Thornfield

by woozifi

Summary

After a hard childhood and many miserable years in boarding school, Jeon Wonwoo doesn’t expect accepting a job as a live-in chilmdminder and caretaker for a wealthy man’s only daughter to make his life any more exciting. Enter his admittance into the sprawling, high-end Thornfield Hotel, where all the guests are rich and ditzy and the staff seem to carry a hundred secrets. The owner of Thornfield and his employer in question, Wen Junhui, is a brash, cynical, persuasive, and impossible man, with a whole lifetime of regrets and mistakes he either wishes to make up for or forget entirely. It’s here, against all odds, that Wonwoo finds himself falling desperately in love.

(a.k.a Jane Eyre AU)
“You majored in Child Development?” Jeonghan has long hair, something that kind of surprises Wonwoo. He sees men with their hair tied up into little buns all over campus (some new trend he suspects), but he never expected the Director of Operations of a high-end hotel to even be allowed to grow their hair out the same way as some hipster know-it-all in a Women’s Study class.

Regardless of hipster know-it-all hairdos or not, Yoon Jeonghan’s locks are shoulder length and a dull berry red, or the colour of copper and rust, and he has it pulled back into a loose low ponytail so it doesn’t get in his way. The method of how his office is arranged is strangely similar. Rather than having his desk face the door like most managerial offices Wonwoo has seen in his life so far, it’s pushed completely around to face the window so Jeonghan doesn’t have to walk along the entire perimeter of its rectangular cherry oak surface before taking a seat. He has elegant bookshelves arranged against one of the pea-green walls but several of the shelves are empty, its occupants arranged on stools and side tables by his desk so he doesn’t have to get up to grab them. Everything is designed for him to use the least amount of movement and energy to get what he needs, and five minutes into their conversation Wonwoo can’t tell if Jeonghan is lazy or a genius or simply interested in making things as convenient as possible. It’s very likely that he might be all three.

“Yeah,” Wonwoo says, licking his lips slightly when he finds them dry. He’s feeling rather nervous. Why is he nervous? “I love kids.”

Jeonghan gives him a little look over a file containing what are probably copies of his résumé, birth certificate, university transcripts, spotless criminal record, what he had for breakfast two weeks ago, everything. They were very particular that he provide them with numerous archives of absolutely anything that could give them a clue that Jeon Wonwoo might not be fit for the job. “To be honest, I wouldn’t expect that.”

“Oh.” It must be the environment that’s making Wonwoo nervous. Thornfield Hotel is no two-story motel off the side of the highway, that’s for sure. It’s large and extravagant without being overly gaudy, and despite being just on the scattered outskirts of Seoul it’s impressive how large and open the estate is, with grounds and courtyards and indoor pools and just about everything he can think of. When he arrived, he didn’t even enter through the main entrance; he was ushered through a side door straight to the staff wing and towards the managerial offices so he won’t bother any of the actual customers. That’s the kind of hotel this place is. “Yeah, I get that a lot. I don’t look like the type that’s good with kids.” He pauses, suddenly aware that that’s probably not the best thing to say when they just accepted him for a job involving kids. “I, uh, am, though. Just to put that out there.”

Jeonghan gives him one of those tight-lipped smiles that are more for politeness’ sake than any genuine friendliness and moves on without comment, to Wonwoo’s relief. “You have a reference letter from the headmistress of Lowood. That’s pretty impressive. She said you were the one in charge of helping the teachers take care of the younger kids?”

Wonwoo nods. “Lowood Academy was a pretty … tight-knit place to live in, I guess. Miss Temple liked to think of us all as one giant family. I’m good at getting the children to calm down and listen, so when I was done with my classes they’d often ask me to drop in and supervise for a little while.”

“How old were you when you did this again?”

“Started at around fifteen or sixteen. I stopped when I left Lowood for my undergrad—so eighteen.”

“I see.” Jeonghan still doesn’t look convinced, although Wonwoo can’t exactly blame him. Hiring
someone fresh out of university with nothing but a Bachelor’s degree and a simple teaching certificate probably didn’t put him at the top of the pile of choices. The fact that he’s even here right now is almost impossible to believe. “Sorry for having to ask you these again, we just have to make sure. Anmei is … a very special girl.”

“I’m sure she is,” Wonwoo says, unable to help himself from sounding a little dry. “Considering she’s the daughter of Thornfield’s owner.”

Jeonghan looks up at him and smiles again, this time a little more approvingly. “Living in a big place like this all her life has given her free reign to do just about anything she wants,” he says. “She’s the hotel’s little princess, we all spoil her rotten. Unfortunately, there’s no school close enough here for her to attend and Mr. Wen can’t bear to send her off away from her home while she’s still so young, hence why a childminder is necessary until she’s old enough.”

“And course.” Wonwoo can imagine it, a young child being waited on hand and foot in a place as grand as Thornfield. He thinks he watched a movie like this before, only the name escapes him now. “I take care of her and oversee her tutoring lessons, right?”

“Yep.” Jeonghan lets out a little laugh, fiddling with one corner of the file until it begins to crease and bend under the pressure between his fingers. He tosses it to a side of his desk. “She’s a sweet kid, but she can’t sit still and pay attention for even fifteen minutes before she starts fidgeting and running off and disrupting the guests. We’re all far too busy to look after her, and besides, we need someone she’ll respect. Someone she’ll listen to. Mr. Wen figures a live-in companion who’ll be at her side all day long instead of some babysitter counting down the hours until the end of their shift will be more effective. Like a governess or nurse or something, you know? Someone from those old Regency Era times.”

“And I’m the governess?” Wonwoo’s lips almost quirk into a smile, but he quickly schools his expression back into seriousness. He doesn’t want to appear impertinent.

Luckily for him, Jeonghan laughs again, and this time he really does sound friendly. “Yep. You are the governess. Well, you don’t have to teach her much of anything, but you’re something like it. You brought your things?”

“Someone said they’d send it up to my room. Chan, I think his name was.”

Jeonghan’s easy smile turns fond. “Oh, Chan. Our best bellhop. Good kid, isn’t he?”

More than a good kid. He was a smiling, eager youth of around nineteen, and had intercepted Wonwoo with immediate friendly chatter and helpfulness. Wonwoo, who isn’t shy by any means but also definitely doesn’t possess any of the confidence or skills needed to engage with strangers so warmly, had been impressed by his ability to make him feel so comfortable the second he walked into the hotel. “Shouldn’t he be in the lobby, at the front desk? Shaking hands, carrying luggage, closing car doors?” That’s what he figures bellhops do, anyway.

“Oh, he does.” Jeonghan stands up, causing Wonwoo to quickly stand up as well. “But you, Mr. Jeon, are our most important guest today.”

“I see.” They shake hands; Jeonghan may seem lazy sometimes, sluggish even, but his handshake is firm and strong. Wonwoo reminds himself to never underestimate him. No one becomes the overseer of all the staff in a hotel like Thornfield for nothing. “That’s a great honour.”

“I’ll get Seungkwan to show you to your room. Anmei will be out until four-thirty for skiing lessons with her language tutor, or rather,” Jeonghan smirks, “her other childminder. You’ll probably be
seeing a lot of him from now on, so let’s hope you two can get along.”

“Other childminder?” Wonwoo can’t stop a confused half-laugh from escaping from between his lips. “Why do you need me, then?”

“Sorry, I misspoke. He’s like a childminder, but he isn’t.” A glimpse of Wonwoo’s increasingly bewildered expression has him hastily explain, “Minghao is an interesting case. Mr. Wen brought him all the way here from China so he can help Anmei grow accustomed to this country, under Mr. Wen’s wishes—she only knew Mandarin, so she needed a translator, a Korean language tutor. He doesn’t have any friends or family in South Korea, so he lives here in the hotel, just like you will be. But Minghao isn’t exactly … he doesn’t have the same experience with children that you do, he doesn’t have the patience or expertise to be with Anmei all the time. We give him shifts like it’s any old job.”

“Oh, okay—I get it.” At least Wonwoo will have someone to talk to besides a little girl. He hopes Minghao is decent with Korean.

Jeonghan calls for Seungkwan, and five minutes later a young man with chubby rounded cheeks and big bright eyes bounds in. “Jeonghan, are you serious?” he yelps almost immediately, loudly and passionately. “I don’t have time for you right now, three of the laundry machines are busted again and the fucking Laundry Manager is away sick now of all times, do you know how much responsibility I have on my shoulders?”

He receives a heavy eye roll in return. “Surprisingly, considering I am your boss, I do. And I can safely say it’s far, far less than mine.” He turns to Wonwoo with an all-suffering look. “Wonwoo, meet Boo Seungkwan, Director of Housekeeping. Seungkwan, this is Jeon Wonwoo, Anmei’s new childminder.”

Seungkwan turns to survey Wonwoo, giving him several once-overs with his arms crossed and eyes narrowed. Wonwoo stands up a little straighter and hopes his collar isn’t crooked, but he doesn’t want to risk drawing attention to his insecurity by trying to fix it.

“Are you sure you’re the one babysitting that little brat?” Seungkwan says, hands moving to his hips. He looks like he’s trying to be intimidating, but it’s very hard when he’s wearing a green apron a size or two too big and a lacy bandana pushing his caramel-coloured hair away from his forehead. “You’re far too handsome to be a nanny. You’re tall, you should try modelling.”

“Oh,” Wonwoo says, equal parts startled and flattered, as Jeonghan flaps his hands at Seungkwan and says exasperatedly, “Are you trying to get rid of him before he even starts his job or something, Seungkwan? Shut up!”

“Thank you, I guess,” Wonwoo says. “Although I don’t really use the term nanny to—”

“A voice deep enough to shake rocks, too!” Seungkwan grins. “And you like working with kids? You must be the entire package with interest, Mr. Jeon Wonwoo.”

“Oh, that’s enough,” Jeonghan snaps. “Go away and deal with your laundry problem, I’ll get Jihoon to—”

“I’m kidding, Jeonghan, oh my god, I’m not gonna chase away the nanny by flirting with him. I can take him up to his room, okay? I’m a far better choice than Jihoon, bother him when he’s off duty and see where that gets you.”

Jeonghan groans, but he ruffles Seungkwan’s hair in a distinctly affectionate way, knocking his
bandana askew, before pushing the two of them out the door and saying, “Just go, the both of you, I have to make calls.”

Seungkwan waits until the door is closed before turning to Wonwoo and saying, “Jeonghan likes acting prickly, but he’s got a soft spot for everyone who works here. He just can’t help it, he’s got the craziest maternal instincts I’ve ever seen in a man before in my life. Anyway, let me take you to your room. You’re gonna be living close to Anmei for convenience’s sake, is that cool with you?”

Wonwoo lets out a small laugh. “Hey, I’ve got a roof over my head and I’m getting paid,” he jokes, “you can make me sleep in the basement and I’d be okay with it.”

Seungkwan laughs, a bright, happy sound. “The basement is dark and cold and always a little damp. Trust me, I would know, I just spent two-and-a-half hours down there trying to fix the damn laundry machines. I think a night sleeping down there would make you hit the streets in no time.”

Wonwoo only shrugs. “Trust me, I’ve made do with worse before.”

Seungkwan looks curious and slightly alarmed, but he gets distracted by a couple girls wearing crisp, ironed Thornfield uniforms and the same apron asking him questions about so-and-so’s linens and which stain remover is the one that gets out blood best. Seungkwan answers them and they rush away again, turning back around to see Wonwoo looking a little horrified. “You learn a whole lot about people when you get a housekeeping job,” he says with a smirk. “Some are things you never want to learn about anyone.”

“I don’t think I even want to know,” Wonwoo mutters.

He remembers it now. The movie was called *Eloise at the Plaza*. In this case, Thornfield was the Plaza Hotel. Anmei was Eloise.

“Everyone’s got their secrets,” Seungkwan says with a derisive snort, playing with a small silver-banded ring on his pinky finger. There’s a stone set in it, something blue, but Wonwoo can’t tell what it is from this distance. “It’s not them you should feel sorry for; it’s the people who are forced to keep their secrets for them that are the really pitiful ones.”

At five-thirty, Wonwoo meets Wen Anmei for the very first time.

As a young girl of eight, she’s rather tall for her age, with pretty miniature facial features and dainty doll-like fingers. Her eyes are big and double-lidded and framed by thick, dark lashes; her hair is a glossy brown, loosely curled, and pulled into a high ponytail. She’s supremely unaffected by shyness or even general politeness towards strangers—she bounds forwards and shakes Wonwoo’s hand with two of her own with overwhelming enthusiasm, immediately babbling in an odd mixture of Mandarin Chinese and Korean before correcting herself and repeating it again, this time in careful, slightly stilted Korean only.

The other childminder and her language teacher, Xu Minghao, is younger than Wonwoo expected and is a scrappy stick of a guy who looks more like a surly teenager than a young man, with dark-lined eyes and dyed silvery-grey hair and dangling black piercings. He looks utterly exhausted but still manages to shake Wonwoo’s hand and politely bow.

“Sorry,” he says, in accented but relatively fluent Korean. “She’s hard to repress.”

“I see,” Wonwoo says, although he doesn’t see at all. What he can see is that Jeonghan was right about Minghao not being suitable for a full-time childminder: he’s unsure of how to treat a young girl
like Anmei. He talks to her sometimes like one would to a toddler, in other times like a misbehaving grade schooler, even occasionally like she’s an adult just like him. He crumbles easily under the pressure of her demands, can’t follow through with threats of punishment, and although he can be both kind and sarcastic to her in turns he definitely treats her with all the care of a man whose entire livelihood depends on keeping his job.

These erratic intervals in his behaviour have made Anmei think of him and treat him like a friend rather than a tutor, an equal rather than an authority figure, and while it’s clear she adores him like she would to a brother she does not respect him the way she should to a caretaker.

“I will be staying with you from now on,” Wonwoo tells her when they sit down to dinner. This is a wing of the hotel that he thinks is either Mr. Wen’s personal area or a private sector for only the most important guests. The dining hall is much smaller than the ones for the other wings but no less grand, with maybe five or six different tables placed in an orderly fashion around the room; they choose a small table for just the three of them rather than the obnoxiously long fifteen-seater in the center of the hall. Their dinner is, thankfully, simple rather than gaudy: Chinese-styled Peking duck with assorted rice and vegetables. Minghao looks happy to dig in, although Wonwoo can’t tell if it’s because the style of cooking is authentic enough to remind him of home or if he’s just that hungry.

“Like Minghao?” Anmei asks, mouth full. Wonwoo grimaces at the sight of chewed-up food bulging in her cheeks but decides he can save the lessons on table manners for another day. No need to start lecturing her the second he arrives.

“Yes, like Minghao. But Minghao isn’t always with you, is he?”

“I’m with her in the mornings and evenings,” Minghao mutters into his bowl of white rice. “Not counting the weekends, holidays, exceptions, and time I take off when I need—space.”

“Right. Well, Anmei, I’m like Minghao, but I don’t really have time off. I’ll be with you almost all the time, especially during your lessons.”

“A nanny!” she says with a laugh, like it’s funny. Maybe it is.

“Yeah, sure.” He really wishes they’d all just use the term childminder. Nanny makes him feel old and fussy, like a significantly less interesting Mary Poppins since he can’t even fly or jump into chalk drawings or shit. “I’ll be staying near your room, too, so you can come see me whenever you need help with something or want to talk, okay?”

“Oh, right?” she says brightly, and then immediately gets distracted by the arrival of dessert. The Director of Food and Beverages—Lee Seokmin is what he introduces himself as—is a handsome tanned young man with well-kept dark hair and a smile as bright and sweet as the ice cream sundaes he pushes in on a cart. He’s clearly familiar with the other two, greeting Minghao with a friendly fist-bump and giving Anmei the biggest sundae of the batch.

“How is my favourite guest?” he asks fondly, like a gushing uncle. She claps her hands and coos something in Chinese that nobody but Minghao understands, but Minghao laughs so Seokmin laughs too.

“Are you the kind of director in charge of, like, everything?” Wonwoo asks when Seokmin hands him his own sundae. He wants to tell him that he doesn’t care for sweet food, but worries he’ll sound rude being picky on his first day here. “Wouldn’t it waste your time to come deliver our food personally?”

“Indeed it’s our thing to serve Mr. Wen and his daughter ourselves,” he says with a grin. “They deserve the best of the best, and since we tend to eat with him, we might as well make our own food
and leave the staff to focus on the guests. Besides, I teach the kitchen well, they can survive a few minutes without me.”

In a moment of pure irony, a sous chef pokes their head in through the nearby door, sounding slightly panicked. “Sir, we’re out of lettuce.”

Seokmin’s smile falls right off his face, and he straightens up immediately. “What do you mean, out of lettuce? We just got stocked, like, yesterday!”

“Well, Nayeon can’t find it, sir.”

“I just—Jesus, gimme a minute, I’ll be right there.” The sous chef disappears, and Seokmin turns to see Wonwoo looking at him, intentionally grim and blank-faced.

“They can survive a few minutes,” he echoes ironically back at him.

“Oh, shut up.” Seokmin pinches Anmei’s nose and makes her laugh. “Sorry, kiddo, I gotta go. Enjoy your dessert.”

While Anmei is too invested in smearing her mouth with ice cream and chocolate sauce to distract them both with her inane, childish chatter, Wonwoo discreetly pushes his own bowl aside and takes the time to ask Minghao, “Do you know Mr. Wen? Like, personally?”

“Sure.” Minghao licks ice cream off of his lips. “Well, I mean, I met Junhui maybe … three years ago? Yeah, Anmei was around five and a half, so three years ago. My mother was taking care of her in China when he came to fetch her.”

“Your mother?” Anmei’s spoon scrapes loudly against the sides of her glass. Wonwoo looks over at her, frowns, grabs a napkin, and leans over to wipe her mouth and chin clean. She squirms and whines against the action and then escapes the moment he pulls away. He doesn’t give chase; for tonight, he lets her grab his bowl (with a sugary smile and a sweet little “Please, sir?” until he can’t help smiling back and nods in confirmation) and run off to another table to eat in peace, giving him space to talk to Minghao away from her hearing. “Was she—I mean—”

“What?” Minghao’s eyes grow wide and he lets out a sharp peal of laughter. “Oh, god no! No, no, my mom wasn’t Anmei’s mother. I mean, you didn’t … you don’t know the story?”

“No?” He didn’t even know there was a story. “What happened?”

Minghao seems strangely pleased that he gets to tell it to a new audience. Wonwoo has a feeling that everyone in Thornfield has already heard this story many times before. “Well, for starters, Junhui met Anmei’s mother in Japan. I don’t really remember what she was—some actress or singer or model something? I don’t know, something glitzy like that. He was obsessed with her apparently, spoiled her with jewelry and gifts and the damn moon, anything his money could buy her.”

He pauses, making sure that Anmei really can’t hear them, before leaning in to say in a conspiratorial undertone, “She was a real mega-bitch, you can trust me on that. Was seeing other men behind his back and worse, I don’t know the details but he found out and cut all ties, not knowing she was pregnant. A couple years after she had little Anmei, she sent him a text or an email or a fucking handwritten letter or whatever telling him about the child and that she sent the kid away and wanted nothing to do with her. It took him two years to find Anmei, and at that point she had been bounced around various orphanages and foster homes all over the place before landing with me and my mom in China. Once he found out I was studying Korean as a minor in college, he hired me to come to Seoul with her so she wouldn’t be lonely and I could help teach her the language.” He shrugs. “And
that’s the story.”

“Is Anmei really, you know … his?” Two of the green apron-clad cleaning staff members scuttle in to clean up their dishes, giving them warm and welcoming smiles (and a couple pleasant words towards Minghao) before disappearing again. One of them provides Anmei with several damp towels to wipe off the sticky vanilla-chocolate residue coating her face and fingers, something she does so carefully and primly without complaint. Wonwoo makes a quick mental note of that, rather amused. “You said her mother had been seeing other men behind Mr. Wen’s back. Could she be …?”

“It’s entirely possible,” Minghao says with a sigh. “Not a single part of her looks like Junhui—well, not a single part of her really looks like any other man, they say she’s a splitting image of her mother from head to toe. Either way, Junhui refuses to do a paternity test. I don’t think he wants to know the answer. He’s adopted her all the same, so she’s legally his daughter regardless of blood.”

“It must be hard,” Wonwoo observes thoughtfully, “to raise a daughter that will forever remind him of a woman like that. What kind of man is he, though? I mean, does he still treat her right?”

“As well as he’s able.” Minghao hesitates. “Junhui is sort of … eccentric.”

“He’s an extraordinarily wealthy man from a wealthy family who could live anywhere in the world, and instead chooses to stay in his own hotel. Trust me, I gathered that much.”

“Yeah. He’s not a bad person or a bad boss, he just likes to, uh, walk to the beat of his own drum. As for how he treats Anmei …” he pauses and turns away for a moment, chewing at the inside of his cheek. Wonwoo waits patiently, more curious than he expected.

“Well,” Minghao finally says, “he treats her well, but I don’t know if he actually loves her. I don’t know if he loves much of anybody, to be honest. He always finds something wrong with the company he keeps—he can’t hang out with us lowly staff members because we’re too simple for his tastes and he’ll get laughed at by his colleagues, and he hates spending too much time with his guests because he finds them, and I quote, ‘fabulously rich and impossibly stupid’. Would be nice if he found somebody, though, then maybe he will stop shitting on the entire world and stay in Thornfield longer. He’s hardly ever home, it’s like he’s trying to run away or something.”

After dinner and an hour or two of running up and down the halls and playing tag to tire Anmei out, they all head upstairs to the private rooms to put her to bed. Minghao had proven his assumption to be correct: this entire vicinity, this small private haven in the very back of the hotel close to the staff wing, has at some point been restructured to tailor to Junhui’s personal use. The first floor has the dining hall and common area and a couple other rooms that apparently aren’t used very often, while the second and third floor are all bedrooms. Minghao’s room is right across from Anmei’s on the second floor, and both are within an arm’s reach to Wonwoo’s new home as well.

Seungkwan had already shown him his suite earlier, a miniature apartment with its own little living room and miniature open kitchen and a balcony that overlooks the courtyard full of small trees and bushes and iron-wrought benches. This place is meant to be his—his one suitcase and all the personal belongings he owns within it is placed next to the closet, a hamper by the bedroom door contains a helpful sticky note telling him its contents will be collected for cleaning and returned every Sunday, the drawers and cabinets in the kitchen already full with bowls, utensils, snacks, dried food, fruits, another note telling him it will be stocked with whatever he wishes if he doesn’t want to eat in the dining hall with the others—it’s meant to be his, meant to welcome him to his new job and to make him feel as comfortable as possible.

And yet, maybe it’s just because at the end of the day it’s still a hotel room, but Wonwoo can’t see
this as anything other than a temporary stay, a day or two of indulgence at most. He is still amazed at the simple extravagance of a Queen-sized bed all to himself, of a fully-stocked fridge and bright uncluttered spaces and glistening glass showers and space, so much space all for himself, but Seungkwan had laughed at him for gaping open-mouthed the first time he came up here so he does his best to act nonchalant in front of Minghao. To not act like the character archetype he knows he is in the story of his life, the pitiful, depressing little orphan boy deprived of luxuries because he was raised to believe they weren’t his to have.

“Which room is Mr. Wen’s?” he asks in a half-whisper, indicating the numerous other doors lining the red-carpeted hallway.

“He’s on the floor above us,” Minghao responds. “We aren’t really allowed up there. Like I said, eccentric. He likes his privacy and usually keeps to himself in his office or on the third floor whenever he comes back to Thornfield, and he hardly ever stays for long.”

The more he hears about his illusive employer, the more curious Wonwoo becomes. He wonders what it’s like to be someone like this Wen Junhui, to be someone exciting and mysterious, always away from home, always off on some grand adventure. He suddenly feels plain and boring, more so than usual, painfully aware that his own life experiences so far have been underwhelming and terrible and grossly sheltered from the rest of the world. Normally he can pretend his own lack of adventure doesn’t bother him, but faced with the austere status of Thornfield’s high ceilings and casual abundance of everything, it’s hard for him to think about anything else. “Do you think I’ll ever get the chance to see him?”

“Who knows? He comes back at least three or four times a year, but only for around two weeks at a time. It’s been seven weeks since his last visit; you might get lucky.”

Jeon Wonwoo’s parents were dead.

Well, the fact of the matter is, Wonwoo had been too young to remember his parents at all. One moment they were alive, and he was only a baby, and they were a normal sort of family. The next they were a smouldering wreckage buried beneath the twisted metal of a car, and he was taken in by his uncle. Choi Byunghoon was his mother’s brother, and loved her dearly, dearly enough to immediately adopt Wonwoo into their family and insist that they treat him as one of their own. Wonwoo’s few memories of his uncle were happy, sun-filled ones, remembering a warm hand to dry away tears and strong arms who picked him up and rocked him until he fell asleep free of nightmares. Unfortunately for Wonwoo, Uncle Choi died soon after from health complications, and Wonwoo was left to the care of his aunt and three cousins, all of whom were not as affectionate towards Wonwoo as his uncle might have wished.

Wonwoo doesn’t like to remember his time in that place very much, but it wasn’t as if Lowood was any better. Boarding school had been a blessing at first, disguised as a curse—he was shipped out partly because Aunt Choi desperately wanted to get rid of him, partly because of an incident that ended in words exchanged between them that no child or adult should ever say to each other. As impossible as it had seemed, Lowood turned out to be worse than Aunt Choi in the end, at least for the first few years.

His first day in Thornfield ends with Wonwoo suffering through a long, restless night full of vivid dreams of Lowood International Academy and Mingming. He tosses and turns, dreams of messy black hair and a serene smile and watching the rise and fall of a struggling chest until it stops moving, and he wakes up with a start. For a moment he panics under the heavy weight of his brain kicking back into gear and the creepy-crawly feeling of unfamiliarity, forgetting where he is. This spacious,
big bedroom, the four-poster bed with its golden gossamer curtains tied to its posts and the heavy
silken sheets, the big windows revealing a starry purplish night sky—absolutely none of it has any
semblance at all to the sloped attic rooms and overcrowded bunk beds of Lowood, or the cramped
broom closet of a dorm he slept in when he went to university. He should be grateful for this massive
upgrade, but instead he just feels homesick. Which is funny, because he’s never once considered any
of those places—not Aunt Choi’s expensive townhouse, or Lowood, or his university dorm—to be
home.

He’s homesick for a place he’s never had.

A strange noise echoes somewhere in the distance, out in the halls somewhere. The faint brushing of
heavy footfalls against soft carpet, a woman’s despairing, ghostly laughter. Wonwoo’s heart pounds,
head spins, hands shake, ears straining for the noise—he’s not a body, not a person, he’s just a ball of
nerve endings and faulty sparks and sensations. In his confusion and panic, he remembers something
he hasn’t thought about for a long time and thinks it’s Uncle Choi’s ghost coming to haunt him. He
lets out a strangled noise from the back of his throat, desperate and frightened, and the laughter
grows louder before cutting off sharply and fracturing, devolving into an inhuman sob.

The hotel falls silent. The moon is full. Wonwoo turns to rest his sweaty forehead against a cooler
patch of his pillow, struggling to control his breathing, not sure if he’s awake or dreaming anymore.
Maybe he imagined it all.

Sleep doesn’t come easily that night, but when he wakes up he brushes the exhaustion off under the
hot steam of the shower and the wavering, weak pale grey of the morning sky. He’s in Thornfield
now, he has a job to do. Today is a new day.

A couple nights later, he hears the same ghostly voice again. It’s too faint to be heard properly, and
the sleep still heavy on his eyelids and clouding his brain make him bleary and muddled. He thinks it
might just be a dream again, but the sound of that sometimes laughing, sometimes sobbing voice,
eerie and strange, begin to haunt his thoughts and the mystery starts distracting him even during the
daytime.

“Hey,” he asks Jeonghan later on in the day, sitting in his office while Anmei is busy splashing away
and learning how to tread water in the hotel’s swimming pool, one of the only classes she takes
where she actually puts one hundred percent of her concentration in. “Did you hear anything weird
last night?”

Jeonghan pauses, before his expression clears into one of comprehension and he laughs. “You sure it wasn’t a dream?”

“Like, a-a weird laugh. A woman’s laugh. I don’t know, I thought I heard it before and it just kinda
creeped me out. Did you hear it, too?”

Jeonghan doesn’t say anything for a moment, before his expression clears into one of comprehension
and he laughs. “You sure it wasn’t a dream?”

“Probably not.”

“It might just be one of Seungkwan’s girls. The housekeeping staff tend to stay up really late, and a
bunch of the silly younger girls are bound to forget to keep their voices down occasionally.” He turns
back to look back at his laptop, typing away at some document. “Thanks for telling me, Wonwoo,
I’ll get Seungkwan to tell them to be more careful. Luckily, they were in the back of the hotel and
not near any of the guest wings, or we’d get complaints from our customers.’’

Wonwoo isn’t convinced—the sound he heard was ghastly, terrifying, the sort of thing he’d find in some late-night Halloween special horror movie on cable TV. It definitely wasn’t the sound of some giggly cleaning girls running down a hall. But Jeonghan sounds so self-assured, so confident, that he can’t bring himself to argue. He doesn’t mention it again, and in the end it doesn’t really matter because he doesn’t hear the laugh for a long while.

It takes Wonwoo almost a month to get used to his new occupation, but when he finally does, it no longer seems strange and exciting. No sooner has he gotten used to the high ceilings, the good food, the strange sense of both confinement and freedom he gets by taking care of Anmei and having an (almost) entirely free reign of Thornfield, the occasional glimpses of all the rich, famous, fashionable guests in the crystal-chandeliered lobby—does he quickly grow bored, does the fascination pass and he settles into the sort of day-to-day monotony he expects from his life.

His studies in Child Development and learning how to best work with children makes him an excellent childminder for Anmei: he never gets cross with her, never uses corporal punishment; instead he reprimands her gently for the things she does wrong and praises and rewards her for things she does right. He’s careful to applaud her for the work she puts into things, and not for any sort of innate intelligence most parents seem to delude themselves into thinking their children have. He encourages her imagination and creativity and never tries to dampen it in any way. His quiet, calm, impassible nature makes it difficult for her to be comforted when she throws a temper tantrum, nor is he quite so easy to push around as Minghao, so she soon learns to respect him in a manner different from the staff in Thornfield, or even her tutors themselves.

Wonwoo strangely likes Anmei, more than he was expecting when he applied for a job watching over a rich kid. She’s certainly spoiled rotten, having no elementary school to go to and only numerous home tutors for various subjects and extracurriculars to busy her. The rest of the time, she’s running up and down the halls, charming the guests in the game room or lobby, and visiting her favourite hotel staff, all of whom dote upon her. Seokmin, Director of Food and Beverages, and Soonyoung, Director of Events and Catering, both love her to death and give her candies and little toys every time they see her. Even Seungkwan, who frequently calls her a brat and whines every time she insists he give her a piggyback ride, has to turn away to hide the tears swelling in his eyes when she gifts him with a touching hand-drawn portrait of the two of them holding hands.

She’s a pampered little hotel princess—his very own Eloise living at the Plaza Hotel—but she’s sweet and exuberant and unashamed. He quickly learns that she likes the idea of fashion, beauty, glamour (all things, he secretly thinks, that must remind her of her missing mother and everything people must have told her about the person she was minus the, uh, unappreciative bits), and once he uses that to remind her that Hollywood starlets don’t spill tea on their dresses and runway models don’t stomp in elevators to feel them shake, she behaves as demurely and ladylike as can be. It’s utterly adorable.

Days, weeks, months pass, until finally it’s a cold January morning when Wonwoo finally meets Wen Junhui, owner of the Thornfield Hotel and his employer, and it’s definitely not in the way he expects.

Anmei has math and ancient history lessons back to back today. Both Minghao and Jeonghan are starting to get concerned that he might go crazy if he doesn’t have some time off for a few hours, and they urge him to take a break while she’s busy with her tutors. Wonwoo tries telling them that he’s fine, he doesn’t mind at all, it’s his job to look after Anmei and keep her well-behaved in her classes,
but they won’t have it.

“We can’t have you pulling a *The Shining* on us and axe-murdering down doors,” Jeonghan says, almost pushing him out the back door of the hotel staff wing.

“But the whole point of *The Shining* was that he went crazy because he was alone,” Wonwoo protests, “not because he’s in a hotel.”

“Look, Wonwoo, whatever. I’m doing you a favour.” The door shuts in his face.

It’s not terrible to have some time to himself without a child’s babbling in his ears, despite his complaints. He doesn’t bother going out into the city—they may technically be in Seoul, but they’re way too far out on the outskirts, so it’s still a long way to go to get to anywhere interesting—instead, he walks around the large, open grounds outside of Thornfield. There are carefully cultivated topiaries and small walkways weaving through gardens, all encircled by a tall hedge barrier that acts as a fence and is grown far over his head.

Wonwoo loves the fresh air, cold and crisp and glazing over the inside of his nostrils with ice. He likes the feel of the wind ruffling his hair and biting at his cheeks, and the absolutely still silence of being by himself. He weaves his way through dead flowers and dry, brittle stalks of things that might be prettier in the spring, and surrenders himself to the tranquility of the moment.

“Fuck, watch out!”

He looks up and lets out a terrible squawking noise, a cancelled word that never finished itself spilling through his lips in alarm. He isn’t quite sure what happens in the next few seconds, but it goes something like this: someone had tried hopping over the hedge wall, jumping across to the other side at the exact unfortunate moment Wonwoo was passing under. He barely has time to react—the man about to crash headlong into him tries twisting out of the way in the middle of losing the fight to gravity—Wonwoo gets knocked into—and the next thing he knows, the two of them crash to the ground with simultaneous grunts of pain.

Wonwoo thinks he blacked out, but it’s just spots swimming in his eyes from hitting the ground so hard. When his vision clears again, he sits up on his elbows and shakes cold dirt out of his hair. Besides what might be a bruised skull, he’s definitely faring much better than the other man, who’s expensive-looking dark blue suit is now dirt-stained and wrinkled, and he’s clutching his ankle in obvious pain.

“Oh shit, I’m sorry!” Wonwoo yelps, scrambling to his feet. A brief moment of dread overtakes him. This might be some rich guest in Thornfield, a rich guest with enough time and money and pride to complain to management, and Wonwoo’s going to get fired before he even gets this month’s wages. “Here, let me help you.”

“Oh, I think you’ve done more than enough already,” the man says crossly, although he still accepts Wonwoo’s offering hand and hauls himself up, staggering on one leg. He’s a little taller than Wonwoo and ridiculously handsome, with smooth golden skin and sharp, angular features and honey-amber flaxen hair. His good looks are diminished by the frown on his face though, along with the creases between his eyebrows, although even those look somewhat striking. “You couldn’t look where you were going?”

Wonwoo raises a brow at him, unamused at his crabbiness and suddenly not afraid anymore. “You were the one who jumped the hedge, sir. I think we can safely say that it was your fault.”

The stranger glowers at him and takes a small hop forwards, wincing when the action aggravates his
ankle further. “Whatever, no use pointing fingers and spreading the blame.”

“But you just did.”

The handsome man stares at him for a moment, looking slightly startled, as if he’s not used to being contradicted like this. Eventually, he says, “That’s great and all, but I’m fine. Why don’t you run along now?”

“You’re injured,” Wonwoo says, stubbornly not removing his hands from the man’s arm where he’s helping him keep balance. After a quick moment of hesitation, he adds diplomatically, “And I guess I am partially to blame that you got hurt in the first place. Is your ankle broken?”

“No, probably just twisted.”

“I can help you get inside. You were trying to get into Thornfield, right?”

The man scowls. “Of course,” he says, like it’s obvious. “What, do you think I just randomly jump over hedges to get to where I need to go?” Wonwoo stares at him blankly. “Yes, I’m here for Thornfield. It’s just faster getting in this way.”

“What a coincidence,” Wonwoo says in a dry tone, taking slow, measured steps with him as they make their way back to the hotel. “I’m also here for Thornfield, this works out perfectly. Look, sir, just let me get you inside and call for help, there’s no way you can hobble back there all alone without hurting yourself further.”

“I wouldn’t want to disrupt your—” his gaze flickers down the entire length of Wonwoo’s body and back up again, taking in Wonwoo’s old jacket and oversized sweater and shabby jeans with some degree of confusion, clearly wondering if he’s rich enough to even afford to be a guest here, “—stay at the hotel. Just get lost, I can do fine on my own and you’ve done enough damage.”

If this man had been a kind, gentlemanly, friendly sort, with a gleaming white smile to go with his extraordinarily handsome face, Wonwoo might have been spooked enough to do as he says and run off. Just being in close proximity to the man and his fancy cologne and suit is enough to lower his own self-confidence, make him feel inferior and unwanted, and he’s not sure how he could take it if the guy was also above all that a nice person. Luckily for him, this man won’t stop scowling and appears to be ridiculously bad-tempered, which makes him both less attractive in Wonwoo’s eyes and also, strangely enough, far less intimidating.

“With all due respect, sir, I refuse,” Wonwoo says cheerily, and without even a trace of fear he immediately wraps one arm around the man’s waist to help keep him upright (and he’s fit beneath his suit, of course he is), his other hand going to grab the man’s arm and haul it over his shoulder. He takes great care not to make any sharp movements that might jostle his injured ankle. “Now please shut up and move another step.”

With a heavy sigh, the man follows his instructions, and they begin making their way carefully through the gardens back towards Thornfield. It’s slow going, and Wonwoo’s not strong enough to take all of the man’s weight; he struggles a bit, but manages to not drop him. After a few minutes of silence, the injured stranger says, “You aren’t a guest here, are you?”

“What gave it away?” Wonwoo asks, unable to help himself from being sarcastic. “My second-hand clothes? My lack of a bulging wallet?”

“Oh, how cute, you think you’re funny. Do you know the owner, then?”

“Of the hotel? Are you kidding? I’ve been here for three months, and I haven’t seen Mr. Wen at all.”
“So you don’t know him?”

“No, sir. No, he’s apparently never here.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“Jeonghan—er, the Director of Operations, Mr. Yoon—told me he had business somewhere in America. They said he might not be back until spring.”

“I see. Then what are you to the owner?”

“Sir?”

“I mean, why are you here then, if you aren’t a guest and don’t know Mr. Wen?”

“I’m the childminder for his daughter, Wen Anmei.”

“The childminder!” The man’s eyes widen. He has very pretty eyes, Wonwoo thinks in the back of his head. They have a strange, almost hypnotizing cat-like quality to them, with elegant double lids and intensely dark irises, more concentrated than any ordinary eyes should be. “Right, of course, I completely forgot. Alright, well, hurry up and let’s get inside as fast as possible. The chill is starting to get to me, and I forgot my coat.”

“You can have mine, sir,” Wonwoo says. He’s already shrugging his jacket off of one arm before the man rolls his eyes and leans forward to jerkily pull it back onto him again.

“I’d rather not,” he says shortly. “You’re much skinnier than me, you might freeze to death before we even get inside. Keep it.”

Oh. Of course he wouldn’t want to wear his nasty old jacket, why didn’t Wonwoo think of that? The stranger is wearing a suit that probably costs more than five times his salary, he wouldn’t want to be caught dead in something like Wonwoo’s thrift store parka. He adjusts it back over himself and pretends his brief blush of shame is just from the cold wind.

When they reach the back door of the hotel, the foyer directly in-between the entrances to the private wing and the staff wing, Wonwoo is lucky enough to see Seungkwan walking by instructing a group of staff members the best way to air out a room. “Seungkwan!” he calls out, being extra careful when he notices the stranger wincing as they attempt to get into the hallway and out of the cold.

“Seungkwan, he needs help!”

Seungkwan turns around and his entire face grows pale, mouth dropping open. “Sir!” he squeaks, running over to them. Wonwoo is startled by his drastic change in mannerisms, until he realizes Seungkwan isn’t talking to him. “Sir, you—when did you get back? Are you injured?”

The man waves his hand impatiently, the kind of lazy gesture a king might make amongst his subjects. “Yes and yes. Seungkwan, can you call someone? It’s just a twisted ankle, but I’d like to have it looked at all the same.”

“Yes, yes of course! I’ll just—just—give me a second.” Seungkwan flounders for a second before he turns back to yell for his staff members, completely thrown off his composure. “Chaeyoung! Call Dr. Go immediately. And Jeongyeon, I need you to get one of those wheelchairs from the lobby and bring it here as fast as you can.”

His staff rush to do as they’re told, practically scrambling over each other while attempting to sneak peeks at the injured man resting heavily against Wonwoo’s shoulder. Wonwoo watches this unfold
with a sense of calmness and tranquility he doesn’t actually feel, and turns to look back at the man. “You’re Wen Junhui,” he says, a little betrayed.

“Of course.” And then the man smiles—well, it’s more of a smirk, but it’s still a smile nonetheless—and he looks oddly pleased at tricking Wonwoo for so long. “Who else would I be?”

The news of Wen Junhui arriving back at Thornfield Hotel quickly spreads (no doubt from Seungkwan’s influence), and the sudden dull, boring traditions of Wonwoo’s world are bursting with life and novelty again. Housekeeping staff tumble up and down stairs to get his room up to par, knocking over each other with fresh sheets and bottles of wine, the doctor is called to check up on his ankle, and the directors of all the various sectors of the hotel are bustling to keep everything in order. Even the guests get caught up in the fervor, gathering together in the dining halls or gaming rooms or the indoor swimming pool and whispering excitedly to themselves over the chance to get a glimpse of the wealthy, charismatic owner.

Anmei is too excited to pay attention to much of anything; not even Wonwoo can get her to calm down. She keeps squirming in her seat during the rest of her lessons, fidgeting with her hair, insisting that she wear one of her prettiest dresses.

Minghao tries to make her think realistically. “You know Mr. Wen is busy, mèimèi,” he says to her, as sternly as he can which isn’t sternly at all. “He’s probably tired from the plane ride back to Korea. He might not see you today.”

“I want to look pretty,” she says obstinately, clasping her tiny little hands together. “Gēgē, Won-gē, please let me! Please please please!”

In the end, Jeonghan pops into Anmei’s playroom and tells them that Mr. Wen wants to have dinner with them all, and Anmei gets her wish. She pulls on a pretty blue dress as floaty and gentle as angel lace, and Minghao helps her French braid her hair, twisting and looping with a complexity Wonwoo can’t understand. Wonwoo himself doesn’t have anything fancy to wear (he only has maybe three or four sets of clothes to his name) so he pulls on his best, least frayed grey sweater vest over a simple white collared shirt and his most intact dark jeans and leaves it at that. He’s already met Mr. Wen, after all. There’s no possible way this dinner can go any worse than their first meeting had.

They move to the fifteen-seater table and are joined by the many directors of the hotel: the ones Wonwoo recognizes and is on good terms with are Jeonghan, Seokmin, Soonyoung, and Seungkwan, as well as the Chief of Security Lee Jihoon, a short, grumpy man Wonwoo could never expect to be an effectively intimidating security guard. According to Seungkwan’s rumours, though, he got promoted to Chief after knocking down a criminal who snuck into the hotel to kidnap a wealthy guest’s child. Knowing Seungkwan, though, it’s very possible that the story is just a grossly exaggerated lie.

“Bābā!” Anmei crows happily, clambering onto Junhui’s lap immediately the moment she sees him and missing the way he flinches in pain. One of his pant legs is rolled up, revealing a gauze-wrapped ankle balanced gingerly beneath his chair. Wonwoo feels a pang of guilt when he sees that, an uncomfortable feeling that intensifies further when Jeonghan gestures for him to take the seat on Junhui’s immediate right.

“Shouldn’t I be …?” he starts to say, not really sure of what to say except that he’s fairly certain the lowly childminder shouldn’t be sitting so close to the head of the table.

Jeonghan just rolls his eyes and pushes him slightly towards his seat. “He insisted on it,” he hisses,
and that is apparently the end of that.

The man who insisted on it is currently sighing at Anmei, stroking her hair absent-mindedly. “You certainly have grown since I last saw you,” he says, looking down at his daughter with an uncomfortable look in his eyes and an odd twist to his mouth. He’s rough in his tone, certainly not the voice of a doting father, but Wonwoo notices he treats her gently, as carefully as one would to a handful of diamonds. “What? A present? No, no, no presents at dinnertime. I’ll give you something once we’re all done eating.”

“I hope you like tonight’s dinner, sir,” Seokmin says brightly as carts of food roll up to their table. Wonwoo’s mouth waters at the sight of all the duck, lemon chicken, fried rice, beef noodle broth, and Dim Sum platters that are placed in front of them. “I was going to get Renjun’s team to make your favourite spicy dan dan noodles, but I didn’t want Soonyoung to start crying at the table.”

“Hey,” Soonyoung complains loudly. “You don’t have to tell Mr. Wen that!”

Junhui throws his head back and laughs, a harsh biting bark of a sound that suits him perfectly, carefully lowering Anmei to her feet and letting her sit next to Minghao. “Good thinking, Seokmin, the last thing I want right now is to give Seungkwan another tablecloth to wash once it’s soaked with Soonyoung’s sweat.” The table roars with laughter, playfully teasing Soonyoung as he whines in protest that everyone’s ganging up on him, and Junhui’s eyes twinkle. Wonwoo secretly finds him more handsome than before when his eyes look like that.

The dinner goes well underway, Thornfield’s managers all laughing and talking. Minghao is busy keeping Anmei distracted, Seungkwan is making Seokmin and Soonyoung howl with laughter over some ridiculous guest that came in last week, Jeonghan is in the middle of discussing security measures for some future event with Jihoon, and … there’s no one nearby for Wonwoo to talk to. He’s left silently picking through his dinner next to Junhui. He’s not sure if he’s uncomfortable or embarrassed or simply unsure of whether or not he’s allowed to even be talking to him. Not only is Junhui a man rich enough to not have to worry about a single damn thing in life, but he’s also technically Wonwoo’s boss, a person the fate of his paycheck rests upon. He’s painfully aware of the differences in their social status.

“So,” Junhui says, shocking Wonwoo into fumbling his chopsticks, “What’s your name?”

“Jeon Wonwoo,” he responds.

“Where did you go to school?”

“I got my Bachelor’s at Sungkyunkwan University,” he recites immediately, “followed by two years of extra studies for my teaching certificate. Before that, I spent eight years in Lowood International Academy.”

Junhui hums. “That’s a private boarding school in England, right? Your family must be very well off to send you to a school like that.”

“I don’t have a family.” Junhui’s eyes are trained on him, impossibly dark and careful. Wonwoo feels his mouth go dry, stomach lurching suddenly for no reason at all. “My parents died when I was very young. I lived with my aunt’s family, she was rich. My late uncle was involved in an import-export company.”

Junhui’s voice is brusque, matter-of-fact, an oddity of harsh, teasing sarcasm and genuine, focused seriousness. “Did you like them?”
Luckily, Wonwoo is equally as matter-of-fact in his words. “Not really.”

“And why not?”

“They hated me. When I was a child, I’m fairly certain I hated them, too. The only one who was kind to me was my uncle, but he got sick when he went overseas and just couldn’t recover.” He shrugs. “A few years later, Aunt Choi sent me to Lowood under the advice of some family friends, mostly to get rid of me for as long as possible.”

“How old were you when she sent you away?”

“Just under ten.”

“So that makes you,” he pauses for a moment, doing the math in his head, “twenty-four or twenty-five by now then, Wonwoo.”

“Twenty-four, sir.”

A slight commotion distracts the two of them—dinner is finished, and the servers are bringing in trays of desserts. Wonwoo blinks, strangely unnerved. They must have only been talking for a few minutes, but he feels like they have been having a conversation for hours, time swimming around them until centuries have passed and all Wonwoo can remember is the sound of Junhui’s vowels wrapping around the syllables of his name. Junhui waves away the slice of raspberry cake presented to him, and with a quick wave of relief Wonwoo refuses his as well, glad he’s not the only one doing it. When Junhui gets up from his seat, he waves at Wonwoo and indicates for him to follow.

They don’t leave the dining hall; they just move towards a different table, this one a small square four-seater. Junhui awkwardly sinks into one of the seats, grunting a little from his injury, and then gestures for Wonwoo to do the same. Wonwoo sits in the chair across from him, fighting the urge to pick at a stray thread in his vest, and observes his employer carefully. The others are still digging into their desserts and don’t appear to have noticed they left the table.

“I figured we can have some more privacy to talk here,” Junhui says by way of explanation. “So, you were telling me about your time in Lowood. Did you like it there?”

“I did during my senior years there. My first couple of years were …” he twists his mouth, struggling to find a word to describe this particular brand of hell. It’s hard to find any. Sometimes, he looks back on his life and wonders if there even are words to explain something so utterly terrible, so surreal, that they almost feel like the beginning chapters of a fairy tale. Child-eating witches in a house of sweets, evil jealous queens with magic mirrors—ridiculously tragic and embellished and impossibly absurd. “Not pleasant.”

“Care to explain?” Junhui asks, piercing eyes not moving from where they’re resting on Wonwoo’s face. Wonwoo wishes they would—the longer Junhui looks at him, the more self-conscious and strange he feels. Junhui could burn holes right through steel and diamonds if he wanted to, with a stare like this.

“Perhaps another time.”

“I understand. So, what do you do?”

“Uh, excuse me, sir?”

“Well, your life must not revolve around my daughter and musing over a depressing childhood. What do you do for fun?”
“Oh.” This is the question that throws Wonwoo off harder than anything before. He can maintain his
composure answering Jeonghan’s typical questions about his education, his career requirements, his
interests only brushed upon because they want to make sure he doesn’t have any creepy hobbies that
are cause for concern. But he doesn’t think Junhui is asking him this question because he wants to
test him, it feels like he genuinely *wants* to know. “I, um, I like to read, I guess. Fiction novels
mostly, I don’t care which genre. I also like to listen to music.”

“Any sports? Tennis, swimming? We have rooms for those here, you know, you’re free to use them
anytime. Don’t worry about getting in the way of our guests, they can deal with it.”

“I’ve seen them and they are very nice, but I’m alright. I prefer more, um, I prefer quieter activities.”
He desperately wants to look away, but finds that so long as Junhui is regarding him with that cool,
complicated expression, he can’t stop himself from returning the favour, raking over his handsome
features as if he wants to memorize every curve and angle. “I like things I can do when I’m by
myself.”

“Must be hard to have time to yourself when you need to take care of Anmei,” Junhui observes. “Do
you want breaks? Maybe, say, an hour or two free every day, or taking every Sunday off?”

“No, I’m alright, Mr. Wen. It’s kind of my job to take care of her all the time. Besides, there are some
lessons she has that I don’t need to be present for, I consider that my time off.”

“I would prefer if you didn’t call me Mr. Wen.” He lets out another rough-sounding short laugh. “It
makes me feel old.”

Wonwoo doesn’t know how old Junhui is, but he suspects it can’t be much more than thirty. “I don’t
know if it’ll be appropriate to call you anything else, unless you want me to refer to you as “hey you,
sir” for the rest of my stay here.”

Junhui snickers into his palm, and it makes Wonwoo feel almost proud. “You can just call me
Junhui,” he says.

“That doesn’t feel appropriate, sir.”

“As much as my ego enjoys hearing you call me ‘sir’, the offer of just ‘Junhui’ still stands.” He turns
away now, breaking his hold on Wonwoo, and turns to stare contemplatively out the nearest
window. Wonwoo blinks, feeling frazzled and strangely flustered. “That’s enough for tonight. Can
you send Anmei to bed? She’s looking a little tired.”

Dessert is over, and while the directors are all still deep in conversation (now transitioned to a
surprisingly childish group argument about which *Lord of the Rings* movie is objectively the best),
Anmei is nodding off into her empty plate.

“Good night, sir,” he mumbles, as he stands up. And then another thought comes to him, and he
adds, sincerely, “I’m really, really sorry for hurting you.”

Junhui doesn’t look at him. He’s still staring at the darkness outside, an almost troubled frown on the
edges of his lips, creasing the faintest of thin lines into his forehead and the sides of his eyes. “That’s
perfectly alright,” he says tersely. “Good night.”

That’s the clearest sign of a dismissal if he’s ever heard one. Wonwoo bows, rouses Anmei and
gently takes her by the hand, and leads her stumbling, sleepy figure out of the dining hall and back
towards their rooms.
“So,” Jeonghan says when they happen to eat breakfast together at the same time one morning, “what do you think of our Mr. Wen?”

“He’s definitely very unusual,” Wonwoo decides. He hasn’t seen much of Junhui in the past couple of days—he doesn’t exactly come to visit Anmei in-between her lessons or when she’s in her playroom, nor has he joined any of them for dinner since his first night here. He spends most of his time in his office in the staff wing or out on business in the heart of Seoul, only returning late in the evening. The only moments Wonwoo has when he meets his employer are when they accidentally run into each other in the halls, or when he's visiting Jeonghan’s office, or awkward silences in the elevator.

Sometimes Junhui treats him coldly, with a disinterested and faraway gaze and a rough catch to his voice like sharp nails scratching grooves into leather; other times he’s all smiles and charms and warm butterscotch eyes, politely asking Wonwoo how he is, if Anmei is giving him any trouble, if he needs anything, anything at all. These variations in behaviour are a little startling, but Wonwoo never troubles himself much with it—he knows that whatever is making Junhui’s temper flip-flop like this has nothing to do with him, and he’s not the cause of it, so he doesn’t pay it any mind.

“He’s got the craziest mood swings I’ve ever seen,” Wonwoo adds as an afterthought with a little exasperated smile.

“Yeah, well, that’s Mr. Wen for you. Mind you, rich people can afford to be as crazy as they want, it certainly doesn’t bother them a bit.” Jeonghan smears a thin, perfectly uniform layer of cream cheese over a bagel. “Still, he has his excuses.”

“Such as?”

Jeonghan bites into his bagel and takes a moment to chew, before saying thickly through a mouthful, “For starters, it’s just in his nature. Can’t really help it if you’re born fickle and temperamental, can you? He’s got his fair share of troubles, though, plenty of Freudian Excuses. Made enough mistakes in his youth to bother him even now.”

Troubles? Mistakes? Wonwoo tries not to sound too curious when he asks, “What kind of troubles can a man like Mr. Wen have when he’s only just out of his twenties?”

“Family troubles, for one. I mean, he wasn’t even supposed to own Thornfield. Did you know that?”

“I didn’t.”

Jihoon’s slim, small figure slumps into the room, yawning and heading immediately towards the coffee machine. Jeonghan watches him stumble with a small laugh, before turning back to Wonwoo and saying, “Yeah. Thornfield used to be owned by his father, and when he died from lung cancer it was meant to be inherited by Junhui’s older brother. But he died too, some sort of car accident, so Thornfield and everything else the Wen family owns was handed down to him at a super young age, I think when he was still in grad school. He’s had to struggle to prove himself as the owner and the boss of this establishment ever since.”

“I see.” It’s weird for Wonwoo to think of Junhui with a family. He just seems so alone, like he doesn’t need a single person in this world, like he was born a fully-formed, fully-unpredictable adult man from the get-go. “Was he close to them? His family?”

“Oh, fuck no, not from what I know of,” Jeonghan says, just as Jihoon joins them at their table, yawning so much he can barely manage a gulp of coffee. Jeonghan pats his back and hands him a chocolate chip muffin, and Wonwoo automatically pours him a bowl of Frosted Flakes cereal. Jihoon
doesn’t really wake up until after ten-thirty, and it’s best to coax him into the world of the living as gently and gradually as possible. “His father was the kind of rich asshole that’s always greedy for more money, and his brother was the same. I think they both pushed Mr. Wen to do things in the past that he didn’t want to do, just to add more wealth to their family name, you know?”

“Things he didn’t want to do? Like what?”

“Don’t ask me, man. I just run his hotel.”

“This is just me guessing,” Wonwoo says once he’s finished swallowing down his bowl of brown sugar and cinnamon oatmeal, “but I don’t think Mr. Wen is the forgive-and-forget sort.”

Jihoon abruptly snorts at their conversation. His voice is croaky, thick with sleep, when he pipes up with a, “Yeah, hell no. He’s cut ties with all his family, won’t see any of them or even let them into the hotel. Has been all on his own for nine years now.”

Wonwoo looks down at the last dregs of oatmeal at the bottom of his bowl, a strange, pleased sensation buzzing over his skin. No family, he thinks in the back of his head, just like me. It’s nice to know that there’s people out there just as alone as him.

A particularly special party of guests enter the hotel the next day, and Junhui dines with them. He appears to be in a good mood afterwards, because when Wonwoo is just finishing his bowl of green tea ice cream (Seokmin had figured out by now that he can’t stand sweet food, and had apparently instructed his staff to use less sugar in his desserts), Jeonghan walks in and says, “Wonwoo, he wants to see you and Minghao and Anmei in an hour.”

“Us?” Wonwoo asks, rubbing at his mouth with the back of his hand. “Why?”

“How would I know?”

Seungkwan, who had sat down to eat with them tonight, snorts. “He’s probably just bored,” he reassures Wonwoo. “He did that to just about all of us directors before, just randomly calling on us to come talk with him for an hour or two. He likes picking people apart and trying to figure out what they’re thinking, it’s his favourite form of entertainment.”

This does make Wonwoo feel better somewhat, knowing that this is commonplace and they aren’t getting singled out for no reason, and once he’s sure that Anmei looks presentable they enter the wing’s primary common area, a large room that’s warm and cozy, with several couches arranged in loose circles by a wall-mounted flat screen TV and rich brown bookshelves lining the walls. The January frost on the windowpanes, crystallizing bluish-white against the backdrop of the darkness outside, doesn’t let its chill reach the room, where the hotel’s heating system and the room’s electric fireplace (blooming burning and bright behind a layer of embellished glass) keep them warm. Several fancy-looking ceramic ashtrays are set up on the tables, although none of them have been used and look more like aesthetic decorations than anything else. Junhui is already by the fire, settled into a plush red armchair, his ankle completely healed. He looks up and crooks a finger at Wonwoo, indicating for him to move closer.

“Good, you came,” he says. “I thought I’d have to talk to Anmei or Minghao for the next hour, and I was preparing myself for a night of sheer boredom. Oh, Anmei, that reminds me—come here. Your present awaits, your ǐwù.”

Anmei excitedly grabs the gift he presents to her and tears into the wrapping, revealing several well-made dolls with miniature closets full of what looks like dozens of unique, hand-stitched clothing. She squeals in delight and bursts out her thanks in enthusiastic Chinese, kissing Junhui on the cheek.
and making him grimace. “Okay, okay,” he mutters, “go play with Minghao. I’m going to talk to your childminder.”

Anmei asks something, turning between the two of them. The only word Wonwoo understands is a curious questioning word of “nanny?”

“Yes, your nanny. I want to talk to him. Minghao will play with your new toys with you.”

Minghao gives him a despairing look, but under Junhui’s stern, albeit highly amused gaze he reluctantly moves towards the couch with Anmei on the other side of the room. Wonwoo hides his sympathetic smile behind his knuckles when he sees Minghao fight back a sigh as Anmei starts to chatter away, helping her hold up all the tiny little outfits to examine them.

“Sit,” Junhui gestures at the armchair placed rather close to him. “I won’t bite. No, don’t move the chair, I put it there exactly where I wanted it. Don’t shift it away slightly as though I wouldn’t notice, are you afraid of me or something?”

Wonwoo frowns at him, indignant. As intimidating and odd as Junhui may be, he’s definitely not afraid. He does as he’s told just to defy that statement, moving the chair back towards him and sitting down with a stern expression.

“A little closer. I’m old and I’m too comfortable to change my position, and I can’t see you properly.”

“You can’t be that old,” Wonwoo remarks, boldly dragging the armchair over the rug until his lanky, bony knees almost touch Junhui’s.

“I’m thirty-four and that’s much older than you, I can say that’s enough for me to make excuses. So,” he abruptly says. “How do you like Thornfield?”

The shadows cast by the fire flicker across his warm skin like a living thing. It makes him look eerie and unearthly, but Wonwoo squashes that feeling down as far as it can go. Junhui’s no inhuman creature, no siren tempting people with his beauty and strangely charismatic words, he’s just a man. A very rich, very weird man who likes to play mind games on people. This might all just be one elaborate mind game. “I like it a lot. It’s very … big. And open. And the food is delicious.”

A hint of a smile crosses Junhui’s features, but he quickly frowns again, like he doesn’t want to be caught. “And what do you think of your employer so far?”

Wonwoo stares at him, caught completely off guard and growing flustered again, almost blushing a little in surprise. He’s at least ninety percent certain that Junhui didn’t mean anything by it, but considering this is Wen Junhui he’s talking about he can’t be sure of anything anymore. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You keep staring at me, especially when you think I don’t notice. It’s like you’re scrutinizing me. Why? Do you find me handsome?”

His answer jumps out of his throat before he can stop it. “No, sir.”

His hand flies up to clap over his mouth, but the damage is done. Junhui doubles over with laughter, almost gleefully satisfied with the answer he received. Wonwoo feels heat crawl up his cheeks in embarrassment, jaw clenching as he mentally kicks himself for saying that to his boss, like what is he even thinking? Years of getting his insolence beat out of him, and even now he still can’t control himself. Eventually, Junhui calms down enough to look up at him and gasp out, “You are, without doubt, the most interesting man I’ve ever met.”
He’s blushing now, for sure. He can feel the redness spreading across the back of his neck and to the tips of his ears, and he can only hope the distracting glare of the fire hides his reaction. “You couldn’t possibly know whether I’m boring or not,” he mutters. “We’ve talked exactly twice and greeted each other only about a handful other times.”

“And yet, here you are, being interesting.” Junhui’s eyes are bright and mischievous, an almost youthful glint that makes this thirty-something man look at least ten years younger. It’s a horribly good look on him. “Well, tell me. What is it about me that’s not handsome? Is it my nose? I’ve always found my nose a bit too big. Is it the shape of my mouth?”

Wonwoo straight up wants to die. He seriously just wishes this can all end before he puts his foot in his mouth again. “It’s not—it’s not anything. I’m sorry for being rude. I-I meant that you are conventionally attractive, and I’m sure plenty of people find you handsome, regardless of my own personal … feelings. I should have said something about beauty being in the eye of the beholder, and that people’s opinions can differ and that mine wasn’t important and you should just ignore me, or something like that.”

“No, you shouldn’t have. That’s a boring, roundabout answer, and you’ve just shown me that you are anything but boring.” Junhui leans back in his chair, grinning in that way of his that makes him look awfully more striking and devious than he usually does, long nimble fingers clasped together. “Go on, what is it that makes me not handsome? I still think it’s my nose.”

“You have a very nice nose.” Wonwoo sighs, praying to god that Minghao can’t eavesdrop on their conversation, or he’ll never hear the end of it. “If you really must know, I guess your behaviour is kind of unpredictable and it’s hard for me to follow sometimes, so that turns me off. Also, you don’t listen to people sometimes.”

“So it’s not any physical qualities that you find not handsome,” Junhui says cheerfully, looking thoroughly unoffended. “It’s just me that’s unappealing. I can’t fight that.”

“You certainly can’t,” Wonwoo says slowly. He doesn’t understand a single thing about this man, and it’s getting increasingly off-putting.

“Well, since you’ve given me your opinion on my looks, don’t you think it’s only fair that I give you my opinion on yours?” Without waiting for a response, Junhui scoots closer to the edge of his seat so he can lean in and look at Wonwoo’s face carefully, firelight dancing in the reflection of his eyes. “You’re tall and rather good-looking, that’s for sure. But I have to admit, when I first saw you I thought you were a little dull; or at the very least someone with not much to say. You’re very … composed, for someone your age. Like some eighteenth-century demure young woman who’s been taught to never speak her mind, hiding behind a paper fan or something.”

“Wow,” Wonwoo says wryly, “thank you for comparing me to a sexually-repressed eighteen-year-old girl from historical times. That’s something I don’t get often.” The next Elizabeth Bennet, right here. Again, coming to Thornfield is a huge mistake.

Junhui snorts, leaning away again so he can snicker into the back of his hand. “And there it is again — dry wit, a sarcastic sense of humour, blunt words that are posed in a way that they don’t feel impolite. That is what’s interesting about you, Jeon Wonwoo.” When Wonwoo scoffs low in the back of his throat and makes to get up from his chair, Junhui instantly frowns. “Where the hell are you going?”

“It’s almost Anmei’s bedtime, sir,” Wonwoo says, eager for a way to get out of this conversation and return to it when he’s capable of having some semblance of control, when he’s capable of steeling himself against Junhui’s abrupt subject changes and ridiculous words.
“She can afford to stay up another thirty minutes. Better yet, make Minghao take her. Why the hell do I pay to have two of you here otherwise? No, stay and keep me company for a little longer, I insist.”

Wonwoo sits back down again, but can’t help raising a brow at Junhui’s bossiness and shooting back at him, “You insist or you order?”

“A little bit of both,” Junhui answers shamelessly, and runs one hand through his golden hair, where it’s beginning to break free from its styling, some strands falling gently over his smooth forehead or curling around his ears. “I am your boss, and that position demands some respect, it’s true. But I don’t need a simpering, scampering little subordinate to kiss my ass and follow every word I say, that’s annoying and unnecessary. What I want, Wonwoo, is for you to talk to me and keep me company when I ask for it, but to talk to me like I am your equal, not your superior.”

“So what you’re saying is,” Wonwoo says, lips quirking, “that you want me to come to you when you beckon and call, like a trained monkey, and challenge you only when you want me to. Any other time and you are the boss, I’m your employee, and we are supposed to act as such.”

“You make it sound so terrible.” Junhui sighs, tilting his head back to rest against the chair and revealing the long column of his throat. A weaker man than Wonwoo might have grown slack-jawed at such a decadent sight, but all Wonwoo can think of is that this man is surprisingly rather childish.

“Look, what I’m saying is that I enjoy talking to you. You’re polite but you’re fearless. I like it, you won’t believe how hard it is to find someone who’ll talk to you like this these days. Just—treat me the way you do right now. Don’t be afraid to speak your mind. That’s all I ask of you, Wonwoo.”

In his peripherals, he can see Minghao rapidly losing energy and Anmei yawning into her dolls, and he stands up again. This time, Junhui doesn’t stop him. “I will do as you ask, sir,” he echoes back, and he can’t fight back the slight smile on his face when he bows and bids him goodnight.

On one particularly nice day, Wonwoo bundles Anmei up in a coat and scarf and absurdly tiny little mittens and they go out to the grounds behind Thornfield for her to play. Surprisingly, Junhui accompanies them, although by the time Anmei starts playing fetch with Seokmin’s dog Pilot (Wonwoo standing on the sidelines by an empty stone fountain that’s been retired for the winter), he feels like it’s just him and Junhui out here, which makes this whole thing feel strangely intimate.

“Just look at her,” Junhui mutters, half to Wonwoo and half to himself. He seems taller than usual in a long black coat that brushes the back of his calves, a white scarf wrapped tight around his neck like a cravat. He looks elegant and graceful and minimalistic, and once again Wonwoo feels idiotic standing next to him, almost equal in height and stature, but with messy hair and old-fashioned glasses and wearing clothes he found in the bargain bin of some Walmart three years ago. “Not a single feature is similar to mine. She looks just like her.”

Wonwoo doesn’t say anything at first. He knows what Junhui’s talking about, of course—Anmei’s runaway mother. It’s very easy to tell what he means now that Junhui is actually here at Thornfield and Wonwoo can so easily compare the two. While both Anmei and Junhui have big, pretty eyes, the form is all different. Their mouths and noses aren’t similar either, nor their face shape, or even something as small as the curvature of their earlobes. If he was just a stranger and happened to see the two of them together, he’s not sure if he would place Junhui as the little girl’s father just by sight alone.

“I mean,” he eventually says in what he hopes sounds like consolation, “you two share the same stubbornness. And childishness. And hard-headed determination to make everything go your way,
no matter what sort of underhanded tricks you need to pull.”

Junhui snorts at that, but he doesn’t respond, instead staring with a surly expression at his daughter, who is chasing after Pilot and shrieking with laughter. “Chinese names for girls are usually meant to invoke traditionally feminine, virtuous qualities, maybe because they hope it will influence the child to grow up with those virtues in question. You know what her name means? Ān for quiet, měi for beautiful. Clearly, something went wrong down the line, because my child only ended up with one of those traits.”

Wonwoo can’t be sure if Junhui is joking or not. In moments like this, when his words are so sardonic and his expression is dark and contemplative, it’s hard to tell. He settles with, “She is very beautiful.”

“Of course she is. Her mother was gorgeous.”

Wonwoo listens carefully for any sense of wistfulness, of heartbreak, of pained longing in Junhui’s voice, but he hears nothing but frank straightforward words and the faintest taste of long-forgotten bitterness. “I’ve heard most of the story from Minghao.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you did. Everyone in Thornfield loves to gossip.” Junhui heaves a sigh, shoulders slumping, as he watches Anmei run until her cheeks turn red as cherries and she’s pulling off her hat and scarf. “Well, I’m in the mood for oversharing, so if you have any questions that Minghao couldn’t answer feel free to ask them now.”

“What was her name?” Wonwoo blurts out almost immediately. “Of—of her mother, I mean.”

“Watabe Seiko.” Junhui’s answer is short and unfeeling. “A singer in Japan. She adored music, all the arts, really. Passionate, headstrong, romantic. Exactly the kind of fool I would fall in love with.”

Weirdly enough, Wonwoo feels a faint tightness in his chest. It’s only there for the barest millisecond, and then it’s gone. “So you were in love with her?”

Junhui throws his hands up into the air, suddenly exasperated. “I mean, can you call it love? I was obsessed with her, blinded by her beauty, overwhelmed by her intensity. I was so certain I wasn’t good enough for her—nobody could be, she was a goddess in human form in my eyes—so I tried to buy her love. I gave her everything she wanted, basically worshipped her at her feet. And when I came back to the penthouse I shared with her in Tokyo on a surprise visit, I catch her in bed with another man. Not only that, I catch her in bed talking shit about me to another man. Calling me a vain, hopeless idiot, a cash cow, a giant wallet on legs she’s so masterfully tricked into splurging on her.”

“Oh my god. I-I’m so sorry. That must have been so terrible.”

Junhui doesn’t say anything for a slight moment, just a brief window of hesitation, before he turns to Wonwoo with an almost breathtakingly crooked smile. “Nah,” he says lightly, all the irritation and simmering anger drained out of him seemingly out of nowhere, “that was probably the best thing that could’ve happened to me. It wasn’t her fault, in a way. I had built her up to impossible standards, basically molded an idea of her and fell in love with that. The goddess I imagined her as would have never said the kind of crude, greedy things I overheard her say. The angel I envisioned her to be would have never been stupid and ugly enough to crow and triumph over her success the way she did. Either way, I burst in there and kicked them both out, ignored her cries and pleas and feeble excuses. It was the fastest I’ve ever gotten over someone in my life.”

“Have there been other women like her?” Wonwoo asks cautiously. “Who’ve, you know, used you
like that?"

“Oh, plenty. Men, women, it’s all the same: when you get to a certain level of fortune, they flock to you in droves. The trick is to figure out within the first five minutes of conversation whether they want you out of genuine attraction or just a desperate grab for your money.” He grins bitterly down at the murky puddles at the very bottom of the fountain, more a baring of teeth than a real smile. “I was stupid and rebellious in my youth. Lots and lots of mistakes. I used my dad’s money to travel all over the world, picking up anyone who caught my eye, Venice, Paris, LA, Puerto Rico, London, Hong Kong. You lose count of all the dumb decisions you make, eventually.”

“When did you … stop picking people up?” Wonwoo pauses. “Or did you ever stop?”

Junhui looks up at the grey sky and hums noncommittally for a moment. In a strange flash of inspiration, Wonwoo thinks he looks like artwork, some marble-carved statue radiant in the faint flashes of sun that manages to spear through the wintery clouds above. “As cliché as it sounds, I stopped fooling around like that right after the disaster with Seiko. I may not have been left horribly traumatized by her betrayal or anything, but she was a clear wake-up call for me. I refused to let myself, my time, my money, my body, be used by people like that ever again. And when I found out about Anmei … well, I know I’m not a great father to her, and I probably never will be, but I’m not going to put her through a string of stepmothers like that.”

Wonwoo isn’t sure what to say for a couple seconds. “That’s very noble of you,” he finally says.

“Heh. Noble.” Junhui kicks at a loose stone on the path, his expression one similar to a sinner contemplating the point of going to church, before looking back up to yell out, “Anmei, come here! It’s too cold, we’re done for the day. Come back inside, we’ll have lunch together.”

Anmei gives Pilot one last pat on the head before running over to them, eager to spend more time with her long-absent father. “She has a biology tutor in twenty-five minutes, sir,” Wonwoo says quietly.

“Cancel it.” Junhui lifts Anmei up in one smooth, easy motion and lets her sit up on her shoulders, making her shriek delightedly and cling to his hands. “Cancel all her classes. She can do with one free day.”

And in this moment, under the cold, wet, white sunlight and amidst the dry brambles of bare trees and dead stalks, Wonwoo thinks he’s the most handsome man in the world. How can he not? He may be callous at times, impossible to predict, but somehow his faults only make Wonwoo admire him more. It’s his crankiness, the frequent bouts of bad temper that Wonwoo had only a few days ago called a deal-breaker, that makes Junhui’s moments of gentleness—of genuine good humour and warm laughter—all the more precious. He watches Anmei giggle up on Junhui’s shoulders, stretching out to touch high branches she couldn’t reach before in a way that even makes Junhui laugh, and something in him feels ridiculously warm and fuzzy.

From that day onwards, Junhui calls them over almost every evening to talk in the common room before bedtime. Wonwoo doesn’t want to make assumptions, but every time they walk in and Junhui gestures for him to sit in his usual spot close by he can’t help but feel flattered, wondering if this is all for him, if out of everyone in the hotel Junhui is calling the childminders over to talk to him specifically.

Minghao and Anmei are usually there to distract them, while other times it’s Jeonghan or maybe Seokmin, or Soonyoung trying to convince Junhui to fund a clam bake in the courtyard, or Seungkwan impatient to spill all the latest gossip, or even Jihoon dropping by to engage in conversation whenever he has the time to sit and laugh with a beer, more relaxed than Wonwoo’s
ever seen him before. Junhui also has a special interest in Chan, letting the bellhop sit in the common area and have snacks and laughing at the way Chan practically bounces on the edge of his seat in excitement and trepidation.

But Wonwoo is the constant in this equation, *never* the variable, and there have been plenty of moments where it’s just him, alone, and he and Junhui end up talking well into the night.

He finds himself looking forward to this new tradition more than he’s willing to admit.

“You told me the first time we met,” Junhui says during one of those nights where they’re on their own, where there’s no light except for the dim lamps and the electric fireplace, and Wonwoo feels like the warmth emanating from this room and his employer is a singular lighthouse in the center of a cold, still black ocean, “that you didn’t have a good time in Lowood. Is this a good time to tell me your reasons why?”

Wonwoo fidgets uncomfortably for a moment, but he has a glass of some really good, really expensive wine in his hand (from Junhui’s personal collection, and Junhui wouldn’t take no for an answer when he pressed it into Wonwoo’s hand) and it’s loosening his inhibitions a little. “You really wanna sit here and listen to my sob story?”

“I’ve got sob stories of my own, too, you can say I’m desensitized to them by now. I have all the time in the world for your tale of woe.” Junhui leans heavily back in the comfortable smooth leather of his armchair. He looks lazy and powerful, the deep red of the wine he’s drinking a stark, vivid colour against his dark skin and the crisp cream-white of his shirt. Wonwoo sighs and shifts into a more comfortable position, taking another sip before speaking.

“Lowood’s old management didn’t care very much for its students. The old headmaster before Miss Temple was this horrible old guy, Brocklehurst. Despite never shutting up about the school’s pride in taking on international students from all over the world, he wasn’t very … kind … to any of the kids there that were anything other than white.” Just the memory of that man, with his cold gaze and self-important, holier-than-thou words, makes Wonwoo look down to hide the unbearable hate in his eyes, makes him want to clench his jaw and punch something. He has to fight down the fire—he has to control himself. He thinks of Mingming, of sunshine and snow and flowing streams and soft, gentle things. Of Anmei’s warm little figure sleeping in his arms when she comes running in after a bad dream. “And since my dear old aunt made sure to tell him what a terrible, vicious troublemaker I was, I was given special attention.”

Special attention in the form of belts, of rulers against the soft parts of his palms, of ridiculing and tormenting him in front of all his classmates and forcing them to ostracize him, of running laps around the school until he’s throwing up, of making him stand outside of the classroom holding his arms up to the ceiling for so long he can barely use them the next day. Of forcing him in a corner of Brocklehurst’s office as he rants and raves about his sins, scaring a small ten-year-old child to shakes and tears with threats of fire and brimstone and the deep pits of hell all liars and mischief-makers and sinful young boys are sent to.

“That does sound awful,” Junhui murmurs. When Wonwoo manages to look up from his lap, he sees that his employer isn’t looking at him anymore; his gaze is directed towards the fireplace, frowning heavily and lost in thought. “I knew of Brocklehurst, or at least I heard his name dropped a couple times from my father’s circle back in the day. A pompous idiot, from what I’ve heard. A wealthy, arrogant preacher in the making who doesn’t like to walk his talk.”

Wonwoo’s lips crook into a bitter smile. “A hypocrite if there ever was one. He forced us to wear ugly old uniforms that didn’t fit us properly and cut our hair right down to our skull so we could ‘build character’, but then he would bring his wife and children over in their fancy, expensive brand-
name clothes and salon-styled hairdos. The kids used to laugh at us and ask us why we liked looking poor.”

“Jesus.”

“Oh yeah. The whole family was terrible.” Wonwoo hesitates, and he’s not sure why he’s saying this next part, why he trusts Junhui so much with this information, but it’s falling out of his mouth before he can even think about it. “My friend—my closest friend, the only person I’ve ever cared for in my entire life—he died because of Brocklehurst. I can never forgive him for it.”

Junhui turns back to look at him, which Wonwoo ignores by studiously examining the back of his hands. If Junhui was planning on saying something—words of comfort, of encouragement, of sympathy—he doesn’t, which Wonwoo somehow appreciates. He eventually finds the words on his own.

“His name was Mingming. We shared a bunk. He was … unlike anyone else I ever met. He was only a year older than me, but he had this weird sense of—of maturity and peace about him, like he knew things adults did, maybe better than them. He daydreamed a lot, but he was smart, really smart, and it didn’t matter if the teachers didn’t let him eat dinner, or made him stand outside in the rain all day long as punishment, he never cried or complained. I’m not exaggerating when I say he was the kindest, most genuine person I’ve ever known.”

“Did you love him?” Junhui suddenly asks.

“What?” Wonwoo blinks at him, startled. “I-I was ten. He was and still is someone I think of dearly, but I loved him as much as anybody could at that age.”


“Well, you’ve probably heard of the big disaster in Lowood eleven years ago, the leptospirosis outbreak, right?” Junhui nods in confirmation. “The Lowood building was so old and gross rats were living in the walls. They would, well, they were infected and would creep around the kitchen and piss in our food. We started getting fevers, headaches, stomach pains … it would go away for a few days and we’d think we’re all better, and then it would start up even worse than before. We were the only ones who had to eat that disgusting mushy gruel shit and old bread which meant none of the teachers got sick, so Brocklehurst thought we were—I dunno—faking it or something? He refused to look into what was going on, or call a doctor up, or anything.”

He has to stop; he has to look away and clench his hands into fists and grit his teeth to fight back the burning building up in the back of his eyes.

“I remember hearing about that,” Junhui mutters. “Lowood was isolated in nature, and Brocklehurst had a tight hold on all the phones and wouldn’t let anyone leave. By the time Miss—Temple, her name was?—managed to defy Brocklehurst and call the nearest hospital, it was already too serious. Some of the students got severely infected and didn’t make it.”

“Yeah. Meningitis was what did most of them in. Mingming was one of them.” It had been an utter disaster, chaos of the highest order. Wonwoo had been one of the lucky kids, a skinny, awkward thirteen-year-old who only had a mild case of leptospirosis and managed to come out of it as healthy as can be. Throughout the confusion of that time in his life, he has the distinct memory of sitting on a swing in the courtyard and watching the doctors rush in and out to assess the damage; of watching his classmates get quarantined in various rooms when they realized there was no way to take so many of them all the way down to the hospital without putting their lives more at risk; of breaking into the sick room in the middle of the night and risking contracting the disease himself to comfort
Mingming as he slowly died, so far gone that not even treatment saved him in time. Wonwoo gently
swirls his drink, moodily stares at the flow of the wine in his glass. “I was with him when he finally
stopped breathing.”

“I see.” Junhui’s voice is complicated, strange. He makes a movement as if he wants to comfort
Wonwoo, pat his hand or maybe touch his arm or something, but after a split second of hesitation he
settles back even further into his seat than before, his free hand clenched into a fist at his knee. “I’m
sorry.”

“Yeah. Yeah, me too.” He takes a deep gulp and lets his head swim with the sudden rush of alcohol.
“Well, that got Brocklehurst arrested and charged, and it got Miss Temple into the headmaster’s
office and she made Lowood a much better place, so it wasn’t all bad. When she was the
headmistress, I actually enjoyed myself there.”

“Still, that’s a horrible thing to go through as a child.” Junhui sounds so genuine, so heartfelt, when
he says, “Guess we both have sob stories after all. You have my utmost sympathy, Wonwoo. Truly.
You do.”

Wonwoo smiles weakly up at his boss. “I don’t need it,” he says, fiddling with his glasses to combat
the sudden leaping and soaring feelings roaring in his head and chest, “but thanks.”

The more time he spends with Junhui, the more nervous Wonwoo starts to get. Everybody had told
him that Junhui only ever stays for about two weeks or so before leaving again, and as the days
crawl by into weeks and then eventually settles into two months, he has very definitely long
overstayed his usual visit. It makes Wonwoo feel almost anxious, as if every time he sees Junhui it
will be his last.

But Junhui seems comfortable staying in Thornfield, bantering loudly with Seungkwan in the dining
hall or inviting the other directors for a game of pool. Sometimes he’s in a good enough mood to go
greeting the guests in the lobby with firm handshakes and charismatic smiles. He even seems to be
warming up to Anmei somewhat, taking more time to see her and letting her rant away to him in
Chinese.

At some point in the middle of March, as the weather starts to get warmer and the tiniest buds of
flowers begin to poke through the slushy dirt, Wonwoo wakes up drenched in cold sweat after
another terrible dream of his childhood. This time it’s not Lowood or Mingming, he’s nine years old
and he’s back in Aunt Choi’s house, in a room as red as blood, screaming until he thinks his throat
will rip itself apart. His uncle’s presence beyond the grave, ashy and whispering in his ears, clawing
for him with a terrible, unearthly scream—

The spacious hotel room is dark, the sky a dull shadowy blue empty without a sun. He’s in that state
of alertness where he’s able to clearly distinguish the difference between being awake and dreaming,
and yet that ghostly howl is still echoing faintly in the real world.

“Hello?” he croaks out, not sure why, not sure of anything. His heart is pounding right up to his ears,
hyperaware of the blood thundering like racehorses through his veins, more scared than anything
he’s ever felt in his life. There’s no answer, but he can hear the voice breaking out into muffled sobs
somewhere above him, on the upper floor. This isn’t the Red Room and this isn’t his uncle’s ghost.
It’s not a dream. He knows it isn’t. It’s real, it has to be real, where’s Anmei, where’s Minghao,
can’t they hear it too or is it all in his head? His mind races. It would be so easy to forget this all ever
happened. To return to bed and go back to sleep and write it all off as a dream. But whether this is
some strange, creepy lady or simply just one of Seungkwan’s housekeepers having a hysterical
meltdown in the forbidden upper floor, he needs to know.

He leaves his room and follows the sound up to the staircase on shaky legs, where it fades away with a gurgling gasp and he hears only faint footsteps in the distance. By the time he reaches the landing to the third floor and peeks down the spooky darkened hallway, there is absolutely nothing. The air feels strangely dry and heavy up here, light flickering dimly in a room off in the distance, and as his bare feet take a couple silent steps forward on the plush carpet he realizes with a start that it’s smoke.

*Something’s on fire.*

Wonwoo stumbles a couple steps more, confused and stiff, his brain not quite in sync with his body, before breaking out into a full-on run. He races towards the source of the smoke and finds the door unlocked and wide open, revealing a suite room just like his own. It makes it easy to navigate through the space when it’s this familiar, wasting no time in bursting into the bedroom to find it blazing and alive with light, the curtains hanging on the four-poster bed caught into flames.

He blanks out.

“Shit!” he choked out, repeating himself when he sees a sleeping figure sprawled out in the bed. He doesn’t have to look closer to know who it is. “Shit! S-sir! Mr. Wen, wake up, please, your curtains —”

Junhui groans in his sleep but doesn’t stir.

“Mr. Wen, come on!”

He shakes him violently, but Junhui still doesn’t respond.

“*Junhui!*”

Wonwoo is beginning to panic for real now; the smoke is starting to make it hard to breathe, forcing tears into his eyes, the fire eating away at the curtains beginning to creep closer and closer to the blankets draped over his employer. He remembers reading somewhere that people can die from smoke inhalation far more than actual fires, and that cements his decision—he runs out to the kitchen and grabs a large glass bowl full of fruit, sending apples and oranges and a pineapple scattering every which way on the ground, fills it up with water, and runs back to the bedroom to upend it all over Junhui’s face.

Junhui wakes up spluttering and choking, thrashing in his bed for a few seconds as if he dreams of drowning. When he comes to, eyes blinking rapidly from the smoke, Wonwoo practically drags him off the bed with a half-sob getting stuck in his throat.

“What is—” Junhui stops when he sees the burning drapes, expression darkening into first awareness and then understanding. Without another word, he grabs the bowl from Wonwoo’s shaking hands and races to the adjacent bathroom, turning the faucet on at full blast and filling the bowl up as quickly as possible. With that, he begins to douse the flames, and once they’re at a more manageable level Wonwoo grabs the blankets and throws it against the bedposts, smothering the fire down to nothing.

The two of them gasp for air, standing in Junhui’s bedroom, choked with smoke, the charred remains of the pretty golden curtains burnt black and crumbling. Without another word, Junhui takes Wonwoo by the elbow and silently leads him out to the living room, pushing him with extraordinary gentleness down onto the couch. He leaves him for a few moments and Wonwoo watches as he pads over to the tiny kitchen area and fills a glass with water.
“Here,” he murmurs, giving Wonwoo the glass. “What happened? Tell me everything.”

“I-I—” Wonwoo pauses to take a sip, completely undone. *He could have died,* he realizes suddenly, with a nauseating sensation of dread and despair, *Junhui could have died tonight if I hadn’t come up here.* “I heard a sound—a strange noise—like a-a-a woman crying—” Junhui’s jaw twitches imperceptibly, but he makes no other movement. “—and when I came up here to see who it was I noticed smoke and your door was open and I found—” he breaks off, waving helplessly at the scene around them. “Why didn’t your smoke alarm go off, sir?”

“I disabled mine,” he replies curtly, “the ones in my room are finicky and I don’t need the entire wing evacuating every time I accidentally burn too much of my toast. This voice—this person—you were talking about, did you see it? Did you see where they went?”

“Down there,” Wonwoo points with a trembling hand down the direction the hallway follows outside, “but I-I couldn’t see anything, I only heard—did someone try to kill you, Junhui? The fire didn’t start itself, did—did someone try to—” he sets the glass of water down onto the coffee table before his shaking spills it, running one hand weakly through his messy bedhead hair. “Fuck, you could have died, oh my god, how are you not freaking the fuck out right now you could have died—”

“Hey. Okay, okay, sssh, hey, you’re alright.” Junhui sits down beside him, and before Wonwoo can process what’s going on he’s being pulled forwards until he’s resting his head against Junhui’s broad shoulders, a strong hand gently rubbing circles into his back. “You’re alright, we’re both alright, nobody died.”

“Jesus, fuck,” Wonwoo takes a sharp breath, ragged and feeble, “What fucking idiot doesn’t turn on his smoke alarms? I can’t have you die on me like Mingming did, like my parents did, like my uncle did. God, Junhui, it’ll kill me, I can’t.”

“No one is dying, Wonwoo, I promise.” Junhui’s hand tightens around his shoulder, the weight firm and just on the side of almost hurting, grounding him back to reality. “Nobody got hurt, everything’s gonna be fine. Sssh, sssh.” He holds him until Wonwoo’s shoulders stop trembling, his breathing steadying out, then leans in to say gently, “Listen, I have to go check out that noise, okay? I’ll have to leave you alone for a bit. Open the windows in my room to air out the smoke and get my housecoat from the closet, use that to keep you warm. Keep quiet, don’t make any noise. I’ll be back soon.”

Wonwoo’s hand spasms into an unprecedented movement and reaches out to grip Junhui’s shoulder. “Be careful,” he croaks, aware that he sounds desperate.

Junhui looks down at him and the hand on his shoulder before giving him a soft smile and disappearing, the door closing behind him. By the time he returns, the room is a little brighter than before from the lightening sky of a pre-dawn world, Wonwoo weary and dozing uneasily on the couch and wrapped up in a fluffy red housecoat.

The walls are thick and sturdy and he doesn’t hear him walk in, but Wonwoo wakes up the second Junhui touches his arm. “Did you find anything? Who was it? How did they—?”

“Enough, I’m exhausted.” Junhui sinks down beside him, rubbing blearily at his face and looking thoroughly bad-tempered. “I didn’t find anyone. There was nothing out of place.”

“But there was someone there! There must have been. W-we should go to the police. or—or—I dunno, talk to Jihoon and invest in more security?”
“No, we’re not doing any of that.” He steals Wonwoo’s glass of water and drinks deeply from it.

“Sir, that’s bullshit! Someone tried to kill you, we should try to find out who!”

“Wonwoo.” Junhui’s eyes turn to him. Even in the sleepy blue of early morning light, they’re as dark and piercing as ever, alert and dangerous, like some sort of intelligent, wild jungle animal. “Do you trust me?”

He scoffs. “Frankly? Fuck no.”

One side of Junhui’s mouth slowly curls up into a smile, then the other. “Well, you better start now. Believe me when I tell you this, making a scene of this whole affair will only make things worse. If it makes you feel better, I’ll lock my door from now on and reinstall the smoke alarms. But keep quiet about this, don’t tell anyone you saw or heard anything out of the ordinary. Make sure your own door is always locked. I’ll deal with it, okay?”

He knows from experience that when Junhui’s voice goes like this, he’s not looking for an argument —his word is law. “I will do as you ask, sir,” Wonwoo mutters a little bitterly, which makes Junhui let out a low, throaty laugh. “I better return to my room and get a few more hours of sleep before Anmei and Minghao wake up.”

He stands up, glad that his legs aren’t shaking anymore, and moves to leave the room. Junhui stops him with a sudden hand constricting around his wrist. “Hey, are you serious right now?”

“W-what?”

“You’re just gonna leave me like this?” Junhui frowns at him teasingly, but his gaze is poignant and mesmerizing and full of a strange, unexplainable fire, the gravity of his eyes alone keeping Wonwoo in place as he stands up (suddenly looking so much taller and more imposing than Wonwoo) and takes one of Wonwoo’s hands in both of his. Junhui’s skin colour is darker, fingers more lithe and sure compared to the knobby knuckles and faint pre-coffee jitters belonging to the hand he’s clasping, and Wonwoo finds that he relishes the contrast between the two of them. They’re standing so close together that Wonwoo has this strange, wild moment where he thinks his boss might swoop down and kiss him. “Wonwoo, you saved my life. No pay raise in the world can repay what you’ve done for me tonight.”

He feels himself grow hot and embarrassed under Junhui’s heated stare, but he really, really likes the feeling of their hands pressed together. “I didn’t do anything out of the ordinary. Just forget it.”

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“You said you thought I was dull at first, you idiot,” Wonwoo thinks, more fondly than he meant to. Out loud, he simply says, “Good night, sir. I’m going back to bed now.”

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“Oh, of course.” But Junhui doesn’t release his hold on him. They remain standing, as close together as ever, hands clasped together in a strangely intimate way. Wonwoo’s heart thuds hard and quick against his lungs and ribcage, loud enough that he thinks the entire hotel might be able to hear it too. “You called me Junhui back then, do you remember that?”

In the back of his mind, Wonwoo tells himself to just pull away. He knows if he does, if he drags his hand back, Junhui wouldn’t fight it. But for reasons that escape him, he doesn’t. “Thank you for the housecoat, Mr. Wen. Here, take it back.”

“You keep it. Good night.”
Wonwoo’s ears are burning, setting fire to his insides and sinking deep into the center of his chest. “You’re still holding my hand. Um. Sir.”

Junhui’s fingers don’t move for a moment. Eventually, they very slowly loosen their hold and Wonwoo’s hand slides away, tingling slightly and searing hot from the touch. He doesn’t look behind him as he leaves the room, rushing as quietly as he can back down to his own comfortable bed. The adrenaline rush still pounding its way through his veins makes it difficult for him to fall back asleep and when he finally does, his head is filled with confusing thoughts of his employer, the terrible despair he felt when he thought there was a chance he might lose the man, and above all else, the way Junhui looked at him when he held Wonwoo’s hand.

“Jesus, did you hear?” Jeonghan says when he sits down for lunch the next day. “There was a fire in Mr. Wen’s room last night.”

“What?” Soonyoung squawks, nearly choking on a mouthful of bacon-egg sandwich. “Holy shit, is he okay?”

“Yeah, he’s fine, woke up just in time to put it out.”

Wonwoo hides his small jolt of nervous shock by taking a sip of his coffee, nearly spilling it all over his bitten nails. He had been wondering what Junhui’s story would be, had spent the entire day desperately waiting for an opportunity to see him again, to have a moment alone to talk to him about what had happened. He’s not an idiot. He knows Junhui is hiding something, but what and why he will never be able to tell. Unfortunately, he hasn’t seen Junhui even once, and with all his attention taken over by Anmei this morning he hasn’t had the chance to go out and find him himself. He asks, as calmly and indifferently as he can, “Did he say how it started?”

“He lit some candles in his room and forgot to put them out,” Jeonghan says with a slight shrug. “They must’ve caught fire on the bedpost’s curtains sometime during the night. I was talking with Seungkwan, you should see them, they’re burned to a crisp. We have to fix the blankets, the curtains, the bedposts, clean out all the water stains in the carpet… poor guy is losing his mind. I think he was about ten seconds away from cursing Mr. Wen out for adding to his stress.”

“That would be a sight to see,” Jihoon mutters.

“All the rooms are exactly the same,” Seokmin pragmatically points out, “he can just sleep in another one until it’s cleaned up, right?”

“Yeah, but he’s pretty annoyed by it all. You know how he gets once he claims something, never wants to let go of it. He insists on sleeping in that suite only. If it’s still not fixed by the time he gets back, he’ll probably end up crashing on the couch until the bed is replaced and the carpet dried.”

“Wait, what?” Wonwoo blurts out, and this time he really does spill some coffee over his hands. “Did you just say ‘when he gets back’? Where the hell is he now?”

“You didn’t know?” Jeonghan replies, giving his outburst a weird look. “He left this morning. He’s out on business in Incheon.”

“He’ll be back, right?” When everyone’s gaze turns to him (Jihoon looking a little too suspicious for his liking) he ducks back down into what’s left of his coffee that isn’t currently staining the pretty white tablecloth, face growing hot. “I-I mean, he’s probably only going to be gone for a day or two, right?”
“I mean, *maybe.* But it’s not like he’ll be in a hotel. He’s staying over at Im Bora’s penthouse, so he could be gone for a week, maybe a month. Flighty, remember?”

“Im Bora?”

“Socialite and daughter of the late CEO of Ingram Cosmetics,” Seokmin pipes up. He looks a little silly with his bangs pulled away from his face in a bright red hairband, but Wonwoo is too stunned to even make a joke about it right now. “She’s one of Mr. Wen’s particular friends. Whenever he needs to be in Incheon, he stays over at her and her sister’s place. God knows rich people have enough time and space to do that sort of thing.”

“I’ve never heard of Im Bora before,” Wonwoo says, feeling a strange hollow pit form slowly in his stomach. He pushes his cup and half-finished sandwich aside, no longer hungry. “What’s she like?”

“Jeez, I dunno.” Soonyoung lets out a small laugh. “We’re just the help, bro. She doesn’t have time to talk to us.”

“Last time she was here was for a Christmas get-together, like, two years ago,” Jeonghan says. “They host it in different places each time, but that year it was at Thornfield. She was the life of the party, and she knew it.”


Jeonghan gives the directors a disapproving (although somewhat understanding) look. “Because she said your turkey was too dry?”

“Because she insulted *everything* I made for her!” Seokmin brushes crumbs off of his fingers in disgust. Jihoon cackles even louder. “Like, *I’m* sorry your French chef can make you gold-dusted pancakes and thousand-dollar espressos or whatever the fuck you want, but Mr. Wen never had a problem with the food I made, so it should be good enough for you.”

“Like he said,” Jeonghan says, flashing Wonwoo a sly grin, “a *bit* of a bitch. She’s really pretty, though. The kind of girl Mr. Wen would dumbly chase after, to be honest, that man has no sense when it comes to romance.”

First Watabe Seiko, now Im Bora. He’s starting to see a pattern in Junhui’s taste in lovers. “What does she look like?”

“Hold on.” He pulls out his cell phone, a simple rose gold thing, and starts scrolling through his photo library. “She told me to take a picture of them together once, I think I forgot to delete it. Ah, here it is. Take a look.”

He passes Wonwoo his phone, and Wonwoo stares at the screen with growing trepidation. There’s Junhui, as handsome and glowing as ever, and next to him, with his arm securely around her thin waist, is a beautiful woman with pale porcelain skin and big brown eyes. She really is beautiful—whether it’s plastic surgery or natural genetic luck, every single facial feature is perfectly in place, wavy hair flowing down her back and over her elegant bare shoulders. She looks utterly breathtaking in a vivid red dress, matching lipstick showing off her cupid’s bow upper lip and faint dimples. Next to Junhui, with his own smile and dashing black-suited figure, they look like a match made in heaven. The kind of couple that are red carpet ready and famous and probably have a fan name that combines their own and mashes it up in an amalgamation of letters.

“She really is pretty,” he mumbles, staring and staring until the image of Im Bora is burned into his
pupils, and he quickly hands Jeonghan his phone back. “I better go get Anmei, she might be hungry after her class ends.”

He leaves before they can say anything else, and as he walks down the halls towards the music room where Anmei is taking her piano lessons, he internally punches himself. Stupid, hopeless idiot. Did he really think he was some kind of favourite in Junhui’s eyes? That Junhui liked his company, liked him?

Junhui is rich and irreverent and selfish, he angrily reminds himself, and while he may enjoy talking to Wonwoo when he’s staying in Thornfield, he’s obviously going to leave him for wealthier, more privileged, more interesting company of higher status and more intelligent opinions than some lowly fresh-out-of-his-undergrad nanny. How can he be so pathetic as to make himself think Junhui actually liked him, that the strange moment between them last night meant anything?

“You know better, Wonwoo,” he mutters to himself, rounding a corner. By the elevators there happens to be a mirror, and he stares at himself with increasing loathing, at his messy dark hair and smudged round glasses and his lanky frame.

Some may call him handsome, and maybe back in his university campus amongst fellow undergrads with instant noodle diets and all-nighter eyebags that may be true; but within this world of crystal and gold and the dazzling, ditzy allure of people with more money than they know what to do with, all he sees is someone mild and plain and poor and utterly uninteresting. Someone who is not even close to a passionate Japanese singer, or a beautiful heiress to a cosmetics empire. The kind of person that couldn’t hold onto a man like Wen Junhui if his life fucking depended on it.

“Remember this, he tells himself, forcing a smile onto his face when he opens the door and Anmei looks up from the grand piano. Every time you think Wen Junhui sees you as anything other than his daughter’s babysitter, every time you think of him as anything more than the man who pays you, think of Im Bora. Remember what she looks like, who she is, what kind of status she carries under her name. Remember that the place she holds next to him is not the kind of place you can reach. Remember, and forget, and give up on this—whatever the fucking fuck this is.

If there’s one thing Wonwoo is good at, it’s keeping himself from thinking of distracting things. And for the most part, it works.

When there’s a lull—when Anmei has finally gone off to sleep, or Seokmin isn’t convincing him to help give Pilot a dreaded bath—when there’s any sort of break in his work that makes him weak to the thought of his absent employer, he thinks of the picture of Im Bora and composes himself again. When Jeonghan tells him that he won’t be surprised if Junhui goes from Incheon straight to Busan for business at Thornfield’s sister hotels and then to China and then on to America and they probably won’t see him again for another year, he refuses to let himself feel disappointed and resigned.

A week goes by, then two, and eventually the stray, errant thought of Wen Junhui doesn’t make his heart race and his stomach clench, to his immense relief.

He’s finally getting over him.

Well into the start of April, as a whole team of gardeners prepare the grounds of Thornfield for its beautiful spring and summer months, Jeonghan receives an email from Junhui that sends everyone into a state of panic once again.

“Change of plans, apparently,” he tells Wonwoo, in the middle of sending mass emails to all the hotel directors. He’s looking slightly frantic. “Originally, there were all planning on going to Mr. Nam’s summer home, but it’s still too early and it won’t be cleaned out in time, so Mr. Wen
suggested they all come to Thornfield instead. We need to get all the rooms in his wing ready, get the
gardens looking nice, hire a couple more special chefs, oh my god why can’t this man send me this a
week or two in advance? Why three days before they arrive? He’s going to be the death of me, I
swear, he must enjoy tormenting me.”

“What do I do?” Wonwoo asks, eager to help and get his mind off of things, desperate to make
himself busy enough to forget everything.

“You do nothing. Just keep Minghao and Anmei out of the way.” And with that, he returns to the
emails, muttering to himself, “There’s Mr. Nam, his wife, their two daughters, there’s Mrs. Lee and
her two sons, there’s Mr. and Mrs. Do, Mrs. Im and Bora and Miyeon, that’s … twelve people,
okay, okay, and …”

The next few days are pure, utter chaos, even more than it had been when Junhui first came back. He
thought Junhui’s little slice of home in Thornfield was already pretty enough, but evidently it’s not,
since he and Anmei and Minghao are ushered to Anmei’s play room and forced to stay there as
vacuums roar up and down halls and teams of Seungkwan’s staff dust away at chandeliers and
paintings. Anmei is excited for the new company—especially all the fancy, stylish ladies that Junhui
will be bringing—and even Minghao seems interested, if at least to bring some liveliness to the peace
and quiet of Thornfield’s private wing.

Wonwoo, on the other hand, is not as excited. Well, he’s something like it, but it’s more like
anticipation and dread than anything else. The moment he heard Junhui was coming back, his
resistance had crumbled away and he’s back to the same way he was before, heart palpitations and
sweaty palms and racing thoughts. Against all sense, against all reason and judgement, Wonwoo is
eager to see him again, to talk to him, to have their late-night conversations over glasses of wine and
rapid, witty discussions full of odd banter and sarcastic comments.

But Junhui’s not coming back for him, he’s coming back with Im Bora and his other high class
friends. Wonwoo shouldn’t be so impatient to see his boss again. He shouldn’t be feeling anything.

Three days later, several expensive cars in velvety black or glossy red or pearly, elegant white roll up
to the front of the hotel late in the evening. Wonwoo doesn’t let Anmei go into the lobby to see the
new guests, but he does let her look through the peephole of the play room as the members of
Junhui’s party of friends and their various assistants and secretaries and so on make their way to their
rooms. She’s so worked up over all the commotion outside she can barely sit still, and it isn’t until
around twelve, when Minghao is fast asleep on the rug and Wonwoo has to keep pinching his arm to
stay awake, does she finally tire out and her eyelids begin to droop. Wonwoo makes sure that the hall
is empty—he can hear, judging by the sound of voices laughing and glasses clinking downstairs, that
the party (and Junhui) are still enjoying themselves down in the dining hall or common area—before
picking Anmei up and carrying her back to her room.

He’s walking back to his own room to sleep when he hears the muted voices of two housekeepers
making their way up the stairs. He doesn’t catch the beginning of their sentence, but he hears a little
bit of the end.

“… remember to bring some food upstairs for her, I’m sure Mr. Boo has completely forgotten to send
someone in the chaos.”

“Poor thing, the noise must be confusing her.”

“I hope she won’t frighten the guests.”

“But they’re Mr. Wen’s friends. Don’t they know?”
“They—” The girls reach the landing and see Wonwoo standing there, one hand on the doorknob to his room, and they both quickly cut off their conversation and give him a quick bow, rushing away. He frowns, confused at what he heard—are they talking about one of the directors or managers? Pilot? A special hotel guest he’s not privy to the information of? —but resolves to think nothing of it for now.

The next day is a bright and sunny April morning, and Junhui’s party are all out doing fun things in Seoul before Wonwoo and Minghao even head downstairs for breakfast. There are staff members cleaning up the leftover breakfast dishes at the big table in the center of the dining hall, and Wonwoo watches them work as he and Minghao take a seat at one of the tiny tables off to the side.

“It’s suddenly so crazy around here,” he remarks.

“Yeah,” Minghao yawns, cracking his neck and scowling at him. “I can’t believe you just let me sleep in the play room all night. I’m stiff everywhere.”

“I couldn’t wake you up, you sleep like the dead. I doubt an entire construction team could get you to awaken.”

“Ugh, you suck.” Minghao ruffles at his silver hair. He looks even younger without his eye makeup, less mature. It’s hard to believe he’s actually twenty-one. “How long d’you think they’re all gonna be here?”

“Jeonghan says they’ll probably stay for maybe three or four weeks. Thornfield is so much closer to Seoul than Busan is, so they’re probably going to spend their time here until the weather gets warm enough to go for holidays and vacations or whatever rich people do.”

“Man, imagine being rich enough to just go stay at a friend’s place for three weeks.” Minghao laughs and stretches, his long skinny arms reaching as high up as they can go. “If it was me, I’d go to Disneyland every day for a week straight. Make sure I get a chance to go on every single ride. And I’d pay off everyone to let me get first in line.”

Wonwoo snorts. “If I was that rich, I’d buy a house with a hidden door that reveals a secret library. And if anyone tries to bother me, I’d go there and hide and just read all day long until they go away.”

“What if, what if.” Minghao smiles, but his expression turns wistful after a minute or two. “If I was that rich, I’d buy the nicest apartment in Seoul and bring my mom here to come and live with me. That way we can always be together.”

“Oh.” He’s not sure what to say to that. Sometimes he forgets that he and Minghao aren’t one and the same, aren’t two people in the same boat with the same circumstances. Sure, they may both be childminders of a sort under Junhui’s employment, living in Thornfield not three doors away from each other, but Minghao isn’t alone like he is. He has a mother who loves him. A mother who misses him. Wonwoo wonders what that feels like. “Do you get to see her often?”

“Every holiday, when I can be spared. A month or two off in the summer. Junhui even pays for my plane ticket. Still, it gets pretty hard sometimes.”

What would Wonwoo do if he was that rich? He doesn’t have a family who cares about him. He doesn’t have a dream to give his loved ones a better life, for the simple fact that he doesn’t have any loved ones. This thought normally doesn’t bother him, but when he sees the homesick look on Minghao’s youthful face, he realizes he might be missing out on something very important. He wishes, more than anything, that he will have people he cares about, and one day the means to care for them.
The group returns in the late afternoon, the sun already starting to set and dying the sky a vibrant orange-pink like fresh grapefruit. Wonwoo is ready to spend the next several hours distracting Anmei in the play room where they won’t bother anybody, but Jeonghan knocks on the door of his suite and tells him, “Mr. Wen wants you and Anmei to be downstairs in the common room after dinner.”


“Might have been my fault? I told Mr. Wen how excited Anmei was about seeing everyone and asked if he could just show her to them for even a few minutes, and somehow that gave him the idea to have you come along to keep an eye on her.”

“I-I really would rather not.” Just the thought of him, drab and unassuming, having to sit in the same room as all those fancy wealthy families, reminding him so much of the Brocklehursts and the people his aunt used to bring to her house, all turning their noses at him, fills him with a mild fear. “I really don’t want to do that, Jeonghan.”

“I figured as much and told him so.” Jeonghan clucks his tongue and gives him a sympathetic look. “He said that he wants you down there too, and if you don’t show he’ll come up and get you himself.”

“Oh, fuck.”

“No, hey hey hey, it’s okay, I got this. The easiest way to do it without having all their eyes on you is to just be there before they finish dinner. There’s that little window seat by the corner, right? You can stay there and let Anmei have her fun, you won’t have to be there long.”

“Thank god.” Wonwoo weakly hangs his head and grasps Jeonghan’s forearms. “You are a god, Yoon Jeonghan. A lifesaver.”

“Yeah, I know. You better go tell Anmei, she’ll want to get ready.”

Anmei just about screams with joy when he tells her, which he has to quickly silence. From then on, she’s in a frenzy finding the right outfit to wear, settling on a soft rosy pink dress full of frills and lace like she’s some sort of life-sized doll, and Minghao helps Wonwoo brush her hair and do it up nice and pretty. When Minghao waves goodbye from the top of the staircase, he does so with relief and doesn’t look the least bit disappointed that he doesn’t have to go.

“If I don’t survive, tell my story,” Wonwoo says dully as they descend to the lower floor.

“I’ll drink your suite’s share of alcohol in your honour,” he responds with a cheeky smile.

The common area has been prepared with more comfort and entertainment for Junhui’s guests. The couches are arranged closer around the widescreen TV, a karaoke machine set up beside it. The electric fireplace is glowing bright and warm, and there are blankets and cushions thrown haphazardly about. Wonwoo makes a beeline for the window seat, pleased to see that it’s half-hidden behind the window’s thick curtains and the general darkness of the spot in the corner of the room. Anmei fidgets with her dress, makes sure it doesn’t crease, and then sits quietly and patiently next to him. He pats her hand reassuringly as he reads a book. “Good girl, Anmei,” he says softly, and she beams up at him. Adorable.

After about fifteen or twenty minutes, he hears the hum of voices and laughter get closer and closer. He readjusts his tightening grip on the spine of his book, mentally preparing himself for the onslaught, and then the ladies of the party round the corner and enter the common area.

The wives and widows are all elegant, stately middle-aged women, doting over their daughters and
sitting with all the dignity of queens in the armchairs. The four daughters lounge on the couches, pretty little social butterflies with nothing to do in their lives but spend money and look good and marry rich. One of them, Wonwoo recognizes instantly as Im Bora.

She’s just as beautiful in real life as she is in her picture, wearing a soft, draping scooped-neck shirt that showcases her delicate collarbones. However, he’s surprised to find that there’s something about her that he hadn’t picked up from Jeonghan’s photo—a slightly nasty air about her, like she knows she’s better than everyone else and is intent on having everyone see things her way. Oh, she’s smart enough, and clearly very talented at a number of things, and if she was just a self-confident kind of woman Wonwoo would have understood her appeal; but there’s something about the way she looks at everyone and the way she talks to everyone—even her own mother and sister—that rubs him the wrong way. Forget self-confident, he’s never met someone so outrageously self-smug before in his life.

Anmei is out of her seat in an instant, gliding over to the ladies and bowing, introducing herself in polite, sweet Korean. The older ladies all smile at her and pet her cheeks, while the two daughters belonging to Mrs. Nam coo and dote on her instantly, calling her “the sweetest thing” and “a lovely child”.

Im Bora and her family don’t treat her with half as much kindness. It’s evident from Bora and Mrs. Im’s similar sneers that they don’t think a girl like Anmei, born out of wedlock from a frivolous, uncaring mother and possibly not even Junhui’s real daughter, is something worth fussing over at all. Bora gives Wonwoo an equally disdainful sneer when she sees him sitting in the corner, but to his great relief she largely ignores him, and he’s able to hide behind his book again.

After about a half-hour or so of the women lying around in mostly dull silence, proclaiming how bored they are or that they are full to bursting from dinner, the men of the party finally enter the room and the ladies are all suddenly vivacious and charming again.

There are two younger men around his age—are they also called socialites, Wonwoo wonders? — but neither of them look half so charming and interesting as Junhui. His heart jumps into his throat, because seeing Junhui in the flesh is much, much more fascinating than memories or pictures. Maybe he forgot how tall the man was, or how sharp his jawline is, or how nice he looks in a silky black shirt. Either way, his mouth goes dry and he quickly looks back down at his book, fighting back the blush creeping up his face.

He likes Junhui, that much is certain. There’s no use trying to deny it. He’s at the very least attracted to him in a way that goes deeper than just mere looks. This is utterly terrible, because the last thing he needs to do is pine after his fucking boss. He can only hope that this passes soon, this dumb crush fades, because when he watches Im Bora interact with him and blatantly flirt with a freedom and liberty he can never have, he feels sick and depressed.

“Jun, darling,” she says, linking her arm through his in an impressively natural way. “Isn’t Anmei old enough to go to school by now? Such a … cute thing. She should be out with friends her own age instead of running around your hotel, don’t you think?”

“There aren’t any schools that are close enough for me to consider,” Junhui replies calmly, “and I don’t want to send her off to boarding school when she’s so young.”

“What? But boarding school is so much fun! Ask Lee Heejoon, he went to boarding school and he had a great time. Much better than letting her suffer under the hands of a nanny.”

“I didn’t realize nannies were such a hated figure,” Junhui says, not even looking anywhere close to Wonwoo even though Im Bora is very obviously talking about him. He’s not sure if he’s happy or
upset at that. “If I knew they bothered you so much, I would’ve reconsidered getting one for Anmei. I don’t want to disappoint you in any way.”

“You’re lucky you never had one, Jun. Miyeon and Taeil and I absolutely died. They’re always so annoying and stuffy, or weak-willed, or bad-tempered! Oh, the pranks we’d pull with our brother, putting frogs and ants in their bed or dropping buckets of water on them until they screamed! It was our only source of revenge against those people. Mother, weren’t they always such nasty women?”

“Oh, yes, my dear,” Mrs. Im says from her spot in her armchair, where she had been talking to the other older ladies. “Waste of time and money, if you ask me. They were always so ungrateful and complained so much, as if they had any right to tell me how to raise my children. I guess it’s just something you have to expect from their—” she eyes Wonwoo distastefully, “—type.”

Im Bora laughs, but when she sees Junhui unresponsive she quickly changes the subject. “Oh, enough, mother, you’re only adding to an already-irritating conversation! Let’s have music. Miyeon, set up the karaoke machine, would you?”

Her sister immediately does as she’s told, and within the next couple of minutes they start up the machine and begin adding their favourite songs to the list. Wonwoo takes the moment of distraction as songs begin to blare out from the speakers to quietly leave his seat and slip out the door, back towards the direction of the staircase. He can’t stay in that room a moment longer. He’s just put his foot on the first step when he hears the sound of someone approaching him from behind, and when he turns around he realizes with a start that it’s Junhui.

“Why are you leaving so early?” he asks, voice strangely rough. This is the first time he’s spoken to him since they’ve arrived, or even looked at him.

Wonwoo turns away and tries to let the darkened stairwell hide the way his face is flushing, turning pink under his employer’s impossibly heavy gaze and the sudden pounding of his heart.

“I-I’m tired,” he mumbles, “I was going to go up to bed, sir.”

“Without Anmei?”

Shit. With Anmei being happily doted upon by Mrs. Nam and her daughters, he had completely forgotten about her. He can feel himself blushing even harder and prays to god that Junhui has poor vision. It’s highly unlikely he does. “I … that is …” He trails off into mortified silence. Since when has he ever been tongue-tied around Junhui before?

“You didn’t say hi to me,” Junhui says, and despite the guttural timbre his voice is taking he sounds ridiculously measured and composed. Could it kill him to be even a little bit off-kilter sometimes?

“You didn’t say hi to me,” Junhui says, and despite the guttural timbre his voice is taking he sounds ridiculously measured and composed. Could it kill him to be even a little bit off-kilter sometimes? “Don’t you think you should greet your employer when you see him after spending weeks apart?”

Wonwoo shuffles his feet, one hand flexing nervously around the staircase’s railing. “You looked busy, I didn’t want to intrude.”

“I see.” Junhui’s eyes are bright with some sort of emotion but utterly unidentifiable. “What have you been up to while I was gone?”

“Taking care of Anmei.”

“You don’t look well.” He steps closer before Wonwoo can protest and stoops a little bit to peer at his face, even though their height difference doesn’t necessarily require it. “You look pale. Did you catch a cold that night when you tried drowning me in my sleep?”
“No, sir. I’m fine.”

“Call me Junhui.”

“I’d rather not, sir.”

His voice turns coaxing, yet laced with that kind of dangerously commanding tone that makes it clear he doesn’t want any protests. “Come back in with me, you’re leaving too soon. You don’t have to talk to anyone, you can just sit in the corner like you did before.”

“I-I don’t want to.”

It’s the first time he’s ever outright refused one of Junhui’s requests/demands, and it’s the first time he’s ever said it was because he “didn’t want to”, either. He’s not sure whether it’s from his rattled nerves sitting with all those people or if it’s because Junhui’s so close to him, cologne dizzying his senses, or if it’s because he saw him and Bora flirting together, who knows, maybe something else, maybe all three, but to his sheer and utter horror his eyes start to fill up with tears. Junhui’s jaw tightens and he makes an odd, impulsive motion, but quickly drops his hands back down.

“I’m tired, Mr. Wen. Please let me go upstairs.” His voice breaks a little.

After a moment’s pause, painfully silent and tense, Junhui says softly, “Okay. Go up and get Minghao to fetch Anmei in the next thirty minutes. Take tomorrow off if you need to, my—” he stops short, eyes alive with the same kind of fire Wonwoo saw in him that fateful night, hands clenching and unclenching for a second, before he steps away and finishes with, “Good night, Wonwoo.”

And then he’s gone, disappearing back to the common area. A few minutes later, Wonwoo hears his voice break out into song with the others, clear and melodious. Of course he can also sing too, what the fuck.

Wonwoo rubs furiously at his eyes, angry at his lacrimal glands for betraying him like this, and runs up to his room.

His days in Thornfield are certainly no longer quiet and monotonous and boring anymore. Every day, there seems to be some new thing happening. A dance for all the guests in the biggest ballroom. Movie night in the common area. Tickets to the theatre, swimming in the indoor pool, having picnics and admiring the flowers that have begun to decorate the hotel grounds in plumes of orange and red, purple and yellow, white and blue.

The tranquil stillness of Junhui’s private wing is no longer still nor tranquil; Wonwoo can barely leave his room without some emergency happening somewhere down the hall, or running into someone’s assistant or so-and-so’s hairstylist (yes, a couple of them even brought along hairstylists, he seriously can’t stand rich people). Junhui had apparently assigned all of them to the second floor and kept the third floor to himself as always, something he hears the Im family complain about constantly (“I can’t believe we’re sharing the same floor as the help,” he hears Bora sneer more than once).

It’s funny, really, how he only realized his feelings for his boss when Junhui no longer spares the time to talk to him, when they can be in the same dining hall for a good solid hour and not have him even shoot a glance in his direction.

He definitely can’t call this a simple infatuation anymore. Nope, this is turning into love. The most
terrible, most atrocious kind of love imaginable: an unrequited one.

And the thing with watching Junhui and Im Bora interact, see them lean in close to speak quietly to one another and favour each other’s company and conversation over everyone else in the group, is that Junhui so obviously doesn’t actually like her.

Im Bora is beautiful, sure, and she can sing and dance and play three or four instruments and speak five languages—but she’s also arrogant and shallow and self-obsessed, unbearably rude, and it’s no wonder she’s nearing thirty-five and has never had a lasting relationship despite her looks, money, and connections. She makes herself agreeable enough in front of Junhui, that’s for sure, laughing at anything remotely funny he says and giving him teasing touches, running her hands through his hair or caressing his bicep. Wonwoo watches all of this happen, hiding in the background and melting into the wallpaper as Anmei gleefully eats up all the attention she can get, and he wants to either punch himself or punch Bora, he can never be sure.

She doesn’t have to gush over Junhui so much, he thinks sourly. She doesn’t have to hang onto his every word like he’s the most interesting man in the world, she doesn’t have to dress so over-the-top so his eyes will fall on her more than anyone else, she doesn’t have to do any of these things.

Wonwoo knows. He knows what Junhui likes. He knows that saying less, fighting back more, calling him out on his bullshit, being honest, not letting his inconsistencies and whims off the hook, would grab his attention and his affection far more than sucking up into his good graces.

That’s the worst part of it.

Wonwoo knows—somehow, impossibly, in the deepest darkest part of his heart—that he could make Junhui fall in love with him if he had Im Bora’s chances. If he had her wealth, and status, and her opportunities, and her breathless beauty and charisma, he knows he could make Junhui fall at his feet. He knows he can do it and that’s the worst part of it because he never can, he’s a poor dull childminder at the mercy of his beloved employer and it’s beneath Junhui to even consider going after a guy like him, a guy with no friends, no family, no money, nothing to offer.

That must be why Junhui’s allowing Bora’s affections, why he’s (if not returning, at the very least) encouraging them. Something to offer. Maybe he wants to settle down now that he’s getting older, and he doesn’t mind settling with someone beautiful and rich even if they’re cold and vain. Or maybe the family he’s abandoned for nine years are starting to pressure him to get with a girl with connections like hers.

There’s a good many number of reasons, but all Wonwoo can tell is that the reason does not include actual love on his part, and it’s killing him inside to see someone he likes and admires so much to be flirting around with someone he doesn’t actually care about. Junhui had told him, many months ago, that he stopped dealing with girls like Watabe Seiko. Like Im Bora. I refused to let myself, my time, my money, my body, be used by people like that ever again, he had said.

Wonwoo has to stop himself from frowning, from making it so obvious how unhappy he is in front of them. What a fucking liar. He can’t help but feel disappointed, and jealous, and he hates that he even feels jealous of a woman as nasty as Im Bora just because of a single man’s attentions.

Today, Junhui is out in Seoul on business, and his absence has a noticeable effect on the party. If Junhui isn’t there, it’s like they’ve lost all their motivation, all their spirit. The group originally plans to go out to the city as well, but the weather turns wet and moody when they finish breakfast and it starts to rain hard by eleven. They all end up lazing about in the common area or dining hall all day, complaining about their boredom the way rich people often tend to do, forcing Wonwoo and Minghao to tread carefully around them and not get in their way.
Hours pass, and Junhui still hasn’t returned. When they’re eating dinner (Wonwoo and Minghao giving each other suffering glances at their own tiny four-seater as the party gossip and complain some more at the big center table), Anmei runs in, babbling as coherently as her Korean can allow her. “Bàbà is back! He’s back, I saw a car!”

“He’s back?” Bora says, perking up immediately and quickly adjusting her cashmere cardigan so it falls over her shoulders nicely. “You saw him from the lobby?”

Anmei nods, curls bouncing, and without another word Bora gets up and leaves the dining hall, presumably to go see for herself. Wonwoo ducks his head to hide his frown, slowly losing his appetite.

“What’s the matter?” Minghao asks, noticing his expression.

“Nothing,” he says quickly, letting Anmei jump up into one of their empty seats and feeding her the leftover food he can’t stomach. It’s not your place to feel upset, it’s not your place, he repeats to himself.

Bora re-enters the hall a few minutes later, looking thoroughly annoyed. It’s not a good look for her. “It wasn’t Junhui, you big-mouthed brat!” she hisses at Anmei. “It’s some other man. Don’t go running your mouth if you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Anmei shrinks inwards at her words, look embarrassed at being spoken to so harshly like that in front of everyone. Wonwoo and Minghao are immediately there, patting at her back and petting her hair. Minghao’s mouth is twisted into a hard, angry line, eyes bright with held-back fury. He’s never looked more like an overprotective big brother than he does right now.

“It’s alright,” Wonwoo says quietly, and it’s taking all his strength not to turn to Im Bora and run his mouth off at her as crudely as he can. “It’s okay, Anmei, don’t you mind her.”

Bora’s pale face turns red with anger. “What did you—?”

Whatever she had been planning to say to Wonwoo is put on an indefinite hold, as the dining hall doors open once more and Jeonghan leads in a stranger they have never seen before. He’s a handsome, frail-looking man maybe around Junhui’s age or slightly older, with careful combed-back dark hair and big, bright doe eyes. He’s shrugging off his rain-splattered pea coat, but when he notices everyone staring at him, he gives them a hesitant smile.

“Hello,” he says. His voice is pleasant but a little timid from all the stares, and tinged with some foreign accent Wonwoo can’t quite identify. It sounds like American mixed with other things. “My name is Hong Jisoo. I’m terribly sorry, but I’ve been on the road for hours and I’m starving.”

And with that, he takes a seat at the big table with the rest of them and starts piling food onto his plate without another word. Jeonghan goes to sit with Junhui and Minghao.

“Who is he?” Minghao whispers.

“A person,” Jeonghan mutters, looking thoroughly put off by the whole affair, and takes a large bite out of Wonwoo’s leftover food.

It takes a few minutes due to everyone’s surprise, but eventually the older gentlemen and ladies remember their upbringing and start engaging in careful, polite conversation with him. Wonwoo is ridiculously curious and tries eavesdropping as best as he can, but Jisoo’s answers to various questions of himself and his work are occasionally muffled by the giggles of Mrs. Nam’s daughters and Im Miyeon, Bora’s younger sister. They keep talking about his good looks and how sweet and
unassuming his manners are, which annoys Wonwoo terribly, especially when he realizes they’re comparing him to men that sound (to him) a whole lot like Junhui.

“He’s exactly what a handsome man ought to be,” one of Mrs. Nam’s girls whispers. “Nice, smooth cheeks, a gentle sloping face! None of those harsh angles or strong features that look so wild.”

“And his eyes! So big and bright. They just open up his looks completely.”

“He smiles so much—I love a man who always smiles. And look how nice his teeth are! He looks like an angel.”

*Junhui looks handsome when he smiles too,* Wonwoo thinks peevishly.

It’s slow going having to sift through their conversations, but eventually Wonwoo gathers some information about this stranger, who was in fact the man Anmei had mistaken as her father. He introduces himself as Junhui’s “old friend”, and while he was born in America he’s travelled back and forth from Korea, LA, and London throughout the years, which explains his odd mish-mash of accents. He doesn’t really explain why he’s here, and whenever anyone tries to ask, he casually changes the subject or gives a half-answer.

“Did Junhui expect you to come?” Mrs. Im asks primly.

“Surprise visit, ma’am. I only need to stay for a day or two to ask Junhui about some … affairs.” Jisoo gives her a quick smile and looks back down at his food.

There’s a clatter of footsteps and some other commotion outside the dining hall, and before Im Bora can throw down her napkin and complain about some peace and quiet, Chan and several other bellhops come barging in, out of breath and panicking slightly. “Mr. Yoon, sir!” Chan gasps out, clutching at a stitch in his side. “Mr. Yoon, there’s a—um—a situation? I think?”

“Not even a minute to myself,” Jeonghan mumbles, carefully setting Anmei down and standing up. His long auburn hair is starting to fall out of his ponytail. “What is it, Chan?”

“There’s an, uh, a weird guy in the lobby.”

“ Weird as in suspicious or weird as in weird?”

“The last thing. Some old man saying he’s a fortune teller. He refuses to leave. He’s starting to freak out the other guests, sir.”

Jeonghan lets out a frustrated sound, yanking irritably at the cuffs of his sleeves. “Then kick him out. Where’s Jihoon? Why hasn’t he already sent him off the premises?”

“He won’t do it, sir?” Chan hunches up his shoulders in preparation for Jeonghan’s fury. Wonwoo truly admires this kid, he really does.

“The fuck do you mean, he won’t do it?!”

“Wait!” Im Miyeon blurts out, sounding excited. “Will he tell us our fortunes?”

Chan gives her a shy, quizzical look. “He, um, he says he’d love to do free fortunes for all of the owner’s special guests. The, uh, ‘young and single’, he calls it. I can’t tell if he meant it in a creepy way or not, but—u-um—”

“Just kick him out,” Jeonghan says, exasperated. “We have an entire staff of security, we don’t need
Jihoon around to get that done.”

“No,” Bora declares, standing up and throwing her hair back over her shoulders like a proud horse. Wonwoo desperately avoids making a face, not that any of them would notice. Everyone’s attention is focused on Chan, and now on her. “I’ll go get my fortune told first.”

“Sweetheart, no!” Mrs. Im cries out. “My darling, think of your safety—”

“Oh, hush,” she snaps. “I’m certainly not afraid of some delusional old man. Besides, I’m bored to tears and this is the most fun we’ve had all day! Send him here, Yoon, bring him to a private room. We can all go in one at a time and listen to his rambles, try and catch him in his lies. It’ll be something to laugh about for the next hour or two, at least.”

Jeonghan grinds his teeth, but he does nothing but give Bora a short bow and stalk out of the room in rapid, long strides, the bellhops scrambling after him. Wonwoo and Minghao give each other eyebrow-raising looks as the party in the center of the room dissolve into loud, enthusiastic chatter. The parents keep attempting to talk their free-spirited children out of it, but with the prospect of something so ludicrous in store they steadfastly refuse to change their minds. Eventually, Jeonghan returns (looking, oddly enough, much calmer than before, his face blank and cool) and tells Bora that the old fortune teller is waiting in one of the smaller, unused common rooms down the hall.

“I’ll lead you there,” he says to her, “if you ever feel threatened or unsafe, start screaming. I and a few of the security guards will be right outside in the hallway, and we’ll come in immediately.”

“I won’t need any of that,” she says snidely, and they’re gone.

“Hey,” Minghao mutters to Wonwoo, leaning in close so he can’t be overheard, “I know wishing a murderer on anyone is terrible, but imagine that the old dude has this huge grudge against bitchy socialites or something …”

Wonwoo jabs at his bony hip. “Shut up,” he hisses, fighting back a laugh.

The servers arrive to give them platters of crème brûlée and slices of freshly-baked raspberry cheesecake, which manages to distract everyone in the dining hall for the next ten minutes until Im Bora returns, cheeks flushed red and with a stormy, thunderous expression. She throws herself into her chair and, ignoring the flurry of questions directed her way, starts stabbing her spoon into her bowl of crème brûlée. Wonwoo watches this, amused. Clearly, she didn’t like whatever she heard.

“Bora!” Miyeon cries. “Come on, we’re dying to know! Was he a real fortune teller?”

She slams her spoon down so hard that the sterling silver screeches loudly against the ridge of the fancily-decorated ceramic bowl. “For god’s sakes, Miyeon, fortune tellers aren’t real!” she retorts. “He was a foolish old man who didn’t know what he was talking about and was clearly twenty years off his meds, exactly as I thought he was. What a waste of an evening. I didn’t realize Thornfield was going to be so boring.”

And with that, she refuses to speak any further.

At this point, the rest of the girls all refuse to go alone, and after several agonizingly painful minutes of hearing them whine and wail about being too frightened, and an all-suffering Jeonghan having to go back and forth between them and the fortune teller, it’s eventually agreed upon that the girls can all go at once along with Mrs. Lee’s two sons for protection or whatever. Wonwoo hears muffled, distant shrieks of laughter and little screams and squeals for almost twenty minutes before they run back, out of breath.
“He—he’s totally real!” they all howl to their parents. “He knew so many things—”

“—things he shouldn’t be able to know about—”

“—things from our childhood, things we’ve said and done at parties, the names of our old boyfriends —”

“—how did he know, what kind of tricks—”

Amidst the chaos, Jeonghan pads quietly across the hardwood floor towards Wonwoo’s tiny table and leans in towards him, speaking in a low and quiet voice. “The fortune teller wants to see you, too.”

“What?” He looks up, confused. “Why me?”

There is definitely a knowing look in Jeonghan’s eyes. “He said he asked for all the young, single people. He knows there is one more in this room.”

“There’s still Minghao,” Wonwoo protests.

Jeonghan turns to Minghao with a raised brow, as Minghao studiously ignores them all and suddenly grows very interested in his cheesecake. “Wait,” Wonwoo says, connecting the dots. He almost swears he can hear a ding! go off inside his head. “Wait! Minghao, you—?”

“The crazy old man is waiting, Wonwoo,” Jeonghan says.

Wonwoo stands up, glad that once again Junhui’s guests are too obsessed with themselves and each other to even notice his presence. “We’re talking about this,” he says, pointing a threatening figure at Minghao. “You’re in a relationship and you didn’t even let me know, we’re talking about this.”

“Go get your fortune told,” is Minghao’s exasperated reply, and he waves a skinny, long-fingered hand at him.

Wonwoo follows Jeonghan down the hall towards the unused common room. It makes sense that when Junhui took over this little section of the hotel he would only need to use one of the common areas provided for him, but it definitely feels weird to enter this unfamiliar room and realize that Thornfield is much bigger than Wonwoo sometimes thinks. The room is dark and empty of furniture, except for a single armchair that is occupied by a hunched figure, curled in front of the electric fireplace flickering a dull yellow. The door closes behind him.

“Well?” the figure croaks. “Come closer.”

Wonwoo takes his time to step up, and once he reaches a suitable distance he rolls on the balls of his feet, hands clasped politely behind his back and observing as much of the old man as he can. He can’t see much in the darkness of the room, and the way the chair is angled makes the light from the fireplace hide even more of his features, but from what Wonwoo can see he’s curled into himself and bundled up in several layers of clothing, perhaps to protect his frail bones from the faint wet chill outside. He wears a wide-brimmed hat like one a farmer would wear, a thick woolly scarf wrapped up right above his nose and concealing most of his face.

“Are you cold, sir?” Wonwoo asks. “Should I get someone to fetch you some blankets?”

“I’m quite all right.” The old man’s voice is aged and hoarse, but not weak—he clearly has some life left in him yet. “None of the others who came in asked me about my comfort. Why are you so different?”
“They are Mr. Wen’s personal guests in Thornfield,” Wonwoo says smoothly. “I am his daughter’s childminder, and in a way I am a member of Thornfield’s staff myself. I consider it my duty to represent the hotel as much as any housekeeper or dining hall server.”

“So, you’ve come to have your fortune told, haven’t you?”

“Only because you’ve insisted on it, and I don’t want you to make any further hassle. I’ll tell you this right now—respectfully—I don’t believe in fortune telling and crystal balls. I admire your art, but I don’t find anything real about it.”

The old man cackles, a sound so dry and brittle it could almost be sandpaper. “Interesting,” he says. “The other foolish girls screamed and trembled and cried pretty little crocodile tears in front of me to gain sympathy from the two young men that came in with them. Why is it that you aren’t shaking in fear?”

“Because I’m not cold.”

“Why isn’t your face turning pale in anticipation?”

“Uh, because I’m not sick?”

“And why do you not believe in fortune tellers?”

“Because I’m not ridiculous.”

The man laughs even harder. He shifts beneath his many layers. “I can tell you right here, right now, that you are cold, you are sick, and you are most certainly ridiculous.”

Well, Im Bora was right, Wonwoo thinks. This definitely is the most interesting thing that’s happened all day. “Please, by all means prove it. I’d love to hear your reasons.”

The fortune teller turns towards the fire slightly. “You are cold because you shut yourself out. You have suffered enough hardships in your past to believe that holding yourself back from everything, always being mild and sensible, never letting your heart speak above your mind, is the best way for you to live. You are sick because you are missing a key element in your world, a key emotion, a key feeling, that would make everything better if only you cared enough to notice it. And you are ridiculous because you suffer from this emptiness in your life and yet you still refuse to acknowledge it. You refuse to act upon it. You are an intelligent, strong-willed man, Jeon Wonwoo, but in matters like this you are as shy and naïve as a boy.”

There’s a moment of silence.

“That’s not really good enough,” Wonwoo says, still polite. “You’re being kind of vague. These kinds of words could be easily interpreted into whatever fits, especially by someone in my situation and living in a fancy place like this.”

“And what about me knowing your name?”

“You could’ve heard it from anyone. For all I know, Mr. Yoon himself could’ve told you when you asked for me.”

The old man looks at him from beneath the brim of his hat, and for a moment his eyes are unnervingly bright. “Then I shall be a little clearer in my fortunes, Jeon Wonwoo,” he rasps. “There is happiness and success and wealth waiting for you, so close you can hardly imagine it. An endless opportunity filled with joy, access to anything and everything you could ever want, a chance to live a
full life you’ve never experienced before. It is a chessboard with all the pieces set, each position
precisely where it needs to be. All you have to do is make the last move, and you win the game.”

“That’s hardly a clear answer,” Wonwoo says. “I’m not good at riddles.”

“Again, you insist on trying my powers. Very well. Step forwards, closer, and bend down. Let me
look at your face and see your secrets from there.”

“Now, sir, you are finally being interesting,” Wonwoo says with a slight smile, willingly shuffling
down to kneel against the hard floor, letting the old man examine his face for a few minutes in
silence.

“It must feel strange,” the fortune teller finally says, “to live all alone in this hotel. You must spend
quite some time alone, feeling isolated.”

“That is true, sometimes.”

“There must be people your thoughts turn to when you are alone. You don’t have any family, I can
see it in your eyes. Not many friends, either. Perhaps a special someone?”

“I don’t have any particularly special people in mind.”

“Are you sure? A young man like yourself, in the prime of your youth, and not a single person
catches your eye? None of the attractive young ladies you see in Thornfield? Any of the gentlemen?”

“I don’t know any of the people in Mr. Wen’s group of friends,” Wonwoo replies, words halting
slightly. Now he’s starting to get a little confused. He doesn’t know what the fortune teller is getting
at—if he came here for money, he hasn’t asked any from Wonwoo so far. “Even if I was familiar
enough with them to actually engage in conversation, I doubt they’d be my, well, my type.”

“I see,” the old man says. For a moment, something strange happens to his voice—it cracks, or
maybe breaks, and for a split second he doesn’t sound as old and croaky as he used to be, the
difference so jarring Wonwoo wouldn’t have been surprised if the voice belonged to a completely
different person. But then he speaks and he’s as crackly as an old radio again, and Wonwoo thinks
he might’ve imagined it all. “And what of your employer?”

“Employer?”

“The owner of this fine hotel.”

“Mr. Wen is out in Seoul right now for business. Gangnam, I think.”

“Yes, yes, I’m aware. He won’t be back until later tonight or maybe even tomorrow. Does he not
grab your attention? I’ve heard tales of this man, both good and bad. Is he not intriguing in your
eyes?”

“Mr. Wen is certainly intriguing, although I don’t see what that has to do with anything.”

“I can see in your looks that you’ve noticed your employer growing rather close to one of the women
in his group. A young, beautiful, talented woman. Im Bora. You have witnessed this.”

“I have.” This surprises Wonwoo somewhat. He can’t imagine the fortune teller would’ve heard this
information from the other girls, being that they were far too excited for their own fortunes to be told,
yet he doesn’t understand how out of all the women presented to him he had managed to peg Im
Bora as the one Junhui had been closest with. He fights back a slight shiver, despite being so close to
the fire. He feels strange, like he’s wrapping himself up in a dream or something. The old seer’s voice, while harsh and grating and hoarse, is almost spellbinding.

“You have seen the way his eyes twinkle when she smiles at him, the way he laughs at her Wittiness. You’ve seen the way he admires her when she plays the piano or sings. You’ve seen the love in his expression when they are together. How did you feel about this?”

Wonwoo can’t stop himself from snorting derisively. “Your crystal ball must be getting a little muddy, sir, because love is the last thing I’ve seen on Mr. Wen’s face when he talks to her.”

“You sound so certain. Do you know Thornfield’s owner so well to be so sure of that? Have you watched him long enough to be so confident in his mannerisms?”

For the first time since he came into this room, Wonwoo feels his composure slip. He struggles to find an answer, rather embarrassed. “I’ve talked with him often. I know enough.” Then, when the curiosity and slight anxiety is too much to fight back, he blurts out, “Is it—so you know he’s going to get together with her? Im Bora, I mean.”

The old man settles back in the gracious curve of the armchair, looking rather self-satisfied. “Ah, so you believe me now, do you? Yes, I can see this happening in the future. He is handsome enough, and charismatic enough, and Thornfield is large and grand enough for our lovely lady to try to get into his good favours. I can see her even agreeing to marry him, if he so asks her. She’s been left single for a very long while, and despite appearances the Ingram Cosmetics empire is not doing so well as they used to. Not that she actually cares for him, you understand, but she does like the money tied to the Wen family name. Now, if someone more handsome and agreeable and—more importantly—richer came by, she would leave him to the rats without a second thought—”

“That’s enough,” Wonwoo says, suddenly desperate to drop this conversation as quickly as possible. He’s sure he must look visibly uncomfortable by now, although hopefully the fortune teller might just think his knees are getting sore from pressing into the ground. Fortune telling isn’t real, this whole thing is impossible. And yet, the old man had just said aloud all the fears Wonwoo had been obsessing over for the past few days. Everything he has imagined. “I came here for my fortune to be told, not Mr. Wen’s.”

“Very well. We are done here, either way. Turn to me again, look deeply into my eyes.”

Wonwoo does so, the commanding tone in the old man’s voice impossible to disobey. His eyes are so strange—so impossibly bright, so strong and piercing. He feels a weird twist in his stomach, a faint curl of surprise and recognition. The old man extends his hand out to him, and after a moment of hesitation he takes it. The hand does not belong to an old man—it had been hidden in the folds of his clothes throughout the entire session, but now he can see it clearly, illuminated from the light of the fire. Strong, smooth skin, familiar long fingers, carefully trimmed and healthy nails. A hand he couldn’t forget for the life of him.

“Well, Wonwoo?” And the old man’s voice is no longer raspy and hoarse, it is younger, powerful, and very, very amused. And the old man is not an old man, as he reaches up with his free hand to yank off the scarf and reveal a handsome, tanned face and a brilliant grin. “Do you recognize me?”

“You—” Wonwoo stutters out. Junhui stands up, pulling Wonwoo up to his feet as well. He staggers a little, pulse jumping in his throat from the feeling of Junhui’s hand on his. “You really are insane.”

“Let me have my fun. Having to play nice with all those foolish, vain families tires me out, you can’t blame me for wanting to tease them a little.” He sheds off the layers of clothing that he had been using to disguise his features, all cardigans and jackets and shawls of various sizes, one by one. Now
Wonwoo understands why both Jihoon and Jeonghan seemed so unconcerned about a strange random old man wandering into the hotel—he must have revealed the secret to them to make this whole act go smoothly.

“I understand, sir.” Wonwoo feels his mouth go dry when Junhui tosses the hat aside and ruffles his golden hair. He looks so young with his hair messy like this, so reckless and carefree (bed hair, Wonwoo’s brain says weakly, post-sex hair, oh god don’t do this right now Jeon Wonwoo think about something else immediately). “I don’t appreciate you trying to mess with me, though. That whole thing was so confusing and weird, that bit about—about me not making a move or something? Or you talking about yourself—and Im Bora—I-I just, um, what was that about?”

“Don’t take it too seriously, I was just rolling with it. I’m rather proud of my acting skills, but improv isn’t my strongest suit.” He pauses as he adjusts his jacket and smooths out wrinkles, turning to Wonwoo with a suddenly apprehensive gaze. “You aren’t angry with me?”

“I’m a little angry,” Wonwoo admits, refusing to let Junhui’s puppy dog eyes weaken him. It’s extremely difficult. It’s like trying to withhold dessert from Anmei. Still, this is how he feels, and he needs to make sure his boss knows the truth. “I don’t like being made a fool of, and I feel like you were trying to make a fool of me, or at least try to pry into my private thoughts or affairs. And I don’t like being lied to.”

“I’m sorry,” Junhui says, and he sounds genuine. “I definitely wasn’t trying to make fun of you or anything like that, and I didn’t mean to make you feel that way with my dumb pranks. Will you forgive me?”

Of course he will. He already has. Wonwoo hates being so weak for this man. He hates being so utterly infatuated that he’s forgetting and excusing Junhui’s faults and imperfections, thinking of him as the most perfect being under the sun when he knows Wen Junhui is far from it, but he can’t help himself. “I haven’t really decided whether or not you actually caused any harm. You were trying to trick me, but from what I can remember I don’t think I was tricked out of anything important. You are safe, for now, but I might put you on probation.”

Junhui laughs that harsh, short sort of laugh again. Oh, how Wonwoo missed his laugh, how its rough tone is still richer and warmer than Seokmin’s special creamy soups. “A safe, boring, diplomatic answer. How very like you, Wonwoo. Wait, before I go back and pretend I’ve only just returned from Seoul, go see what they’re saying. Tell me if they seem shaken by what I said to them.”

“You’re a vicious man, Mr. Wen.” But he does as he’s told, excited despite himself. Junhui just has this effect on him, maybe on everyone. When he finds something amusing, when he overwhelms the room with his enthusiasm and passion, suddenly everyone is compelled to feel the same way. When he voices his displeasure over something, it only feels natural to agree with him as well. It’s a dangerous ability.

Wonwoo leaves the room—Jeonghan gives him a knowing smile and a slight wink where he’s leaning on the wall of the hallway—and peeks into the dining hall. He feels like he had been gone for hours, but the plates of desserts have only just been cleaned up, and the youngest members of the party are still eagerly recounting their own personal versions of what had happened with the fortune teller over wine and cheese. Jisoo is there, listening politely but clearly off in his own little world.

He returns to the room, Jeonghan and the security guards gone by now to do actual business. Junhui is humming to himself and looking out the window at the starry sky.

“They believed it fully,” Wonwoo says, smiling despite himself. “They’re enjoying being the center
of attention and exaggerating every detail. By the time you walk in there, they might start saying you
were shooting fireballs out of your palms and had little voodoo dolls designed to look like each of
them.”

Junhui snickers, ridiculously proud of himself.

“Oh—I forgot to tell you. A friend of yours arrived during dinner, a Hong Jisoo—”

And just like that, Junhui’s smile drops. His eyes bug out, mouth opening and closing with no words
manifesting. His dark skin makes it biologically impossible for him to turn pale, but Wonwoo knows
that if he was slightly fairer, that’s what would be happening right now.

“Fuck,” he says, a snarl of a word, before suddenly staggering.

Wonwoo is by his side in a second, ignoring the pounding of his own heart when he leans in close
enough to smell his faint cologne and grabs at Junhui’s shoulder. “Sir, are you alright?”

“I’m fine, I just—fuck! Fuck, what is he doing here, why is he here, why didn’t Jeonghan keep him
from—?”

“Sir?”

“This isn’t good, Wonwoo,” he chokes out. Wonwoo feels almost afraid; he’s never seen Junhui like
this, so visibly upset and helpless, not ever. “This isn’t good.”

“What do you need me to do, Junhui?” His first name is leaving Wonwoo’s lips before he can realize
what he’s doing. It just feels natural to say it right now, and he lets this feeling continue for as long as
it may last. “Junhui, talk to me—I’ll do anything, any-anything you need. Can I help you at all?”

“Go get me a glass of wine from the dining hall. While you’re there, see what he’s doing. Try and
see if he looks suspicious for any reason, or saying something iffy to my guests.”

“Of course, Junhui—of course.”

He goes back to the dining hall, nervously flattening down his shirt’s collar and trying to appear
casual. He doesn’t need to, of course—the interest in the fortune teller has died down somewhat but
they’re still plenty distracted enough to ignore him, and as he quietly approaches the fifteen-seater
table and pours a glass of wine (Im Bora frowning at him as though she thinks he’s taking it for
himself), he tries to discreetly listen in to Jisoo’s conversation with Mrs. Lee’s sons. It’s hard to tell,
but they don’t seem to be discussing anything too serious—they’re all laughing and joking about—
and he hastens back to the common room as fast as possible, the wine sloshing in his glass and
almost threatening to tip over in his hurry.

Junhui is glaring at the fire, already pulling himself together and looking grave and surly once more.
“Well?” he says, taking the glass from Wonwoo’s hand and downing almost half of it in one gulp.

“He’s talking with the others. Nothing important, as far as I can tell. Just casual conversation.”

“Okay, good. Good.” He takes another sip and rests the glass carefully on the fireplace’s
marble mantelpiece, sighing heavily and pressing his fingers against the bridge of his nose, between
his eyebrows, like he’s trying to massage away an incoming headache. “This is a disaster.” Then,
before Wonwoo can say anything to try and alleviate some of his obvious discomfort, he looks up at
him and says, “Wonwoo, if everyone in that room were to come in here and hurl insults at me, what
would you do?”
Now what was he thinking of? Wonwoo ignores the absurdity of his questions and responds, slightly confused, “I would kick them all out, I guess, whether they were your friends or not.”

“What if I went to them? What if I walked into that dining hall right now and every single one of them turned on me and walked out of that room? Would you go with them?”

“Of course not.”

“Even if they pressure you? Even if they ostracize you, give you the same kind of torment you experienced in your childhood? Even if they threaten to make your life miserable?”

“Why should I care what they have to say?” Wonwoo says, slightly exasperated. “They mean nothing to me. You—I like your company way more than I like theirs.”

Junhui smiles, an off-tone, bitter, resigned sort of thing. He looks so … defeated. So weary. Wonwoo’s heart aches. “What if it wasn’t them, then? What if it was Minghao, or Jeonghan? Or Seungkwan? What if they looked at me with hatred in their eyes and told you I was a terrible person who’s done terrible things? What if they told you to leave me and find something better?”

“I—I—” Junhui is looking at him in a way that makes Wonwoo’s skin flush red, “this is stupid. I don’t understand the point of these questions, Mr. Wen.”

“What happened to calling me Junhui?”

He doesn’t answer.

“Okay, okay, I won’t press you. Look, just humour me—please, Wonwoo.”

“I,” he says slowly and firmly, looking right into Junhui’s eyes, “would listen to their reasons, then go to you and listen to yours. I will carefully compare both sides of the story and make a decision. And after all that, I’ll probably stay with you anyways.”

“Would you?”

“I think I would, sir.”

And then a strange, inexplicable thing happens. Junhui’s bitter smile relaxes, the sharpness fading away somewhat, the twist of his mouth less mocking and gloomy. He smiles at him, and it’s the softest, most gentle thing Wonwoo’s ever seen from this man.

He thinks he’s stopped breathing. He’s so in love it hurts.

“Thank you, Wonwoo,” he says, words hushed and hollow and so, so tired. Wonwoo will do anything to see some of this invisible weight lift off of Junhui’s shoulders. “Do you think you can tell Mr. Hong—quietly—to come see me? You and Minghao and Anmei can go back upstairs if you’d like.”

“Of course.” He makes to leave the room, but hesitates at the last moment. “Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

“I will. Maybe.” His soft smile is gone, replaced with a troubled expression. “I hope so.”

“Okay.” He pauses again, heart hammering so hard against his lungs and ribcage he might actually pop something. “It’s good to see you back, sir. Everyone was—everyone was very bored and lonely without you here.”
To his great relief, this does seem to make Junhui feel better somewhat. His shoulders lose some of their tension as he smiles and waves him along.

It’s late at night when Wonwoo gets jolted awake by a scream again. For a split second he thinks it’s the woman—the ghost—whatever the fuck she is, back again to haunt him and set someone else on fire. It only takes him a few moments to realize that’s incorrect. This scream is not the frightening, hair-raising wail of a bad dream come to life, it’s masculine and pained and coming from somewhere upstairs. It’s also, without a doubt, one hundred percent real.

“Help! Help, please, I—oh god, oh god—please, help me!”

He runs out in his sweatpants and T-shirt. Doors are banging open left and right, dull thuds echoing somewhere on the floor above him, people filling the halls in various states of undress and wakefulness. Wonwoo sees Minghao in the small crowd and manages to make his way towards him. His hair is sticking straight up in the back and his oversized shirt is slipping down one shoulder, and he looks almost as if he’s not even conscious. It’s amazing that he even managed to wake up at all.

“What’s goin’ on?” he slurs to Wonwoo, who lets him lean heavily against his body.

“I don’t know,” he says, attempting to smooth down the catastrophe of his bedhead. The loudest people in the halls are, of course, Junhui’s special guests—the wives are clinging to their husbands, the widowers wailing in harmonizing unison. The younger ones are shouting and adding further to the ruckus, lines such as “What was that?”, “Is someone hurt?”, “What happened? I thought I was dreaming!”, and “Junhui! Where is he! Why isn’t he here?”, all words that are utterly useless when they’re thrown about without any actions being done to answer said questions.

At least ten minutes of this chaos occurs, with everybody too scared to breach the prohibited third floor to go up and see the source of the scream for themselves, until Junhui appears from the direction of the staircase, wearing only loose-fitting pyjama pants and a sweater pulled hastily over his bare upper body. If the situation wasn’t so weird and confusing, Wonwoo thinks he might’ve started blushing redder than a firetruck by now. The party sees him and dives forwards, all shouting a thousand things at once.

“I’ll explain—I’ll explain, just—back away, give me space to breathe—” he says irritably, as Im Bora (covered in an exquisite white silk nightgown wrapped tight to her waist) latches onto his arm and Miyeon begins clinging to him as well. His jaw clenches dangerously, eyes flashing. “Back off, all of you, I’m serious!”

They back away, the hallway falling silent. Junhui takes a breath before saying, calmly, “There’s nothing to worry about. A few of my housekeeping staff sleep upstairs, one of them had a nightmare. He’s a very active sleeper and we’ve had problems with him sleepwalking and sleep-talking before. That’s all that happened. I’m terribly sorry for waking you all up from your sleep, it must have been a frightening experience. But it’s done now. Go back to bed.”

He speaks in his usual hard, unrelenting tone, and one by one everyone nods and begins disappearing back to their rooms, satisfied with the answer they’ve been given. Only Wonwoo and Minghao remain, both too familiar with Junhui to not be able to ignore the tightness of his jaw. Whatever that was, it definitely wasn’t a sleep-talking cleaning boy.

“Minghao, you’re exhausted,” Junhui says, speaking in a low, urgent tone. “Check on Anmei quickly and see if she’s asleep, and then go back to bed yourself. Wonwoo, if you’re feeling up to it, I need you to follow me. Quickly.”
Wonwoo’s brain is wide awake ever since he heard the scream. He nods, following Junhui down the hall and up the stairs as Minghao staggers over towards Anmei’s room. He can feel the tension simmering beneath Junhui’s skin, a kettle half a second away from boiling, and he doesn’t say a word until Junhui stops in front of a door a little ways off from what Wonwoo remembers is his own bedroom.

His hand wraps around the handle, but doesn’t open it just yet. He turns to look back at Wonwoo, leaning in. “Before we go in, I have to ask: are you bad with the sight of blood?”

“No.”

“Good. Either way, stay close to me in case you get lightheaded.” And with that, he opens the door and they walk into the suite.

The lights are on, but Junhui immediately switches them off. The first thing Wonwoo sees is that there is a dish left on the kitchen counter, leftovers from the night’s dinner from the look of it, and two glasses of some sort of drink. Then he hears a low groan, and he looks down and has to fight back both a flinch and a surprised shout when he sees someone slumped over, propped up against the cabinets. It’s Hong Jisoo, face pale and clammy, and Wonwoo chokes on his own spit when he sees his left arm and shoulder dyed an unmistakeably dangerous red.

“Holy shit,” he whispers. “Is he—is he okay?”

“He’ll live,” Junhui says, his expression impossible to determine. “The wound is bleeding quite a bit, but the cut wasn’t too deep.” He turns slightly, glaring at an object next to Jisoo’s collapsed body. Wonwoo realizes with a cold, sickening wave of unease that it’s a knife, an ordinary one that goes with a meal and found in the utilities drawer in every single suite. Roughly half of its blade is a glossy dark red with fresh blood. “I’m going to be gone for maybe an hour or so to set things right and get help, and I need you to stay here. Use this cloth, keep pressure on the wound, and when you think it’s stopped bleeding clean it with warm water. I’ll get Seungkwan or someone to come in and help you soon. But whatever you do, keep quiet, and don’t let him make a sound. If he says anything to you, ignore him, understand?”

There’s so many questions Wonwoo has right now, but the sight of Jisoo’s blood-damp sleeve has him faltering. Without another word, he goes to grab a bowl of warm water and a sponge. While he’s gathering what he needs, he sees in the corner of his eyes that Junhui moves closer to Jisoo, bends down to talk in a low, hard tone to him. “How you holding up, you goddamn idiot?”

Jisoo’s too dazed to say much, but Wonwoo can make out a few of the words he’s mumbling, all of which don’t make a whole lot of sense to him. “Just wanted … worried she … hadn’t eaten …”

“I thought I made it clear in our conversation what was going to happen if you did shit like this right now. I thought I was being very. Fucking. Specific.”

He whimpers, voice high-strung and weak. “Why did … why couldn’t she … stabbed me! … Her … her own …”

“Shut up, you’re just pushing yourself now. Let Wonwoo help you with your wound while I fix your mess and call a doctor. And remember, one word—if I hear you breathe a word to Wonwoo, scare him in any way, put ideas in his head—”

“I won’t,” Jisoo hiccups, frail eyelashes fluttering as he drifts in and out of consciousness, “I won’t.”

“Good.” And with that Junhui stands up, looking over to see Wonwoo staring at him. Some of the
hardness in his face diminishes, but he only gives Wonwoo a brief nod before leaving the room, shutting the door behind them and bathing them in cold moonlight. Wonwoo wastes no time in grabbing the clean cloth and pressing as hard as he can against Jisoo’s shoulder, ignoring his faint sounds of pain. He feels shaky seeing so much blood, head pounding with confusion and a million other thoughts.

Someone had just stabbed Hong Jisoo. Maybe meant to kill him. This is no ghost screeching past Wonwoo’s hallway, no terrifying presence setting fire to Junhui’s bed curtains. This is definitely, for sure, a corporeal being, a person.

The question is, who? And why? Jinhoon’s security is tight to a fault and he has eyes like a hawk, there’s no way he’d not know if someone with malicious intent had slipped their way inside. It has to be someone who’s already in Thornfield, someone who would know which room Junhui was in, Jisoo was in.

Someone who worked here.

This realization clings to Wonwoo, creeps through the crevices in his brain’s outer cortex and shocking him to the bone. One of the staff members, one of the few hundreds of workers that keep Thornfield up and running, make sure the guests are happy and the dozens of rooms and activities are clean and functioning, one of them—at least one—has a grudge against Junhui and the people in his life. Wonwoo feels almost betrayed. He’s really starting to love Thornfield—already does love it, in fact—and the people he’s met here have been some of the most welcoming, kindest, friendliest people he’s known.

His thoughts immediately begin to race. Jisoo had explicitly referred to a “she”, which is some sort of relief, since that means he can immediately cross off his closest friends on the list of potential murderers. But still, there were quite a few female directors and managers too, any of them could have done it. Or what if it’s one of Seungkwan’s housekeeping staff, able to wander the halls without question? One of Seokmin’s chefs, with access to all the food in the hotel? Jinhoon’s security guards? Can he trust any of them anymore, knowing that one of them tried to kill Junhui and make it look like an accident, knowing that they attacked one of Junhui’s acquaintances?

Nothing ever seems to come easy for him.

He knows Junhui said he’d only be gone for about an hour, but it feels more like two or three. Neither of them speak, although Jisoo occasionally stirs feebly or makes tiny little noises. At one point, Wonwoo thinks he sees tears glinting off the injured man’s smooth cheeks, but it might have just been sweat and he doesn’t comment on them. While he waits for the bleeding to stop, he awkwardly pets Jisoo’s hair and his uninjured arm, mumbling little words of encouragement and comfort that aren’t given a response beyond shaky breathing.

Seungkwan appears with a first aid kit about halfway through this night watch, mouth tensed into a tight line, and when Wonwoo tries to ask him what’s going on he just shakes his head, looking visibly upset and trying not to freak out at the mess before him. Together, they silently clean Jisoo’s wound and wrap it up as best they can with gauze, and they only have to wait a few minutes more before Junhui reappears, this time with his private doctor.

“How you doing, old pal?” Junhui says, as Wonwoo and Seungkwan scramble out of the way so the doctor has space to examine his injury.

“Am I gonna die?” Jisoo groans. He’s weak, but he seems a little more coherent now, his words less slurried.
“Of course not, don’t be stupid. You’ve had Wonwoo and Seungkwan looking after you the whole time. The wound wasn’t deep or in a fatal spot.”

“That’s true,” Dr. Go pipes up, “you are definitely not anywhere close to being on death’s door, Mr. Hong, but you should come back to the hospital with me just in case.”

“She stabbed me!” Jisoo wails out. “Junhui, why would she—? Why is she like this? Why haven’t you done anything, why aren’t you helping her?”

“I am doing everything in my power just short of forcing her out of this hotel, Jisoo,” Junhui says, words devolving in eloquence until they become something very close to a growl. “I don’t need you blaming me, not when you haven’t been here in the past four years. I’ve been here. You haven’t. Understand?”

Dr. Go straightens up, fiddling with the thick glasses perched on his beaky nose. “I assume, sir, you’d like to be discreet about moving him,” he says quietly.

“Yes,” Junhui says, eyes hard and cold. It almost frightens Wonwoo, to see him glaring so unforgivably at someone who looks so helpless. “I don’t need him scaring more of Thornfield’s guests. We’ll take him out the staff wing’s side door, there’s a car waiting. We can move him the second you say it’s safe to do so.”

“Don’t jostle his arm,” Dr. Go says, “but other than that we should move him now, before people start waking up.”

And with that, Jeonghan walks into the suite, followed by several members of the security. They carefully lift Jisoo into a waiting wheelchair they must have grabbed from the lobby, and Wonwoo watches numbly as the injured, fitful man is steered away towards the elevators. Jeonghan’s hair is out of his usual ponytail, the rusty auburn locks falling about his chin and shoulders in a tangled mess. He looks utterly exhausted as he surveys the scene—the blood-stained floor and cabinets, the leftover weapon, the bowl of pink-streaked water and sponge.

“We can deal with this in the morning,” he eventually says. Junhui refuses to look at any of them, instead staring out at the moonlit night outside of the window. “We need to sleep. Seungkwan, I’ll leave it to you to decide who’s allowed in here. You know what to do. Make it so this never happened.”

“Yes, sir,” Seungkwan says, hands shaking. Wonwoo suddenly realizes that Seungkwan is young, very young, maybe too young to be a witness to something like this. “Jesus, Mr. Yoon, Mr. Wen, sir, I didn’t—I didn’t expect this to happen, I thought she was—”

“Seungkwan,” Jeonghan says sharply, “not now.”

It’s quick, quick enough to almost be unnoticeable, but Wonwoo catches the way Jeonghan’s puffy eyes flicker towards him and back specifically. They know, he thinks, they all know. They know who did this and so does Junhui but none of them are telling me.

He can barely say a word about it—not to Junhui, or Jeonghan, or anyone—before he’s ushered out the door and back to his own room. For once, he hates how all the suites look alike, how walking into his own bedroom, his own source of privacy and comfort, feels like entering a mirror image of the crime scene all over again. He keeps looking at the kitchen floor, thinking he’ll see drying red stains and a bloody kitchen knife every time he blinks. He’s not even remotely tired anymore, and instead of falling asleep he dresses himself quietly and sits back in his bed, staring out the glass sliding door to the balcony as the sky steadily grows lighter and lighter. There’s so much he has to
think about that now, when he’s on his own, it’s too overwhelming to figure out where to start.

At around dawn, the world soft and orange and angel-pink, the phone next to his bed begins to ring. When he picks it up, it’s Junhui’s voice on the other line. “Are you awake?”

It’s hard for him to gather his words for a moment, and when he does, his voice is thick and croaky with lack of use. “Yes.”

There’s a brief moment of silence. “This was some night, wasn’t it?”

“It was.”

He can hear Junhui doing something on the other line, tapping his fingers against a hard surface or knocking a pen on the wall or something. It’s almost like a nervous habit. He seems concerned with Wonwoo’s short answers. “The hotel is starting to suffocate me. Do you mind going out for a walk with me? I think we both need some fresh air.”

“Of course, sir.” As if he wouldn’t agree—he hates himself sometimes. “I’m already dressed, I’ll wait for you in the back foyer?”

And, with birds beginning to stir and chirp sleepily from the branches of new budding leaves, wildflowers poking through the earth and dotting the grounds with clusters of white and baby blue and lavender, Wonwoo and Junhui walk slowly around the grounds of Thornfield, looping around the stone paths and along the perimeter of the hedge wall. Junhui hasn’t bothered changing his clothes, except for putting a shirt and jacket on and some proper shoes, and Wonwoo immediately feels overdressed.

“The sky looks beautiful,” Junhui abruptly says, chin tilted up, staring at the slowly rising sun.

“It is,” Wonwoo agrees quietly. He thinks Junhui looks more dazzling, practically shining in the low, early sunlight. He doesn’t look as grave and cold out here the way he did in Jisoo’s room a few hours ago, the fresh air and soft dawn giving him an almost rosy glow.

“I’m sorry for making you stay there with him. Were you scared?”

“Not at all. I’m just glad I could help.” He pauses, before admitting slowly, “Okay, I was a little scared that whoever did that to Mr. Hong might come back and finish him off.”

“Well, that’s not something you should’ve worried about. I locked the door behind me. I even sent in Seungkwan to keep you company.” He looks down at him, eyes twinkling, a curious little smile worming its way onto his face. “Do you really think I would have let any harm come to you, Wonwoo?”

He has to turn away and pretend to admire the flowers before his blush becomes too obvious. Junhui is being smooth, why is he acting smooth? “There are always things you can’t stop from happening, no matter how hard you try. That’s what I was afraid of, even though I knew I was perfectly safe.”

“You think I can’t protect you?”

“I’m just saying that sometimes there are things you can’t protect.”

“Then maybe I should take you away and prove you wrong. Hide you somewhere so no one can find you and hurt you.” Junhui’s eyes are gleaming, half-joking and half-something … he doesn’t know, Wonwoo can’t really figure it out. He wants to ask him what he means by that, wants him to repeat his words—wants to know what’s with the almost possessive tone in his voice. In the end,
he’s too scared and too insecure to voice any of those thoughts, and the moment passes.

“Do you know who did that to Mr. Hong? And who set fire to your bed curtains?”

Junhui’s smile fades, replacing itself with a look of seriousness. “I think so,” he says, choosing his words carefully.

“Is it someone who works here? Someone who lives at Thornfield?”

“Possibly.”

“Then what—what should we do?” he asks weakly. He doesn’t understand why Junhui is hesitating, why Jeonghan and Seungkwan and all the others, maybe everyone else who works here, seems to know who is doing this and yet won’t do anything about it. His first thought is that maybe Junhui is soft on this mystery woman for some reason—maybe he’s too fond of her to press charges? But he can’t really imagine him falling for any of the girls working here. Or maybe she’s blackmailing them for some reason, holds some sort of position of power over the leaders of the hotel that makes it impossible for them to get her to leave.

“Nothing, not yet. Not until Jisoo leaves the country and he’s far, far away from here.”

“Will he, um, will he cause you any trouble, Mr. Wen?”

“Probably not. He won’t mess with me, he’s too soft-hearted for that. Besides, he’s scared of me.”

“Scared?”

Junhui gives him a wry glance. “You don’t think people are scared of me?”

Wonwoo snorts. “You’re … intimidating, if not abrasive. But I don’t see how anyone can find you scary.”

“Hah! That’s understandable. He’s scared of me because he thinks I hold some sort of power over him, so he’s afraid of going against me, or doing or saying anything that might cause me to, shall we say, make use of that power.” A butterfly, yellow and striped with delicate lines of black, flutters past their line of sight and Junhui watches the motion in a distracted manner. “In reality, I’m far more vulnerable to him than he thinks. We don’t hate each other, not really. We went to school together back in the day, and I know there’s not a malicious bone in his body. He won’t ever want to purposefully hurt me. But if he were to find out that I was not this impossible, immovable object, that I am in any way weak to the dangers his presence creates, then he might do something stupid. So I think we can safely say that we can trust Hong Jisoo for now, but we shouldn’t keep him too close.” He hesitates and turns to Wonwoo, smiling a little. “You’re my friend, aren’t you, Wonwoo?”

He had thought that for a while now—for all intents and purposes, they are something like “friends”. Even that meagre little bit of affection manages to make his ears burn hot with satisfaction. “I’d like to think so.”

“Good. You know, I think of you as my conscience.” He grins at the look of bafflement Wonwoo gives him. “For someone who enjoys being so frustratingly polite all the time, you can be pretty easy to make out, you know. When we talk, I feel like you genuinely enjoy being around me, but you also aren’t afraid to show your displeasure if you don’t approve of something I do or say. I feel like if I were to try and make you do something you thought was wrong, you’d give me so much shit for it.”

“That’s understandable,” Wonwoo echoes with a light grin, and he gets extraordinarily pleased when Junhui starts to laugh. The sound feels like it belongs in the air out here, in the freshness of the world.
“You have power over me too, you know,” Junhui says, casually. As innocently simple as it may be, his words make Wonwoo’s heart stop for a moment. “I’m sure you can hurt me as badly as Jisoo can. Maybe even more. This is why, despite having the utmost faith in your loyalty, I will never let you know where I am vulnerable. That’s what friends do to a person, I guess.”

It takes a moment for him to find his voice, and when he does, he winces when it comes out slightly shaky. “I think telling me that you’re vulnerable is a little anti-productive, sir. Now that I know, I might start trying to push your buttons.”

“Like I said, I trust you wholeheartedly. I know you’ll never purposefully hurt me. Here, let’s sit down.”

He gestures to a stone bench, the base of it tangled in old vines and dead grass that haven’t been cleared away by the gardeners yet. It’s meant to fit two people comfortably but Wonwoo still feels like it’s a bit of a tight squeeze. Maybe because they’re sitting close enough to knock knees, maybe because they are completely alone out here.

“Can I ask you something?” Wonwoo doesn’t think he has any choice in the matter, so he just nods, letting Junhui speak. “I want you to imagine that, for a moment, you weren’t an orphan, or a student at Lowood, or studying Child Development in university. Imagine, for a moment, that you are born into a ridiculously wealthy family, that you are young and brash and angry at the world for many, many reasons, some of them more … reasonable than others. And you make a lot of mistakes when you’re younger. In an effort to run away from these mistakes, you drop out of grad school and travel the world and try to forget about the things you’ve done, the things that await you back home. You distract yourself in parties and festivals, in vapid, beautiful men and women, believing that so long as you keep on moving, never staying too long in one place, your past will never catch up to you.”

Wonwoo has a feeling who he’s talking about. This is definitely not a simple hypothetical question.

“Now, imagine that you return home after a while, and in time, you become more familiar with someone. Someone who you find captivating, someone who makes life more enjoyable for you. Suddenly it doesn’t feel like torture to be back home—you look forward to every new day, you’re inspired to do more with your life, to become a better person, a better man for—” he halts, jaw working for a moment, before saying, “So, the question is, what can this man do? If the past mistakes he wants to atone for have the capability of ruining his present chance for happiness, for self-improvement, is it really so wrong for him to want to avoid confronting these mistakes?”

Wonwoo can’t answer him for a moment. What kind of answer can he give? What is Junhui looking for? His jaw works as he struggles, aware that Junhui’s strong, unrelenting gaze is trained on him and waiting. “You’re asking me if, in this situation, running away from your old problems is a better choice than dealing with them.”

“More or less, yes.”

“I think—” he stops, licking his dry lips. “I think this is the kind of complicated problem that can’t be solved with a simple answer. You’re asking me to give you a yes or no, but there are too many factors I don’t know about to be able to give a reasonable response.”

“Playing it safe again. I’ll get an honest answer out of you one day, Wonwoo, you’ll see.” And then he falls silent for a long moment, lines furrowing in his brow as he glares thoughtfully at a bunch of flowers growing by the bench, before abruptly standing up to look across the grounds towards the direction of the hotel and saying, “Im Bora is very beautiful, isn’t she?”

“Yes,” Wonwoo says slowly, reluctant to start a conversation about that woman.
“I think you’ve probably noticed that I’ve been paying her … special attention since she’s arrived. She looks like she belongs here, doesn’t she? King of Thornfield always needs a Queen.” He snickers a little at his own private joke, before there is a brief moment of silence. His voice is plaintive and strangely vulnerable when he asks, “Wonwoo, do you think she can make me happy?”

Wonwoo swallows around a lump the size of a golf ball in his throat. Is this something he really has to answer? Something he has to put into words, lie around a professional smile? He doesn’t have a chance to say anything—Junhui turns back around to look at him and says, “You’re looking pale. Are you tired? You probably haven’t had a chance to rest since what happened earlier. I apologize, you must be suffering a lot for my own selfishness, as usual.”

“Never, sir. I’m not tired.”

Junhui gives him a rueful smile. “You’re too kind to me. I might force you to stay up and keep me company more often if you don’t tell me to fuck off. Like, I dunno … my wedding night? What if I’m nervous and I need you to stay up with me, listen to me tell you about how excited I am to marry the woman I love? Would you do that for me?”

Wonwoo feels like he’s being ripped apart at the seams. Something inside of him is being torn out of its safe place and stomped on until it fizzles out of existence. “Of course I will, Mr. Wen.”

Junhui’s smile twists into something Wonwoo doesn’t understand, and without another word he gestures for him to get up. The two of them make their way back to Thornfield in silence, birds twittering below a blue sky. They split off once they leave the foyer, and as Wonwoo makes his way back up to his room (“Have the day off, catch up on your sleep,” Junhui had insisted), he hears Junhui enter the dining hall and cheerfully say to someone, maybe an early rising party member or housekeeper, “Oh, Mr. Hong just left! Was in a real big rush to get back to work. He caught a taxi, I just saw him off.”

Like fortune tellers and crystal balls, Wonwoo has never believed in bad omens.

“Wonwoo?” Chan’s voice echoes through the playroom, making Wonwoo and Minghao look up from where they had been testing Anmei on her Korean vocabulary. He gives Minghao a quick, shy smile—Wonwoo can’t believe they’ve been dating for almost two months now and he never knew, he can’t believe neither of them told him anything—before turning back to Wonwoo and saying, “There’s a man here to see you.”

“A man?” Wonwoo shrugs when Minghao looks at him questioningly, standing up and massaging feeling back into his knees. “Asking for me, specifically?”

“Yep. He said your full name and everything.”

“Alright, I guess I’ll go.” He waves goodbye at Anmei and follows Chan towards the lobby. “Any idea what he might want?”

Chan shrugs, adjusting the sleeves of his bellboy jacket. “No idea. He’s dressed awful funny, though. In all black, like he’s mourning. He was also holding a letter I think, but I didn’t get a good look at it—I went to get you immediately after I sent him to a private room.”

“Thanks, Chan,” Wonwoo says, indulgently slipping him one of Anmei’s strawberry candies as he enters the small room off the side of the lobby. He’s curious but not particularly nervous, assuming it might be someone from a bank or his school or whatever, but once he catches sight of the man in
front of him he stops dead and the coldest, sickest sensation of dread washes over him.

The man himself is not a source of terror—he’s as harmless as he looks, well past middle age, with a rounding belly and grey hair, indeed dressed in all black like he’s just left a funeral home—but it’s what he represents, what this man stands for, that makes Wonwoo suddenly feel like a terrified little boy again.

He may not believe in bad omens, but the sight of this one single person standing there like a black-suited gargoyle in the half-darkness of the stuffy room immediately implies that whatever happens next will not bode well for anyone.

“It’s been a long time, Mr. Jeon,” the man says in a gravelly voice. “You remember me, don’t you?”

“Of course, Mr. Kim,” Wonwoo says stiffly. He can feel his fight-or-flight response kicking in for no reason at all, instincts telling him to run away before this man can catch him, can drag him back to a hell he thought he finally managed to escape from. “You’ve been the family’s chauffeur for twenty years, I could never forget you. How is my aunt?”

“She isn’t well, Mr. Jeon. None of them are. This is from the family doctor, the particulars of the situation in formal writing, I think.” Mr. Kim holds out his arm, and just like Chan had said there is a letter in his hand, sealed firmly in a crisp white envelope. Wonwoo takes it with shaking fingers but doesn’t make a move to open it. “Jonghyuk died last week, in his apartment in Busan.”

Wonwoo freezes up. “You’re kidding.” His pulse jumps weakly against the side of his neck. “Jonghyuk? What on earth happened?”

Mr. Kim shakes his head sadly. “He’s been getting himself into trouble left and right for the past three years or so. Dropping out of grad school, getting involved with the wrong kinds of people, going out gambling, landing himself in jail … a few weeks ago, he came back to the house to ask for money from Mrs. Choi—of course, I’m not at liberty to know how much, but I can assume it was a sum she wasn’t able to provide—and he left empty-handed. The next thing we heard, he killed himself. Overdosed on sleeping pills, they say.”

Something very dark and ugly is trying to crawl its way out of Wonwoo’s heart. For as long as he has been living on this earth, all he ever wanted was to be a level-headed, compassionate person. He wants to be someone who would make Mingming proud, he wants to be someone who would make his parents proud, his uncle proud, Miss Temple proud, Junhui and Minghao and Anmei proud. He wants to be someone that both the living and the dead and the only people who ever truly cared about him can look on with pride.

But the moment he hears the words “Jonghyuk died” leave Mr. Kim’s lips, something vicious and twisted begins crowing with triumph inside of him. Somewhere, some part of him he’s been trying to bury for so long, is happy Choi Jonghyuk is dead, that his childhood tormenter is no longer part of this world, and Wonwoo is both horrified and ashamed of himself for having these emotions.

“How—” he has to pause and take a quick breath, voice wobbly and cracking. “How is Aunt Choi holding up?”

“Her health has been failing these past few years,” Mr. Kim says gravely, “and I think the news of her only son just tipped her right over the edge, gave her a stroke and near frightened us all half to death ourselves. She’s been bedridden ever since, and she’s fading fast. Yesterday, Nam Siyeon—you remember her, right? I believe she took care of you the most when you were young—was looking after her when Mrs. Choi started to call for you. We think she wants to see you before she dies. If possible, I’d like to take you back to Daejeon with me to fulfil her last wishes.”
Wonwoo nods, not trusting himself to speak right away. Not only is Choi Jonghyuk dead, but his mother is about to be too. Instantly, a frightening, vindictive side of himself demands for him to refuse, to laugh in Mr. Kim’s face and tell him that nothing Aunt Choi has to say to him on her deathbed is worth returning back to that house. That unless she wants to bow down and apologize profusely for the way she treated him, he’s satisfied with her paying her dues in whatever pit of hell she gets dropped into.

Almost as soon as that fire begins to eat away at his insides does it extinguish, and he’s left feeling empty and hollow and miserable. Who is he kidding? “Of course, Mr. Kim, I’ll just need to talk to my boss first. Do you mind waiting for me to finalize things and pack some stuff? I’ll let the staff know you’re free to stay and have a bite to eat while you’re here.”

Mr. Kim nods gratefully. “It’s been a two-hour drive coming here, that would be great.”

Wonwoo leads him outside and talks to Chan in a low voice, and as he leaves Mr. Kim to the care of the bellhops he heads back towards Junhui’s private wing, head buzzing with his thoughts and old nightmares. He can’t find Junhui in the common room or in the dining hall, and it’s highly unlikely he’s in his office when all his friends demand so much of his attention. Finally, he catches sight of the group out in the courtyard through a window and he rushes out to meet them.

They’re all either walking up and down the stone paths or resting underneath umbrellas in the shade. The other hotel guests that are using the courtyard keep their distance from the owner’s special friends and look at them admiringly, something they probably all enjoy. Mrs. Lee’s sons are playing Frisbee. Wonwoo hunches his shoulders and tries to appear inconspicuous as he searches for Junhui’s familiar blond head, eventually finding him—as usual—talking with Im Bora. They’re standing quite close together, and as he watches Bora tilts her head up to him to say something and he smiles at her and laughs.

Im Bora catches sight of him first as he approaches them, and instantly her charming smile sours, and she gives him a look like she wants to order him away. Wonwoo ignores her and hesitantly says, “Mr. Wen? Sir?”

She sighs and presses her hand on his arm. “I think this boy is looking for you, Jun, darling.”

Junhui finally notices him, looking equal parts confused and satisfied for some reason. “Is there a problem, Wonwoo?”

Wonwoo fiddles nervously with the envelope in his hands. “I need to speak to you privately. It’s, uh, urgent.”

“Oh, of course.” Junhui excuses himself and heads back inside with Wonwoo. Once they’re through the doors and in the small courtyard’s foyer, he closes the French-style doors and rests his back against them. He looks casually handsome in a loose button-up shirt that reveals his collarbones, the sleeves rolled up past his elbows. “What’s wrong, Wonwoo?”

Wonwoo hands him the envelope, watching as Junhui opens it and begins to read the letter with an impossibly complicated expression. “I’ll need a week or two off, sir. I have to leave Thornfield and head to Daejeon.”

Junhui hums but doesn’t reply for a moment, until eventually he looks up at him. “This letter says a woman is dying. Choi … Youngsook? What’s she to you?”

“She’s my aunt.”
Junhui blinks. “The aunt that despised you and made your life miserable as a child? The aunt that let her son hit you until you bled and did nothing about it? The aunt that locked you up in the room your uncle died in and let you scream until you fainted? The aunt that sent you off to Lowood to get rid of you?”

“Yes, that aunt.”

He scoffs harshly. “Why the hell do you want to leave to see her? This is ridiculous, there’s no need to drive across the country to pay your dues to a sick old woman who’s never treated you kindly once in your life.”

Wonwoo sighs. Privately, he feels the same way. “I feel like I must. She was … well, she was calling for me specifically. I feel like it would be really shitty of me to not honour her last wishes.”

Junhui mutters something low in his throat that Wonwoo can’t catch, before he folds up the letter, places it back in the envelope, and thrusts it back into his hands. “Only stay for a week, alright? Then come straight back.”

“I don’t want to promise anything, sir. I don’t know how long I’ll be needed there.”

Junhui’s expression is dark and off-putting, something that eventually fizzles out into reluctant acceptance. “Alright, alright. When are you planning to leave?”

“There’s a man here to help take me back to Daejeon. I just need to pack a few things and I should be gone right away. There’s also the matter of money. If it’s possible, could I have this month’s and next month’s salary in advance? While I’m in Daejeon, you see. I don’t really expect the family to provide much for me while I’m there beyond simple meals, and that’s me being optimistic.”

“Of course, of course.” Junhui produces a chequebook from his pocket—of course rich people would carry those with them wherever they went—and scribbles down a sum with a fancy black pen. “How’s this?”

Wonwoo chokes on his own tongue when he reads the amount. “I think you, u-uh, added in a few too many zeroes at the end, sir.” He hands it back to him with shaking hands, completely stunned that, for a moment, he was holding such a ridiculous sum of money.

“Maybe I should add a few more?”

“Sir, please, I nearly had a heart attack. I just need what I’m owed, no more than that.” He presses a hand to his chest to try and slow his heart. “Jesus, Mr. Wen.”

Junhui snickers and tears up the first cheque, writing down a new one to give to him. “Fine, here. Notice I gave you a little less than the full amount you’re owed. You’ll have to come back from Daejeon and return to Thornfield to get the rest of it, understand?”

It’s such a petulant, strangely childish way to do things, and Wonwoo can’t help himself from smiling as he accepts the cheque and tucks it carefully into the envelope with the doctor’s letter. “You don’t have to try so hard, Mr. Wen, I promise I’ll come back.” He hesitates, heart breaking a little as he comes to a decision over something he’s been mulling over since that night with Hong Jisoo, and says, quietly, “Mr. Wen, there’s something else I’d like to talk to you about.”

“Of course, Wonwoo.”

“You told me you were thinking of getting together with Im Bora. Even marrying her.” Under Junhui’s gaze, he flushes and quickly adds, “You implied it, at least.”
“And?”

“And I think you should start looking into schools for Anmei to go to. No doubt she and Minghao would, um, cause trouble once Im Bora decides to live in Thornfield as well. I mean—I’m not exactly sure if the future Mrs. Wen would enjoy having her daughter-in-law homeschooled, if you get what I’m saying. But I know you’ll find her a good place, you’ll make sure she’s happy there.”

“Alright, I’ll look into finding her a suitable boarding school to go to.”

“There’s something else. Since she’ll be sent to school, there won’t be any need for me to stay here either.” Some part of him shrivels up and dies as he says it. “So in the future, when things between you and Miss Im become official, I’ll also need to leave and find another job somewhere else.”

“I see.” Junhui’s expression is dark and thunderous and—he doesn’t know what else, Wonwoo can’t figure it out, he can barely look at him long enough to make out the rest of it. He settles for the safe option of staring at his sneakers, hands pressing hard into the envelope to cover up their trembling. “Are you planning on finding a new job when you’re out in Daejeon?”

“No, not exactly, I doubt I’ll be able to find anything. But still, I’ll probably, um, advertise myself. Make flyers or something.”

“Flyers? Like hell you will!” His voice is practically a growl. “I would’ve given you one-tenths of what you’re owed if I knew you were going to use it to print out fucking flyers. Give me the cheque, I’m taking back three-quarters of it, you don’t deserve this advance.”

He reaches out to grab the envelope, and Wonwoo snatches his hand back, raising an eyebrow at his behaviour. “Sorry, I need this money.”

Junhui glowers at him, equal parts playful and genuinely frustrated. “Give me back the cheque, Wonwoo. I think I need to change something on there.”

“No offense, sir, but hell no.” Junhui steps closer to try and grab it, and Wonwoo quickly places it behind his back, smothering an amused laugh. “Sir!”

It’s amusing to see Junhui behave this way, but once he gives up Wonwoo realizes how close they are right now, how he has to tilt his head ever so slightly to look into Junhui’s face, and he’s instantly nervous. Junhui doesn’t seem to have noticed, as he calmly says, “Don’t advertise yourself. Come back here once you’re done in Daejeon, I’ll see to it personally you get a good job, alright? A job that’ll be just as accommodating as Thornfield.”

“I will, sir. Thank you.”

It hurts to even think about it, to have to leave all this behind, but luckily for him Wonwoo is busy giving Minghao and Anmei a hasty explanation, packing what little clothes he owns into his ratty old suitcase, and spending the next two hours fidgeting uneasily in the back of the Choi family’s fancy black car to Daejeon.

The interior of the car is exactly the same as he remembers it, with its plush leather seats and pristine, unused cup holders. There is a single scratch that has gone unnoticed, and Wonwoo knows exactly where to find it—it’s right underneath the car door’s handle, hidden so cleverly it would be difficult to see unless you already knew where to look at. He was the one who put that scratch there when he was eight, and Aunt Choi was yelling at him in the passenger seat. He had bit back his tears and resisted kicking the seat in front of him (knowing he would get in even bigger trouble if he did), and putting that scratch on the otherwise spotless car has been his little moment of rebellion.
His heart sinks into stomach acid the moment Mr. Kim rolls up into the driveway of the familiar large townhouse, its grey shingles and white-bordered windows and perfectly trimmed garden exactly the way he remembered it, the small clusters of peonies and chrysanthemums and sweet-scented heathers never moving from their position. Fifteen years later, and it’s like no time had passed at all.

“Wonwoo!” Nam Siyeon rushes forwards to give him a hug when he walks through the door. Wonwoo hugs her back, surprisingly wistful now that he sees her again. She was the only one of Aunt Choi’s housekeepers that had been kind to Wonwoo as a child. She had been a hard young woman with a fiery temper back then, yet she pitied him and snuck him treats, cared for him when he was sick, and was the only one to cry and see him off when he left for Lowood. She’s no longer young or particularly hard-looking, her face softened with wrinkles and something else, something a little happier. “How have you been? Oh, look at you, you’re so tall and handsome I hardly recognized you!”

“I’m alright, Siyeon noona,” he says with a slight laugh. “Are you still with, uh, with Lee Daewon?”

She giggles and flashes her left hand at him, revealing a simple gold band on her ring finger. “We got married ten years ago! We’re doing wonderful, we have two kids already.”

“That’s great, that really is.” He glances up at the wide curved stairs leading to the second floor with some trepidation. “How is Mrs. Choi?”

Siyeon’s face falls as she looks up to the landing as well. “Oh. She, well, she was asking for you again this morning. She’s asleep now, but she’ll be awake and willing to talk in the evening after dinner. Here, let’s get your things upstairs. Your old room is okay, right?”

“As okay as it can be,” he mumbles. The room he stayed in as a child was one of the two guest rooms in the Choi residence. Once he was old enough to use a bed instead of a cradle, Uncle Choi had planned on redecorating it so it became a bedroom more suited for a young child, but he died before those plans could be finalized and Wonwoo had to stay in an entirely impersonal room, as if to physically provide proof that he’s not a part of the Choi family. The double bed that had felt so large and cold when he was five now fits him more comfortably, the paintings of flower vases and contemporary blocks of colour that used to scare him now seem so ugly and ridiculous.

All the same, he doesn’t want to stay in here any longer than he needs to, so he heads downstairs and towards the living room. The double doors to the room are shut, and almost instantly a strange fear seizes him—he remembers being forbidden to enter the living room when the doors were closed, remembers a long yardstick leaving red lines on his palms every time he disobeyed. He shakes it off and opens the door, walking inside.

There are two women already there, lounging on the couch. He recognizes their features instantly, although it has been years and years since he’s last seen them in person, and both have changed rather drastically. One of them is tall and almost gaunt, with stiff formless clothing and a severe expression—his cousin Eunjoo. The other is plump and pretty, fiddling with her cell phone and dressed in something flowy and fashionable—his cousin Gayoung. The two of them, along with their recently-deceased older brother Jonghyuk, make up the three Choi children that Wonwoo lived with in this house.

Eunjoo is busy reading a book and barely spares him a glance and a nod before turning back to her reading, while Gayoung gives him a once-over (taking in his shabby brown long-sleeved shirt and old jeans) and greets him with a sneer she doesn’t try fighting back. Wonwoo remembers being terrified of them as a kid. While neither of them were as cruel and vicious to him as their older brother was, they weren’t particularly kind to him either.
It’s funny how much more different twenty-four-year-old Jeon Wonwoo feels compared to seven-year-old Jeon Wonwoo.

He takes a seat between the two of them, undaunted by Eunjoo ignoring him or Gayoung making half-sarcastic light conversation, determined to not let the past decide his behaviour for him and prepares to be civil.

Dinner is much the same way as their first interactions—Eunjoo only takes a plain bowl of rice, bulgogi, and a small cup of kimchi with her back to the living room to eat in silence, while Gayoung props her phone up with a water jug and watches some drama while she eats, the silence between her and Wonwoo only broken by her occasional snorts of laughter or gasps of indignation.

He never would have expected it, but Wonwoo feels relieved when Siyeon pokes her head into the living room and tells him Aunt Choi is awake. He stands up and follows her up the stairs towards the master bedroom, strangely calm even as his stomach flutters with increasing nerves.

The master bedroom is just as he remembered it, with heavy expensive furniture and photographs of three well-dressed children everywhere, dark and suffocating now that the curtains have been drawn. Aunt Choi rests in the bed, propped up with several pillows. At once, his promise of not letting the past dictate his actions in the present proves to be bullshit, and he’s struck with both terror and the oppression of a child forced to always hold their tongue, the same feelings of hate and bitterness he had left her with starting to bubble up his throat again. With difficulty, he swallows it back down and approaches to sit on the edge of the bed. “Aunt Choi?”

She stirs feebly, focusing her eyes on him. She’s so much older than he remembers, and he could’ve sworn when he was nine she seemed so tall and imposing and strong, three adjectives which do not come to mind when he sees her tucked into the bed, all skin and bones. Her stare is as icy cold as ever, utterly unforgivable. He wonders if she’ll continue to hate and loathe him until her very last breath. “Wonwoo?”

“It’s me, aunt. You called for me.”

She glares even harder at him, but her eyes are going unfocused again—it appears as though she doesn’t have the energy to stay concentrated for very long. She grows restless, irritable, fidgeting with the blankets over her aged body. “You are Jeon Wonwoo?”

“Yes, aunt, it’s me.”

“He was the most wicked boy I’ve ever seen,” she hisses up at the ceiling, at no one in particular. Maybe at herself. “He did nothing but cause trouble, wear down my nerves, snapping in sudden bouts of temper. That thing … I thought for sure he was some sort of wild child, some little demon sent to give me hell—the way he spoke to me that day, when I sent him away”—she’s starting to overexert herself, her weak breaths coming out in furious little gasps, “—I thought I won! I thought I won and then he says such, such horrible things to me, things no nine-year-old should ever be able to say! Oh, oh, that—I wish he died with his parents and left me in peace!”

Wonwoo’s jaw tenses, eyes burning. He hates her. God, he hates her so fucking much. But with her ranting and raving mindlessly in her bed, so skinny, so weak, her veins stark green and purple through her thinning skin, how can he look at her and still see her as the immovable, evil matriarch of the family, the queen of the house? How can he still hate her when she’s so weak and powerless, when he’s so much of a different person now? “Why did you want him to die, aunt?”

She wheezes for a moment, fingers grasping weakly at the sheets with no real strength. “He loved them so much,” she croaks. “Byunghoon didn’t care that his sister married a grade school teacher, he
didn’t care she married a man beneath our status and embarrassed our family. He insisted on visiting their ugly, tiny little house, buying that—that *spawn* of theirs expensive presents. He cried so much when they died.”

Wonwoo can’t stop a wet, ragged gasp from escaping his throat, almost a sob but not quite, as he stills and shuts his mouth and lets her speak.

“Their baby was a horrible thing. It didn’t *cry*, not in the way babies should. It never screamed. It just fidgeted and whined and whimpered all night long. Why did Byunghoon dote over that sickly little thing? Why did he stay in the nursery and cradle it and *coo* for hours on end when he never did that much for his own children? Did he love it more than his own, *my* own …?”

She hisses at the memories, eyes unseeing and far off in some other world, remembering things from a lifetime ago. “*My* children were smart, they knew that thing was nothing but trouble, but he’d try so hard to make them get along, would get angry when they revealed how much they disliked it… how could he make me promise? He knew I hated the thing, but he let the child stay with him in the Red Room, still made me promise that I would care for the child when he died. He knew, but he made me do it anyway, he knew I wouldn’t refuse his dying wish. How could he?”

“How could he indeed?” Wonwoo mumbles, heart aching for an uncle he can barely remember anymore. He wishes the man lived even a few years longer, he wishes he knew more about the one family member he had that treated him so lovingly. He closes his eyes to try and compose himself and all he sees in the back of his eyelids is red. The Red Room.

“I don’t have any more money for you, Jonghyuk,” she cries out, tense and frantic, eyes bulging in their sockets. “I’m *sorry*, but I don’t. Over half of my money goes towards paying off your debts, your gambling habits. I can barely keep this house going anymore, Gayoung needs an increase in her allowance or she loses her club membership but I don’t have anything to give her. Darling, they’re cheating you, why can’t you see that? Don’t ask for more money, you know I have nothing!”

A cool hand presses against Wonwoo’s shoulder, and at that moment he realizes he had completely forgotten Siyeon was in the room with him. “She’s losing herself,” she whispers, “we should let her rest. Come on.”

“He threatened to kill himself if he didn’t get the money!” Aunt Choi wails, veins so prominent Wonwoo’s half-afraid they might rip out of her entirely. “What do I do? He says he’ll kill himself, or kill me, I dream of him hanging himself or jumping off a roof—I want to help you, Jonghyuk, but I don’t know what to do!”

Siyeon gestures quickly for Wonwoo to leave, and he does so gratefully.

It’s ten long, painful days before he can see Aunt Choi again. She tends to ramble on like this throughout the night, either too delirious to make any sense or fast asleep, and the doctor that visits daily to check up on her forbids her from experiencing any sort of stressors for the time being.

Counting himself as the biggest stressor after the death of her favourite child, Wonwoo keeps away from her room and does his best to get along with his female cousins, but they certainly don’t make it easy.

Choi Eunjoo is as strict as a nun, her schedule stern and unchanging, as she goes about her daily activities with all the punctuality of a mechanical doll, living her life on the chimes of the grandfather clock in the hall. Wonwoo has never seen someone so cold and unaffected in his life—he once asked her what she will do after the funeral and a short mourning period, and she replied by saying, “I plan on completing my studies and becoming a teacher at a Catholic private school. Somewhere far off and isolated, like the boarding school you went to, where I won’t have to be bothered by anybody.”
“Are you feeling alright? With—with Jonghyuk, and your mother, and everything?”

“Jonghyuk almost ruined us,” she said, sounding completely calm despite losing her brother less than three weeks ago. “He almost dragged the family name to dirt, with all the things he’s been up to in Busan. I struggled a lot with shame and my sense of worth because of him. It’s good to know that he can’t cause us any more problems.”

Wonwoo had smiled, stood up, and left the room, resolving to never repeat such an uncomfortable experience again.

Choi Gayoung is no better. She’s even more vapid and self-absorbed than Junhui’s friends back in Thornfield, and equally as callous about her brother and mother. The tears she sheds for their fate only last so long as she’s interested in feeling sorry for herself, until something else manages to distract her. She’s glued to her phone all day long, keeping up with all the gossip she’s missing, easy to throw a fit or get huffy when things don’t go her way. Wonwoo once had to sit through two and a half hours of her rattling on about the lives of people that he decidedly did not care about, and decides that dealing with Anmei is less torturous than this.

Not for the first time since he left, Wonwoo’s thoughts flit back to Thornfield. He misses the comforting familiarity of the hotel’s halls, the friendly smiles of their staff. He misses Chan and Minghao keeping him company in his room with bags of microwave popcorn and a Guillermo Del Toro movie playing on the TV. He misses Jeonghan’s clever smile, Jihoon’s tired dry wit, Seokmin and Soonyoung’s latest schemes, Seungkwan’s twinkling eyes when he has a story to share, and Anmei’s small hand reaching out to hold his. And of course, he misses Junhui. Misses him like there’s a hole inside his heart.

*Consider this practice, he tells himself, for when Junhui gets together with Im Bora and you have to leave him forever.*

But that just makes him even more depressed, because it means that even once he leaves this house there won’t be anything better waiting for him back in Seoul.

One evening he finally grows sick of Eunjoo and Gayoung screeching at each other like angry bats. He quietly gets up from the couch and leaves the room completely unnoticed (“You’re an embarrassment to everyone! All you want to do is marry a rich guy and laze around doing nothing for the rest of your life!” “Well, better that than being a dead plastic robot who thinks she’s better than everyone else because she doesn’t look any further than the end of her own nose!”) and heads up to his room to read a book in peace.

The master bedroom’s door is slightly ajar, and as he walks by it he hears a voice cough and weakly say, “Who’s out there?”

He squeezes his eyes shut briefly and sighs before walking in. Aunt Choi is awake, looking at him with eyes slightly more clear and aware of her surroundings than before. “It’s me, aunt.”

“Who?”

“Jeon Wonwoo, ma’am. You sent for me, remember?” He remembers the family doctor’s orders a minute too late and worries she might work herself up again, but it’s too late now. He chooses his words carefully and slowly says, “You wanted to see me for something.”

She doesn’t speak for a long moment, thin dry lips twisting as she shifts on the bed in discomfort. Wonwoo makes no move to offer help.
“You’ve gotten taller,” she eventually says. “And older.”

“It’s been fifteen years since we’ve last seen each other, aunt. I’m not a nine-year-old boy anymore.”

Silence. Wonwoo can almost hear the grandfather clock’s ticking downstairs.

“That makes it two times I’ve done you wrong, you know,” she says abruptly. Wonwoo stares at her with some confusion, but waits for her to finish. “I won’t pretend to care for you, but being stuck in this bed gives a woman time to think. I’ve thought a lot about you, and there are two things I’ve come to regret.”

Wonwoo can feel a muscle jump in his jaw, which he tries to ignore. He wonders which of the several shitty things she’s done to him are the ones she genuinely feels remorse for. Is it sending him off to Lowood? Or all those times she blatantly ignored the bruises and scratches on Wonwoo’s body in favour of siding with her son? Is it that time where she locked him in the Red Room? There’s just so many to choose from.

“The first,” Aunt Choi continues in a tired voice, “is that I promised my dying husband I would treat you like one of our own, and I very clearly broke that promise. The second is in the third drawer of my nightstand. It’s in an envelope.”

Wonwoo hesitates for a moment, not sure whether he can even trust her, but eventually his curiosity gets the better of him. Her nightstand is fancy carved wood, and the drawers all have polished little handles on them. Nestled between shallow boxes of expensive jewelry and assorted photo albums rests a cream-coloured envelope, and when Wonwoo picks it up he checks the date and realizes it was sent nine years ago, back when he was still in Lowood.

“What is this?” he asks.

Aunt Choi lifts her arm—it looks like it takes her a lot of energy to do so—and gestures for him to read it.

Wonwoo reads it as calmly as he can, even though the more typed words he reads the more he suddenly feels the sudden urge to smash everything in the room and scream himself into oblivion. When he’s done, he speaks up, unable to stop his voice from shuddering. “Why didn’t you send this to me?”

Aunt Choi doesn’t answer him. He looks up to glare at her. His fingers are beginning to tense, the letter crushing in his grip. “Why didn’t you tell me my father had a brother? Why didn’t you tell me he wanted to adopt me?”

“You’ve heard about the Jeon family’s situation. What could he have done to support you that we couldn’t have?”

“Aunt Choi’s so angry he almost shakes the letter right under his aunt’s nose. He holds himself back at the last second, but his heart is racing and the bedroom is suddenly too small, too cluttered, too dark. He wants to be back in Thornfield, he wants to forget and be home with Minghao and Anmei and Junhui and he wishes he never came back here in the first place. “That’s bullshit! It says right here that he got a position that earned him a whole bunch of money! He was rich, and he was willing to take me off your hands and take care of me, and you j-just, just what? Hid the letter all this time?”

“I hated you,” she says simply. “You know that. I hated you too much to ever want to help you. I immediately remembered the things you said to me that day, so long ago, when you left for Lowood. I could never forget it, you know. The way you spoke to me that day, so unchildlike, the intensity …
I couldn’t forget it, and when I read the letter it all came back to me … when you spoke to me, I felt fear unlike anything I’ve ever known in my entire life.”

Wonwoo doesn’t say anything for a moment as he struggles to control his temper, calm his breathing. They will never truly make up in these next few days, he knows this. The resentment between them is too strong and has gone on for far too long, and he’s not a good enough person to be able to forgive her so easily—the anger and nausea he feels when he sees her is almost a visceral reaction at this point. Still, he thinks it’s only right to try and comfort her in her last moments. “That was a very long time ago, aunt. I was only nine. You don’t have to let it bother you anymore.”

Aunt Choi doesn’t respond to him. Now that she’s revealed her last secret, she seems to be determined to say everything she needs to, to just let it all come out. “I was too angry at you to let you be handed off to your uncle. The thought of you being adopted by a wealthy man and be spoiled and pampered and made happy was too much for me. So I wrote back and told him you were dead, that the leptospirosis outbreak in Lowood took you. I’m ashamed, now, to have stooped so low. It was beneath me to do that.”

Wonwoo doesn’t say anything, but he does start to look down at his aunt with something other than pent-up rage. He wonders how it must feel to, in your final days on your deathbed, suddenly be reminded of all your past misdeeds, to look back on your actions with regret. He wonders if this is how people die—if they lie there and think about all the things they wished they did differently. It sounds like an awful way to go.

“Eight years under my roof,” she whispers, “never speaking a word out against me, just taking what you were given without complaint. Then on the ninth year, exploding with such fury.” Her fingers twitch weakly. The diamond-studded ring on her left index finger looks so big on her bony digits now, so out of place, but it looks like it’s been polished as often as possible until it sparkles like it’s new. “You terrify me, Jeon Wonwoo.”

“Stop thinking about that, aunt, it will only trouble you and too much time has passed for it to be a problem anymore.” He hesitates, chewing at his lip, and decides that it can’t end like this. Why did he come all this way? He wanted to honour her wishes, but is this how it’ll go? She dies and the two of them remain as angry as ever? No—at the very least, he wants to walk out of this with some form of improvement. He speaks up again, words slow and halted. “You were the only thing I had that I could call a ‘parent’, Aunt Choi. There were lots of times back then where I thought I could even love you like one, if only you and your family were a little kinder to me. Love me or hate me now, but … I forgive you for everything.”

And with that, he leaves the room, shutting the door carefully behind him. He rests his back against the solid wood for a moment, breathing in deeply. It’s a difficult thing to swallow, forgiveness, especially when the other person doesn’t exactly deserve it. But this was something that needed to happen, and Wonwoo really does feel better about it, at least on some level. Maybe he’ll appreciate it after two or three more years to let it really sink in.

The next day, Aunt Choi dies in her sleep.

Gayoung throws herself into hysterics immediately. Eunjoo and Wonwoo look at each other, and for a moment he sees something in her eyes that surprises him, a brief moment of emotion and vulnerability, before she quickly looks away. He tucks the letter from his estranged uncle further into his pocket. Neither of them shed a tear.

Junhui had told him to only stay a week, but it’s nearly a month by the time Wonwoo finally heads
back to Thornfield. There were funeral arrangements to make, having to greet a train of black-clad people that Wonwoo’s never met before, shaking their hands and pretending to feel sad along with them. When it’s finally over and done with, Gayoung has a meltdown and insists he stay to keep her company until her boyfriend comes to pick her up after a few more days because she doesn’t want to be stuck with Eunjoo by herself. And then Eunjoo asks if he’ll stay a couple days more to help keep an eye on the house with her, and then it’s a June evening when he finally takes a taxi to the foot of the road up to Thornfield and resolves on walking the rest of the way, trying to put off the actual arrival as much as possible.

Funny, really. He spent the past month wanting nothing more than to go back home. And now he’s here, and he remembers the conversation he had with Junhui before he left, and it’s like he thinks if he avoids the inevitable for long enough things will be different. He’ll come back into Thornfield and it’ll be like Im Bora never happened, and he’ll live with Junhui and take care of Anmei forever.

Jeonghan sent him one email a couple days before he left, just letting him know what was going on back in the hotel and asking when he’ll return. The email didn’t say much—it was written in classic Jeonghan as-little-words-as-possible style—just telling him that all of Junhui’s friends left three weeks ago, Thornfield was a little quieter now, Minghao and Anmei and all the others miss him very much, little things that made Wonwoo smile.

The one thing that bothered him, though, was Jeonghan’s little comment about Junhui going back to Im Bora’s apartment in Incheon only a few days ago, and that managed to irk him more than anything. Like, what, she was with him for weeks and he can’t last one more month without having to see her again?

Thornfield is now close enough that he can start counting the individual windows and make out the fancy limos and cars parked out front. Not willing to walk through the lobby with his shoddy old suitcase and scratched-up sneakers, he immediately takes a detour around the side of the building and towards the back door.

Time is ticking, he thinks, as he passes by flowering bushes and crawling vines and a leaf-strewn path. He forgot how much he hates the summer, how even a fifteen-minute walk can make sweat drip down his arms and the back of his neck, how bugs will buzz closer and closer to his face until he swats them away. Time is ticking and he shouldn’t spend his last moments in Thornfield moping around. If Junhui really does decide to settle down and get together with Im Bora, if she ends up moving into the hotel with him, if they end up having a family of their own, then Wonwoo wants to spend whatever time he has left here as happy as he can and make the most of it.

At least, that’s what he’s trying to tell himself.

As he rounds the corner onto the smooth square patio tiles, the wide expanse of the hotel’s grounds and the hedge wall spread out before him, he sees a familiar figure reading a book on one of the stone benches nearby, looking brilliant under the bright blue sky. The sun seems to have been absorbed into his golden hair. Wonwoo swallows, knees shaking slightly, as every single one of his organs turn into rubbery, loose knockoffs.

Junhui doesn’t notice him at first, but as Wonwoo steps closer he hears the clattering of the suitcase’s wheels against the stone tiles and looks up, mouth stretching into an easy smile. “Well, well, well,” he says, standing up and leaving his book on the bench, walking over to greet him, “look who finally came back. I thought you took my money and ran.”

“You know I’d never do that,” Wonwoo mutters, hoping the heat and his exercise up to the hotel will explain the sudden redness in his cheeks. He can’t quite look Junhui in the eye—heart hammering, he instead focuses on the unbuttoned portion of Junhui’s silky, light shirt, which is
decidedly even worse than sucking it up and looking at his face.

“That’s true. What the hell have you been doing for a month?”

“Watching over my aunt, sir. She died. I had to stay and help with funeral arrangements.”

Junhui lets out a frustrated sigh, although it’s light and amused and seemingly all in good fun. He looks genuinely happy to see him again, and Wonwoo thinks he somehow lost the ability to breathe. “How am I supposed to argue that? Fine, I’ll forgive you for staying away for far longer than our agreement, but only if you give me your hand. Right now.”

Wonwoo stares at him, and when he realizes Junhui is serious he holds his hand out, almost blindingly pale under the glare of the sun. Junhui takes it and examines it, thumb rubbing little circles into his skin, and Wonwoo feels like crying.

“W-what are you doing, sir?”

“Just wanted to see if you were real,” Junhui hums, letting go of him far too soon.

“You … you’re so hard to understand sometimes, Mr. Wen.” That’s not what he wants to say, but his heart is trying to do backflips against his lungs and he’s hot and gross from the walk up and Junhui is looking so ridiculously stunning right now that Wonwoo can’t think properly. He says another thing he wasn’t planning on saying. “I heard from Jeonghan that you went back to Incheon recently.”

“Hm?” Junhui sounds distracted. “Oh, yes, I did. There was something very important I needed to ask someone in that city, something that I needed an answer for in order to make me a happier man. Luckily, that person gave me the answer I wanted.”

There’s an uncomfortably long pause that should have been filled with Wonwoo’s reply, if his vocal folds had been capable of producing sound at that time. “Oh?” he finally manages to utter, throat closing up on him even as he desperately struggles to sound normal. So it’s done. He did it. There really is no chance for him anymore.

“Yep. You must be tired, Wonwoo. I would say you must miss your room, but it seems pretentious of me to call a hotel suite your bedroom. You know, I just realized this, but living in a hotel is kind of a stupid idea.”

Wonwoo can’t stop himself from laughing a little. “Kind of, sir. But I’m glad to be back. Thornfield is my … my home.”

Junhui smiles at him, a soft smile Wonwoo rarely sees and makes his heart do funny things. Im Bora better be one hell of a girlfriend, or Wonwoo will never forgive her. “I’m glad you’re back too, Wonwoo. Now go on upstairs and get some rest. I know everyone’s missed you tons.”

Seungkwan practically screams when he sees him, diving into a bone-crushing hug, his shouts quickly gathering the attention of several other directors. Many of them smile and give him friendly pats on the shoulders, welcoming him back, while Soonyoung and Seokmin immediately demand to know why he’s been gone for so long and what the hell he’s been doing with himself. Anmei gives a very Seungkwan-like shriek too when she sees him, launching herself into his arms and wasting no time in showing him all the drawings and stories and songs he’s missed out on. Minghao smiles, cheeks squishing upwards and eyes curling into puffy crescent moon slits, and pulls Wonwoo aside before dinner to tell him in an undertone that he missed him very much.

Dinner is a fun, joyous affair, all the directors congregating together for once, much like they did
when Junhui first came back to Thornfield. Wonwoo talks about his time in the Choi house with
Jeonghan, Minghao, and Jihoon (since they’re closest), skipping the letter and the uncomfortable
parts about his dead abusive aunt and focusing instead on the antics of his terrible cousins. When he
gets to the story where Gayoung called her sister a “stone-faced cunt” Jihoon snorts so hard he gets
water up his nose, which sends the whole table off again.

In the evening, Wonwoo is curled up on the couch in the common room with Minghao, Anmei
nestled as comfortably as can be between them, as they flip through the TV and laugh at silly,
inconsequential things. Junhui arrives a little later and seems to soften at the sight of them, ruffling
Minghao’s hair in a genuinely brotherly fashion and even kissing Anmei’s forehead as he settles on
the other side of Minghao to watch TV with them. It’s comfortable and warm and strangely so, so
domestic.

Wonwoo suddenly wishes that, even when Im Bora eventually takes over Thornfield, they won’t get
separated. He wishes he can somehow find a way to have both him and Minghao continue taking
care of Anmei, maybe moving with her into a different house closer to an elementary school so she
doesn’t have to go off to some private academy. Even if he can’t be with Junhui, he thinks he’ll be
happy if he can remain together with these two.

So this, he thinks when Anmei’s little brown head rests against his arm as she starts to doze off, is
what Minghao feels whenever he thinks about his mother back in China. So this is what it feels like
to have a family.

A few weeks pass, the happiest few weeks Wonwoo’s experienced in a while. It’s like the world
wants to make up for all the discomfort and misery he’s experienced with Junhui’s friends, with Aunt
Choi, and to make sure he can be truly at peace when the time comes to quit the hotel.

Minghao gets permission to leave for China to visit his mother next month, and he circles the
approaching date on his calendar with increasing excitement. Wonwoo will definitely miss him once
he leaves, although he thinks he’ll be just fine when it comes to handling Anmei on his own.
Luckily, she listens to him well, and seems to be improving in both her manners and her
concentration enough to not need him present for every single class anymore. Wonwoo has more
freedom to bother his friends for a little bit, trying out the pool table with Soonyoung when no
customers are in the game room or having a conversation with Jihoon in his office. When Anmei’s
lessons are finished, he gets to listen to her talk about what she learned the way a child might talk
about their day at school to a parent, and it makes him feel warm and tingly inside.

The summer air is warm and breezy one night, the kind of night where the darkening sky is alive
with the happy glow of fireflies and the setting sun is still sending its last few rays of golden light out
into the world, and it’s too beautiful a night for Wonwoo to spend his days indoors. Once he’s
certain that Minghao will keep an eye on Anmei and make sure she gets to bed on time, he heads
outdoors, eager to feel the breeze on his bare arms and through his T-shirt.

He walks around the grounds mindlessly, satisfied with just looking at all the flowers that have
bloomed and all the green, leafy shrubs and small trees that wind around the paths on the grounds
like a maze. He runs right into Junhui like this, who seemed to have the same idea as him about
enjoying the night air. They smile at each other, sharing a sort of secretive, bonding moment together
alone in the grass, and they begin to start slowly walking together.

“You like Thornfield, don’t you, Wonwoo?” Junhui says after a few minutes of peaceful silence.

“I do, sir.”
“And you’re fond of lots of people here, right? Jeonghan, Minghao. Even Anmei.”

“I am.”

Junhui smiles but says nothing for a long while. The faint wind ruffles his hair and he roughly smooths it back in a crisp, shampoo-commercial type of move that makes Wonwoo’s palms grow sweaty. Crickets chirp around them a hundredfold, like some sort of summertime orchestra, but they never show their faces. “I suppose you’ll be sad to have to leave Thornfield one day, huh?”

Wonwoo feels his smile drop right off his face like *that*, and he immediately turns his head to try and mask the disappointment and sickness hitting him like a sledgehammer to the guts. “I re-really have to leave, then?”

“You know I went to Incheon,” Junhui says, his voice almost disturbingly light and cheerful. “I’m sure you know what I went there for.”

“When will—” Wonwoo nearly strangles himself on the words, “when will Miss Im move into Thornfield, sir?”

“Oh, rather quickly, I think. She doesn’t enjoy having to share a penthouse with her sister, I think she’s eager to try her hand as the queen of her own castle. I’d say she’ll be moving into the hotel in about … a month?”

A month? A *month*? That can’t be, Wonwoo’s brain seems to be screaming, even though his mouth can’t form the words. It can’t be so soon, he’s not ready, this can’t be … only one more month left here? Will Minghao even *be* here by the time Wonwoo has to leave? “I see. I’ll … I’ll start looking for a different job now, I guess.”

“You don’t have to worry about anything, Wonwoo. I told you I’ll see to everything, didn’t I? I found a nice school for Anmei to go to, just as I promised, and I even found a new childminder job for you. I had to dig through my connections, but they’re willing to treat you well, just as well as Thornfield did, of course. You can speak English, can’t you? How do you feel about moving to Canada?”

“Canada?” Wonwoo licks his suddenly-dry lips, all the moisture in his mouth deciding to morph from saliva into tears, tears that sting the corners of his eyes and threaten more and more to leak out entirely. He’s suddenly desperate for the sun to disappear completely, for night to well and truly fall over them so the darkness can hide his face. “Canada.”

“Yes. I think you’ll like them. They’re a good family, and they live in a very big house. I’m talking a giant personal library and an indoor pool of their own, it’ll be like you never went away.”

Wonwoo doesn’t trust himself to answer. The moment he opens his mouth, he thinks the only thing that he’ll be able to vocalize is a pitiful wail. He thinks the ocean is roaring in his ears, waves crashing furiously against rocks and cliffs, drowning him beneath the tide, taking away all his senses one by one until there’s nothing but coldness and the unmistakeable feeling of not being able to breathe.

“Wonwoo? What’s wrong?”

“It’s just—” He can *hear* the trembling in his voice, how unstable he is. “It’s just so far away, sir.”

“From Seoul? South Korea? Never pegged you as one to really miss your homeland or anything.”

“No *that*. It’s far from Thornfield, from everyone here, from—from you.”
And just like that, he breaks out into tears.

“Wonwoo.” They stop walking. Junhui’s hand is already there, fast as lightning, pressed against his cheek in a way that both soothes and upsets him even further, his other hand brushing Wonwoo’s bangs away from his face and trying to lift his chin up, turn his head so they can meet each other’s gaze. “Wonwoo, why are you crying?”

He just shakes his head, struggling against Junhui’s grip to remain staring at the stones beneath his sneakers, tears running freely down his face. “It’s so far away,” he says, voice cracking.

“Well, to be sure, we won’t ever see each other again—” This makes Wonwoo cry even harder, and when he finally manages to peek up at his employer, he sees an expression on Junhui’s face he can’t understand, although he has seen it before. It’s the kind of look he gave Wonwoo the night of the fire, a sort of internally-lit flame that grounds Wonwoo firmly to the ground, roots him in place, gravitates him towards Junhui as helplessly as a satellite would to the planet it orbits. Junhui’s thumb reaches up to wipe his cheek, catch some of the tears that refuse to stop flowing.

“You know, Wonwoo,” Junhui whispers, stepping a little closer, his voice oddly hushed and soft and overcome with emotion, “you make me feel—so strange sometimes. It’s a little sappy to describe it this way, but it’s like you … it’s like I have a string attached to me, in this spot right here—” one of his hands leaves Wonwoo’s face for a moment to gesture towards a point on the left side of his chest before returning back to holding him in place, “—tied to one of my ribs, and the other end of the string is tied to you. And I feel—sometimes—like if too much distance comes between us, that string will snap. That once you get on a plane and fly away, far away from me, that string will break apart, will rip out of me, and I will bleed and bleed and bleed until I’m empty. And it won’t rip from you, it will just cut away, and you will forget me and keep on living your life the way you’ve always done.”

“I wouldn’t forget you,” Wonwoo manages to say between sobs, his chest and shoulders twitching with the force of it, with the heaving of his ragged breaths as he vainly struggles to calm himself. “I couldn’t.” The word breaks in half and snaps apart, and he dissolves into a fresh bout of tears, wrecked from the inside out. “God, I wish I never came here. I wish I was never born.”

“Don’t say that, Wonwoo.” Junhui’s face is very close now, close enough for their noses to almost touch. Wonwoo feels like he really is drowning this time, helpless, he can’t see anything but Junhui’s handsome face, right there in front of him, far too close to be appropriate. “Why would you say that? Do you regret coming here because you have to leave?”

“I love it here,” Wonwoo whimpers, “I luh-love Thornfield. I love everyone here. I’ve never h-ha-had a family before, but they—they make me feel like a family. I don’t want to leave, I want to stay here forever.”

“Then why do you have to leave?” Junhui’s fingers spasm around his face and tighten momentarily. The fire in his eyes is almost wild. “Why do you have to take another job?”

“Because of Im Bora!”

“What the fuck about her?”

“The—what do you mean, what the fuck about her? I’m talking about the person you love! The person you went to Incheon for! The person you want to be with, to marry, to have by your side! The person you want to have living in Thornfield with you!”

“Yes, and?”
“So I can’t stay!” And it’s too much, Junhui is too close and his eyes are too forceful and Wonwoo’s heart is breaking and it’s all just too much. He begins to struggle, trying desperately to yank Junhui’s hands off of him, trying to escape and run back to the safety of his room. “Don’t you get it? I have to leave.”

“You said you wouldn’t—you said you didn’t want to! Didn’t you once tell me you would stay by my side no matter what?” When Wonwoo makes a pained, unhappy noise and tries to pull away again, Junhui’s fingers hold him down even harder. “You’re staying, Wonwoo.”

“No—I’m—“ And something surges up inside of Wonwoo, something he hasn’t experienced since it was beaten out of him by Lowood. A fiery, furious passion that feels like it’ll eat away at his bones, a feeling that gave him the courage to fight back and scream words at his aunt so fervently that they haunted her to her grave, a feeling that gave him the courage to leave Lowood and his university and send out his résumé to a fancy, high-end hotel on the outskirts of Seoul looking for a childminder, a feeling that gives him the courage now to raise his voice and fight back against his employer with all the strength in his body. “Fuck you, Wen Junhui!”

Junhui stares at him, struck dumb by his outburst, and Wonwoo takes this chance to press both hands flat against Junhui’s chest and bodily shove him away.

“You’re a fucking asshole,” he says, voice shaking. “You don’t listen, you don’t think, you just—you just do, do, do! You do whatever you want, and say whatever you want, without thinking about how it might affect other people! Do you think I’m some kind of robot, some wind-up toy you can mess with for fun? I have feelings too, Junhui! Last time I fucking checked, I have just as much right for happiness as you or any of your stupid high-class friends, and I’ll—” he chokes on a hiccup, his breathing staggering up-up-up until letting it out in a shaky, slightly hysterical exhale, “—I’ll have you know that if I was gorgeous and rich and important like Im Bora, I would’ve made it just as hard for you to leave me as it is for me to leave you!”

He barely has time to finish his tirade when Junhui surges forward again, this time to wrap his arms around him and press their lips together.

Wonwoo’s so shocked he doesn’t have the chance to react, or to push him away. Junhui’s kissing him. Junhui’s kissing him. Junhui pulls away, looking frantic, then impulsively leans in to kiss him again. Once more. Twice. Three times. Wonwoo wants to commit the softness of his lips to memory, but it’s over too fast for him to even process what happened.

“You’re right,” Junhui breathes, his voice sounding strangled and broken. “You’re right, Wonwoo, you’re absolutely right, you do have feelings. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt you like this, I didn’t realize you were hurting, I am a cruel, vicious man but I wanted to be certain you felt—Wonwoo, my Wonwoo—”

“Don’t.” Wonwoo mutters, trying to twist his face away. “Don’t kiss me. You have a girlfriend now—a girl, by the way, who doesn’t fucking deserve you and could never make you truly happy—let me go.” Junhui presses another kiss, searing warm and trembling, against the very corner of his mouth and he closes his eyes, confused and wretched but so, so eager for the feeling of this man’s lips to engrave itself into his skin, leave behind a scar that he’ll be able to feel for the rest of his life. “Junhui, let me go.”

“Go where? To Canada?”

“Yes, to fucking Canada.” And while he’s too weak to struggle further out of Junhui’s grasp, he turns to glare at him, Junhui’s handsome face slightly out of focus through his tears. “You can’t just make these arrangements for me and then cancel them on a whim! I am a human being with my own
force of will, and I’m capable of making my own decisions, and I can choose where to go.”

“Yes—yes it’s your decision, of course, Wonwoo. Of course.” Junhui’s voice is raw with emotion, almost terrifying in the sheer overwhelming torment in his words. “But won’t you consider all the options before you make your choice? You can go and I can’t stop you, but you can also stay. Here. With me. Wonwoo, I’m offering myself to you, everything. My heart, my hand, everything I own, everything in the world—I’m giving all of it to you, if only—if only you’ll stay with me.”

There’s a brief pause, broken by the howling of the crickets around them and their own choppy, uneven breathing.

“You’re lying,” Wonwoo says sharply.

“How could I lie about this? I’m asking for you to stay by my side, preferably for the rest of our lives. I’m asking if you will love me as much as I love you.”

“You’ve,” he mutters, twisted up and numb and confused, trying to wriggle his way out of Junhui’s hands again, “already chosen someone to love. A horrible choice. Don’t try and fuck with me now, that’s cruel, even for you.”

“I’m not fucking around. Please listen to me—please. Can we just take a moment to calm down and, and talk? Like grown men?”

His words are so vulnerable, so unlike him, pleading and heart-wrenching, and Wonwoo gives up. He stops struggling, and Junhui’s hands slide away from him. They stand there in the rapidly darkening grounds, a moth fluttering past them.

“You have a girlfriend now, Junhui,” Wonwoo says, speaking up first. “Whatever you’re trying to say to me doesn’t matter. She’s living in Thornfield next month.”

“I made that up. She’s not my girlfriend, and she’s not moving into Thornfield.”

“So the way you two have acted all this time meant nothing?”

Junhui lets out a weak, sardonic laugh. “Im Bora? My girlfriend? My future wife? Please. The moment the party all left to go back home, I sent a rumour anonymously her way saying that Wen Junhui wasn’t as rich as he claimed to be, that the Wen family name and Thornfield were not even a third as successful as they say, and then I went down to Incheon to visit her and see for myself the reaction I’d get. Both her and her sister treated me with coldness and disdain. Her entire family cast me off as worthless. She was only in it for the money, Wonwoo, I told you I knew that. You think all that wealth and beauty and status can make me marry someone like that? It’s you, Wonwoo, that I love more than anything in this world. It’s you I want to be with.”

Wonwoo closes his eyes, briefly, when everything becomes too much for him. “You’re willing to be with me—someone who has no family, no connections, nothing to his name? Someone who has no money other than what you give me?”

Junhui reaches out—not to grab him, or hold him the way he did before, but to grasp his forearm almost imploringly, the touch a bit too tight in his high-strung emotions but in a way that seems to imply that if Wonwoo were to wrench his arm away, Junhui would let go in an instant. “I need you, Wonwoo. I need you to be mine, to have my heart. God, please say yes. Please.”

Wonwoo shudders at the words, the sheer wanting laced through them. “Move over here, towards the light. I need to see your face.”
They stumble a few steps back, towards one of the lampposts that dot the grounds of Thornfield and where orange light casts some clarity on Junhui’s expression. Wonwoo studies him, carefully, rubbing at his eyes until they feel pink and sensitive but aren’t obscured by tears anymore. Junhui’s face is flushed, his eyes dark with intensity and overexcitement. The longer Wonwoo stares at him, the more flushed Junhui seems to get.

“You torture me,” Junhui whispers, hardly daring to move his lips. “Looking at me like that. You really are going to kill me, Wonwoo.”

“I sure hope not,” Wonwoo whispers back, “because that would make telling you I love you really fucking awkward.”

“Do you love me, Wonwoo? Please, you need to say it. I need to hear you say it.”

“Do you love me?” He chokes up. “You aren’t joking? You really love me?”

“Yes,” Junhui breathes. “Yes, I fucking love you. I have for the longest time. You make me happy unlike—unlike anything I’ve ever felt before.”

“Then I won’t leave.” Wonwoo wants to cry again, and he thinks he does, at least a couple stray tears more. “I’ll stay right here, in Thornfield, with you.” His voice breaks. “Fuck, Junhui, I’ve loved you for so long.”

This time, when Junhui kisses him he returns the favour with enthusiasm.

When Wonwoo wakes up the next morning, it’s difficult for him to determine what was real about last night and what wasn’t. Or, more importantly, what will change now and what won’t. He dresses himself as quickly as he can and makes his way down for breakfast, where Seungkwan is flicking milk into Jihoon’s drowsy face in an effort to wake him up.

“Morning,” he says brightly, laughing when droplets of milk splatter onto Jihoon’s glasses and he splutters angrily in response. “You look like you’re in a good mood today.”

“Is that so?” Wonwoo says, beaming. He’s a bit too exuberant and spills some orange juice as he pours it into a glass, and he hopes nobody notices. Seungkwan does, of course, and he raises an eyebrow at him.

“Yeah, you’re definitely chipper,” he says suspiciously, leaving Jihoon to nurse his coffee in peace, and aggressively spooning more cereal into his mouth. “What’s the good news?”

“I’m just glad to be back home,” Wonwoo says, ducking his head as he applies a careful layer of peanut butter and raspberry jam to slices of toast. “That’s all.”

Another person enters the dining hall, and Wonwoo looks up and his heart jumps into his throat. It’s Junhui, ruggedly handsome and casually lazy in long flannel pyjama pants and a loose shirt. He feels his cheeks heat up instantly and stares down the bottom of his orange juice glass, suddenly nervous. What should he do? How should he act? Should he remain the polite, distant childminder as always, or does Junhui want a loving, doting boyfriend to greet him in the mornings? What does Junhui want out of this? What does Wonwoo want out of this?

Junhui gives him the answer. “Morning, my love,” he says, the affection in his voice almost a tangible thing, then he leans over to kiss his cheek before settling down into his chair.
Seungkwan drops his spoon with a loud clatter. It sends milk and cereal everywhere, and Jihoon shouts and looks like he’s ready to strangle Seungkwan when a single soggy cheerio falls into his coffee mug. Wonwoo can feel his cheeks burning and hastily resumes drinking his orange juice, ridiculously shy and nervous as Junhui calmly begins spooning eggs and sausages onto his plate like nothing out of the ordinary happened.

Enough time passes for Seungkwan to process the event he’s just witnessed. He turns to stare at Wonwoo, eyes wide, mouth opening for what he’s sure is about to be a tirade of questions and exclamations. Embarrassed, Wonwoo flaps his hands at him and snarls, “Don’t ask. Don’t.”

Junhui is checking the news on his phone and doesn’t look up from his screen, but he says, “If you need sufficient gossip for the next few days, Seungkwan, then I’ll let you know that Wonwoo and I are currently a couple. There. Are you satisfied?”

Seungkwan dives across the table, sending juice and coffee sloshing out of cups and bacon jumping into laps (Jihoon’s irritable shout and glare implies he’s seriously considering the benefits of colleague homicide), so he can grab both Wonwoo and Junhui’s hands. “Thank you,” he croaks, “thank you for giving me this opportunity. I knew taking this job would be worthwhile.”

When Seungkwan has a story to tell, he wastes no time in sharing his joy. By lunch, every single staff member in the hotel, even some of the guests, have heard the news. Wonwoo can’t walk down a single hallway without getting curious, even occasionally scrutinizing looks from people.

Minghao is confused but more or less thrilled. “Like I said before, I just wanted him to find somebody,” he says as they tidy up the whirlwind known as Wen Anmei that had left toys and books scattered around the playroom in her wake. He has a little under two weeks left before he sets out for China and it’s starting to show; he’s more antsy and impatient, suffering from cravings for authentic cuisine that not even the Chinese members of Seokmin’s kitchen staff can sate. “It’s only a little weird that it turned out to be you. It’s like having an older relative with two divorces and a kid under his wing date a friend you knew from high school or something.” He hesitates, thinking it over. “Dude, you’re dating an old guy.”

“Thirty-four isn’t that old,” Wonwoo protests, gathering plushy soft rabbits and unicorns and monkeys under his arm.

“Ten year age difference,” Minghao points out with a thin, raised eyebrow. He pulls up a flowery little bonnet from Anmei’s dress-up closet and puts it on, laughing when it reveals itself to be too small and he tosses it aside. “By the time you’re thirty-four, he’s gonna be forty-four. Think about that. And when you’re forty-four, he’s gonna be fifty-four. He’ll be an old old man with back problems and a sagging belly.”

“You’re being ridiculous. First of all, forty-four and fifty-four are basically the same thing once you’ve reached, like, a certain threshold of old age. Second of all, there’s no way Mister—I mean, Junhui—is going to be out of shape when he’s fifty. I mean, look at him. He’s gonna be one of those George Clooney types that just look like hot dads no matter how much grey he’s got in his hair.”

Minghao stares at him for a long moment as Wonwoo realizes what he just said and flushes a bright pink. “God, you really are grossly in love with him,” he finally says after a long moment. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m not blind. I thought there was, well, something going on with you and him. But I never expected for it to actually happen.”

There’s a knock on the door, and Jeonghan pokes his head in. “Wonwoo, Mr. Wen wants to see you in his office.”
“Oh.” Normally Wonwoo would be overjoyed at being able to talk with Junhui. But somehow, this feels different. Maybe it’s because he’s not normally called like this in the middle of the day, maybe he’s just nervous, still painfully awkward and unsure of himself, having never been in love or been together with someone before. “Well, I’m supposed to pick up Anmei and help her with her math homework in six minutes.”

“Minghao can cover for you,” Jeonghan says, his tone unidentifiable. “C’mon, he’s waiting.”

Wonwoo stands up, discreetly aiming a kick at Minghao when he wiggles his eyebrows lasciviously at him and mouths something highly inappropriate, before following Jeonghan towards the staff wing. Jeonghan is oddly cool and quiet with him today, which worries him, makes him wonder if getting together with Junhui has somehow pissed the director off.

“He’s here, Mr. Wen,” Jeonghan says once he opens the door to Junhui’s office. He closes it and leaves without even a goodbye or a smile or a slight nod, and Wonwoo instantly knows something is wrong. God, what should he even say to fix this?

Whatever is up, he doesn’t have time to ask about it. Junhui is away from his desk and standing by the window, looking out at the beautiful summer day, but at the sound of Jeonghan’s voice he turns around and a wide smile spreads across his face. He crosses the room in three long strides to gather Wonwoo into his arms, kissing him until he’s woozy.

“I wanted to do this since I saw you at breakfast,” he sighs, a firm warm hand on the back of Wonwoo’s neck and careful, sweet pressure against Wonwoo’s lips. “Hello, my love. Did you sleep well? How have you been? I’ve missed you.”

“I-it hasn’t even been a day yet, sir,” Wonwoo stammers, uncomfortable and mortified by his own discomfort. He’s super into being showered in love and affection by Junhui, loves how it feels natural to be adored by him—a feeling he’s never allowed himself to have before—but at the same time, he’s just spent the past six months thinking of and addressing Junhui as his employer, as someone he can only pine after from afar. Only yesterday morning, they had greeted each other with friendly smiles and maybe a hand on the shoulder and that was it. It feels beyond overwhelming to have the object of his pining to suddenly be pressing reverent kisses to his nose and cheeks, holding him like he can’t bear to take his hands off him.

“Sir?” Junhui raises an eyebrow. “You’re going to call your boyfriend ‘sir’?”

“I-I mean Junhui! Junhui. Sorry. It’s, um, it’s a habit.”

Junhui doesn’t seem to mind. He laughs, his countenance completely light and handsome and worry-free, dragging Wonwoo by the waist towards the window so the sunbeams slanting through can catch light in their hair and eyes. Junhui runs a hand through the parts where Wonwoo’s black locks glow almost auburn, amazed. “Well, I’m not saying I hate it, but I want you to be comfortable around me. I’m not your boss anymore, Wonwoo.”

“Yes you are,” he mumbles, hands reaching up to fiddle with Junhui’s collar, staring firmly at a patch of dark skin on his neck when he discovers that no force on earth can compel him to look up at his face in this moment. “Technically. I’m still your daughter’s childminder.”

“Then quit. You don’t need the money anymore, I’ll give you everything you need. You want to go back to school, get a major in something pointless? Go right on ahead, I’ll pay all your tuition. You want a brand new wardrobe? Gucci, Armani, Ralph Lauren, Hugo Boss? You like to read, don’t you? Would you like a private library of everything you want? Shakespeare? Tolkien? Dickens? Woolf? Brontë?” Junhui tilts his head up to playfully nip at the skin just above Wonwoo’s eyebrows,
making him shiver and let out an embarrassing little noise. “What’s mine is yours, my love. Just snap your fingers, and I’ll place the entire universe at your fingertips.”

Wonwoo stutters out something incoherent, bright red and head swimming from all the possibilities Junhui is suggesting. Anything he wants? The freedom to do everything he ever wanted to do that a lack of money and support stopped him from achieving? “W-what are you,” he hiccups out a weak snort in a lame attempt to scoff at him, “a sugar daddy?”

Junhui laughs into his hair, smoothing it down. “I don’t mind being called that, either.”

“You—ugh, you’re impossible.” He buries his face into Junhui’s shoulder for a moment, too flustered to think properly. Junhui’s cologne doesn’t really help clear his head, but he does have a moment to think. He looks up and very pointedly steps away, not out of Junhui’s arms but enough for him to have space to breathe. Junhui stares at him, dark eyes looking almost hazel in the brilliant sunlight shining through the windows. The way he’s looking at Wonwoo is concerning, almost too devoted, although Wonwoo doesn’t understand why something as amazing as devotion bothers him.

“I came here for a job,” Wonwoo says, in as firm a tone as he can manage, “and I plan on completing it. Please don’t, don’t think of me as someone I’m not. Look at me the way you’ve always done, as your dull, poor, insignificant childminder with a smart mouth, at least for a little longer.”

“How can I do that?” Junhui’s fingers rub distracting circles into his hip bones. “From the moment I first met you, you’ve practically been an angel in my eyes—”

“No, I specifically remember you saying—”

“—and I have to make sure the rest of the world knows what a lucky man I am.” His voice is low and silky, like rich cream in coffee, and it’s so hard to argue when Wonwoo feels himself melting into it like he’s enamored. “I want to dress you in the best clothes money can buy. You’ll look sharp and handsome in a well-fitted suit, but I’ll buy you those big, baggy sweaters you like so much, nice comfortable ones with long sleeves that cover your fingers so you can be cute and soft for me. I’ll buy you a pretty little car and someone to drive you around in it. Fancy rings, expensive diamond watches. Your very own house anywhere you want, any city, any country.”

And suddenly, Wonwoo realizes which part of this is weirding him out. “Sir—I mean, Junhui—hold on a second—”

“We’ll go travelling,” Junhui says, not really paying attention, too caught up in his own little fantasy he’s constructing for himself, “all over the world. I’ll take you to France, Italy, Spain, Japan, Hawaii. We’ll visit all the wonders of the world, all the famous museums and historical sites. That’ll make you happy, won’t it, Wonwoo? Won’t you be happy seeing all these places?”

“Junhui—”

“And of course, my love will make everyone jealous of me once they see you at my arm, with those endearing round glasses of yours, buried in a book. And I’ll take my love to visit the grandest, most magnificent churches ever made in history, the only places that are good enough for you, that are worthy of worshipping you.”

Wonwoo sighs and leans in to kiss him, which effectively shuts him up far more than words can. “Junhui, listen to me,” he says quickly, before Junhui has a chance to speak again. “No one is worshipping me, especially not you. And I can’t just take your money like that and buy useless things with it. I didn’t fall in love with you because I wanted to be spoiled by you, okay?”
Junhui’s brow furrows and he looks like he wants to argue, but newfound confidence takes hold of Wonwoo. He presses his fingers to Junhui’s lips and makes sure he’s paying attention, that he’s hearing every word. “I’m not going to be another Im Bora, Junhui, I don’t need blatant displays of your wealth to love you. And I will definitely not let you treat me like the next Watabe Seiko. Don’t you remember what you told me about her? You put her on a pedestal and built her up into this impeccable goddess, and then you crashed and burned when your image of her warped way out of reality.”

“Well, that,” Junhui says defensively, words a little muffled around Wonwoo’s fingers, “that was a different case. She wasn’t a good person from the start, she was using me and I was young and stupid—but you, Wonwoo, you’re good and pure and selfless inside-out, I know you are. What the fuck else am I doing with all my money? Can’t I use my useless wealth to make the love of my life happy?”

“You’re so childish, Jesus.” But it’s cute, Wonwoo thinks, and he leans in to plant an approving little kiss on the very tip of Junhui’s nose. He loves the fact that he can do that, he can kiss Junhui whenever he wants. It’s something to get used to, that’s for sure. “Okay, I admit, travelling the world and seeing museums and churches sounds pretty great, I wouldn’t mind doing that one day. But buying me a whole bunch of expensive brand-name clothing and useless apartments and parading me around like a dress-up doll definitely won’t make me happy.”

Junhui’s eyebrows furrow together even further, confused. “Then what would make you happy?”

“What would make me happy is for me to continue being Anmei’s childminder with Minghao, and to receive my wages just the way it’s always been. And in my free time, I’d like to spend time with you.” He laughs a little self-consciously and removes his fingers, sliding them back down to rest against Junhui’s chest. “We’ve talked a lot in the past six months, but I feel like there’s still so much I need to know about you. I want us to learn more about each other, and, and take our time with this.” He hesitates, smiling. “And one day, when Anmei is old enough to not have to be looked after anymore, we can travel the world like you said. Just the two of us.”

Junhui’s eyes slip shut and he hums out an answer, a soft smile on his face. “That sounds great.”

“Then it’s settled. Don’t make me wake up one morning to a wardrobe full of five-thousand dollar jeans or drawers full of cash or I will kill you.” And then, when the idea pops into his head almost immediately afterwards, “Actually, wait, can I ask you about something?”

Junhui is still smiling, but he looks a little troubled. Wonwoo can definitely see the faint tightness of his jaw. “What?”

“Why did you try to make me think you were getting together with Im Bora?”

Junhui’s expression clears up in an instant and he laughs, wrapping his arms around Wonwoo and linking his fingers against the small of Wonwoo’s back. “Simple answer, really. I’ve been crazy about you for months but I could never tell if you liked me back or if you were just being polite. I was unsure of your feelings for me and I was desperate to make you fall as madly in love with me as I was with you. So all those things I did—flirt with Bora in front of you and ignore you, dress up as the fortune teller, I did all those things to try and make you fall for me and get jealous.”

“You did all that shit to make me jealous? You are a terrible, terrible human being.” Wonwoo tries to sound severe, but he’s too caught up on the “madly in love” part to really follow through. God, he’s so weak. “Okay, forget me for a second. You flirted with Im Bora for weeks, you totally made her believe you wanted to make things official. You can’t just play with someone’s feelings like that.”
Junhui snorts. “I didn’t realize snakes had feelings.”

“Si—Junhui! Honestly. You really got her hopes up, you know.”

“Listen, she’s the one who ended things with me. I can assure you, Wonwoo, news of my so-called poverty took out that flame real fast for her. I think I can safely say she will do just fine without me.” He gives him a cheeky, wide smile.

“Fine, fine. One more thing.”

“I’d love nothing more than to please you, my love. Ask me anything you want and I will give it to you.”

“Will you stop with that, oh my god, you’re gonna kill me before this week is done. Look, can you talk to Jeonghan for me? I don’t think he, uh, he approves of what’s going on with us right now.”

“Is that any of Jeonghan’s business?”

“He really respects you, and I really like him. He’s been good to me these past nine months, and I don’t want our friendship—or your relationship with him—to be ruined because he thinks the worst of us and what we have together.” When Junhui continues looking unmoved, Wonwoo leans in to just barely brush their lips together. “Please?”

Junhui consents immediately, resolve crumbling without resistance and shocking Wonwoo with his newfound power. “Alright, I will. I’ll go talk to him.”

And he really must have, because later on that day Jeonghan approaches Wonwoo and asks if they can talk for a couple minutes. Wonwoo finds himself back in the familiar green office that he first started this whole affair in, Jeonghan twisting his chair around so they can face each other properly. He looks tired and tense, russet hair pulled into a high bun to combat the heat.

“So,” he says after a minute or two of silence, “you and Mr. Wen.”

Wonwoo fidgets, uncomfortable under his scrutiny. “Yes.”

“This is really happening? You and Mr. Wen are dating?”

Wonwoo nods, picking nervously at his cuticles.

There’s a moment of silence once again, as Junhui runs a hand down his face and looks more tired and more tense than ever. “There’s an old saying you’ve probably heard before. ‘All that glitters is not gold’. I know you, Wonwoo, and I know you’re not the kind of guy to purposefully go after rich men for their money, and I’m sure you two really do like each other, but I still have my … reservations … for this relationship.”

“What’s so wrong about it?” Wonwoo finally manages to stammer out, getting more and more distressed as time goes on. Jeonghan is someone he deeply respects, even considers a friend, and it’s genuinely upsetting to see him look so disapproving. “I-I mean, yeah, dating your boss kind of has its issues, but we’ve worked it out. I’m going to make sure he doesn’t give me special treatment, my monthly pay will be the exact same amount it’s always been—”

“That’s not what I meant about reservations, Wonwoo.” Jeonghan chews at his bottom lip, brow furrowed. “And it’s not you I have problems with.”

“What do you mean? You have problems with Jun—with Mr. Wen?”
“Maybe. Yes. Look, all I’m saying is, be careful. If you really do like him, and if you really are following through with this, don’t let his intensity blindside you to his faults and issues. I know love tends to cover up everything you’d rather not see, but please, Wonwoo, keep an eye out for any red flags. Okay?”

Wonwoo lets out a weak laugh. “You’re acting like he killed somebody or something, Jeonghan.” At the sight of Jeonghan’s unusually beseeching, persistent gaze, however, he relents. “I promise, I won’t make excuses for him. I don’t plan to. But if I see any red flags or whatever, then I’ll talk to Mr. Wen about them. Isn’t that the whole point of relationships? To work things out together?”

Jeonghan turns his head to look out the window, open to let the late afternoon air breeze in. There’s a sound of wind chimes off in the distance, ethereal and almost haunting. “Yeah, I guess so,” he finally says, voice reluctant. “But sometimes there are things that can’t be worked through by just talking.”

The days that follow go by almost in a dream. Wonwoo hugs Minghao goodbye and comforts a teary Anmei as Minghao leaves for the airport, her sadness so acute that Wonwoo eventually insists to have her keep him and Junhui company during their usual late night talks. Junhui looks distinctly annoyed at the request—Wonwoo has steadfastly refused to slack off on his work to see him, so these after-dinner moments in the common area or his office are usually the only chance they have to be alone—but at the sight of Anmei sniffling and weepy he softens with an irritated sigh and lets her sit between the two of them on the couch, smoothing back her hair until she’s fallen asleep.

“So you love Anmei?” Wonwoo asks.

“What brought this on?” Junhui’s hand is absent-mindedly smoothing some stray curls away from Anmei’s sleeping face.

“I don’t know,” he admits. “Sometimes you seem to really care for her, at least in some weird awkward way. Other times it’s like you, I don’t know, like she’s just a nuisance that happens to be living with you.”

Junhui doesn’t answer for a moment. Eventually, he says, “I was never the kind of man that could’ve been a good father. I was never a good brother, either, or a good son. It’s … difficult, to be here for so long and realize that I have no idea how to treat this girl the way I’m supposed to.”

His hand reaches down to take hold of one of Anmei’s, balancing the weight of her tiny pale hand in his own tanned one. The juxtaposition in sizes is surprisingly touching, like a Hallmark card.

“Sometimes I think, what if I found her earlier? What if that bitch Seiko gave her to me outright instead of just throwing her at the first orphanage she saw? Would that paternal instinct I seem to be lacking come to me if I had just held her in my arms as a baby?” A shadow passes over his eyes and he gently lets go of her hand, moving it to run down his face for a moment. “I don’t know. I keep waiting for that sudden burst of familial love to come to me, to be hit with that feeling of ‘this is my daughter, I am her father, and I will do whatever it takes to make her happy’. But how can I learn that sort of thing when I never saw it in my own parents?”

Wonwoo stares at him, Adam’s apple bobbing weakly as he takes in the strangely vulnerable, unsure look in Junhui’s face. He very slowly leans in and presses his hand to Junhui’s cheek.

“You spent two years of your life looking for her,” he says gently. “Two years, Junhui. If you really didn’t have that paternal instinct, wouldn’t you have just sent her away to some boarding school so they can do your job of raising her for you? Instead, you went through all the trouble to hire home tutors for her, hire childminders to take care of her right here at home, knowing she’ll be surrounded
by people who adore her.” Junhui looks at him, and Wonwoo smiles. “I’ve never had a father to
learn from either. The closest thing I had was my uncle, and he was out of my life way too soon.”

“But you’re so good with Anmei,” Junhui whispers.

“Yeah, well, I learned how to work with kids in school. Maybe you should take a Child
Development course, too.”

“Maybe I should.” Junhui smiles, the cloudy expression vanishing, and Wonwoo’s heart swells so
much he thinks it might burst open like soft fruit. “You would make a very good father to her,
Wonwoo.”

“What, you want me to adopt Anmei?” Wonwoo snorts.

“That’s not exactly what I meant.”

Wonwoo’s smile dies down as he stares at the earnest look in Junhui’s dark eyes. “Oh shit, you’re
serious. About, uh …”

“Marrying you?” Junhui lets out a satisfied little noise when Wonwoo blushes and squeaks in
response. “Of course I am.”

“Korea doesn’t allow same sex marriage.”

“Then we’ll travel somewhere else to get married. Maybe France.” There’s a gleam in his eyes when
he traces his fingers along Wonwoo’s jawline, the bridge of his nose. “We can spend our
honeymoon touring the Louvre, Versailles, the Musée d’Orsay.”

Wonwoo thinks his cheeks are about to overheat and sear his flesh right off his bones if this keeps
up. He’s still definitely not used to this. “C-can we date for at least a year before we start talking
about this?”

“Three months.”

“Nobody gets married after three months of dating unless it’s a shotgun wedding, Junhui.” When
Junhui looks unmoved he glares good-humouredly at him. “I’m not having a shotgun wedding. I’m
not particularly romantic, but I draw the line at that.”

“Fine, six then.”

Wonwoo purses his lips. “Nine months of dating before we can talk about it, and I’m not going any
lower.”

“I’ll take it.” Junhui cackles at his expression and leans in to kiss his pouty lips. “Let’s get her to bed
and have some time together alone, please.”

Junhui is the one who carries her on his back up to her bedroom, tucking her in clumsily with slightly
too-rough hands. Wonwoo watches this and doesn’t think there’s any possible way he can love
Junhui more than he does right now, in this exact moment, when Junhui takes a second to press his
hand to the side of Anmei’s head and watch her sleep peacefully.

These moments of softness and vulnerability between the two of them are frequent, but apparently
not frequent enough for Junhui. He constantly expresses exasperation that Wonwoo refuses to kiss
him in front of other people or let him be adoring and loving in public. It gets to the point where he
swears and throws little fits and calls him teasing almost as much as he coos and kisses and calls him
“my love”. Wonwoo will watch him nonchalantly during these tirades and give him only a smile, before leaving to look after Anmei.

He thinks Junhui secretly likes it, is entertained having to struggle and fight for attention and affection. It’s too easy to have someone eager to bend to his will, to be submissive and defer to him at every word. Wonwoo knows this, and sometimes he likes to purposefully draw it out, calling him “Mr. Wen” and “sir” and pretending they are still just a boss and his hired employee, something Junhui always gleefully curses and snarls at until Wonwoo relents, drops the “that is inappropriate conduct, sir”, and gives him a kiss and calls him Junhui again.

During this time, he starts thinking of that letter by his uncle more often than not. It’s been nine years since the letter was sent and his uncle thinks he’s dead—but all the same, Wonwoo wants to get to know him. If there really is a family member of his that genuinely cares for him, he wants to meet them.

When Junhui is busy with some hotel guests one afternoon, Wonwoo types out a polite message telling his uncle that he’s alive and would like to talk in person one day whenever he’s free, prints it out, puts it in an envelope, and makes the excuse to go to Seoul to fix his glasses so he can drop it off at the nearest post office.

A whole month passes by, Wonwoo almost giddy with happiness. It seems almost impossible that after all this time, after twenty-four years of the same naïve little monotonous life of drudgery and unhappiness, that suddenly the world can be so bright and wonderful and full of promise. Every summery blue sky he wakes up to is a miracle, every pretty flower he passes by in Thornfield’s grounds is the prettiest flower ever seen. He’s overcome with affection for everybody—for little Anmei and the way she clings to him affectionately, for Seungkwan and Seokmin and Soonyoung’s laughter and stories, for Chan’s adorable FaceTime chats with Minghao, for Jihoon’s quiet smiles, even for Jeonghan’s subdued attention towards him, their relationship improving again after Jeonghan saw Wonwoo wasn’t keen on letting Junhui have his way with everything.

And of course, every moment he sees Junhui again is like that first moment when Junhui told him he loved him. Bursts of fireworks, fizzy champagne bubbles, the sweet scent of flower gardens under a summer night. All he has to do, he thinks, is wait for Minghao to be back, and then everything will be utterly perfect.

But of course, perfect things never stay that way for long.

Junhui is forced to go out to Changwon for business for a few days and mutters irritably about it the whole time he’s packing. Wonwoo is disappointed too, but he hides it much better. Just before Junhui leaves, they exchange desperate kisses and hurried, embarrassingly intimate whispers in the darkness of the alcove beneath the stairs, before they’re caught by a highly amused Jihoon coming to get Junhui and Wonwoo runs off mortified.

His good mood is dampened somewhat without Junhui here, but the knowledge that he’s coming back in only four or five days is enough to keep Wonwoo’s spirits up. He absorbs himself in helping Anmei with her various math and science homework sheets, walking Pilot with Seokmin, even at one point taking an afternoon off with everyone and driving out to Seoul to sit by the Han River and eat street food.

One of those nights, something strange happens to Wonwoo, something only he knows about. He could’ve just dismissed it as a dream, but that’s not quite right either. He impatiently waits for Junhui to come home, needing answers but not sure who else he can turn to. He knows that no matter how
weird it sounds, Junhui will definitely listen to him and have an answer—or at the very least, he’ll give an answer so convincingly that Wonwoo can accept it as the best option.

Finally, finally, one rainy, windy evening after dinner and once Anmei is put to bed, Junhui comes back from his business in Changwon. The moment Wonwoo hears about it, he flies over to his office and bursts in, too excited to remember his manners and knock. Junhui looks up from where he had been sorting out files and just barely manages to catch him as Wonwoo throws himself into his arms.

“Missed me, much?” Junhui grins, unashamedly triumphant. He pushes Wonwoo’s hair back and presses his lips to Wonwoo’s forehead, right where it meets his hairline. “Knew you’d be a mess without me, my love.”

“Fuck off,” Wonwoo huffs, even as he clings to Junhui and presses his closed eyelids to the warm skin on the crook of Junhui’s neck. “I just really wanted to see you.”

“I know,” Junhui says, sounding smug. Wonwoo stomachs it as best as he can, indulging him just this once.

They stay there for a few moments, in each other’s arms and perfectly at peace, before Wonwoo remembers what had been bothering him. “Hey,” he mumbles. “Hey, I need to tell you something. Kind of important. Kind of weird.”

“Of course.”

“I, well, I had a weird dream—I think it was a dream, anyway—two nights ago. I woke up in the middle of the night and something was blinding me, like a flashlight or something.” It feels weird even saying it out loud. “And I think there was a woman in my room or something? I don’t think I’ve seen her before, I didn’t recognize her face from any of the staff. She was wearing like a … like a nightgown, or something like that, and her hair was all dark and tangled around her face. She scared the shit out of me.”

Junhui tenses up completely. Wonwoo feels just about every muscle in his body stiffen. “Were you dreaming?” he asks, voice rough and harsh and a lot more similar to the tone he used to carry before they got together, back when they were practically strangers.

“I don’t know,” Wonwoo says. “I couldn’t tell. She stared at me and then went over to the closet and—you remember that tie you got me last week when I said I didn’t own any? The— the red one, with that gold pin?”

Junhui nods, jaw set and eyes hard.

“She grabbed that and tore it at with her bare hands! Straight up dug her fingers in and pulled it in half. I think I got so freaked out I fainted or whatever, because the next thing I knew it was morning and I was completely alone.”

“So it was just a night terror, then,” Junhui says. “A creepy dream.”

“That’s just the thing, though.” Wonwoo looks up at him and forces their gaze to hold, trying to show how much this has been worrying him. “The tie was on the floor and ripped in half, and the gold pen was bent. I think—I think someone really was in my room that night. I-I didn’t know what was real or what wasn’t, but I’ve been making sure my door has been locked ever since.”

Junhui lets out a shuddering breath and his fingers tighten around Wonwoo’s waist. “Jesus,” he mutters, “Jesus, Wonwoo. You could’ve been hurt, or, or fuck, and I wasn’t even here to—” He rests their foreheads together, his eyes squeezed tightly shut. “Shit.”
“Do you know who it is?” Wonwoo asks cautiously. When Junhui doesn’t answer, Wonwoo gives him a sharp look. “You said you did. You said you knew who’s behind all the weird things in Thornfield.”

“I do,” Junhui admits quietly. He looks like he’s in genuine pain, mouth turned down unhappily at the corners, all the fire drained out of him. It kills Wonwoo to see him like this, see him look so defeated. “I do know who’s doing this, but I never thought she’d … well, that she’d go this far. She can’t help it, I know, but still”—he cuts himself off abruptly, and after a few deep breaths he says, “Wonwoo, I know it’s selfish of me, but I’m begging you. Please. Don’t ask me about this, not now, wait until I am—braver. I promise, when the time is right, I’ll tell you everything. The whole story.”

“Okay,” Wonwoo says softly. “Okay, I’ll wait. I’m just worried. I don’t want you or Anmei getting hurt because of this—whoever she is.”

“Then how about we go away?” Junhui gives him a slight smile. “You, me, and Anmei. We’ll take a big, long, extended holiday away somewhere. Maybe China, we can go visit Minghao. I’ll take you to my hometown, as much as I hate the place, and show you all the good food we’re missing. We can even walk along the Great Wall.”

Wonwoo is charmed by the idea. Get to visit Junhui’s home country? Eat the cultural cuisine he and Minghao seem to miss so much? Get to meet Minghao’s mother in person, the woman who helped raise Anmei for a little while? “I’d love that.”

Junhui’s smile widens, eyes crinkling up and his whole face softening. “Let’s get tickets tonight,” he declares. “Leave tomorrow. Anmei will love it, it’ll be like going to Disneyland or some shit. That woman won’t … won’t able to hurt us there.”

“I’ll go anywhere with you, Junhui, you know that.” And he’s genuinely excited to go to China, blood pumping and nerves thrumming with the suddenness of the decision, the sheer spontaneity of the act. It’s so bold and reckless and everything he’s never been but has secretly craved, and he thinks this is what he has to look forward to when it comes to a life with Junhui. Excitement around every corner, plane rides to all corners of the globe, all the cultures and languages of the world exposed to him and at his fingertips. And he’s so happy just thinking about it, he can barely wait.

At that moment, there’s a sudden clatter, a rising commotion, that jolts Wonwoo out of his absorbed happiness. He and Junhui look at each other for a second before jumping up to their feet and running towards the source of the noise, shouts and sounds of struggle that get louder and louder as they reach the back foyer.

What Wonwoo sees, to his surprise, is a young man with his arm in a sling besieged by several guards, one of which includes an incredibly pissed off Jihoon. The young man must have entered through the back door, and—Wonwoo notes the shattered glass of the door close to the lock—had clearly been desperate to come inside.

“What’s going on here?” Junhui asks, voice loud and powerful. The man looks up from whatever he had been saying to Jihoon. Wonwoo recognizes that soft, sloping face. He recognizes that full mouth. And, possibly most importantly, he recognizes the reason for the sling.

The man is Hong Jisoo.

“I heard what you’re doing, Junhui,” Jisoo says, chest heaving, his face pale and sweating. It’s possible that his exertion and fight with the guards put tremendous pressure on his still-healing arm. “I heard what you’re doing with him.” His last word is directed at Wonwoo, who nearly flinches from surprise. Him? What has he done?
“Jisoo—” Junhui warns, beginning to sound dangerous.

Jisoo recoils, nearly cowering, but still stands his guard. “No, Jun! I thought long and hard about this, and I don’t care what happens, or what you do to me. That man was good to me, comforted me when I was fucking bleeding out in this godforsaken hotel. He’s a good man and I’m not going to let you go through with this and lie to him!”

“What is he talking about?” Wonwoo asks nervously, while at the same time Jihoon tries to get the guards to haul him away again and Junhui growls out, “Jisoo, you don’t know what you’re doing—”

“I do, Jun! I know you, man, I know what you’re like, and the moment I realized this was serious I knew you weren’t going to tell him, maybe for the rest of his life.” He’s frantic now, the adrenaline rush making him desperate. “He’s a kind person, don’t you dare ruin him!”

“Junhui,” Wonwoo calls out nervously, voice shaking.

“Jisoo, for the love of god, you better shut your fucking mouth right now—”

“You’re lying to him, Jun!” Jisoo yells, as the combined strength of the guards bests him and start to drag him back out of the hotel, his feet scrabbling for purchase against the floorboards. “Tell him yourself, but don’t trick him! If you love him so much, then he deserves to know—”

“Shut the fuck up, Jisoo—”

“Wonwoo!” And Wonwoo jumps, practically shaking from the confusion and growing fear of the entire situation, and he looks up and meets Jisoo’s wide, desperate gaze. There’s something in Jisoo’s expression—gratitude, is it? Gratitude that Wonwoo stayed with him and tried to help him that night he got stabbed? Is it gratitude towards Wonwoo’s kindness that has somehow made him brave enough to fight against Junhui today, make him come all the way here to reveal—what?

“Wonwoo, you deserve to know the truth!” Jisoo calls out, fighting against one guard that’s trying to cover his mouth and prevent him from speaking. “He will try to hide it from you, say I’m lying, but it’s true, you can ask anyone in Thornfield, any of the staff, his lawyer, his estranged family, anyone! Wonwoo, Wen Junhui is already married, and his wife is living in the hotel with you!”
The entire foyer falls silent. Wonwoo can hear his blood travelling through his veins, almost sluggish. He is suddenly painfully aware of his own nerve endings, can feel every scratch and drag of his clothing against his skin, can feel a single bead of sweat drip below his collar and travel down his spine. For a moment, it’s like nobody else dares to even breathe.

The guards’ grips on Jisoo relax for a moment, and he shakes himself free. He straightens up and breathlessly says, “Nine years ago, on October 15th, Wen Junhui married my sister, Hong Jina, in a small church just out of London. People don’t generally know this because it was kept quiet, both families made sure of it, but they’ve been married ever since.” He looks directly in Wonwoo’s eyes, and although Wonwoo wishes to god that Jisoo is lying, that his fear of Junhui has made him desperate to try and ruin him in some way, there is nothing but nervous, honest truthfulness in Jisoo’s wide eyes. “I’m sorry. You’re a good kid, I could tell that night when you took care of me. You had to know the truth.” He looks back at Jihoon, defiant. “If you want to drag me away, go ahead. I’ve said what I needed to.”

Jihoon turns to look uncertainly at Junhui, a questioning “Sir?” unspoken at his lips.

Wonwoo can’t turn his head. He’s suddenly just as terrified of Junhui as Jisoo is. He’s still trying to cling to that last bit of hope that this is all a lie or a terrible misunderstanding, or maybe one of Junhui’s stupid pranks, but he knows that if he turns his head just a little bit more to the right, he’s going to see Junhui’s expression and it will confirm everything for good or worse.

And he can’t have that happen. Not yet.

“Sir,” Jihoon eventually says out loud. “Should we …?”

“Do whatever you want,” Junhui says. His voice is flat and unemotional. “I don’t care anymore.”

A hand grips Wonwoo’s arm, and before he knows it he’s being spun around to face Junhui, forced to look at Junhui’s grim, defeated expression and eyes full of cold fire. “Wonwoo.”

“Is this true?” he whispers, shocked that his vocal folds can even manage to produce sound right now. “Junhui? Is he telling the truth?”

Junhui’s grip tightens around his arm to the point of hurting, and his expression crumples into something heartbreaking and awful and horrible. “I need to explain this to you—”

“Let me see her.”

He pauses, evidently taken aback.

“I want to see her,” Wonwoo says, voice shaking even as he speaks barely above a whisper. “Let me see your wife with my own two eyes.”

“Mr. Wen,” Jihoon says a little urgently, “would you like me to send some people with you?”

“No,” Junhui says, not looking away from Wonwoo. He stares right at him, hard and careful, as though he’s trying to make absolutely sure that Wonwoo means what he says. “It needs to be just us
two.”

“But what about Mr. Hong—”

“Just get that fucking door fixed. I don’t care what happens to him.” He turns and walks towards the private wing, yanking Wonwoo along to the point that it feels like there might be bruises later. Up they go, up to the second floor, then to the third floor, down past Junhui’s bedroom, past the room that had been Jisoo’s, down down to the very end of the hall, where Wonwoo has never set foot in before.

The door is locked—Junhui takes out his master key card and opens it with ease—and as they walk into the suite Wonwoo feels all the air knock out of his lungs.

Sitting on the couch like she’s been there the whole time—and she’s been there, Wonwoo realizes with a confusing mixture of terror, anger, confusion, despair, everything all at once rolling in his stomach, she has been there the whole time—is a woman. She looks like she might have once been beautiful, but her hair is greasy and unwashed and hasn’t seen a comb in a while, and her nightgown is extremely rumpled, like she’s been wearing and sleeping in it for days. She looks up at them with a gaunt, pale face, sunken eyes with heavy shadows, and an expression that is both blank and fearful all at once.

“Junhui,” she murmurs, her accent strange and voice hoarse, and Wonwoo lets out a choked breath when the full realization of who this woman is hits him.

“Hello, Jina,” Junhui says, and there is no love in his voice. There is a trace of concern, of sadness, of misery and powerlessness of an acute degree, but nothing that indicates any affection. “I would like you to meet someone.” He steps aside just a little bit so she can see Wonwoo’s face, but he keeps a protective stance in front of him. “Although I think you two have already met.”

Jina turns to stare at Wonwoo, who feels a full body shiver. Her eyes are wide and unblinking and haunting, a thousand-yard stare that sees things he doesn’t or nothing at all.

“I’m sorry for frightening you,” she says to him. “I only wanted to help.”

Junhui’s jaw twitches. “Help?” he repeats.

“Help help help help help,” she mumbles to herself, before raising her voice again to say, “They told me. They said—they didn’t like him, they wanted to hurt him. They put a listening device in that tie, they were trying to spy on him. I wanted to help, I know I shouldn’t have, but I wanted to before they could and they.” She stops abruptly and doesn’t finish the rest of her sentence.

“Wonwoo,” Junhui says, in the same flat and tired voice, “meet my wife, Hong Jina.”

“Wife for life,” she mutters, again to herself. “wife for life, wife for—did that bad man come back, Jun? I told you, there was a bad man, he was trying to poison me, I hurt him and I know it was bad but—”

“It wasn’t a bad man, remember?”

“No,” she insists, “no, he was, they told me, my aunt was right there and she was reading my eulogy and she said I would die by the time I’m thirty-five and that man was going to kill me. He was going to pretend to be my brother and he would try to hurt me if I didn’t hurt him back. You know my aunt beat me when I was younger? She would lock me up in a room and she told me I couldn’t play with the other kids, she said I was crazy and I should be sent away or I shouldn’t have been born at all, she wouldn’t even feed me. One of the cooks would take pity on me and give me some congee
afterwards, but it was so watery and plain and it never tasted good—” She stops herself again, eyebrows furrowing and lips twitching as if she’s visibly struggling to get back on topic. “Was he my brother? She said he wasn’t but if he was, but I stabbed him, but, but …” she makes a frightened noise, breaths beginning to quicken and hyperventilate. “Was that another lie? Did I hurt Jisoo? Jun, I hurt my brother, didn’t I? That was another fucking voice in my head and they made me hurt Jisoo oh god—”

Junhui instantly runs to her side as she lets out a shrill, terrified wail that makes all the hairs on Wonwoo’s arms and the back of his neck stand on end. The cries of his mysterious ghost woman.


“I don’t—know—what’s real anymore!” she sobs out in between her hiccupping, heaving gasps for air. She bends down into herself, fingers reaching up to curl into her tangled hair and tug hard enough to hurt. “It’s gotten worse, Jun, I can’t tell what’s real or what isn’t or if I’m dreaming or if I’m even alive or if anything means anything anymore, I can’t tell!”

“Calm down, calm down. Deep breaths. In, out. In, out. Have you taken your medication?”

“I told you,” she hisses, tears beginning to trickle down her pallid face, “I can’t. They laced it with something, they’ll know where I am if I take them.”

“Dr. Go gave you some new ones last month, didn’t he? Brand new, he promised they weren’t tampered with.”

“They did it when his back was turned. They told me. They told me they’d be able to get in my head easier if I took them, they’d be able to make me do worse things. I already flushed them down the toilet.” She lets out a muffled sob. “I don’t want to do bad things. I don’t want them to control me.”

Junhui closes his eyes and lets out a sharp exhale through his nose. Wonwoo stands there, frozen, just watching the scene unfold with no idea what to do or what to say. He was prepared for a woman like Watabe Seiko, like Im Bora, a haughty, wealthy woman who for some reason wanted to keep herself a secret, a woman that would be easy to hate. He was prepared for another rich, proud woman to gloat over him and tell him he was a fool, that he was being played all along, that he was an idiot for thinking he could be happy with a man like Wen Junhui. Instead, he gets … he doesn’t know what, but while his heartbreak is still as poignant and aching as ever, his anger is diminishing with every passing minute.


She nods miserably, hands reaching out to cling to Junhui’s sleeves. He stares at them with a strange, stressed expression, but makes no move to push her away. “Jun, you know I can’t be seen, right?” Her voice shakes. “I can’t let anyone see me, it’ll have to be secret, like always. I don’t want people looking at me like this.”

“No one will see you, Jina. They never do.”

Jina turns her head to stare at Wonwoo again. For a long moment, nobody speaks. It’s so quiet here, at the very end of the hallway. No housekeepers walking up and down stairs, no Anmei running up and down the hall or reigning supreme in the playroom. Wonwoo can’t hear anything other than their own breathing and the faint sounds of plumbing in the walls.

“He looks like a good man, Jun,” Jina says, and her eyes look unfocused, as though she’s saying the
words but she’s not truly understanding the meaning behind them. “I’m sure he will make you very happy.”

It’s still the exact same suite room that all of Thornfield’s bedrooms look like, but it has been redone and repurposed with several strange modifications. Wonwoo takes a small walk around the suite as Junhui calms Jina down, noting the changes. The balcony doors in the bedroom have been blocked off, permanently sealed shut, and he shudders to think of exactly why they can’t let her outdoors several floors off the ground. There are no knives or forks or anything in the kitchen drawers, and it seems as though the people who bring her food every day provide her with utensils and then take them away once she’s done.

The most concerning things he finds, however, are the sticky notes on the bathroom mirror scrawled in a shaky, almost unreadable hand. Words like “CAN’T TRUST THE DOCTOR” scribbled out and a steadier, calmer version of the same handwriting jotting underneath “it’s just another delusion, it’s safe to trust the doctor”. Things like “DON’T TAKE THE PILLS”, “JUN IS IN DANGER—WARN HIM”, “THEY WANT TO HURT ME”, and most hauntingly of all, “they aren’t real but they feel real and you can’t trust them they want you to hurt people they will lie to you and get you in trouble they want people to come after you”.

Jina is eventually convinced to go to bed and rest, and Junhui silently leads Wonwoo out of her room—he makes sure it’s securely locked first—and back to his own room down the hall. Once they’re inside the familiar space, he takes a seat on the couch and gestures for Wonwoo to do the same. Wonwoo doesn’t move for a few beats, just staring Junhui down, before his joints slowly start to shift and move to sit on the couch beside him.

“Before you say anything,” Junhui says, voice quiet, “I want to at least be given the chance to explain myself. I know I don’t deserve even that much, I don’t deserve anything from you, but I need you to—”

“I will listen,” Wonwoo interrupts. Junhui gives him a surprised, although grateful, glance. Wonwoo can’t look at him, his eyes are fixed firmly on his own clenched fists pressed against his knees. “Didn’t I tell you this once? I told you that, if I was ever placed in a situation where I had to choose to walk away from you, I would listen to your side of the story first before I make any decisions. Take all the time you need. I will listen to all of it.”

Junhui takes a deep breath. Slowly, haltingly, more unsure of himself than any other time Wonwoo’s heard him speak, he starts to let the words out.

“It was never for love. I don’t think I can even call it an arranged marriage—it was a political one, a strategic one. I was young, only twenty-five, and I had just inherited Thornfield and all the other estates and businesses the Wens owned.

“My entire family hated me, for various reasons that honestly don’t matter anymore, but I still had some use left in me. They strong-armed me into agreeing to the marriage, using anything they could—threats, promises, the death of my father and brother, as an excuse that I needed to continue the family name. They eventually sweetened the deal by saying that if I married this woman, I could do whatever I wanted for the rest of my life, no worries about jobs or money or any of that. They even agreed for it to be almost completely unknown to the rest of the world, so if I wanted to disappear and fool around I wouldn’t have the name of a spouse to hold me back. I was young and stupid and thought that was a good enough deal for me.

“Hong Jina was pretty, but we never really cared much for each other. I don’t think she was ever
attracted to me, either.” He pauses to let out a weak, humourless laugh. “Scratch that; I don’t even
think she’s attracted to men, period. But we were the black sheep in our respective families, with no
one to turn to to get out of it. So we went through with it, and she quietly moved into Thornfield with
no one—not even the staff of the hotel—the wiser to our real relationship. I think to the majority of
them, she’s just another guest, a special guest I’ve allowed to live in my private wing. They probably
think she’s my secret lover or bastard half-sister or whatever, I didn’t really care back then and I
certainly don’t care what they think now.

“It wasn’t even a month into our ‘marriage’ that I started to realize something was—off—about her.
It started off as just little things, but eventually it became worse and worse. She has these—these
people in her head, different people, sometimes she sees them and other times she can only hear
them, but they feel incredibly real to her and they tell her terrible things. Mostly it’s just sad things,
like telling her she’s worthless, or that she should kill herself and do the world a favour. But
sometimes they get particularly bad, sometimes these voices will trick her—they’ll tell her to hurt
someone else, or that they will hurt someone else, and they’ll somehow twist her head in a way that
makes her think she’s in a dream, and that’s when things can get bad. Things like fires or … or
stabblings.”

“So she did do all those things.” Wonwoo jumps when he hears the hoarse, scratchy voice echoing
harshly against Junhui’s own smooth, melodious tones, only to realize that it’s his own.

Junhui nods solemnly. “She thought she was dreaming when she set my curtains on fire. She didn’t
… she didn’t realize what she was doing was real. As for Jisoo, well, I think you heard her story
already. She thought he was an imposter.”

“She wandered the halls sometimes,” Wonwoo recalls quietly. “I thought she was a ghost. I asked
Jeonghan about the voices I heard, but he said they were just Seungkwan’s housekeepers.”

Junhui lets out a low, bitter laugh. “Ah, yes. I remember Jeonghan telling me about that when I first
came back to Thornfield. Normally she keeps to herself, doesn’t like leaving her room. But
sometimes she … wanders. Just paces up and down the hall mostly when she’s in a bad state, trying
to calm herself down. Anmei and Minghao are both very heavy sleepers, we haven’t had problems
with her wandering until you came along.”

Wonwoo nods. “Keep going.”

Junhui takes a breath. “I realized then that the two of us were sacrificial lions. The Hong family
wanted our connections, the Wen family wanted their money. I was the difficult, hated child, the
wild animal they couldn’t control and resented me for it. Jina was a woman they considered a lunatic,
a source of shame they couldn’t show anyone in society or their perfect family image will be ruined.
Nobody ever knew she even existed. So they put us together, threw us under a bus so they could
enjoy all the benefits with the least associated costs.

“So here I was, Wonwoo. I was twenty-five years old, already burdened with the keepings of a hotel
and several other businesses that I barely knew how to manage, and married to a woman that I had
no idea how to help.”

He sees the look on Wonwoo’s face and hastily adds, “I tried sending her to doctors, to take
medication, and it worked after a while. But then the voices and the thoughts started telling her the
medication was trying to kill her, and she refused to take them, and I couldn’t—I wanted to force it
down her fucking throat, but I couldn’t. How could I? She’s been untreated for so many years, since
childhood, her symptoms were already so bad and our families used their connections to make
absolutely sure we couldn’t get the government or anyone involved to help her and thus expose our
families, and she threatened to kill herself if we tried to make her take them and I wanted to help her
but there was nothing I could do, I couldn’t—"

He stops and takes several deep breaths, the expression on his face one of bitterness and long-simmering regret. After a pause, he starts to speak again.

“She can’t help these thoughts, they mess with her. She gets better when she’s convinced to see the doctor, and that usually helps. As for why she’s kept secret … when her head was clear, when she was more herself, she’d tell me how embarrassed she was, how ashamed she was of herself, how she was terrified of people seeing her like this and judging her and judging me by comparison. I may not have loved her, but I didn’t hate her either, and if she refused to take proper treatments then the least I could do was make her feel more comfortable.

“So that’s how it all began. I forbade anyone from going up to the third floor to try and keep them from discovering her. I hired some new directors for the hotel, new staff members if necessary, the ones that would get close enough to know our true relationship, and I swore them all to secrecy. They take care of her, they never let her starve, they’ll help her go outside for walks when no one’s around. When she needs to visit Dr. Go, she’s let out through a side door in the dead of night so no one can see her.

“I … wasn’t great back then.” He looks down at his own hands. “I was angry for being tricked by my family, depressed to realize I was stuck in this situation. So I ran away, travelled around the world trying to escape Thornfield and forget everything. When I was twenty-six I first met Watabe Seiko, and the whole Anmei thing came to be. I kept running away, met more people, left them too. I learned about Anmei’s existence and searched for her, made sure she and Minghao were sent to Thornfield but were kept far away from Jina, and I kept running. I ran and ran and ran … until I came back one day, just a customary visit, and there you were.”

There is a long, painful silence that follows. Wonwoo feels a lump grow in his throat, eyes blinking back tears that he refuses to let fall. The last words Junhui spoke were sorrowful and pained and so, so full of love he can’t even stand it.

“I want to divorce her,” Junhui whispers. “Don’t think I haven’t thought of that, how easy it would be to cut ties, to ignore my family’s warnings and be free. But I know what would happen to her if I do. She has nowhere else to go, no one to turn to. Jisoo cares for her in his own way, but he was never someone like me. He’s too weak to go against his parents and he can’t help her. If I divorced her, she’d have nowhere to go but back to her family, her terrible, fucked up family who would literally lock her up forever, keep her chained in an attic away from everyone else like some sort of wild animal until she really lost her mind. I’m trapped in this, the same way she’s trapped in her own head, and there’s no way I can be free without ruining her life. And even though I am cruel, and cold, and selfish, I’m so, so sorry Wonwoo but I can’t do that to her.”

And suddenly, it’s like an electrical switch went off inside of him. While before they had sat together but kept a distance, Junhui making no move to touch him, he suddenly reaches for his hands, holds them tightly with iron fingers and white knuckles. Wonwoo lets Junhui crush his fingers until they start to sting but doesn’t look away from his fixed spot somewhere by his knees, at a rip in his jeans that reveal pale skin that doesn’t quite feel like it belongs to him.

“I’m so sorry, Wonwoo,” Junhui chokes out. “I’m sorry for lying to you. I didn’t mean for it to be this way, I swear. I just—you made me so happy. For the first time in years, I felt like I could feel warmth, I could see colours, I saw it so clearly in my mind, I saw that you could make me fix myself, you could make me become something good. I knew I should’ve kept my distance, I knew, but every time I saw you all the breath would leave my chest and I wanted and wanted and wanted and I couldn’t help myself, I just loved you so fucking much. I was going to tell you—”
“When, Junhui?” Wonwoo explodes before his words gets to him, makes him forget. “When were you going to tell me?”

“Wonwoo—”

“Tomorrow, when we were on the plane to China, running away again? A month from now? Nine months from now, when we’re talking about marriage? Or maybe at the altar, when I find out you already had your name buried in a register somewhere?”

“Wonwoo, please—”

“I can’t.” He rips Junhui’s hands away from him and stands up, swaying slightly on the spot. He thinks he’s going to be sick. “I’m sorry. I need to process all of this—alone. I’ll be in my room. Don’t come for me, I can’t be around you right now.”

“On—” Junhui’s voice is choked up and sounds very close to tears. Wonwoo’s heart rips itself in two, god, he knows how easy it is to forgive all of this. To turn and look at his face, stare into the core of what must be utter devastation, and to throw himself into Junhui’s arms and kiss all the pain away like he wants to. But Wonwoo doesn’t let him get that far. He doesn’t let himself give in. “Okay, my lov—Wonwoo. Okay. Ta-take all the time you need. Stay in your room, just think ab- about things. I’ll check up on—” he hesitates. “I’ll send someone to check up on you later.”

Without another word, without looking at him, Wonwoo practically runs out of the suite and back down to his own room. He doesn’t quite make it there before he’s crying, sobbing, tears streaming down his face as he locks the door behind him and just collapses right there on the floor, heaving and gasping and choking on his tears and spit and the confusing dark thoughts swirling in his own mind.

About two hours later—maybe, he hasn’t really been checking on the clock—he hears a knock on the door. Wonwoo looks up from his spot on the couch, where he had been sitting and sniffing and staring unfeelingly at a wall, before getting up with stiff joints and shaky legs to open the door.

He’s not sure whether he’s relieved or disappointed to see Jeonghan in his careful low ponytail, looking at him with a concerned, grim expression. “May I come in?” he asks softly.

Wonwoo doesn’t say anything, but he steps aside to let him walk through the doorway. He returns to the couch and collapses back down onto it, as Jeonghan sits down next to him.

“Everyone’s very worried about you,” he says. “Seokmin wants to know if he can send anything special up for you to eat. Seungkwan’s almost inconsolable, he’s buried himself in the basement trying to fix those damn laundry machines again, just to have some time to himself.”

Wonwoo doesn’t respond. _They knew. They knew about Hong Jina and they never said anything._

You look terrible. Have you been drinking anything?”

Wonwoo shakes his head. Jeonghan silently gets up to get him a glass of water, pushing it into his hand and gesturing for him to drink up. “I know you’re upset,” he presses when Wonwoo doesn’t make a move to drink, “and you have every right to be. But don’t torture yourself over this. Right now, taking care of yourself is the number one priority you should have right now, not anything else.”

Wonwoo finally takes small sips. Somehow, even something as simple as cold tap water burns as it travels down his throat, scratches on ragged edges and sensitive grooves he never realized he had.
Everything about him feels tired and raw. “You tried to warn me,” he says slowly. “That’s why you were so against us being together. You knew what I was getting into.”

“I’m sorry.” Jeonghan sounds genuinely regretful. “I couldn’t tell you anything. I couldn’t … I wish I hadn’t have to lie to you all this time.”

“So everyone really knows?” Wonwoo whispers. He hadn’t been screaming or anything, but his throat feels raw and ragged anyway, hoarse and empty. He takes a couple more sips of water. “If not the staff, then at least you guys all know who Jina really is. Seungkwan? Seokmin? Jihoon? Soonyoung?” Jeonghan’s expression says it all, and Wonwoo’s heart sinks. “Minghao? Chan?”

“No Minghao,” Jeonghan says, shaking his head. “He never knew. You’ve tried waking him up in the mornings, haven’t you? He could sleep through a fire.” He hesitates. “Technically, he already did.”

Wonwoo lets out a dry, unhappy laugh as he sets the half-empty glass down and uses the condensation left over in his palms to run through his hair for a moment, try to wake himself up from his blank stupor. “God, I feel … I don’t know. I feel used, and betrayed, and I was lied to all this time, and I … I don’t know what to do anymore.”

He turns to Jeonghan, suddenly desperate to be given an answer that he doesn’t have to come to on his own, to put all his faith into a reasonable figure and hope they’ll be able to tell him exactly what to do. For once in his life, he doesn’t want to be in charge of himself anymore, he wants a vicious aunt or a racist headmaster or a university professor to push and pull and place him exactly where they want him, he wants to be a mindless ragdoll that doesn’t have to make any difficult choices. “I love him a lot, Jeonghan. I don’t—” his voice wavers sharply before he has to cut himself off, try to control himself. “What should I do? I love him so much, but I don’t know if I can … is there any way I’ll be able to forgive him?”

Jeonghan doesn’t say anything for a moment, although he does reach up to smooth stray locks of hair behind Wonwoo’s ears, rub a hand soothingly along his arm for a moment. The touch is comforting.

“I think,” he finally says, after a long period of silence, “that it’s easier than you think to forgive someone, especially if you love them as much as you love Wen Junhui.” He licks his lips, pausing for a moment. “Whether they deserve to be forgiven, though, that’s a whole other question.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying to consider all your options. Isn’t that what you’ve always done, Wonwoo? Try to see the entire picture, rather than narrow your decisions down to one or two?” His eyes are sad, Wonwoo thinks vaguely. They’re sad and immense and they have seen many things. “Anyway, I need to get back to work. Do you need anything? Want me to send food up to you?”

Wonwoo shakes his head. “There’s food in the cupboards, I’ll just have those. Go on ahead.”

Jeonghan looks like he wants to tell him something, but instead he just gives him one last weak smile before leaving, shutting the door softly behind him and leaving Wonwoo behind to be alone, all his dark thoughts beginning to cloud around his head again. This time, though, he manages to shake himself out of his coma. Jeonghan is right. He needs to look at the bigger picture.

Forgiving or not forgiving Junhui, that’s an entirely different situation and not one he wants to make right away. But there is one thing he knows he must do: he needs to leave Thornfield. Right away, before he can talk himself out of it. It’s the only option he can think of.
He drinks more water as he regains some semblance of strength and clarity, forcing himself to think things through. No matter which way he looks at it, he’s doomed to fall back into Junhui’s arms if he remains living here in the hotel, that much is certain. All his common sense flies out the window in front of Junhui, all his sensibility and caution just melts under the heat of his smile. If he stays here, he’ll forgive Junhui and agree to whatever Junhui tells him, and even if that might make him happy at first he knows it’ll only end in two ways.

In the first ending, Junhui will take him and they’ll escape with Anmei to China or France or wherever the fuck, fulfilling Wonwoo’s dreams of seeing the world, only it won’t be the same. It won’t be a vacation, a loving family trip across the globe. It’ll be Junhui once again running away to avoid his problems, with some extra carry-on bags at his side this time, and Wonwoo will find himself jumping from place to place, no rest or moment to breathe, and once more, he’ll have no home to return to. It’ll be a life of hotel rooms and taking up space in the apartments of Junhui’s stuffy rich friends, of stale airports and unstable roots.

In the second ending, they remain in Thornfield as usual, and Wonwoo will be forced to pretend that Hong Jina doesn’t exist. He’ll have to laugh with Jeonghan and Seungkwan and all the others knowing that they knew about this the entire time, they knew Junhui was married the entire time, and not a single one of them said anything as they watched the two of them fall in love. He’ll have to embrace Junhui knowing that his legal wife is just down the hallway. He’ll have to live the rest of his life knowing that he’s involved himself with a married man, that he is basically committing adultery. And while the situation is far more complicated than just that, Wonwoo still feels it burning his skin, sending black toxic sludge through his veins, poisoning him from the inside out.

That’s the worst part of it, he thinks. It’s not the lies, or the mysteries, or even Jina, really. It’s the fact that even the moment Wonwoo heard the story leave Junhui’s lips, the moment he understood what had happened and that he wasn’t being tricked out of malicious intent, he knew he had already forgiven Junhui for everything. He knew that he loved him so much that he’d be willing to keep this charade going, keep staying with Junhui forever.

And Wonwoo knows that if he stays, if he lets this happen, he will come to hate himself more than he already does. He will be changed, somehow, he will feel dirtied and coarse and he will become something that he can never accept.

So it’s not for Junhui, or for Jina, that he needs to leave. He needs to go for himself.

The moment he realizes this, he panics again, breath catching in his throat, spots swimming before his eyes, as he jumps to his feet and doesn’t take the time to ground himself before he staggers towards the door and swings it open, like he’s about to run down the stairs and out of the hotel and down the street without any luggage or money or anything, like a fucking idiot. After confining himself to his room for so long, the sudden stretching expanse of the hallway and the rest of the world beyond overwhelms him, and his knees buckle.

Arms reach out to steady him before he can fall, and he recognizes the cologne before he looks up at the face. It’s Junhui, of course it’s him. It looks like he had been sitting on the carpet in the hallway just out of sight outside his room, almost hidden, waiting for him to come out, for who knows how long.

“Wonwoo,” Junhui mumbles, arms keeping him held up with ease. His eyes roam Wonwoo’s features with a strange, twisted hunger, like a starving man, and for a wild moment Wonwoo both hopes and fears that Junhui might kiss him. But he doesn’t. “Can I … can I come in?”

Wonwoo nods slowly, getting his footing and then backing up to let Junhui into his room. They take a seat at the couch, and it’s like nothing has changed. The conversation they had in his room upstairs
has simply carried right on over to Wonwoo’s room.

“You’re pale,” Junhui says. “Your eyes are red.” He hangs his head. “I did this to you. My love—Wonwoo—please—just let it out. Yell, scream, hit me, whatever you want, I deserve it and I’ll take it without complaint.”

“I don’t want to do that,” Wonwoo says, barely able to move his lips.

“I’m a horrible person, aren’t I?”

He doesn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

“Then tell me,” he begs. “Tell me I’m awful, I’m a liar, I’m selfish and greedy and only care about myself. Punch me if you want to. Go at me.”

“I don’t want to. I just need some water.”

“Let me get you some, then.”

Wonwoo shakes his head and reaches for the glass left over from his talk with Jeonghan. There’s a long silence between them as he takes a sip and sets it back down, broken only when Junhui hisses out an unsteady curse and leans in to kiss him like it’s muscle memory. Wonwoo almost lets him, wants it so badly, but at the last second he remembers, and he turns his head away.

Junhui freezes, slowly leans back. “Ah,” he says quietly, “is this not allowed anymore?” When Wonwoo gives him a look, he grits his teeth and says, “Is this because of my … wife?”

“That’s why you hired me, isn’t it?” Wonwoo bursts out.

“What are you talking about?”

“I always wondered, you know, why I got this job. I mean, good pay, a roof over my head, three meals a day, all for someone with only a Bachelor’s degree and a two-year teaching certificate? I thought it was too good to be true.” Wonwoo turns away and frowns thoughtfully at a spot on the wall. “And that’s why so many of the directors are so young, isn’t it? Even despite their talents and skills, there’s no way anyone would hire so many people this young to be in charge of managing a hotel like Thornfield. It’s because it’s easier to convince them to keep her a secret, right? When they’re younger, more unsure of their place in the world, they’re just so grateful to even have this opportunity, they’ll agree to do anything you wanted.”

Junhui’s silence is all the answer Wonwoo needs. Wonwoo sighs. “Why do the childminders not know?”

“Jeonghan and I didn’t think it was necessary,” Junhui says quietly. “Minghao isn’t a very curious person. If I told him that I don’t want him or Anmei wandering around upstairs, he’ll listen to me and he won’t think twice. As for when we were hiring you … we needed someone for Anmei. We didn’t think whoever we hired would be keen on living in a hotel with a woman who could potentially set your bed curtains on fire. And at the time, we didn’t realize—I didn’t realize—that you would—that it would be you.”

His last sentence is loaded with more meaning than just its surface value. That it would be you. That you would fascinate me so much. That I would fall so hard, fall in love with you so much. That I would do anything, even lie, to make this happen.

Wonwoo doesn’t answer him. He’s not sure if he can. Everything is starting to make sense. All the
little wonders and secrets and mysteries that had been the odd puzzle pieces are suddenly fitting into place, sliding into neat little slots that add depth to the story.

“Staying in Thornfield was a mistake,” Junhui mutters. “Once I realized how much I loved you, I should’ve taken you far, far away immediately. It’s not too late, though, right, Wonwoo? We can send Anmei off to school, I’ll pay Minghao handsomely and he can live with his mother again, and you and I can travel the world, like we’ve always planned. Or—or if you want to live in Thornfield, if you’ll miss everyone, I’m sure I can send Jina away somewhere, hire people to look after her.”

“You’re not sending her away, Junhui,” Wonwoo says, voice sharp. “She needs to be taken care of here, where she trusts people and they genuinely care about her. You can’t just … just uproot her and shunt her away somewhere, what’s the difference between you and her family otherwise?”

“The difference is that they will literally fuck her over and chain her to a damn chair!” Junhui says hotly, hackles raising. “I don’t know what to do with her, that’s true, and I was never prepared for this, but I would never do that to her!” He winces when he realizes his voice is getting loud and closes his eyes, visibly struggling to calm his temper, and speaks in the same low, calm tone, like an animal tamer would to a wild animal. Wonwoo is surprised to realize that he’s the wild animal, not Junhui. Maybe that’s how it’s always been between them. Maybe all this time, it was Wonwoo who was wild and untameable and enigmatic, and it was Junhui doing the frantic chasing. “Okay—okay. She can stay here. But we can still go away, travel far far away to Italy or, or France, or the Bahamas. Somewhere far away, away from anyone. A nice permanent vacation. Doesn’t that—” one dark, thin hand reaches up to almost nervously brush hair away from Wonwoo’s forehead, “—doesn’t that sound nice, Wonwoo? Doesn’t that sound good?”

“You should take Anmei with you when you go, sir,” Wonwoo says as coolly as he can manage—which isn’t that impressive with how much his voice is shaking. Junhui’s face falls at the sudden impersonal use of “sir”, and Wonwoo immediately regrets going for such a low blow. “Junhui.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I know you said you would send her to school, but maybe you should take her with you. Knowing you, a permanent vacation all by yourself will bore you to death.”

“All by my …? Wonwoo, don’t you get it? You’re coming with me.”

Wonwoo grits his teeth, looks him straight in the eye, and shakes his head.

A heartbeat passes by in total silence, before Junhui springs up off the couch and begins pacing the short length of the living room. Wonwoo can sense the energy drifting off of him, the perplexity, the heartbreak, the twitchy insecurity that is making way for the irrational, bad-tempered, impossible man Wonwoo knew and fell in love with, a man who is accustomed to things going his way.

“So,” he finally says, not stopping his pacing, “you’re going to be stubborn about this.”

Wonwoo chooses not to answer. He knows that once Junhui is in this mood, a single wrong word will set him off for good.

Junhui stops abruptly in the middle of his angry strides, directly in front of Wonwoo, before all at once like a surge of hurricane winds he marches right up until he’s hovering over him, hands balanced on the couch on either side of Wonwoo’s head, effectively trapping him.

“Are you not going to see reason, my love?” he whispers harshly, eyes dark and intense and fierce with anger and something else, something weak and sad and tinged with despondency, the look of a
man who’s facing the potential to lose everything. Wonwoo wishes he doesn’t have to see this happen. He wishes he doesn’t have to be the one to put him through this. “Don’t you know how easy it would be for me to make you?”

Was there ever a point in time in which Wonwoo would’ve heard this threat and be frightened? Yes, probably. Junhui never bluffs—if he says he will make him, he very likely will, and he won’t half-ass it either. Maybe Wonwoo would’ve been scared of him if he was still just the meek childminder. Maybe he would’ve been scared when they were just starting this relationship and he could barely comprehend how this came to be. But in this moment, Wonwoo feels no fear, even as he knows Junhui is entirely serious with his threat. It’s that small spark he’s always tried to supress, that fire and burning that has kept him going this far, and in this moment it’s stronger than anything Junhui can say or do.

Wonwoo reaches up to press his hand against Junhui’s cheek, tears pooling up in his eyes. A wet sob leaves his throat.

Junhui’s unchecked desperation fizzles out almost instantly. He sits down beside him again, hands hovering around Wonwoo like he’s not sure if he’s allowed to hold him. Eventually, he settles for pressing a hand on top of the one Wonwoo’s got held against his face, thumb rubbing soothingly into the skin as he begs for Wonwoo not to cry and Wonwoo answers by crying even harder.

“I’m sorry,” he says pleadingly, “I’m sorry, I’m not angry. Please don’t—it was only because I love you so much, you were looking at me like I was a stranger, like I was nothing to you, I couldn’t take it and I—Wonwoo, please don’t cry.” He moves to try and bring Wonwoo closer to him, to hug him to his shoulder, to kiss his wet cheeks, but Wonwoo doesn’t let him. Junhui lets out a despairing, bitter sound. “Don’t you love me, Wonwoo?”

“Of course I do, you asshole,” Wonwoo sniffles. These aren’t the hysterical, half-blinding tears that he had dealt with earlier. They feel almost calming, like the last of his anxieties and worries are draining away with them. “I love you more than anyone else in this world. But that’s the last time I’m ever going to tell you that.”

“Last time? Why the last? If you love me and you’ll see me every day in Thornfield, how can you continue to be this cold to me?” He says it like he knows this will eventually pass, that Wonwoo won’t be able to avoid and resist him forever.

“Exactly right. Which is why I have to leave you.”

“Leave me? For how long? Until tomorrow? It’ll be hard, but I can wait until tomorrow.”

“No, Junhui. Leave you forever. I have to leave Thornfield, and you, and Anmei, and Minghao, and everyone, and I ca-can’t see you ever again.”

A long, heavy silence follows Wonwoo’s declaration. He watches as Junhui’s expression flutters from one depressing emotion to another, before settling into something brutal and broken, something intent in its purpose, something that will fight with every last muscle in his body to win him over until Wonwoo’s resolve comes crashing down.

“We may not be able to be married,” Junhui says, “but we can still be together. Plenty of same-sex couples do that. We don’t need some silly certificate to tell us that we have a bond, don’t we?” His voice catches and falls on the last words. “Wonwoo, don’t we?”

Wonwoo struggles against the brimstone and poison travelling up his throat. There may be no fire, but he feels the smoke and the heat and the fear the same way he did that night. Not a single soul on
this earth is loved more than Wonwoo is loved by this man, he knows this, and when Junhui talks of
him being an object worthy of worship Wonwoo wants to laugh until he can’t breathe anymore
because he has no need for others to find him sacred, not when he’s the one revering Junhui,
venerating every smile and affectionate word and loving touch that comes his way. “I have to go.”

“I’m yours, Wonwoo. I’ve always been yours. Can’t you promise me that as well?”

“I’m not yours, Junhui. Not anymore.”

The silence between them is so sharp Wonwoo thinks he can hear the bustling of bodies below, staff
wandering the halls in the late hours of the night, cleaning dishes or carrying laundry. He wonders if
they’ve already fixed the broken glass in the back door.

“My love,” Junhui finally says, and there’s danger in his gentleness, there’s recklessness rising in the
inflections of his grief. “Wonwoo, do you really mean it? Do you really mean to leave forever?”

He struggles to swallow around the lump in his throat, so big he wonders if any wrong move will
make it tear itself out of his esophagus, rip his neck to shreds and let him bleed out. “I mean it.”

Junhui leans forwards, hands firm and unyielding, and pulls Wonwoo into his arms. His body is
warm, invitingly solid and dependable, his cologne as dizzying as always. Even in his current rash
state, the hand that presses against the back of his skull, threads through his hair and tucks him close
to the burning skin of Junhui’s neck, is exceedingly gentle. Wonwoo bites back a cry of agony. “Do
you still mean it?”

“I do.”

He tilts Wonwoo’s head up and presses his lips feverishly against his forehead, his cheek, every inch
of skin, everywhere he can reach. Wonwoo’s breathing hiccups out of him in staccato bursts. “And
now?”

“I still do.” He tears himself away from Junhui’s grasp before he can lose himself, staggering up to
his feet and backing away from the couch so he can’t be touched.

“This is cruel,” Junhui croaks out, staring after him. “You always tell me I’m cruel, but this is worse
than anything I’ve ever done, by far. Can’t you see that you are the one thing in this world that
makes me happy? If you leave, what will I have left? What can I do if you leave me?” When
Wonwoo bites his lip hard enough to draw blood and just shakes his head, Junhui stands up as well,
although he makes no move to come closer just yet. “So you’ll leave me, then? I tell you that you’ve
convinced me to become a better man, and you throw me to the dirt and you’ll let me go right back
to what I was before?”

“You are already a good man, Wen Junhui,” Wonwoo says, mouth tasting metallic and coppery and
awful. “You may be mean sometimes, and you may even be selfish, but you’re good. And you don’t
need me to convince you of that. You can be a better man all on your own, you will find new things
to pursue and put your mind to, and you will forget about me before I forget about you.”

“What makes you think you can tell me what I will do? You think the love I have for you is
something that can go away so quickly?” A spasm of shattered, ragged suffering crosses his features.
“Is she really what is going to come between us? There’s no one else who’ll be hurt by us being
together, no family or friends to disapprove. No one will know, no one will care. Will you really—
will you really put me through hell for something like this?”

Every part of Wonwoo wants to stop resisting him. Even his own thoughts betray him, crumbling at
the sheer pain in Junhui’s voice, begs Wonwoo to go to him. Look at the state he’s in, they seem to be screaming into his ears, clanging against the inside of his skull, putting pressure against the back of his eye sockets, look at his misery, think of what he might do to himself if you leave him in this state—go back to him, hold him, love him as hard as you can, no one will get hurt if you stay with him. No one else in this world will ever care for you as much as him, no one has ever cared about you. Only him. Fuck, just go to him!

But even as these voices cry out, Wonwoo knows the answer, the rebuttal, the closing statement and the last result. There can be only one other person who will love and care for him more than Junhui, and that is himself. He knows what is right and what is wrong, and most importantly, he knows what he believes is right and what is wrong. And he knows that if he stays with Junhui, even if he’s happy, he will know it’s wrong, and he will forever be weak and dependent and will never be able to fully stand on his own.

If he lets Junhui win, he will lose all respect for himself.

His expression is all the answer Junhui receives, and Wonwoo watches him as he sees this, mulls over it, quietly accepts the answer, and completely snaps.

Junhui storms right up to him, one hand wrapping itself tight enough around his waist that Wonwoo thinks there really might be prints left over, the other hand reaching up to grasp Wonwoo’s face, thumb gripping his chin, fingers digging into his cheek, forcing him to look up and meet his gaze. His face is flushed, hands trembling even with all their strength, eyes bright with red-rimmed tears and full of fierce, soul-crushing fire. Wonwoo lets it all happen, even bends a little into the harsh touch, knowing it might be the last he’ll ever feel.

“What is it that I need to do?” he hisses, close, so close Wonwoo can’t take in anything else other than him. “Tell me, Wonwoo! What do I need to do to get you to stay with me? To get you to love me?”

Wonwoo watches, almost transfixed, as tears finally pool in Junhui’s eyes and slide down his cheeks, drip towards his chin and onto the front of his shirt. This is the first time he’s ever seen Junhui cry, ever seen him so vulnerable. Somehow, even with the powerful grip on him, he’s never felt Junhui so weak before. “I adore you, Wonwoo, I worship the very ground you walk on. I have the money to get you anything you want, buy you anything you want, make it so you never have to worry about a single thing in your life. You said you only wanted my love, but is that not enough anymore? Is it not enough?”

He releases him like the touch burns his skin and staggers back slightly, shoulders shaking. “Do I need to beg?” he asks frantically, words stuttering as they fight against the force of his tears. “I will do it. I will beg you on my hands and knees.”

“Don’t, Junhui. I’m going.”

“You’re really going to leave me?”

“I am.”

He struggles around a terrified, despairing sound that comes from the very center of his chest. “Am I nothing to you?”

Wonwoo closes his eyes for a moment, the pain utterly unbearable. Without another word, he crosses the living room and makes for his bedroom.
“Okay,” he hears Junhui’s voice call shakily out to his retreating back, “okay, just—just sleep on it, have a good night’s sleep and we can talk in the morning. But please, I’m begging—please don’t leave me. Fuck, Wonwoo, my love—my love—my love.”

There’s the sound of him slowly sinking into the couch, the faint depression of the leather, and a choking, desperate sob.

Wonwoo’s already at the door, one foot crossing the dark threshold that awaits him. He can see the moon’s light slanting through his balcony doors, illuminating his bed. But he hesitates at the last second, heart pummelled into a bloody pulp inside of his body, and turns back to quickly go to Junhui, where he’s collapsed down with his head cradled in his hands.

Wonwoo gently turns his face up, smooths hair away from his forehead and tear-stained cheeks, leans in to carefully press a kiss to the very corner of his mouth. He can lie and pretend it’s not a real kiss that way.

“You’re a good man, Junhui,” he whispers softly, pressing another kiss to one wet eyelid, tastes salt against his lips. “And you’ve been so, so kind to me. And a good man will always find happiness one way or another.”

“I don’t want happiness,” Junhui mumbles back, fingers reaching out blindly for his wrists. “I only want you.”

Wonwoo slowly pulls away, moving his hands before Junhui can grab them and hold onto him and they’ll have to start this all over again, and he shuts his bedroom door without looking back.

Wonwoo didn’t expect he’d actually manage to asleep after all this, but he’s able to knock out for a few hours before waking up very early around dawn. There’s only a moment to breathe, staring up at the familiar ceiling with the heavy-hearted realization that this will be the last time he lays eyes on it. After a quick shower he packs up his suitcase with all the clothes he owns as well as important documents, like his graduation certificate and the letter his uncle had sent all those years ago, eternally grateful that he only owns a few things to his name.

He steals out of his room as quietly as he can, casting Anmei and Minghao’s rooms one last quick glance as he walks down the hallway. He regrets having to leave this way, without saying goodbye to anyone. Especially Minghao—he’s going to come back from China any week now to find Wonwoo is just gone.

He knows he shouldn’t, but when he reaches the staircase he pauses, leaves his suitcase by the landing, and goes up to the third floor as quietly as he can. He takes his time moving along the carpet, making sure nothing creaks or groans beneath him, until he’s hovering just outside Junhui’s door. There is movement inside, and it sounds as though Junhui is pacing his living room restlessly, occasionally letting out a frustrated sigh or a muffled, choked-up curse. Maybe he never even went to sleep.

Wonwoo presses his knuckles to his lips to stifle a shaky exhale. Junhui probably stayed up all night waiting for morning, waiting to come and talk to him again, try to convince him with all his might to stay. Wonwoo’s not giving him that chance.

He picks up his suitcase to make sure it doesn’t make any noise and treads, as quietly as he can, down the stairs. One of the steps creaks loudly the minute he puts pressure on it and he cringes, waits with a pounding heart. No response. He continues down as slowly as he dares.
The back foyer is deserted at this time of day, but Wonwoo can hear movement elsewhere—the kitchens, down the staff wing, wherever. He doesn’t have much time. The back door still has the broken glass pane, although the glass shards have been swept away. He makes sure to close the door carefully behind him as he steps out and begins walking down the length of Thornfield, past the entrance and the fancy parked cars and down the winding driveway.

Each step that takes him farther and farther away from Thornfield feels like agony. It wasn’t like this when he left for Aunt Choi’s house, he thinks miserably, and despite crying enough for what feels like the next five years’ worth of salt deposits he can still feel the telltale burning sensation as he half-trots down a particularly steep incline. Thornfield had been more than just an occupation, it had been his home.

*So this is what it feels like to leave your home,* he thinks as he reaches the end of the driveway, out to the road leading to Seoul and elsewhere beyond. *So this is what it feels like to have a home to abandon.*

As he hits the road and turns the corner, there’s an expensive vehicle parked just outside the grounds, on the side of the road and just out of sight behind the stone walls. A familiar figure with his arm in a sling is leaning against the hood of the car, worrying nervously at the end of a cigarette in the pink-yellow early morning amidst twittering birds.

“Hong Jisoo,” Wonwoo says with some surprise.

Jisoo looks up, cigarette dangling between his fingers. “Jeon Wonwoo,” he says, standing up straight. “That … that is your full name, right?”

“It is.” There’s a slightly awkward pause between them—Jisoo with a well-kept light blue suit jacket and matching pants, slightly bedraggled from last night’s mess, and a faint sense of discomfort that comes with him sleeping in the back of his car for several hours; Wonwoo with red, raw eyes and rumpled clothes he slept in as well. The two of them are matching photographs of fatigue.

“Why are you still here?” Wonwoo finally asks when it seems like Jisoo is too anxious to say anything.

“Waiting for you, I guess. I dunno. I just couldn’t … leave, not like that.”

“Waiting for me?”

Jisoo gives him a wry smile. “Can I say it was just a knee-jerk reaction for me to not hit the gas and drive the hell away from here? I dunno, I knew what would happen if I told you the truth and I felt guilty springing it on you like that, and … I had a feeling you would do this. Leave, I mean. I figured, since it’s my fault you had to hear about it in such a bad way, I could do something for you. Give you a lift somewhere.”

Wonwoo had been expecting a long, painful walk to the nearest form of civilization and a bus station, had been expecting bruised heels and calloused soles. He gratefully accepts Jisoo’s invitation, but it isn’t until his suitcase is in the trunk and he’s sitting in the plush, air-conditioned leather passenger seat of Jisoo’s Mercedes Benz and they’re already driving into Seoul, does Jisoo ask where he wants to go and Wonwoo realizes he has no answer.

“I … um …” Where can he go? When he was still in Thornfield, all he could think about was anywhere but here! But really, where can he go? Who does he have? No Aunt Choi, no Lowood, no university dorm. And he never did get enough time to wait for a letter from his estranged uncle.
“Wonwoo?” Jisoo’s voice floats through his panicking consciousness, sounding concerned, and just like that the scope of the entire world, and how big and lonely it is, hits Wonwoo. Hits him so hard and fast he thinks he might rocket off the curvature of the earth and out into space, blow his brains out with the knowledge of how small and insignificant he truly is.

“I don’t know,” he mutters, shamefully, ducking his head and burying his face into his hands so if he starts crying, Jisoo won’t be able to see it.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t—I don’t have anywhere else to go. I don’t have anyone! All I had was Thornfield, all I had was the people that worked there, all I had was Junhui, I just—” he lets out a dry sob, curling inwards until his forehead knocks against the dashboard. “Fuck—fuck!”

“Hey, hey, okay, Wonwoo, it’ll be okay—” Jisoo’s hand reaches out to pat his shoulder clumsily. “No—no family? No friends to help you get back on your feet?”

Wonwoo just shakes his head.

There’s a moment of silence. Jisoo lets out a quiet sigh and says, “Listen, I have a flight to catch in a couple hours so I can’t take you there in person, but there is someone I can send you to if you need a place to stay for a while. He’s a good guy, we were senior volunteers at the same youth shelter initiative when I was in grad school. It won’t be fancy or anything, mind you, but he’ll take you in.”

Wonwoo blubbers out a soft thank-you, and the drive is pretty much silent from there on out. Jisoo pulls over in the city, right out front of the Dong Seoul Bus Terminal. There’s a large poster along the side of its walls just next to the doors, reading: Take the Road Less Travelled By—Come to the Whitcross Bookstore Today!

“There’s a bus here that should take you to all the way to Gangneung,” Jisoo says quietly. “It’s a three hour ride, but if you get there and find a small little neighbourhood called Morton, down by the sea, you’ll be able to find my guy. His name is Choi Seungcheol—I suggest you try searching for the Red Cross drop-in centre or a soup kitchen or something.”

“Thank you,” Wonwoo mumbles. “Really. Thank you for doing this.”

“It’s no problem, Wonwoo. Take care.”

Wonwoo gets out, gives Jisoo one last little smile that he hopes conveys all the gratitude he feels—for everything, for driving him out here, for telling him the truth—and heads into the terminal. It’s not until he’s been waiting for the bus for three minutes and Jisoo is already long gone that he realizes he never took his suitcase out of the trunk. *Fuck.*

This is a total disaster. No clothes, no laptop, no résumé, no ID—and no fucking wallet. Wonwoo is seriously so lucky to have a couple bills shoved into his jeans pocket, because this bit of loose change is everything he has now. He swallows down the panic as much as he can while feverishly counting out the money, and it’s only just barely enough to pay the bus fare. Jesus fucking Christ, he hopes he can find this Choi Seungcheol guy soon. He forgot how scary it is to be on his own, to have to worry about his next meal. He’s been so spoiled.

The bus arrives, and Wonwoo is able to have an uneasy rest for the next three hours. He arrives in Gangneung at about nine-ish, already feeling hungry. He skipped dinner yesterday and lunch felt like a long time ago, and only now does it seem like a good idea to bring some food with him before he left. He wanders down the streets of this unfamiliar city, going into what he hopes is the direction of
the sea, without enough money to catch a bus or hail a taxi.

Many hours pass this way—Wonwoo is exhausted from both the mental shock of everything that has transpired as well as all the walking, and he’s not a particularly fit person or anything either. It’s slow going and wears him out immediately. His hunger and weakness only grows as he continues walking around the city, staring at restaurants and street vendors and feeling too embarrassed to beg for free food.

Where is Morton? He thinks, as he drags his feet underneath a blistering hot sun, sweat trickling down his back and arms and dehydrating him fast. God, he’s so fucking hungry. He wonders if he looks ragged enough to beg on the street, if he looks rumpled enough for someone to take pity on him and give him some coins. He rests against the side of a wall, sneakers stepping in old gum and cigarette butts, and contemplates holding out his hand to ask for spare change. At the last second, he loses his nerve and just keeps on walking tiredly out towards the sea.

The whole day passes in this manner. Wonwoo manages to find a public library and sneak into one of the study carrels to pass out for two hours or so, regaining some of his strength, but when he wakes up with a stiff neck and a growling stomach he knows just sleeping won’t do him any good.

Unwillingly, his mind falls back to Thornfield, to Junhui. Junhui must already know by now that he’s gone, must be utterly heartbroken. Maybe he’s already tearing the place apart, trying to see if he’s still hiding out somewhere within the hotel grounds. Maybe he’ll even throw together search parties around Seoul. Knowing Junhui, and how intense he is, that’s entirely possible. Wonwoo closes his eyes tight against the tantalizing thoughts, the thoughts of gentle arms and soft lips in a soft bed with plenty of food.

He makes the mistake of going up and down blocks of the city, worried that taking a straight route directly to the sea might make him miss Morton, but all that does is make him even more exhausted and hungry. It starts to rain hard sometime in the late afternoon, a torrential downpour that soak through him in seconds. Other people grab umbrellas or race to their cars or head on home, but Wonwoo has none of those things. He braves the rain as best as he can. It’s not terrible, not at first—at least it provides some relief against the summer heat.

He reaches the sea by twilight, the temperature dropping with the altitude of the sun and taking the enjoyment of the rain with it; he’s soaked to the bone and shivering now. The sea itself is grey and grainy with the rainfall, a powerful tide splashing against empty beaches. It’s officially what he can describe as “evening” time when the rain lets up to a wet drizzle, a faint mist rising from the sea spray, and Wonwoo sees a sign reading Morton.

Hope flares up only briefly, once he realizes that despite finding the place Jisoo told him about, he has no address or anything to find this Choi Seungcheol. The neighbourhood of Morton itself is very tiny and not that special, and is clearly one of the less “comfortable” areas of Gangneung. It’s a little square containing a scattering of shops, restaurants, and apartment buildings, the streets almost empty after all the rain. He wanders until he reaches a small building with the sign for the Red Cross on top, the drop-in centre like Jisoo said. Only a few people are in there, and they look startled as he approaches them. Wonwoo must look like a drowned rat.

“I’m looking for Choi Seungcheol,” he says meekly, “do you know where he might be?”

“He took a bus out into the city, but he should probably be heading home right now,” one of them says, looking him over rather warily.

“Can you give me his address? Please?” When they look uncertain, he adds, “A friend sent me.”
They remain unconvinced, but they do tell him, “Marsh End Apartments, buzz for number 16.”

Wonwoo thanks them and heads out on his way, desperate. Okay, he has an address, he has an address, now all he has to do is find the damn place. He thinks he’s going to go crazy before he reaches Marsh End, or maybe he’ll starve to death, or pass out from exhaustion, or maybe hypothermia. He thinks of Junhui again. Maybe dying really will be the best option for him.

It’s dark by the time he finds Marsh End Apartments, a single whitish building with a couple floors. He staggers towards the buzzer and rings it a couple times, but there’s no answer. He presses his thumb down on it so hard he thinks something cracks in the button. Nothing.

Wonwoo slowly sinks down to the ground, right outside what looks like a warm and dry hallway, the lights inside inviting against the unfeeling darkness of the world but not able to touch his skin. It’s hopeless, he thinks feverishly, feeling hot all over but still shivering, the wetness of the rain sinking deep into the marrow of his bones and sticking there, crawling into his heart. His stomach aches with emptiness, his throat dry. There’s no hope for him. He misses Junhui so fucking bad. What’s the point anymore?

“Hey,” a voice suddenly says, “you alright?”

Someone is speaking to him. Wonwoo can’t quite manage to turn his head and look. Already, his eyes feel extremely heavy, the urge to just give up, to sleep, washing over his sore body. He still has enough energy to say, “I’m here to find Choi Seungcheol.”

There’s a brief pause, before a strong, firm hand presses into his shoulder. “Can you stand up?”

Wonwoo shakes his head. The stranger doesn’t hesitate—instantly, the hand on his shoulder moves to press against his back, another around the back of his knees, and Wonwoo is being lifted up into someone’s arms like he weighs nothing. He doesn’t have the energy to so much as squeak in surprise, although he does feel slightly embarrassed when the stranger fumbles to both carry him and open the doors at once, but then he’s suddenly drowning in warmth and fluorescent lights.

“I think I’m dying,” he mumbles stupidly, and he receives a quiet laugh somewhere near his head.

“You’re sick and wet, but you’re not dying,” is his amused reply, and before Wonwoo knows it the stranger is kicking at a door, yelling out, “Mingyu! Hansol! Let me in, quickly.”

The door is opened, and unfamiliar voices wash over Wonwoo. “Cheol, who is it?”

“I don’t know, but he’s looking for me apparently.”

“He’s soaked right down to the bone, was he out there in the storm all day?”

“Get him some fresh clothes and a blanket—and maybe some tea while you’re at it. I’m gonna put him on the couch for now.”

Wonwoo’s head is swimming, consciousness blacking out at times. He has no idea what’s happening around him, no way to process any of it. He feels the strong hands set him down on soft, comfortable fabric, towels patting against him and running through his wet hair, a cup of something warm pressed into his shaking hands.

“He looks really weak,” a voice says, soft fingers tapping against Wonwoo’s cheek. “Hey, are you hungry? Do you need anything to eat?”

Wonwoo nods, and after a few minutes a plate of bread and cheese and sausage slices are placed on
his lap. He dives for the food eagerly, letting out a small sob of happiness once that first bite of cheese and pumpernickel bread hits his stomach.

“Poor thing,” one of the voices says, somewhere to his left, “I don’t think he’s had anything all day.”

“Don’t let him eat too much too fast, he’ll get sick,” the original stranger—Seungcheol—says. Wonwoo finally feels enough strength to look up and see where he is. He’s in the living room of a small but cozy apartment, three men staring down at him curiously. The one kneeling directly in front of him looks strong and sturdy, piercings in his ears and dimples in the friendly smile on his face as he watches him eat. He ruffles black hair that has gone slightly damp from the mist outside and says, “Feeling better?”

Wonwoo nods dumbly, mouth full.

“You said you were looking for me.”

Nods again.

“Oh shit,” one of the others bursts out, a tall, tanned one with handsome features. “Someone was buzzing us a while ago, but we didn’t know who it could be so we ignored it. Shit, I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine, Mingyu,” the man that must be Seungcheol says. “What’s your name?”

“Wonwoo,” he mumbles, swallowing with some difficulty and reaching for the cup of tea placed nearby.

“And your surname?”

“J—Lee Wonwoo.” It’s probably best not to give his real name. Even if Jisoo was the one that pointed him here, they’re still just strangers, and besides—the more he distances himself from his old life, the better.

“And why are you looking for me?”

“Hong Jisoo—” Seungcheol’s eyes widen in recognition of the name, “—he told me you could help me. Take me in for a few days. I … I don’t have any money, or, or friends, or family, or anywhere else to go. Please let me stay here. Just for a few days. Just for—” The exhaustion of the day creeps in on him again, and his hands droop. He leans back against the couch, too weak to hold himself up anymore. A tremendous headache is starting to pound its way into the back of his head, and his sinuses feel terribly clogged.

There’s a moment of silence, where Wonwoo becomes increasingly more fearful that Seungcheol might refuse point blank and kick him out right then and there. Finally, Seungcheol takes away the empty plate and gives him a neatly folded pile of dry clothes. “Here, try these on and get some rest. We’ll talk things over in the morning.”

The three residents of Marsh End withdraw to another part of the apartment that Wonwoo can’t see from his position, talking quietly to each other all the while. Weakly, feeling like the limbs on his body are not his at all, like he’s a floating speck with no sensations whatsoever, he strips out of his wet clothes and into the dry ones, which don’t fit him all that well but are comfortable either way, and sinks back into the couch. Someone comes along to wrap blankets around him and lift his head enough to slide a pillow beneath it, but that’s all he feels before he surrenders himself to sleep.
They don’t talk things over in the morning. Rather, Wonwoo becomes ridiculously sick (likely from the rain) and it takes him three days and nights to recover from his fever. He can’t quite recall everything that happens—he feels like he’s pinned to the couch, trapped beneath his closed eyelids, the fatigue clouding his mind, unable to wake up, unable to even eat—everything is just darkness and occasional voices near his head. At one point he hears whispers by the couch, the two boys that live here with Seungcheol—he gathers from their quiet conversations and the few moments his eyes are able to open that the tall handsome one is Mingyu and the shorter one, with fine eyelashes and mixed features, is Hansol.

“It’s a good thing Cheol found him when he did.”

“Yeah, he looked about a day from death’s door. If hunger wasn’t gonna get him that fast, pneumonia from that storm might.”

“What do you think he’s doing here? Why doesn’t he have anywhere else to go?”

“He doesn’t talk like someone who’s lived in poverty—did you hear the way he talked to Cheol? He enunciates things well.”

“I don’t think you know the meaning of the word.”

“Fuck you. The way he speaks sounds like he’s been to some pretty posh schools, is all.”

Judging by their tone, they don’t sound like they regret taking him in and caring for him. Wonwoo passes out once more, relieved.

On the third day, he feels a little better and more conscious—he’s able to tell when someone leaves or enters the apartment, can recognize each voice and tell who it is, can even respond to a couple questions a little. By the fourth day, he can finally get up from the couch, although very weakly. His old clothes have been put through a laundry machine, and now sit neatly folded by the foot of the couch. When it seems like the others are out (work, shopping, who knows), he finally feels strong enough to leave the couch for good and changes back into his own clothes. They feel much looser around him than he remembers—he must have really wasted away these past few days—but at least they’re dry and he feels a little better.

There’s the sound of footsteps, and the one called Hansol enters the living room. Guess not all of them went out, after all. He smiles when he sees Wonwoo dressed and looking more alert, and takes a seat next to him on the couch. He’s the youngest of them all, and sometimes it shows in the way his eyes widen almost childishly or how he bounces on his hands. “How you feeling?”

“Much better,” Wonwoo says with a slight smile himself. “Sorry for being such a bother. And taking up all your couch space.”

“Not at all, we’re glad we found you. You said Hong Jisoo sent you to Seungcheol?”

“Yeah. Do you know him?”

“Nah, he’s Cheol’s friend, not mine.”

“Are you, uh, related to Seungcheol?” None of the men here look similar, but he supposes it’s not impossible that they could be cousins or something.

“Not exactly, but in a sense, yeah. None of us are blood related, but we’ve been living together for a long, long time so we’re basically family.” At the sight of Wonwoo’s puzzled expression, Hansol explains, “We’re all adopted. Theoretically speaking. This apartment used to be the Rivers Foster
Home—we’re all already adults, so it’s not like we need to stay together anymore, but we just do. By now, it feels like we really are a family.”

Wonwoo is incredibly interested, and Hansol seems pleased to be able to talk about his history with the other two. He tells him about the Rivers Foster Home, about the foster mother who enjoyed reading and adored the three of them even though they were all nearly teenagers by the time they came here, too old to be adopted by any families, and the cancer that took her from them far too soon. The foster father died a few years ago from a stroke, and between these combined hospital bills and funeral arrangements and a couple debts that needed to be paid, the three foster brothers were left with very little money to make do. Now the three of them are struggling to make ends meet and keep their apartment in Marsh End, and Wonwoo can tell that although Hansol sounds hopeful they don’t have much time left to remain here.

That night, Wonwoo is able to join them for dinner. There are only three chairs for the small round table in the kitchen, but Mingyu drags what looks like a desk chair out for Wonwoo to have a seat as well. Mingyu is the chef in the household, and a surprisingly good one, too—Wonwoo’s stomach grumbles when he sets down bowls of transparent soup stuffed with boiled beef brisket and steamed rice full of grains.

“I didn’t want anything too heavy, since you’re still recovering,” Mingyu says with a charmingly crooked smile. “This will warm you straight up, give you more energy.”

Wonwoo enjoys the dinner, taking seconds and even thirds to fill himself up, and the topics of conversation between the four of them are cheerful and light, but he knows that Seungcheol is only being polite waiting for a good chance to bring up the subject of him staying here. It’s only when he’s about halfway through his second bowl of rice and starting to get full and slow down does he speak up.

“So, Lee Wonwoo,” Seungcheol says carefully, “when you say you don’t have anywhere to go, are you being entirely honest? I mean, you’re not running away because of some family problems or something, are you?”

Three pairs of eyes stare at him, but not with suspicion or distrust, more like curiosity. Wonwoo isn’t offended by the question; it’s something that any reasonable, responsible person would ask, if a total stranger passed out on their doorstep and begged to be given a place to stay.

“It’s the truth,” he says. “I haven’t had a family for a very long time. My only home came in the form of school dormitories and j-jobs, but I have no way of going back to any of those.”

“Friends, then? Significant others?”

“No friends, none that can help me.” He purposefully doesn’t answer the last part, but the words bring up all the bitter, twisted, upsetting memories that he had been trying so hard to repress, and they rise up his throat all over again. He ducks his head as heat rises in his cheeks, and he knows his sudden pained change in expression does not go unnoticed.

“Where have you been staying before you came to find me?” Seungcheol asks, thankfully not talking about it.

“You’re pushing him too hard, Cheol,” Hansol mutters, but Wonwoo shakes his head.

“It’s alright,” he says with a weak smile. “I-I understand. I don’t feel comfortable giving too many details, if that’s okay, but let’s just say that I used to live in the place where I worked. Due to a number of circumstances that I can’t explain, I can no longer work there, hence, I no longer have a
home. I lost my suitcase and my wallet and I literally only have the clothes on my back, and the money I brought with me was only enough to pay for the bus fare to this city. That’s all.”

“Why is it that you have to be so secretive?”

“I don’t want people to know where I am.”

“Are people looking for you?”

“Possibly, but probably not this far from—where I came from.” He chews at his lower lip, thin and dry and ragged against his teeth. “I’m not involved in anything dangerous, if that’s what you’re asking. I just don’t want people from my old life to find me.” He finds it necessary to say, “I don’t want to take advantage of your hospitality. I swear, I only need a place to stay while I get myself sorted out and find another job, and I promise, I’ll be out of your way as soon as I can.”

“That’s crazy, of course you can stay. We’re not gonna kick you out into the street,” Mingyu says, determined. “Right, Cheol?”

Hansol nods enthusiastically, cheeks bulging with rice and soup, although he casts a hesitant glance Seungcheol’s way, as if waiting for his answer. A ring set with some sort of blue stone glitters on his hand, and something about it feels familiar to Wonwoo, although he can’t quite figure out why.

“Of course I won’t turn you out,” Seungcheol says, to Wonwoo’s immediate relief. While they’re all grown men, it’s apparent that Seungcheol, the eldest, is the head of their makeshift family. “The couch is yours for as long as you need. We don’t have much ourselves, though, and this place isn’t going to be—well, anyway, in terms of money or anything we can’t help you there. Morton is always hiring in places, though, so I’m sure I can find you something. Just leave it up to me.”

Wonwoo smiles, the first real smile he’s felt himself make in days. It feels weird, his lips moving wrong and his cheeks aching with the force of it, but it still makes him feel better. “Thank you. Really.”

Seungcheol’s answering smile is friendly and genuine. “It’s no problem at all, Wonwoo.”

The more Wonwoo stays in this tiny cramped apartment in Marsh End, the more he learns to like his three new housemates.

Mingyu works pretty lax hours at a graphic design company nearby, and Hansol takes afternoon shifts at an art supply store, so the two of them are often home to keep Wonwoo company as he gains his strength. They’re both friendly and open-minded people, spirited and eager to have a good time while also being considerate. Wonwoo never thought he’d meet people who’d click so quickly with him, but he does. They keep him fed and comfortable, help ask around for jobs around the neighbourhood, even taking him to the nearby thrift store to buy some extra clothes that will fit him. After being under the grand ceilings and critical mirrors in Thornfield Hotel, being able to shop for cheap second-hand clothing with people who get it is really nice.

The one person he hasn’t quite warmed up to is Seungcheol. It’s not that he’s not friendly or anything—Seungcheol is almost impossibly nice, in fact—it’s just that he’s out of the house more often than not. He works at a walk-in doctor’s clinic and spends most of his free time in several volunteering positions at the Red Cross drop-in centre and soup kitchens, just like Jisoo had said. He seems to be the kind of person that is genuinely altruistic and thinks more of helping other people than himself.
Wonwoo sometimes looks at him and thinks Seungcheol wants more than to live in Marsh End for the rest of his life. He’s clearly very close to Mingyu and Hansol, dotes on them the way any responsible big brother would, but there’s a restless energy about him when he thinks no one’s watching. Like he wants to be able to do more with his life, do greater things. Wonwoo can’t decide if it’s overwhelmingly admirable or just plain overwhelming.

A month passes by, and still Wonwoo can find no job. Right—that’s how the real world works when you only have a Bachelor’s degree. Not everybody can get a job at a fancy hotel straight up. Seungcheol had promised him not to worry, that he’d be able to find something, but so far he hasn’t said anything about it. Eventually, Wonwoo gathers up the courage to approach him one evening and ask about it while the other boys are arguing in the kitchen about dinner.

“Hey,” he says, a little nervously. Seungcheol’s strangely intimidating to talk to, like Wonwoo might say something wrong at any moment.

“Hey,” Seungcheol says back with a dimpled smile. He’s curled up in an armchair and reading a National Geographic magazine.

“I was just wondering a-about the—job you were looking for, for me I mean—I don’t want to pry, but I’d just like to know if there was any progress on it or whatever.”

Seungcheol smiles and hums. Flips a page. “I found something for you about three weeks ago.”

“Uhh?”

“Yeah, it was pretty easy to find, actually. But you were still regaining your strength and you seemed pretty happy hanging out with Mingyu and Hansol, so I figured I’d give you some time to get used to Gangneung.” Seungcheol laughs like it’s a simple answer. “I heard they took you to the beach last weekend. Did you have fun?”

“Yeah,” Wonwoo confesses, sitting on the couch next to his careful pile of folded blankets and pillows. “I’ve never … been to the beach before.”

“Not even as a kid?”

“My aunt took my cousins there before.” Wonwoo’s fingers fidget nervously around the oversized sleeves of his loose cotton sweater. “I, um, I had to stay home.”

Seungcheol gives him a careful look like he knows exactly what Wonwoo is trying to say. Thankfully, he doesn’t press for further clarification. “Well, then I’m glad you got to go now.” He hesitates and looks out the nearby window. It’s old and grimy, hinges so rusty they can only manage to scrape it up halfway to let in some fresh air. “You know we’re getting kicked out of Marsh End soon, right?”

Wonwoo chooses to stay silent. He’s had that thought, and he knows that they’ve been selling some of their furniture, but it seems like the others don’t want to talk about it.

“It’s a shitty place with ridiculous rent because the location is ‘good’. Normally, with our combined jobs we should be able to handle the rent no problem, but ever since our foster parents passed away and we had all those bills to pay off we just … couldn’t keep up.” Seungcheol shakes his head, faint creases digging into his forehead as he looks around the tiny living room. The ugly, tiny apartment. Their home. Wonwoo thinks he can understand. “Mingyu and Hansol are heading south to find better work with a couple of my old connections in about three days. It won’t be anything fancy, and they likely won’t be able to work in the art industry like they want, but it’s money.”
“They should be able to do something that makes them happy,” Wonwoo mumbles. “I thought Mingyu really liked his job at that design company downtown.”

Seungcheol’s smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “He does. It just … well, it’s not enough anymore. Not enough to stay in Marsh End.” He must’ve seen something in Wonwoo that Wonwoo himself couldn’t, because he quickly says, “They didn’t want to tell you so soon, they thought you’d worry. About, you know, you only just came here and suddenly we’re all leaving. They wanted you to, well, feel comfortable here.”

He swallows a tiny lump growing in his throat. “What about you?”

“Found a tiny temporary thing for me for the next year or so before I leave.”

“You’re leaving Gangneung too?”

“Eventually, yes. But about that job I found for you. There’s a day care centre just down the street from where I’ll be staying, still in Morton. It’s nothing much, really—it probably won’t be the kind of place you’re used to, with your kind of education—but the girl who owns the Oliver Day Care Centre is willing to rent out the space on the second floor of the centre to anyone who’s willing to help her run the place, and you did say you had experience with children, so.”

He says it rather quickly, as if he expects Wonwoo to express disdain for the job. Wonwoo did tell them about studying at Lowood and in university, and that he had worked in a rather fancy place beforehand. It’s embarrassing to remember that he was never given a loving childhood or many privileges, yet it’s still rather obvious that he was brought up in an environment more fortunate than them.

“I’d love to work there,” Wonwoo says, and he’s completely sincere about it. “Thank you for finding both a job and another place for me to stay.”

Seungcheol stares at him with something a little like shock. “I’m not being humble or anything when I say it’s nothing much,” he says. “It’s honestly a pretty shitty place. We’re trying to fix it up more, but you won’t have much in the way of resources or extra hands. You’d have to take care of a bunch of kids practically all by yourself. It’ll be hard work, difficult work.”

“I can’t think of anything better.”

Seungcheol smiles deeply at him, extremely pleased and approving. Wonwoo abruptly feels his ears burn pink a little, surprised that a smile can affect him so deeply. Then again, Seungcheol was a very handsome man, and he did have a very handsome smile. “When would you like to start?”

“Anytime. I can head over there tomorrow if needed, I can’t wait to get started.”

“Excellent. Glad I could help.” He looks him over a second or two more, before his smile dims and he shakes his head a little.

“Something wrong?”

“No, no, nothing’s wrong. I’m just—you’re a very curious sort of person.”

“I disagree, I think I’m actually rather boring.”

“I said curious, not interesting.” Seungcheol flashes him another quick smile to show he doesn’t mean it in a rude way. “You just … you seem like you’ve been through a lot, even though I can’t imagine you’re any older than Mingyu. You seem so pleased to get a job at some shitty day care in a
poor part of the city, but at the same time, I can’t get this feeling out of my head that you—that you want something better in your life.” He sighs and sets the magazine aside, hearing Mingyu call them for dinner. “Sorry for rambling. You just remind me of myself a lot. But I guess we both have to make do in someplace smaller before moving on to schemes of a grander scale, don’t we?”

Wonwoo watches him as he gets up and heads into the kitchen, utterly befuddled. That one single conversation had somehow managed to make him learn more about Seungcheol than all their other conversations from the past month combined.

Mingyu and Hansol finally do tell him later that evening that they have to leave soon, and Wonwoo does his best to help them pack and keep their spirits up. This apartment is definitely not great—the shower is either scalding hot or icy cold or the worst kind of lukewarm, the stove is finicky, the microwave can’t be used at the same time as the electric kettle, and no matter how much they clean mold and dirt and flaky patches on the walls they still manage to find their way into corners of tiles. Yet, this is where they grew up, and Marsh End is their home.

Wonwoo doesn’t want them to be upset. He doesn’t think it’s right that people this nice and welcoming should ever feel bad. But the bad news just keeps on coming. While they’re all winding down in the living room, Seungcheol pops out for a second to check on their mail and returns carrying a letter, already opened.

“Uncle Wonsik is dead,” he says, expression unreadable.

Mingyu immediately drops his bag of two-bite brownies in shock, and Hansol jumps straight up off the couch like he had been electrocuted by live wires. “Dead?” he repeats weakly.

“No, don’t apologize,” Wonwoo says quickly. “Someone close to you has just passed away, it’s not something I should involve myself with. Do you want me to leave the room, give you guys some space?”

“No, don’t apologize,” Wonwoo says quickly. “Someone close to you has just passed away, it’s not something I should involve myself with. Do you want me to leave the room, give you guys some space?”

“Hansol adds, rather bitterly. He keeps twisting the ring on his finger like a nervous habit. “We aren’t even related to him. He … of course he’d give it all to someone else.” He notices Wonwoo staring and sits back down next to him. “Sorry, Wonwoo.”

“Nah, it’s fine. Besides, it’s not that we were close with him … we only ever really met the guy a handful of times.”

“He was a … I guess you can call it a patron?” Seungcheol explains, tucking the letter into his pocket. “According to what our foster parents told us, he used to be from a rather poor family before a real lucky business venture made him very rich, so out of the kindness of his heart he would occasionally donate some money to the Rivers to help us get by. You know, that’s how we were able to get through college and all that, we couldn’t have afforded all three of our tuition costs otherwise. We knew he was very sick for the past few years, and he didn’t have any other family, so we sort of hoped that if he ever died he’d give us some … something to help our situation.” He looks down at his socks, too disappointed to even manage a fake smile. “Guess he found some other family member alive and well after all, because he gave all his money to them. We got some money, but not … not enough to keep Marsh End.”
Hansol stares hard at a TV stand in the corner that holds extra blankets and cleaning supplies instead of an actual TV. Mingyu quietly gets up and heads over to the room he shares with Hansol, pretending he’s not close to tears.

The subject is dropped and they don’t ever mention it again. The very next day, Wonwoo leaves for his new home in the Oliver Day Care Centre in a different area of Morton. The day after that, he wishes Mingyu and Hansol goodbye at the train station as they head down to Busan for miserable jobs. Within the week, Seungcheol finally moves everything out and takes whatever they hadn’t sold over to the one-room apartment he’ll be staying at, and Marsh End is officially not theirs anymore.

His new home really isn’t all that great, Seungcheol wasn’t lying. It’s only three rooms above the day care center—a room containing whitewashed walls, a tiny table, and a half-kitchen; a bedroom with the exact same dimensions that can only fit a small chest of drawers (still big compared to how little clothes he owns) and a single-sized bed; and finally, a bathroom so small he can literally spread his arms and touch wall-to-wall.

In the mornings, he receives twenty children from all the haggard, overworked people who live and struggle in the neighbourhood. Some of the children are stubborn, rowdy, and eager to act out for the attention they can’t receive at home, while others are more quiet and obedient and only ask for praise. He sees something special in all of them. Wonwoo doesn’t just want to babysit them for the day until their parents pick them up from work, he wants to be able to teach them something, let them come away from this experience a little bit more knowledgeable. To take care of twenty kids between the ages of four to six is a challenge, but Wonwoo likes challenges.

Things are never as fun when they’re too easy, after all.

He passes his days like this, one after the other, and just like he had hoped for he’s kept too busy to think about Thornfield or Junhui or any of the people he left behind. Does it feel like a step down, after being a childminder to a wealthy girl in a ritzy hotel? Well, yes, maybe, and he hates feeling that way, hates feeling superior in any way to these children and their environment. It makes him feel ugly and hateful, reminds him far too much of all the Im Boras and Brocklehursts he’s met in this world, and he doesn’t like feeling that way.

So Wonwoo works to overcome it. It only feels degrading, he tells himself, because it’s difficult right now and he still has to earn the children’s trust. Hopefully, in a few days he’ll be able to win more arguments, and in a few weeks maybe they’ll finally listen to him fully. And maybe, he thinks, in a few months he just might be able to inspire these young, impressionable kids into doing something great.

Did he make the right choice? His mind unwillingly wanders down that road a few times, when the children are gone and he’s cleaning up the playroom and wiping juice stains off of tables. Maybe he’d be living in some villa in France right now with Junhui, all the food and drink and luxuries he could ever want, spending half of his time hypnotized by the overwhelming strength of Junhui’s love, the other half overcome with shame and regret.

Nobody ever will love him as much as Junhui did, that’s for certain—and as Wonwoo’s heart suddenly aches with his last memories of Junhui’s tear-filled words and pleading expression, he knows that he will likely never love someone as much as he loved Junhui, too.

But still, at least he’s doing something for himself with his own power for once. At least he’s out here struggling on his own, making money on his own, allowing himself small treats like a thrift store shirt or a pack of brand new colourful chalk for the day care and being allowed to feel proud of these
things because he bought them, not his boyfriend, not with his boyfriend’s money. And despite the way his entire chest seems to crumple up and collapse inwards at the very thought of Wen Junhui, Wonwoo likes this independence. He likes knowing that he stayed true to himself. He likes being his own person. He likes—

He looks around the empty day care centre and finds himself crying, right in the middle of feeling proud of his decision. Why in the fuck?

He wipes at his face with his sleeve, struggling desperately to calm the flow of tears. For a brief moment, his head is filled with thoughts of Junhui—of the man he can never see again, of his passionate anger and grief and devotion and sadness, of what Wonwoo must’ve done to him when he left like that, the consequences of his actions, whether the disappearance of the one thing Junhui loved most in this world convinced him to stray right back into the wrong path again. And Wonwoo hides his face from the windows overlooking Morton’s streets and realizes he’s very, very lonely.

The sound of the door opening and a faint knock on the glass makes him turn his head. Seungcheol is walking in, looking casually handsome in a tight T-shirt and light blue jeans, carrying a small box wrapped with a bow under one arm.

“Sorry,” he says brightly, “am I interrupting anything?”

Wonwoo sniffs just once under the noise of the door shutting again and stands up, hoping to god that his eyes aren’t red. “No! No, the kids all left already, I just, um, was cleaning up.”

Seungcheol doesn’t seem to have noticed anything’s off about him, which is a relief. “Sorry I haven’t come to visit sooner, I’ve been really busy. Mingyu and Hansol have been going off on me about it in our group chat. I brought some stuff for the day care, it’s not much, but I thought the kids might like it.”

He hands the box to Wonwoo, who unwraps it to reveal several colouring books and boxes and boxes of Crayola pencil crayons.

“This is great, thank you.”

“Has it been difficult? I know it’s only you in here.”

“It’s fun, actually.” Wonwoo gives him a half-smile. “I think I’ll get along with the kids soon enough.”

“You aren’t disappointed? I know the place you were given upstairs isn’t really anything special. It’s not even a full kitchen or anything.”

“You new apartment doesn’t have a full kitchen either, from what I remember. I’m no chef, I make do just fine.”

Seungcheol doesn’t look convinced, as he blinks large puppy-dog eyes at him. Perhaps he’s embarrassed that he couldn’t find anything better for Wonwoo. “You sure?”

“It’s a roof over my head, free furniture, and a place for me to eat and sleep and rest after a long day,” Wonwoo says, and the smile he gives Seungcheol is genuine and thankful. He’s truly never met someone who would worry so much about not doing enough for a total outsider, a secretive, strange person he doesn’t even know. “Five weeks ago, I had nothing. I was literally penniless. Now I have a steady income and a home and things to keep me busy. You did so much for me, Seungcheol, you really did. Words can’t express how—how grateful I am.”
Seungcheol ducks his head, a soft smile on his face. “I’m glad,” he says, then looks up at Wonwoo through his ridiculously long eyelashes, and Wonwoo suddenly feels oddly flustered. “It’s nice to see you aren’t dwelling too much on the past. Eyes forward, one step after another. That’s how I get through my days.” He lets out a self-conscious laugh. “I used to be in a pretty terrible position myself. There were so many things I wanted to do, things I wanted to be, and I had to tell myself each and every time that my—my place in this world, the opportunities that were given me, weren’t enough for me to achieve these goals. It’s my downfall, I guess. I always want to do and be something bigger and better than before. I guess that’s why I’m leaving Korea.”

Wonwoo is immediately curious and wants to ask why, but the door opens once more and a soft, feminine voice calls out, “Wonwoo, I just thought I’d drop by and see how—oh, hello, Seungcheol. I didn’t expect you to be here.”

Seungcheol shoots up like a lightning strike, an immediate expression of panic on his face, although when Wonwoo turns to see the person that had just walked in it’s not a figure that could ever inspire panic. She’s as beautiful as Im Bora had been, without having to be disgustingly wealthy or well connected or proud, with a demeanor so sweet and cheerful that Wonwoo thinks she could have been the kind of muse ancient artists would use to create their works of art that now hang in museums. She’s Oh Seoyeon, the owner of the Oliver Day Care Centre and several other businesses in the area, and from what Wonwoo knows she is the reigning beauty of all of Gangneung, not just the small square that is Morton.

He wonders what Seungcheol thinks of her—he glances to the side and sees that Seungcheol’s usual confident posture and attitude has become abnormally withdrawn, eyes casting downwards, very firmly looking at anything else except for Seoyeon. Interesting.

“I just wanted to know how you’ve been doing,” she asks Wonwoo with a simple, pleasing tone. She has the kind of voice and face that indicates she’s always completely honest and open about everything she’s doing. Nothing she says has a hidden meaning or secret intent.

“I’m doing well, Miss Oh, thank you.”

“Do you like Morton so far? I know we’re not the best neighbourhood in the city or anything, but…”

“I like it very much.”

“Are the children giving you any trouble?”

“Some are pretty lively, but it’s always good to be lively at that age.”

“And your house? I couldn’t get you a lot of furniture, and I didn’t want to clutter up the space, it’s so small already.”

“It’s all just fine, Miss Oh, really. Thank you.”

“I’d love to come and help you with the children sometime,” she says, and Wonwoo finds it almost funny to listen to a person speak and completely believe that they mean what they say. “I often have to go with my father to city council meetings and all that and it gets ever so boring, I’d much rather take care of kids than have to smile and laugh at a bunch of ambitious old men and their flirty jokes!”

Seungcheol looks distinctly unhappy at that remark, his jaw clenching slightly, and finally his eyes turn towards her direction, gaze searching and unrelenting and strangely more similar to Wen Junhui than anything Wonwoo’s ever seen before. The similarity puts him off balance, and he almost misses
the way Oh Seoyeon’s cheeks flush pink and she answers his unvoiced questions with a happy laugh.

“I live on the top floor of Vale Apartments,” she says cheerfully, “you should come see me sometime. I’d love to have some company!”

She says it to Wonwoo, but he has the strangest feeling the invitation was also extended towards Seungcheol. When he uses his peripherals to look at Seungcheol’s expression, he sees the man’s eyes flash with a brief fire and agitated emotion, something very passionate and Junhui-like, only for a second, before it’s snuffed out and gone.

Wonwoo watches, curious and grateful for someone else’s relationship problems to distract him from his own, as the two of them leave and bow quickly to each other—Seoyeon just a delicate bob of her head, Seungcheol stiff and robotic—and go their separate directions. Seoyeon goes one way and looks back twice before she’s out of sight of the window; Seungcheol walks the other way and doesn’t look back at all.

Just as he had expected, it was difficult for the first few days as the children got used to their new caretaker—apparently the old day care manager had not been as nice or as patient as him—but once he sees a change in both their manners and attitudes towards him they start to improve rapidly, far more quickly than he had first thought.

Children, he knows from his studies, are simple creatures with simple wants and needs in a complex world with complex answers, and sometimes that makes it difficult for them to process or interact with things. They have brains like sponges that absorb information from absolutely everywhere—from books, from school, from TV—and they can be quite happy to learn, if taught well. Wonwoo finds himself transitioning from running a day care centre for children too poor to be sent to kindergarten to running an almost pseudo-kindergarten himself, teaching the children how to read and write, simple mathematics and science, even a little bit of Korean history and geography. And with their minds sufficiently entertained and plenty of time to play around, they take to the lessons happily and let their innate childlike inquisitiveness burst forth, asking questions after questions that Wonwoo sometimes doesn’t have an answer to.

Their parents aren’t blind to the differences in their children’s behaviour, and it’s incredibly, impossibly gratifying to have a tired single mother struggling to make ends meet tearfully clasp his hands and thank him for all that he’s doing for her child. And just like that, his quiet existence is quiet no more; he’s constantly busy with the attentions of everyone in the neighbourhood, people thanking him for going above and beyond for their youths, offering him food or even inviting him to dinner. A young man who’s been invisible and friendless and alone his whole life is suddenly a name everyone knows in Morton, a recipient of friendly smiles and gifts of groceries he can’t afford to buy himself.

Wonwoo feels like he’s useful, and he feels like he’s wanted, and it’s a feeling like sitting in Thornfield’s benches out in the sunshine, surrounded by sweet flowers and butterflies. It’s a peace of mind that clings to him and absorbs into his skin.

In the twilight hours, his dreams and stray thoughts are owned by Wen Junhui, and Anmei, and Minghao, and all the others in Thornfield. When he sleeps, he sometimes feels Junhui’s arms around him again, lips pressed to his temple, a happy voice rumbling in his ear, loving and being loved, and he’ll wake up with that burst of fierce, aching hope he once had of spending the rest of his life with that man. Then he’ll remember where he is—he’ll see the grimy buildings and dusty streets of Morton in Gangneung outside of his tiny window, and sometimes he’ll weep with disappointment.
and heartbreak, but by the time he’s opened up the day care and he sees the excited faces of his “students” running in to see him, he’s over it. He’s smiling and ready to face a new day with determination.

Oh Saeyeon does actually come by to visit and help out every so often, dazzling the children with her beauty and soft demeanor and pockets full of little candies. Of course, she also has an uncanny knack of showing up unannounced whenever Seungcheol stops by to visit after the kids all go home.

Wonwoo gets the pleasure of watching the two of them very obviously pine after each other, neither courageous enough to say it or do anything about it (although Saeyeon does drop hints almost constantly), and wonders if this is how everyone in Thornfield felt when they watched him interact with his old employer.

Christ.

Seungcheol never explains why he doesn’t chase after her, even when it’s obvious he clearly likes her and she’s plenty willing to be chased, but Wonwoo can sort of tell. Seungcheol occasionally talks about why he’s planning on leaving in (hopefully) a few months’ time: he’ll be joining some sort of charity organization that travels around the world providing aid to third-world countries and natural disaster victims, and with all intents and purposes he plans on working with this organization for a very, very long time. His heart is set on it, on being a part of something that—like he said—will be bigger and better than anything else he can do staying here, and not even his attraction to the beautiful, gentle Oh Saeyeon can tempt him otherwise.

Oh Saeyeon is not a mystery Wonwoo needs to work particularly hard to figure out. She’s less of an open book and more of an entirely glass bookshelf, absolutely everything that needs to be known about her written all over her expressions and smiles and words. She’s spoiled by her well-connected father but insists on making her own way in the world with no help from the family funds, she’s naïve and lively, but also a little wishy-washy with her decisions. She’s amiable and fun to talk to, but not a woman of profound intellect or deep, philosophical thoughts.

She is, in sort, the exact kind of person Wonwoo can enjoy talking to and befriending without the danger of liking her more than he liked the company of Minghao or Jeonghan. She’s a bit like an adult Wen Anmei, which suits Wonwoo just fine.

She likes to hang out with him, too. Once, when they were drinking in her apartment and she was tipsy on wine, she described him as “like Choi Seungcheol, only not as handsome, and not as strong, although Wonwoo was plenty nice and handsome enough, it’s just that Seungcheol was a sweetheart”, much to Wonwoo’s extreme amusement.

She seems to look up to him, though, admires his independence and his ability to make do with very little, and when he refuses to reveal too many details about his past she decides he’s “mysterious” and that’s somehow charming.

By this time, it’s the start of November, the summer months having come and gone and winter just around the corner and already biting its teeth into anyone who’s not smart enough to dress warm. Wonwoo’s tiny home is completely spotless, having given it a thorough deep-cleaning when he heard Seungcheol wanted to come up to see him later that day. It’s not that he wants to look good in front of Seungcheol, but all the same he’ll feel embarrassed if it’s messy, too.

Seungcheol arrives in the late, late afternoon, the sun setting below the line of orange and red and yellow trees that still retain some of their leaves. Wonwoo greets him warmly and immediately moves to get some tea ready. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Seungcheol approach the polaroid photographs he’s taped to the wall right next to the table. Most of them are pictures of the children he
takes care of, and Seungcheol smiles—the smile drops right off his face when he sees the last picture however, which is of Oh Saeyeon.

Wonwoo sets cups of tea down onto the table, joining him in looking at the wall, and he’s brave enough by now to speak up. “Do you like it?”

Seungcheol looks startled. “Do I like what?”

“That photo. Of Miss Oh.”

“Um. That. I didn’t look at it carefully.”

“Feel free to do so now.”

Seungcheol’s eyes flicker towards the photograph, but not for very long. He dives for his cup of green tea to distract himself. “It’s very—nice. She looks good in polaroid pictures. It really shows her smile.”

“If you’d like,” Wonwoo says carefully, “I can give you the picture. I have a few others that she took of herself, too—you can take any one of them with you when you leave Gangneung. They’re small, too, you can fit them in a wallet or phone case or something.”

Seungcheol doesn’t answer. His eyes look troubled, his mouth a distinct frown.

Wonwoo tries again, one last time. “I know you’re leaving and all, but maybe you—maybe you should at least say something. You know. For closure, or whatever. To her, before you go.”

Seungcheol takes a seat at the table, frowning even harder, although it doesn’t seem to be from anger or even discomfort. This comes as a relief—Wonwoo was worried he had been pushing him too hard, that he had crossed some sort of line. Maybe Seungcheol’s so hesitant because he feels discouraged. “You know she likes you a lot,” Wonwoo says, “and she talks about you all the time.”

Seungcheol genuinely looks surprised at this, and a light flush dusts his cheeks. “You think so?” He ruminates on that for a moment, eyes sparkling slightly. “It’s really nice to hear that. Do you think you can talk about it for another, say, ten minutes?” And he actually takes out his phone and sets up an alarm, which makes Wonwoo laugh.

“You’re a strange man, Choi Seungcheol,” he says, raising an eyebrow when Seungcheol looks at him expectantly. “Are you serious? What’s the point in talking to you about her feelings for you when you’re not going to do anything about it afterwards? I don’t see the point if you aren’t willing to take the risk.”

“You’re no fun,” Seungcheol says with a playful grin, but his features are softened and wistful. “I just … wonder what it would be like. To be with her. Don’t you ever think about things like this? A nice warm home, someone to come back to after a long day of work. She is mine—I’m hers—there’s nothing that would ever bother me, it’s just the two of us making our way in the world, comfortable and happy. It’s a nice dream.”

He falls silent, thoughtful and morose, and Wonwoo politely lets the silence linger. They sit in the late afternoon sunlight and sip tea until the alarm goes off and Seungcheol slips his phone back into his pocket with a slight laugh. “Well, that was fun. I had my time to wonder, and dream, and hope, and think of what it might be like belonging to a woman like her. But now that time is done and I know better, and I know I won’t truly be that happy with her.”

This comes as a source of shock to Wonwoo, and his expression must show this.
“Weird, huh?” Seungcheol says. “I really do like her, Oh Saeyeon. I never had time for men or women when I was younger, I was too busy taking care of Mingyu and Hansol and gathering rent up for Marsh End. Romance was never really an option for me. She was the first person I ever had … feelings like that for. But even now, when I’m still crazy about her, I know that in the long run we aren’t suited for each other. I’m not a man who can make her happy.”

“Can I ask why?”

Seungcheol is silent for a moment as he struggles to find words to explain himself. “She likes to think she’s independent,” he finally says, slowly, “she likes to think she doesn’t need her papa’s money or influence in the city to make her way, and I do have to admit that her willingness to stay in a neighbourhood like Morton without complaint is admirable. But she’s still used to her comforts, her materialistic needs, she’s used to being able to run to her father downtown if she needs help or money for any sort of emergency. She has her charms, but I’m too aware of her faults, and I know that she won’t be … she wouldn’t be able to be the kind of woman that could follow me to provide disaster relief in some poverty-ridden area that’s just been hit with a flood.”

“Is it a set plan?” Wonwoo pries. “You don’t have to go with the NGO, do you?”

Seungcheol snorts, nearly spilling his last dregs of tea. Wonwoo refills his cup. “No. No, this is something I have to do. Must do. Want to do. All my life, I’ve wanted to be a part of something bigger than just myself, and being able to help others has always been where I found my place in the world. This is something I’ve wanted to do my whole life. I’m not throwing it away for an infatuation with a single woman.”

“And Miss Oh? You might break her heart, you know.”

Seungcheol shakes his head with a wry smile. “You don’t know her the way I know her. She’s always surrounded by admirers. Eventually, she’ll move on and forget me. She’ll find a man who’s willing to drop everything to dote on her, and he will make her far happier than I ever could.”

“Still,” Wonwoo says stubbornly, “I don’t think it’s right for you to just leave without saying anything about it. It’s not good for her or for you. I think you’d be able to move on a lot easier if you acknowledged your feelings to her and let her know the truth, keep her from flirting with you so much.”

Seungcheol smiles into his tea, but says nothing. After a moment, he tells him, “I take back what I said before. You are both curious and an interesting man, Jeon Wonwoo. You’re … you’re polite, and you speak carefully, but you’re so decidedly not shy or timid about anything you have to say. But while you are rather observant, you do have one thing wrong: I am not so soft and weak that my feelings for one woman will make it impossible to move on from this period of my life. I’m far colder and harsher of a person than you’d expect.”

Wonwoo grins, rather incredulous. Seungcheol, cold and harsh? No, those aren’t words to describe a man who freely opens his home to someone, a man who lives to help others, a man with a smile like his.

“No, it’s true. I wouldn’t say I’m mean or cruel, but I am very ambitious, and my ambition leads to selfishness, and an ambitious, selfish man is undoubtedly cold and harsh, too. It’s just how it works. My goal to travel the world with the NGO is greater than any feelings I may have for other people, even my love for my foster brothers. I guess you could say I’m insatiable. You know, I’ve been watching how you’re doing with the day care, and I’m pretty impressed. You’re a lot more determined and energetic than I first thought. You’re a deeply compassionate person, aren’t you.”
He doesn’t say it like it’s a question, but Wonwoo answers as though it is. “I do like helping people myself, if I can.”

Seungcheol nods his head and chuckles, but his eyes have once again turned to the polaroid photograph pinned to the wall. It’s almost like a magnetic reaction.

“You sure you don’t want to take one with you?”

“No. It’s alright. Thank you. I actually had something I wanted to talk to you about. Or rather, something I wanted to give you.”

“Well, why in god’s name did you wait so long, then?” Wonwoo chides playfully, watching as Seungcheol leaves for a moment and then returns carrying a very familiar suitcase. “Holy fucking shit.”

Seungcheol cackles at his reaction and places it on the floor, lets Wonwoo dive at it and zip it open right there at his feet. “You left it in Hong Jisoo’s car supposedly, his valet found it when they were putting his Benz away while he’s out of the country and had to contact him to know where to send it. Apparently it got all mixed up in the post office, and then it got mixed up a second time when it arrived at Marsh End. I only just got it back. Sorry you’ve been without your things for so long.”

“I don’t care how long I had to wait, it’s finally here! Thank you, thank you!” Wonwoo throws the suitcase open and clings eagerly to his old, familiar clothes. He thinks he can trick himself and still smell the faint scent of the fresh laundry detergent they used back in Thornfield, but it’s likely aired out weeks ago. Without even thinking of Seungcheol, he starts tossing everything out of the suitcase, jeans and shirts and socks landing here and there around the small room. He finds a stack of papers of some kind, although in his excitement he can’t remember what it’s for, and tosses them away—turns out they’re loose-leaf and not bound together, and they fly everywhere immediately. Seungcheol goes to pick them up while Wonwoo finds his wallet and cradles it delightedly.

He doesn’t quite notice it at first, but he just barely manages to catch Seungcheol freeze as he picks up the papers, his expression strangely troubled, glancing over at Wonwoo himself with a peculiar gaze. But it happens as quick as lightning, and he’s his usual smiling, easy self when he gathers all the papers up and hands them back to him. “You should use a paperclip for those or something,” he says. “I think I better head out, though. It was nice to see you.”

And before Wonwoo can say anything—even offer to walk him out the few steps towards the door—Seungcheol leaves his house. He can hear his feet thundering down the rickety metal stairs towards the street, and he’s gone just like that.

It starts to snow almost as soon as he leaves, and by the next day Wonwoo is dismayed to find the world has been caught in a terrible, rare early snowstorm, something that in his opinion should never exist in November or in South Korea, period. He didn’t realize how badly it snows in Gangneung. While it’s incredible to watch, he’s also super grateful to not have to actually go outside in that weather. It’s a weekend, and he doesn’t have to open the day care, so he’s able to drink hot chocolate at the kitchen table—all-purpose table, really—and read a book and stare at the thick, fat snow flying almost horizontally with the wind outside, humming calmly to himself.

But then the doorbell rings, and when Wonwoo goes over to open the door he sees Seungcheol bundled up in a thick coat and scarf, snow melting in his hair and ears a burning pink.

“Jesus, Cheol,” Wonwoo says, quickly stepping aside to let him stumble into the warmth, “it’s a
freaking snow hurricane out there, what’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“No, no, don’t jump to conclusions,” Seungcheol says, shrugging off his soaked jacket and boots and letting them dry by a nearby old-fashioned radiator. “Jesus, it’s bad. Snow can get pretty thick up here, but nobody was expecting it to happen this early in the winter.”

“Why did you come, then?” Wonwoo asks, extremely curious.

“I needed to talk to you about something. My room was starting to … suffocate me. It just feels so small, even by myself.”

He looks more handsome than usual as he takes a seat at the table, face flushed from the cold and slush still dripping down his shirt and neck from strands of his black hair. Wonwoo grabs a dish towel as he goes to get a cup of hot chocolate for him, making sure to toss it over Seungcheol’s head when he returns. “I wish Mingyu and Hansol were still here,” he says quietly. “Even if one of them could live with you, that would be great. I worry that you aren’t taking care of yourself.” He really does miss those two, even in the relatively short time he had known them.

“No, I’m alright,” Seungcheol says in a distracted manner, rubbing the towel along his wet hair. He yanks a slightly damp piece of paper out of his pocket and goes through it in silence for a few minutes, which confuses Wonwoo, since Seungcheol had just said he came here to talk. Still, Wonwoo doesn’t mind the extra company. He returns to reading his book and staring out the window alternately, slurping tiny marshmallows from his hot cocoa into his mouth.

Eventually, Seungcheol folds the paper into a square and puts it away, and says, “Has anything changed with you? Your plans for the future, I mean. Do you still plan on staying here in Morton, or are you thinking of going away somewhere?”

“I’m pretty happy with what I have here,” Wonwoo answers in bafflement, surprised at such a question coming out of nowhere, “I think it would be pretty stupid of me to leave it now.”

Seungcheol falls silent, and Wonwoo has no idea what to say, except for a meek little, “Miss Oh is trying to convince her father to give us funds to do something special for Christmas.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. Maybe presents or stockings or something like that.”

“Was it your suggestion?”

“No, it was Miss Oh’s. She was the one who went to her father, anyway.”

“That sounds like something she’d do.”

“Yeah.”

There’s a long pause as the wind howls against weak parts of the walls.

“I actually came,” Seungcheol abruptly says, nearly scaring Wonwoo, “to tell you a story.”


Seungcheol hesitates, before he starts. “Many, many years ago, a woman from a wealthy family fell in love with a man from a poor family, and against the wishes of everybody she knew, she married him, disowning herself from the family’s fortunes. Less than two years later, the two of them died in
a car accident, and they left behind a single son. Their son was taken in by his aunt-in-law, a woman called Choi Youngsook, from Daejeon.”

Wonwoo starts, banging his knee against the underside of the table and spilling some hot chocolate all over his hand and the polished wooden surface. He can’t see himself, but he knows his face has gone completely pale. Seungcheol regards this coolly for a moment before continuing.

“Mrs. Choi Youngsook took care of the orphaned son for nine years, before sending him to Lowood International Academy in England. And you know, it’s strange, Wonwoo—didn’t you tell me that you also went to Lowood at that age? Actually, now that I think of it, there are certain points in this story that remind me very much of you. And here’s the most interesting part of it all: the son in the story grew up and finished his undergrad and teacher’s training and took his very first job at a rather important establishment, working under a certain Mr. Wen Junhui.”

“How did—”

“Now, I don’t know much about Wen Junhui beyond the fact that he’s the heir to the entire family name as well as the owner of Thornfield Hotel, but the little birdies that contacted me told me that he entered into a relationship with the young man under his care, only for our main character to discover that Wen Junhui was already married, married to a very troubled woman that he had no way of divorcing. The details were a little fuzzy for me, as they must be for everyone, but the orphaned son stole out of the hotel in the dead of night. And while Wen Junhui hired people to search for him all through Seoul, they couldn’t find even a single bit of evidence or a paper trail to tell them where the hero of our story had gone.”

Wonwoo stares at him with wide eyes and trembling lips, almost frozen in place and unable to say anything, to move, to defend himself.

“It’s a very strange story, isn’t it?” Seungcheol says calmly. “A certain bank has been looking for you and sent emails to all the people you were connected with. This is the answer they got from someone called Yoon Jeonghan, who works in Thornfield. And due to a very specific coincidence that I will get to in a moment, I received a copy of the email—” he pulls out the folded-up piece of paper, “—in my inbox several days ago. Weird, huh?”

“Did it say anything about Junhui?” Wonwoo asks shakily, hands clenched tight around the hem of his sweater. Junhui looking for him he can understand, but why in the hell would a bank be trying to find him, too? Then again, that’s marginally better than Junhui putting out a missing poster of him and a reward, which is what he had secretly been terrified of happening. “Did the—the email say anything about where he is? How he’s doing? If he’s—he’s okay?”

“I think the more important question is, what is the name of this orphaned son?”

“Has no one gone to see Junhui? Did he answer the email?”

“Not from what I know of. The email wasn’t from him, it was that Jeonghan person, although he has requested to receive updates if you’re found.”

Not Junhui himself? Wonwoo’s stomach lurches. Is Junhui even in Thornfield anymore? Has he run away again, escaped to some faraway abode to try and drink and party his sadness away? His heart aches, harder than any homesickness or lingering regret he’s felt before—Junhui, his Junhui—

“To seduce someone while already married,” Seungcheol mumbles, “he must not be a very good person.”
“You don’t know jack shit about him.” Wonwoo’s voice is louder than he had anticipated, and fiercer, too. Seungcheol stares as he turns red and ducks his head down to stare at the tiny marshmallows swirling in his mug.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t want to offend you,” he says softly. “Well, I suppose there’s no point trying to be coy about this. We all know I’m talking about you. Want to know how I knew the Jeon Wonwoo they were talking about was actually the very own Lee Wonwoo I’ve been keeping an eye on all these months?”

Wonwoo nods, slowly, forcing himself to relax once he sees that Seungcheol isn’t angry or anything, and isn’t planning on telling anyone about him anytime soon.

“I had my suspicions, of course—I mean, a Jeon Wonwoo disappears almost as soon as a Lee Wonwoo shows up hungry and penniless at my doorstep? I’m not an idiot. But I only fully committed to it when I was helping you pick up those papers yesterday. I noticed one of them was a letter written to the very same Choi Youngsook mentioned in the emails, and while I didn’t want to pry into your affairs, the name Jeon Wonwoo that the letter was talking about just jumped out at me. And, you know, why would you have a letter in your personal belongings if it was addressed to someone completely different?”

“I see.” That makes sense, then. Wonwoo gulps nervously, hands pressing tight around the warm mug of hot chocolate. “And what did the bank want with me?”

“They want to tell you that your uncle on your father’s side, the man that was mentioned in the very same letter I accidentally found with you, is dead, and he has left you everything he owns. His money, his assets, everything. You don’t have any bills to pay or outstanding charges or anything like that, they just want to tell you that you’re rich and you need to come in to claim the will.”

“Rich?”

“I believe the correct term here is ‘heir to a fortune’.”

A long silence follows these words.

“The bank right here in Gangneung can help you with that,” Seungcheol continues, “you just need to prove your identity. Which should be simple, now that you have your wallet.”

It takes Wonwoo a very long time to process the fact that only an hour ago, he was so poor he was relying on the kindness of other families to lend him groceries here and there so he can have proper meals. Only an hour ago, he was in fact a pitiful orphaned son who had no money to his name despite being brought up in some pretty wealthy places. And now, he has money. Him.

The uncle he had sent a letter to all those months ago, wishing to reconnect with him, has died before Wonwoo had the chance to meet him face to face. He can’t exactly consider himself devastated, considering he never even met him, but it was a small hope, a tiny spot of happiness, that he’ll never get again. His very last family member is gone, just like that. But for him to be so kind as to give him everything—to finally make Wonwoo independent and free—

“How much did he give me? Do you know?”

“About two million US dollars, give or take.”

“Fucking Christ. Holy shit. Fuck.” Wonwoo had been expecting much less—he would have considered himself filthy rich on just a hundred thousand alone! Seungcheol laughs at his reaction. “Y-you sure you read the numbers right? Maybe you added a few extra zeros by mistake. Maybe it
only says two thousand. Or two hundred thousand.”

“It was written out in letters, not digits. It’s two million, Wonwoo.”

He’s a bona fide millionaire.

“I know I just gave you a lot to think of,” Seungcheol says, standing up and leaving his half-finished mug of hot chocolate. “I should probably leave you now.”

“Wh—hold on! You can’t just spring that on me and leave. I want to know why you, of all people, got a copy of Jeonghan’s email. How are you involved in all of this?”

“The email must have been forwarded to Hong Jisoo, and he probably sent it to me,” Seungcheol says hurriedly, moving towards the door. Wonwoo races forwards to block his exit, and Seungcheol stares blankly at him with mild traces of embarrassment.

“That’s not good enough, Cheol,” Wonwoo threatens. He’s skinny and lanky, especially compared to Seungcheol, and he knows physically he’d be no match. But after everything that’s been thrown at him today, he won’t rest until he gets all the answers.

“I’d rather not—at this time—”

“Choi Seungcheol, you will tell me right now.”

“Didn’t I say I was a cold, harsh, ambitious man?” he whines. “I’m very difficult to persuade, Wonwoo.”

Wonwoo stands his ground and lifts his chin, glasses sliding slightly down his nose. “And I’m a cold, harsh, slightly less ambitious man, and I’m very difficult to say no to.” He looks down at the snow-covered shoes and coat that have been dripping water into a corner of his floor. “You brought in a mess I’ll have to clean up later, the least you can do to repay me is telling me what I want to know.”

Seungcheol heaves a sigh of frustration, although he seemed to enjoy Wonwoo’s moment of stubbornness, rubbing self-consciously at a spot on his neck, and says, “Okay, okay. Fine. I was given the email because I was, on some level, involved in the will left behind by your dead uncle. Included in it, in fact.”

“My uncle? But why would—” It all clicks right into place, suddenly so obvious Wonwoo feels a little silly taking this long to connect the dots. “Oh. Your Uncle Wonsik, the one who—?”

“Yes. Jeon Wonsik. The mysterious benefactor for the Rivers Foster Home and the one who paid the three of us through college. The man who was in charge of his will wrote to us in August, remember? The letter that said he gave everything he had to his only surviving relative? That man was the one who, on behalf of the bank and the will, sent the emails out to everyone who had a connection to either you or the Jeon family, trying to find you so you can claim your inheritance. That’s all.”

And there’s something a little bitter in his tone, not at Wonwoo per se, but at the whole situation. At the fact that Wonwoo is the one that took all the money he had hoped would be given to him and his foster brothers to save them from their situation, that out of all of them struggling to survive and make do with what they’ve been given, it’s Wonwoo who is now wealthy and free to move away, do as he pleases, while Seungcheol is stuck in Morton and his brothers are off in Busan working in jobs that make them unhappy.
But no—they don’t have to be unhappy. Wonwoo instantly realizes this. They helped him, they saved him, why shouldn’t he split the money between them? Five hundred thousand each is not awful, Wonwoo thinks he can do just fine with only that. It’s still more money than he’s ever had in his life.

“Tell Mingyu and Hansol to come back to Morton,” he says, speaking quickly, stumbling over his words. “They can go back to doing what makes them happy, they can, they can—”

“You should sit down, you’re getting too excited.”

“Oh, shut up, Seungcheol. You know, you were taken care of by my uncle, so in some way we’re like, almost family? Sort of?”

“You’re really reaching with that statement, Wonwoo.”

“We can take back Marsh End. You can get your home back, Mingyu and Hansol can come back, we can split my money evenly between us. Five hundred thousand each is good enough, isn’t it?”

“Wonwoo, we’re not—” Seungcheol lets out an incredulous laugh. “I’m not going to take your money. It’s yours.”

“Damn right it’s mine, and I want to share it with you and your brothers. I owe you a lot, Seungcheol. This may just be another charity thing with you, but you guys literally saved my life. You opened your home to me, even though you were about to lose it, and you went around to find me a job and another place to stay, even though you were preparing to leave the city yourself. I want to share my money with you all.”

“Wonwoo, with that kind of money, you could leave Morton forever. You could travel the world. You could do whatever you want.”

“I don’t need that. I just want you all to move back into Marsh End and let me sleep on that terrible old couch again.”

This, finally, makes Seungcheol smile for real, his lips stretching into a wide grin and dimples deepening into small pockets on each cheek. “There’s no need to split it equally,” he finally says. “Keep most of it. All we need is enough to pay the first few month’s rent at Marsh End to get us back on our feet, give us time to save up. That way, even once I’m gone, Mingyu and Hansol should be able to afford the apartment.”

“You don’t mind me moving back in with you guys?”

“Not at all, we’d love to have you back. I’m sure we could find a better sleeping place for you, though.”

“Nah, I like the couch.”

“You’re a strange man, Jeon Wonwoo. I guess you don’t really need the day care centre anymore, do you?”

That’s true. Wonwoo doesn’t need this job anymore. And while he likes the work, and he’ll miss being with the kids, he knows plenty of struggling people in the neighbourhood that need a job and a place to stay far more than him. “I’ll work there as long as I need to before I can find someone to replace me. Maybe I’ll still go and help once in a while.”

“Even though you’re so rich?”
Wonwoo just smiles and shakes his head. Money can’t change him. It doesn’t quite feel real, anyway. All this wealth has suddenly fallen his way, and what does it do? It can’t turn him into a different person. He’s still the same as he always was: poor, dull, simple childminder, Jeon Wonwoo.

By the time he finds a replacement for the Oliver Day Care Center and all arrangements have been made, it’s almost Christmas. The children, now numbering almost thirty, cling to him and cry a little at having to see him go, although he promises to stop by whenever he can to help out the nice young woman he’s found to take his place. Seungcheol watches this with a smile, having taken time off from his usual volunteer work today so the two of them can move all their old furniture back into Marsh End Apartments, number 16.

“Was it fun?” he asks, teasingly. “Toiling away all those hours with the children?”

“It was, actually,” Wonwoo says, as they trudge through snow-thick streets towards the tiny apartment Seungcheol’s been keeping his furniture packed up in.

“Only for a few months, too, and you’ve already done so much to help the neighbourhood. Would you have been happy doing it forever?”

“I like being able to do good to other people for once,” Wonwoo admits. It’s not snowing, but there’s a rather strong wind, and he has to lean into Seungcheol a bit to try and protect himself from the gusts. “It’s a nice feeling, to know I’m doing something for others without trying to get anything out of it other than satisfaction. I suppose that’s how you feel all the time, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“I’m not as selfless as you are, unfortunately.” Wonwoo slips on a hidden patch of ice and Seungcheol catches him, snickering. “I’ve missed out on a lot of things in my life, and while working at the day care is really … fulfilling, I guess you could say, I think I’d like a holiday for once.”

“Holiday? Thinking of going anywhere?”

“Only to your ugly apartment to help move your things back into another slightly bigger, slightly less ugly apartment.”

“How dare you.” Seungcheol is laughing, though, as they reach his home. There’s a moving van outside of it already, a favour he managed to gather from the same moving company he’s been working for. “Alright, what do you plan to do, O Wealthy One?”

“Well, for starters, I’m going to deep clean Marsh End until it’s absolutely spotless. I’m going to make sure the furniture all goes into the exact position it was left—oh, we did sell Mingyu and Hansol’s beds, so I guess we can buy them better ones—and when they come back to us in a week I want to make the damn best Christmas dinner we’ll ever have.”

“And what do you want after that? I doubt spending all your time in Marsh End will be satisfying enough for you.”

“I’m plenty satisfied with being able to support you and the others.”

“Nah. I think in two months you’ll start growing antsy. You’ll start looking beyond Marsh End and Morton and Gangneung entirely. Like I said, I think you’re a bit like me, always looking for new things to do and see.”
Wonwoo only laughs and shakes his head, and for the next week until Thursday he’s so caught up in getting Marsh End Apartments ready that he barely has time to think of anything else. Oh Saeyeon’s father had been using his influence in the city council to fix up some of the buildings in Morton at his daughter’s request, and—perhaps Saeyeon had told him to do it—Marsh End Apartments had been one of the first to be improved. The plumbing and electricity have been fixed until it’s almost good as new, and Wonwoo takes it upon himself to use some of his money to buy better furniture, fill up the empty spaces left behind by whatever Seungcheol couldn’t take with him into his one-room apartment.

Seungcheol comes home first, before his brothers, and although he looks around at all the improvements Wonwoo’s made and smiles and voices his approval, but Wonwoo can tell that he’s only saying it for politeness’ sake. That’s maybe one of the few things he’s come to dislike about the generally likeable man—Seungcheol can never bring himself to appreciate the little things, the peaceful things. He can enjoy himself at times, can sit back for a beer or a good book, but it seems as though it’s calculated, as if he only relaxes because he knows giving himself no time off will only exhaust him in the end. He truly is a man that can only think of giving to others, throwing his whole life into helping those less fortunate, and now Wonwoo sees exactly why he can’t bring himself to go after Oh Saeyeon. He’s the kind of man that isn’t enticed by simple things. A nice home with its humble pleasures is never going to be enough to satisfy him.

Mingyu and Hansol arrive when it’s already dark, bright eyes and brilliant smiles on their faces. Mingyu picks Wonwoo up and swings him around, nearly knocking over a chair, as Hansol blubbers out gratitude for what Wonwoo has done for them. Instantly, Marsh End is alive and buoyant with happiness, and it’s like the last several months never even happened.

Christmas holidays pass by joyfully, Mingyu making a splendid dinner that Wonwoo helps with at times and Hansol tries to help with, although his success varies. They get their jobs back—the graphic design company is so happy to have Mingyu back that they actually promote him with better pay, and apparently Hansol’s been sending out his resumes to other designing companies around Gangneung himself—and they spend their week of freedom curled up on the couch with Wonwoo, swapping stories and learning about all that had happened since they left. Seungcheol is gone most of the time, as usual, helping to provide warm clothes to the poor and homeless and running fundraisers to give toys to children.

One morning, Hansol rather pensively asks Wonwoo if Seungcheol’s changed his mind about leaving the country.

“He one hundred percent is going through with it.”

“What about Oh Saeyeon?”

“She’s currently dating some guy who works in one of the ports. He says he’ll take her on a boat out to sea once the weather is warmer.”

Mingyu and Hansol exchange glances. He’s surprised that they knew about the two of them—then again, Seungcheol is their brother. “How long have they been dating?” Mingyu asks hesitantly.

“Only about two months or so. Once Seungcheol had made it clear to everyone in Morton that he would be leaving sometime in the spring.”

The brothers share unhappy, nervous looks, clearly unsure about Seungcheol going off just like that. It’s pretty obvious to anyone who has eyes that they have never been separated from Seungcheol for so long and they aren’t keen on watching him get in a plane and fly off out of the country, but they know there’s no use in arguing. Maybe Seungcheol is right—maybe he can be cold and harsh after
all, selfish in the way ambition warps his priorities. Hansol fiddles with his ring. Again, Wonwoo feels as though he’s seen something like it before, but he can’t remember where.

Once Christmas and Boxing Day ends and the new year approaches, their festivities slow down and Seungcheol takes more time to hang around the living room with them—maybe he just felt uncomfortable with how openly they were relaxing and enjoying themselves. Wonwoo notices out of the corner of his eye that, although he’s reading and appearing wholly absorbed in his book, Seungcheol occasionally looks up towards the couch the rest of them are squished in, like he’s searching for something. If any of them happen to look up, he immediately drops his head and returns to reading. This happens for several days, and it confuses Wonwoo greatly, but he’s busy visiting the Oliver Day Care Centre and helping out whenever he can, and quickly forgets.

Wonwoo does notice, however, that once holidays are over and everyone has gone back to work, Seungcheol tends to notice Wonwoo far more than he used to whenever he’s around. Not notice as in check him out or anything, but just … paying more attention to him than he usually does.

It’s these moments that remind Wonwoo startlingly of Wen Junhui in some places—Seungcheol is a man of just as much strength of spirit and an ability to wilfully hypnotize others with his words and countenance alone. Despite not saying anything about it, Wonwoo somehow finds himself being more aware of his behaviour around him, biting back things he wants to say because he’s worried about how Seungcheol would react, doing this or not doing that because he knows it would please Seungcheol or displease him. He knows Seungcheol doesn’t mean for this to happen, and very likely doesn’t even realize what he’s doing, but this is the result of just the force of his attention alone.

Wonwoo doesn’t like it. He doesn’t like feeling bound to someone again, doesn’t like feeling as though his own self-worth has, once again, become intrinsically connected to the approval of a single person.

Perhaps it’s because, after their conversations about helping others and being altruistic and all that, Seungcheol has somehow placed a standard upon him, and when his (admittedly rather pretty) eyes are trained on Wonwoo, he finds himself unconsciously trying to rise up to meet these standards. But even as Wonwoo does this, even as he feels happy when Seungcheol smiles and does that complimentary little nod of his, he feels more and more than he’s not being true to himself—that he’s not being completely honest with his words and actions, that he isn’t particularly interested in something but goes for it anyway because Seungcheol wanted him to check it out, so on and so on.

His thoughts once again fall to Wen Junhui, a man he’s never had to be anyone but himself with.

Wonwoo craves to know how he’s doing, to know what’s happened to him. He hasn’t sent people out to search for him as he had feared, but then what else is he doing? Is he still in Thornfield, hiding his wife away? Has he run off again to lose himself? Wonwoo is painfully aware that one of the reasons he had left Junhui in the first place was because he couldn’t bear to be chained to him the way he was, nothing to his name, the only money in his pocket given by Junhui himself, whether as wages or as a gift. He’s uncomfortably aware that he is now wealthy in his own right, and that the money has, on some level, raised his status to be slightly more equal.

He chooses not to think about that. But he does think about Junhui. He thinks about loving him, and his chest aches.

In the end, he resolves on writing something out to Jeonghan, just to ask how Junhui is doing. He doesn’t want to use email—it’s far too easy to trace his location, and he’s still half-worried Junhui might find out and come get him in person—so he instead writes out a letter the old-fashioned way, addressing it to Thornfield Hotel and Yoon Jeonghan’s office and sending it on its way.
He receives no answer. Two weeks pass. Two months. Wonwoo writes again, just in case his first letter had gotten lost somewhere like his suitcase. Weeks pass. Nothing. Eventually, half a year goes by, and Wonwoo loses all hope. It snuffs out of him like the light of a candle, and even though spring has gone by and flowers have bloomed and summer is fast approaching, he feels cold and dark beneath the bright sunlight.

It’s a very beautiful day in May when Wonwoo finally cracks and all his pent-up emotion comes rushing out. He curls up onto the couch that is his makeshift bed and bursts into tears. Mingyu and Hansol are both out working, and only Seungcheol is around, dropping in for lunch between volunteering shifts at some local blood donation clinic. He comes rushing out of the kitchen when he hears the sobs, and for a moment just stands there frozen as he sees Wonwoo trying to muffle himself with a pillow. Eventually he acts; he moves forwards to kneel down next to the couch and rub Wonwoo’s back, a firm hand tracing a path down and back up again.

“There we go,” he mutters, “it’s okay.”

Wonwoo eventually manages to dry his tears and calm himself, and with some embarrassment he sits up straight and mumbles something about not feeling well. Seungcheol doesn’t look fooled, but all he says is, “Want to take a walk with me? The path by the sea is really pretty at this time of year.”

They tug on their sneakers and head outside, leaving Morton’s borders, the tiny sphere that has become Wonwoo’s entire cramped world, and they walk along the paths by the city ports that show the brilliant blue-grey of the ocean. It’s a silent, peaceful trip, with flowers blossoming at their feet and the optimistic rumble of cars and motorcycles passing them by.

“Wonwoo,” Seungcheol says after a moment, “I’m leaving in June. The NGO is heading to Haiti first.”

“That’s good.”

“I was wondering if you wanted to come. Travel the world with me.”

Wonwoo immediately trips on a crack in the sidewalk. Seungcheol’s arm reaches out to steady him, but Wonwoo shies away from the touch, suddenly nervous and fidgety.

Seungcheol looks at his expression and his lips quirk into a small, amused smile. “I think maybe I phrased that weirdly,” he says with a friendly laugh meant to put Wonwoo at ease. “I’m not asking you because I’m into you and I want to take you along with me like we’re some sort of power couple on a self-discovery journey or anything. I asked out of nothing but platonic interest, I promise. But I think you’d do well in this line of work, and I enjoy your company.” He shrugs. “If you want something to happen, and if feelings follow while we’re out there, I don’t mind letting them.”

Wonwoo makes a half-strangled noise in the back of his throat before he can find the words, cheeks heating up instantly and not from the temperature outdoors. Didn’t Seungcheol just get over Oh Saeyeon? “I don’t think—I don’t think I’m cut out for your line of work, Cheol.”

“I’ve been keeping an eye on you for about ten months now, Wonwoo. You’re not materialistic, you’re satisfied with what you are given, even if what you are given is beneath your skill set. You are tactful and calm, and you keep a clear head, even after finding out you’re suddenly rich. And you immediately wanted to split all the money equally between you and my family, showing you are selfless and eager to help others. I’m convinced that you are a faithful, hardworking sort of person, and I trust you as much as I trust my brothers.” His voice is casual but hopeful, and once again Wonwoo feels that overwhelming sensation of wanting to agree, to say yes, to make him approve, to make him think Wonwoo is useful and good to keep around. “It would honestly be really great to
have you by my side out there.”

Oh, Jesus, this is a lot to take in. “Could I, um …” Wonwoo licks his lips. He’s suddenly dizzy with the prospect that has been offered to him, the implications, the opportunity. It’s so easy to just say yes. “Could I have maybe fifteen, twenty minutes to think about it?”

“Of course. Let’s head down to the beach.” They walk out until the gravel and grass becomes sand and small rocks. Wonwoo takes great care that none of it falls into his sneakers, although judging by the rough grainy feeling by his toes he has a feeling he’s already failed by the time they reach a patch of shade. He sits down on a bench on the outskirts of the beach, while Seungcheol heads down closer to the water, where screaming children and cheerful adults are splashing around.

Should Wonwoo accept? He’s never seen the world, and he’s always wanted to travel. And isn’t going out there to help people, help those in need with Seungcheol, a far more rewarding job than, say, visiting museums and fancy castles with Junhui and being paraded around like a prized pet? But no—no—he can’t think of Junhui right now. Face forward, stop looking back.

Seungcheol is right. There may not be feelings between them, but what’s to say they won’t develop something while they’re out there? Wonwoo certainly finds him handsome, at least, and the idea of falling in love and regaining that empty part left inside of him sounds tantalizing and hopeful. Will Wonwoo be okay with that, will he be able to move on?

But even then that troubles him, because he’s already observed that Seungcheol isn’t a man that can be satisfied with love. Wonwoo already knows this; Seungcheol is a man that is full of impatient energy, a man that isn’t pleased with staying in one place doing nothing for so long. Wonwoo is happy taking things slow and staring at the scenery, and he desires nothing else than a comfortable home to turn to, steady arms to hold him and a steady heart to love him. So, okay. Romance is probably not in the picture. Wonwoo might get lonely out there by himself, but that’s fine, right?

And Wonwoo does enjoy being around Seungcheol, despite not enjoying how much he wants to please him. And he does like to help others. Wouldn’t doing this become an enriching experience?

He hasn’t realized how much time has passed until someone approaches him, casting a shadow over the small pebbles by his feet. Seungcheol, a little pink from being under the hot sun, takes a seat beside him. “So,” he says, “have you thought about it?”

“Why did you mention it?” Wonwoo asks, and receives a puzzled glance in response. “That—saying you’re offering this as a friend, but that you wouldn’t mind if feelings were involved later on. It wasn’t necessary to the offer you were making. Why did you say it?”

“I’m a human, same as any other, Wonwoo.” Seungcheol shrugs his burly shoulders. “I know I want more for myself, but just like any other human I like having intimacy. I like having someone I can wholly trust and depend on. You’ve been a good friend to me, and I think if it came down to it, you’d also be a good boyfriend, too.”

This is where their differences lie. His version of love, his view of intimate relationships, is entirely possible, completely valid, but Wonwoo suffers from the pain of a romantic’s heart. He dreams of loving and being loved in its entirety. He knows what it feels like to have someone want to bend stars out of the sky for him, to love him so fiercely he feels like he’s drowning in it. And he knows what it feels like to love someone so much he thinks that he’s given that person a part of his own soul, and without that person he is empty.

Wonwoo is lonely, and neither Seungcheol nor this opportunity to see the world is going to fix that for him.
“Well, I—I mean—if I were to join the NGO with you and travel the world, I’d do it as your equal. Not as your assistant, or friend, or romantic partner, or whatever. I’d join you because of helping others, not to help you help others. Do you get what I’m saying?”

“Of course,” Seungcheol says, but even as he says it Wonwoo knows this won’t happen. Seungcheol doesn’t realize it, but Wonwoo does. He knows that he naturally defers to Seungcheol’s wants and needs, does as he asks not because he wants to, but because Seungcheol was the one that asked it.

And he knows that, somehow, along the way—maybe not at first, but eventually—he’ll be just as twisted and helpless around Seungcheol’s whims as he once was around Junhui. He won’t be liberated, he won’t be free. He’s a weak man who chains himself to the hearts of stronger men for comfort and security, because the ability to trust himself and make his own decisions was forced out of him when he was still a child. And he knows this is something that he can’t do if he ever wants to be the master and keeper of his own force of will.

“I don’t think I can go, Seungcheol.”

“I understand.” Seungcheol doesn’t seem particularly upset by it—maybe a little disappointed, because he had seen so much potential in Wonwoo, but not angry at him for refusing. Somehow, that makes Wonwoo feel even worse. How can Seungcheol so casually ask such a life-changing question, even offer a potentially affectionate relationship, and then so easily accept a refusal?

He really does only look at the bigger picture, the world outside of his personal self that is bigger and far more important than his own feelings.

Wonwoo finds it commendable, truly, it must be fascinating to live a life like Seungcheol’s, but he’s soft and sad and it’s not a life he can see for himself.

That night, Wonwoo dreams of the Red Room.

He had told Junhui about this one night, had shared the story in a hushed whisper over drinks and Ritz crackers, Junhui’s gorgeous dark eyes flickering in the light of a nearby candle as he listened. The memory is so vivid, so real to him even now, that he’s instantly transported back to his nine-year-old self. His dreams feel a bit like snapshots, jumping forwards like skips in scratched DVDs, time not flowing as smoothly as it should.

He remembers hiding in the living room, behind the curtains—he just wants to read a book in peace, he wasn’t bothering anyone, he wants to be left alone—his cousin Jonghyuk lurks around the first floor, hissing for him to come out, come out, wherever you are, I promise I won’t hurt you much—he remembers being found, the curtains ripped open—he remembers being punched, smacked into a wall so hard he starts to bleed from a scrape on his forehead, from his nose, head pounding—his small, skinny nine-year-old self drowns in the fire he carries within him and flies into a rage, throwing himself at Jonghyuk, knocking him down, scratching and biting and punching with all the force he carries in his tiny body, howling bloody murder—he remembers being pulled away by maids and housekeepers, Aunt Choi’s ringing voice demanding he be locked up in the room no one ever touched, the room his uncle died in, no food or water to be given to him all day.

The Red Room was haunted, they all said. It was haunted by the ghost of his dead uncle. Wonwoo knows now that he shouldn’t have been so frightened, that out of all the ghosts that could’ve haunted Aunt Choi’s cold, elegant townhouse his uncle was probably the nicest spirit of them all. But still, he
was terrified. He sees the room even now—blood red walls, red curtains, red carpet, red furniture, the red four-poster bed that had been the spot where his uncle drew his very last breath.

Wonwoo dreams of screaming and crying, clawing at the locked door, begging to be let out, please, he promises he’ll be good, please don’t leave him in here. His injuries from his cousin had gone unchecked, and the blood trickling from his head gets in his eye, makes him see more red. Red everywhere, red red red, blood, death, poison, ghosts, please, let him out—

And in his terror and confusion and hazy imagination, nine-year-old Jeon Wonwoo thinks he sees the ghost of his uncle float down the chimney of the fireplace, sending ages-old ash scattering against the carpet. He thinks he sees a grey-smoke ghost, ghastly and terrible, crawl towards him with its withered skeleton arms outstretched—he sobs and shrieks and kicks at the door—he’s so scared, so scared, why won’t anyone come for him—he screams until his throat is raw and sore and he loses his voice, until the blood from his head has stained the front of his shirt—until he passes out and collapses to the ground, to wake up the next morning with a bandaged head, a penchant for superstitions, and the young maid Nam Siyeon pressing a damp cloth to his face, worried sick.

He dreams of the moment Aunt Choi told him he was leaving for Lowood, how she had gleefully made sure to tell Brocklehurst that he was a wicked, lying, spiteful child, who should be treated harshly in order to learn his lesson. And he dreams of the words he had screamed back at her, the words a nine-year-old child managed to say with so much hate and anguish that they stuck to her and tormented this bitter woman until her very last moments on this earth.

“I am not a liar! If I was a liar, I’d say I love you, but I don’t, I hate you more than anybody else in the world except for Choi Jonghyuk. If there’s any liar in this house, it’s Gayoung, and you know it, you just don’t want to see it because then you’ll have to admit that I’m not the worst one here. People think you are a good person, but you aren’t! You are cold, and mean, and you have no heart, and you are the liar! And I will tell everyone in Lowood how terrible you are, and when I grow up and I’m out in the real world I’ll tell all the adults that you are a bad person who did bad things to me and you know. I promise, everyone will know what you have done.”

He wakes up with a start, drenched in cold sweat and the words of his child self ringing in his ears. He was too passionate back then, too full of anger and injustice, and it had burned him for a very long while. But at the same time, he kind of misses it. He wonders where all that fire and intensity of his own had disappeared to, why he clings to people who have that sort of power when he has it locked away within him all this time.

Exhausted, he falls back asleep, and his dreams are softer, more forgiving. This time he dreams of Junhui, Junhui smiling adoringly at him and kissing his closed eyelids, filling him with sunlight and warmth, tucking flowers into his hair, whispering sweet nothings in his ear. There’s only one thing Dream Junhui says that Wonwoo remembers once the dream is over, once he’s woken up:

Come back to me, my love.

“We’re going to have a very special guest with us this evening,” Mingyu says teasingly as he bustles around the kitchen like he belongs there. Wonwoo still can’t remember where all the pots and pans and dishes are—although to be fair, they don’t organize any of the cupboards, so Wonwoo is equally likely to find a plastic cup full of forks in the same shelf as a stack of bowls or the frying pan, and their positions switch with the cycle of the dishwasher—but Mingyu seems to just know where everything is by intuition alone. “Hansol’s fiancé is visiting us. He should be here anytime now.”

“Fiancé!” Wonwoo whirls around to face a now bright red Hansol, who’s trying to hide his flustered
expression behind a laughing, elbow-nudging Seungcheol. “I didn’t know you were engaged! Scratch that, I didn’t know you were with anyone. Congratulations.”

“I’m not engaged!” Hansol whines, giggling self-consciously and twisting the ring on his finger around and around and around. “We … it’s a long-distance relationship, we’re both so busy we hardly ever get to see each other. We sort of promised ourselves to each other, to, you know, be faithful and trusting and all that, until we earn enough money to start a life together.”

“Aww, isn’t that sweet?” Seungcheol ruffles his hair, and Hansol swats him away with another embarrassed grin.

“I can’t wait to meet him,” Wonwoo says, but the words have hardly left his mouth before the loud, obnoxious sound of the buzzer starts to fill the room. Hansol practically dives out of the kitchen to get it and open the door for his boyfriend, racing out of the apartment with a clatter of sneaker-clad feet to greet his lover.

“They’re very sweet together,” Mingyu says fondly. “It’s a shame he lives all the way on the farther side of Seoul.”

“Seoul?”

The door opens again, and two voices laughing and talking loudly echo down the short hall and into the kitchen. They sound ridiculously excited, talking over each other in their exuberant happiness, and it’s sweet, so sweet. Wonwoo is excited to meet him and is prepared, with a happy smile and friendly introduction, to meet Hansol’s supposed fiancé.

He is not prepared to come face to face with Boo Seungkwan.

For a moment, neither of them speak or make a move. They just stare at each other with wide eyes. Wonwoo is strangely relieved to find that Seungkwan looks pretty much the same—he still has his soft round cheeks and messy hair, although he does look strange without his telltale green housekeeping apron and bandana on. Seeing him brings a surge of feelings, both bitter and sweet—but mostly he just experiences the most acute, longing form of nostalgia, of better times, of happier days between the two of them.

“Wonwoo,” Seungkwan breathes, and then he runs forward and envelops him in a tight hug. Wonwoo’s hands instantly come up to hug him back, closing his eyes tight to squeeze away tears.

“Wonwoo!”

“I can’t believe you—” Wonwoo sputters. As Seungkwan pulls away, he spots a ring identical to Hansol’s glittering on his finger, and it’s like everything just clicks inside his head. So that’s where he’s seen it before—Seungkwan’s been wearing that ring since day one. “I can’t believe you’re here! I can’t believe you’re Hansol’s—that all this time—”

“Hansol told me someone was staying with him,” Seungkwan chokes out. He has no qualms with crying, fat tears running freely down his cheeks. The others in the kitchen are clearly startled that they know each other but wisely decide not to interrupt the reunion, although Hansol keeps a comforting hand on the small of Seungkwan’s back. “I had no idea it would be you—that it would—I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” A fresh wave of tears gush out. “I should’ve told you, I should’ve—that night, when we were patching up Hong Jisoo, I nearly did, I was so close to just telling you everything, but—the two of you looked so happy, and I didn’t know if, if maybe—I’m so fucking sorry, Wonwoo.”

“It’s okay.” It really is; there’s not even a trace of anger or betrayal when he looks at Seungkwan’s
face, nothing but happiness seeing him again and a yearning for their old friendship. “I understand. I really do. I don’t … I don’t regret a single thing that happened in Thornfield, and I know you would have jeopardized your position in the hotel if you said anything.” Seungkwan still blubbers, so he laughs and hugs him again. “I’m not upset, Seungkwan, really. God, I’m just so glad to see you.”

“I thought—” Seungkwan hiccups, rubbing at his eyes, “I thought for sure you—you hated all of us. Seokmin thought so, too. I-I mean, you didn’t even come to see us after the fire, so I thought you must’ve really wanted nothing to do with us—”

“Wait, what? What fire?”

Seungkwan stares at him. “You didn’t … you didn’t know?” he says weakly.

“What fire?” Wonwoo turns and looks around the room, but the others look just as clueless as him. The floor disappears beneath his feet, his stomach dropping right down with it. He hasn’t felt this fearful, this horrified, since finding Junhui’s bed on fire—no, not even then, since Mingming and the outbreak in Lowood, since his thirteen-year-old self realized that the very first person he ever loved was going to die, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. “What fire?”

“Oh my god,” Seungkwan whispers, horrified. “You really didn’t know.”

Wonwoo leaves Marsh End that very afternoon with a wallet full of cash, what’s left of the River Foster Home and Seungkwan giving him their blessings and promises that they’ll see each other as soon as possible. He’s comfortable enough with Gangneung now to be able to get to the bus terminal without any problem at all, and then takes the three-hour ride to Seoul. He doesn’t sleep this time, he can’t—he stares out the window with fidgety fingers and twitching feet tapping a nervous rhythm against the floor of the bus, dark thoughts swirling in his mind.

Jeonghan is waiting for him at the bus terminal, and it’s startling how he looks both the same and yet entirely different. His hair is still a rusty red, but it’s been snipped away—or maybe burned off—and is no longer his memorable long and shoulder-length ponytail. It’s cut short to the nape of his neck, with long bangs that fall into his eyes. It makes him look strangely older, more mature, almost a completely different person. Wonwoo steps out, tripping over his suitcase wheels, and feels oddly shy, like the past year has made the two of them become total strangers.

“Wonwoo,” Jeonghan says, and to Wonwoo’s surprise he immediately walks forwards to give him a warm, affectionate hug. “You look good. I’m glad.”

“I’m sorry I left the way I did,” Wonwoo says softly.

Jeonghan gives him a sad little smile. “You idiot,” he says. “I can’t believe you ran out like that, with nothing to help you get by. You should’ve come to us. All of us. Me, Soonyoung, Seokmin, Jihoon, Seungkwan … we would’ve helped you. We would’ve found you a place to go, give you some more money to start off. We’ve been worried sick for months, we thought you somehow starved to death in a gutter or something.”

The thought of them worrying about him, hoping he’s okay, makes Wonwoo’s stomach flutter. The idea that they’ve been missing him as much as he’s missed them is so, so nice to hear. “And I almost did, but it’s a long story. Can you … can you show me …?”

Jeonghan leads him to his car, something sleek but simple, and drives him out of the city and down the road towards Thornfield Hotel. He parks uncaringly between the fancy vehicles of the hotel’s
customers to Wonwoo’s utter delight, tucked in a space between a Rolls Royce and a hot-rod red Ferrari, and they walk around the side of the hotel towards the back door. Wonwoo knew what to expect, but it still shocks him when he sees it.

The front of the hotel is completely untouched, and it’s just as grand as he remembers it. But the back of the hotel, where Junhui’s private rooms and staff wing used to be, where Wonwoo found his home and his people and spent the chief of his time, has been practically burned to the ground. Heavy plastic tarps have been raised to separate the burnt remains from the rest of the hotel, and here and there Wonwoo sees broken, blackened things that he might’ve known once upon a time—a splintered chair that might have belonged to the dining hall, a broken edge of some fireplace mantelpiece, maybe from the common area. A collapsed refrigerator that, if he pretends hard enough, could swear that it came from his very own suite.

“It happened last year, in the autumn,” Jeonghan says, as he watches Wonwoo pick carefully through the ruins that for some reason haven’t yet been cleared away. “It happened in the dead of night.”

“Was it—” Wonwoo instantly realizes this must be why the letters he wrote never got answered—he can imagine that after the fire, catching up on something as traditional as letters (when everything they needed to focus on was getting done through emails) was one of their lowest priorities, and it could’ve gotten lost in the chaos of dealing with the aftermath. He remembers the last time there had been a fire. If he had still been living here, could he have prevented it? Could he have stopped this from happening?

“No, it wasn’t Hong Jina.” Wonwoo is immediately filled with relief. “It was something entirely accidental—candles, faulty wires, I’m not exactly sure. But the fire spread fast, and by the time we all woke up and realized what was happening it was too late.”

“Was Junhui home when it happened?” Wonwoo whispers, heart pounding. He’s terrified of the answer. For once, he actually hopes that Junhui had escaped to some faraway country, had run away.

Jeonghan is hesitant for a moment, before replying, “He’s never left. Mr. Wen … before the fire, Junhui searched everywhere, but he couldn’t find any sign of you. He shut himself up in the hotel, wouldn’t see anyone, wouldn’t see any of the guests or his old friends. He only ever talked to us. I think he … he stayed indoors and only ever walked around the grounds, or he’d stay in your old room. I think he was hoping you’d someday come back, and if you did, he wanted to be there for you.”

Wonwoo turns away, just in case he starts to cry. “What happened with the fire?”

“He didn’t even think twice—while we were all trying to evacuate the guests in case the fire spread, he went in all on his own and went through every single wing, just to make sure everyone had left safely, that no one was still sleeping in their beds or anything like that. Damn near killed himself doing it, too, it was not safe at all, but we were all so panicked we didn’t notice what he was doing.”

“And Hong Jina?”

Jeonghan doesn’t speak for a very long time. “She was confused and scared,” he says slowly. “She … I think she thought she was the one that did it. She was terrified that she had caused this. She wandered the halls as they started burning down around her, and she found Junhui trapped underneath a fallen pillar. I’m, uh, I’m almost certain Junhui would’ve died for sure if she wasn’t there, if she didn’t pull him free and help him get back outside.” He stops for a moment and chews at his raggedy lower lip. “Then she said something about finding you—I don’t think she realized you
were gone—and ran back into the burning private wing before we could stop her. She didn’t—didn’t make it out.”

“Oh my god.” Wonwoo stumbles out of the charred remains, away from the thoughts of orange-red flames, out into the fresh air and sunshine, and collapses on one of the stone benches. The hotel, burned down. His home, gone. Wen Junhui—nearly killed himself trying to save the lives of his staff members. And Hong Jina, a girl who should have had a better life, a girl who deserved some form of happiness after a lifetime of misery and hardship—dead, after saving the life of the man Wonwoo loves. “Fuck. Fuck.”

“Hey, hey hey hey.” Jeonghan runs over to sit next to him, pushing at the crown of his head to make it rest against his knees. “Deep breaths. You were swaying, I don’t want you to throw up or pass out. Deep breaths, Wonwoo.”

He takes in large gulps of air, although his brain tricks him and feels like he’s swallowing smoke and ash. “Was anyone hurt? Did anyone else not make it?”

“Plenty were hurt, but minor things like smoke inhalation and burns. Nothing we can’t recover from.” He lets out a weak, humourless laugh, running his hands through his short hair. “We were lucky, to be honest.”

They sit there in silence for a moment, just staring out at the remains, the stark ugliness in contrast to the rest of the beautiful hotel and the brilliant green grass and flowers that make up Thornfield’s familiar, welcoming grounds. “God, it’s ugly, isn’t it,” Jeonghan says. “We should’ve started rebuilding by now, but the guests are so interested in seeing the burned down sections of the hotel and make up their own stories about what happened that business is booming more than ever. We figured it wouldn’t hurt to let them take pictures and selfies for a little while longer. We’ll start clearing it away and rebuilding the staff wing in a few weeks, before it starts getting too cold.”

Wonwoo can only think about what Jeonghan said about Junhui. I’m almost certain Junhui would’ve died … “Where is Junhui?”

“Recovering in some far-off, quiet place in the country. Don’t worry, he’s not alone, Minghao and Anmei are perfectly fine but they’re staying with him, they refused to leave his side.” Jeonghan looks down and grinds his heel against a dandelion, crushes it down into the grass, mouth twisted at an odd angle. “He … he didn’t come out of that fire pretty, I’ll tell you that.”

He thinks he’s going to be sick. His fingers are shaking a little, although he squeezes them into fists to try and fight it off. “Christ, Jeonghan, just tell me what happened to him.”

Jeonghan winces, and it looks like it’s genuinely painful for him to say. “Maybe it’s better if … if I show you?”

It’s not a farmhouse or anything like that. It’s a bit like one of those large, pretty resorts, only it’s meant for rehabilitation and peace than anything loud and obnoxious. The sign reads “Ferndean Retreat” when Jeonghan takes him up the driveway and towards the front door, the manager and caretakers of the retreat greeting them when they arrive. They talk to Jeonghan with respect, making it clear that he’s come up here often in the past few months, and when they treat Wonwoo the exact same way he has a feeling he’s been the topic of conversation before. As they take Wonwoo’s suitcase up to a free room, they give him a brief tour of the building—its large, open spaces, its flowers and library, and they describe it as a place for people to heal, far away from the pollution and noise of the city.
It genuinely is beautiful here, utterly calm, like nothing in the world can bother it. Wildflowers in clusters of white and yellow and blue grow freely up to the very walls of the building, the shining glass panes of a greenhouse visible in the back, just beyond the brown-tiled rooftop. It’s a kind of beauty that’s different from Thornfield’s ultra-cultivated, carefully managed gardens, a beauty that is allowed to run its course in nature with only a few minor touches by a human hand.

Minghao and Anmei see him first—they’re reading together in a large, open room, but they throw the book aside and run to Wonwoo the moment they see him. Anmei bursts into tears and buries her face into his shirt, while Minghao pretends he’s not tearing up as he smiles and smooths unruly parts of Wonwoo’s hair. Wonwoo thinks he’s about to cry, too, even as he smiles back—god, he’s missed them so fucking much. They’re his family.

“Junhui is an utter asshole for tricking you like that,” Minghao says hotly, but there’s no genuine anger in his voice. It’s been far too long, too many months and too much pain, for that sort of thing. “I swear, Wonwoo, I had no idea about it, about her, about … any of it. If I did, I would’ve punched him in the face and told you everything right there and then.”

“I know you would’ve, Hao.” Wonwoo wraps an arm around his shoulders for comfort, because Minghao really does look upset about what had happened, what he had discovered far too late. “That’s probably why they didn’t let you know.”

Anmei clings to him as they sit down to talk, about the events in Thornfield, the fire, Minghao’s long-distance correspondence with Chan while he stays in the Retreat. The room that has become Anmei’s playroom is circular, the entire back wall made of window panes, and a long bench stuffed with cushions has been built to fit the curvature of the wall right up next to these windows. Wonwoo looks out at the wildness that surrounds the building, calm in the evening darkness, glowing with the light of passing fireflies.

“He’s pretty miserable,” Minghao says. “I mean, he should be, for what he did to you, but … man. He’s totally broken, I think. I’m just glad that he didn’t send Anmei off to some faraway boarding school. He said that’s not what you would’ve wanted.”

“She should go to school,” Wonwoo notes, petting Anmei’s brown curls. “She’s getting old enough now. Homeschooling was fine before, but she should really start learning how to interact with her peers.”

“I agree, she should’ve started last year when that fire happened, let her keep her mind off of things.” Anmei huffs at them, reminding them both that her Korean is getting better and she knows that they’re talking about her. Wonwoo laughs fondly, tucking her closer on his knee. “But I mean … we can’t just leave him. He’s all we got now. Unless …” Minghao hesitates, looking a little bashful. “Unless, well, you’re thinking of staying.”

Is that what he came here to do? Wonwoo doesn’t know. His suitcase is here, Jeonghan has left. All he knows is that it’s not just a wish to see an old face he loves, it’s a compulsion. He needs to see Junhui again. But now that he’s here, now that he’s about to see him, is it for the better? Wonwoo has money now, he can fend for himself. He doesn’t feel like he’s trapped by his dependence on Junhui anymore. But is that enough for him to be with Junhui and still be free?

In the end, it doesn’t matter. What matters is that Junhui is alone, and he’s broken, and he’s in pain, and Wonwoo is here and he wants to see him and he wants to make things better if he can.

He can give no other answer to himself than that.

It’s quite late at night, Anmei already put to bed, when Minghao leads him towards the room Junhui
stays in. One of the staff members of Ferndean Retreat is already there with a tray of food and water—guess he doesn’t like eating with the others, or eating at an appropriate time at all—but Minghao stops them and asks in a whisper if Wonwoo can take it instead.

Wonwoo opens the door, hands shaking so hard the tray rattles, water spilling from its glass, his knees as wobbly as jelly. Minghao gives him an encouraging, sad little smile as the door is shut behind him, and Wonwoo is left alone with Wen Junhui for the first time in months.

The room is large and open, with a comfortable-looking bed and large windows overlooking the night sky outside, the lights on but dim. Junhui isn’t looking at him—he’s sitting in a comfortable armchair next to the window, by a low desk-like hand carved table, staring out at the world. “Thank you,” he says shortly, voice flat. Wonwoo’s heart thuds so hard against his ribs that he feels like something might break. “I’m sorry for asking for food so late into the evening.”

“It’s not a problem,” Wonwoo says, voice shaking and weak, as he approaches the armchair and gets a better glimpse of what Jeonghan had hinted at, what Junhui has to recover from.

His hair is no longer its bright honey-blond, it is now a natural black like raven feathers and hangs loosely around his face, long and shaggy from months going uncut and untreated with any hair products. One side of his handsome, chiselled jaw has terrible patches of rough and twisted skin from healing burn scars, similar patches along his neck and arms, and possibly down his body as well. His left hand is missing a finger, and part of its palm is mangled. A cane, sleek and simple with a carved polished handle, rests by the side of the armchair, as though he needs it to walk. And his eyes, what had once been beautiful and intense and dark as night, what had once been capable of haunting Wonwoo’s thoughts and hypnotize him and make him feel like he’s drowning, are now clouded over. He is blind.

He’s still the most beautiful person Wonwoo’s ever seen.

Junhui jumps at the sound of Wonwoo’s voice, something that must be both familiar and strange at once. His hands shoot out as if to try and grab him, but Wonwoo is too far away, and his fingers brush against empty air. “Who is that?” he demands, voice rather fearful and completely vulnerable, turning his head as if he’s still vainly trying to see. “Who spoke just now? Answer me!”

“You should eat, sir. Junhui. Have some water—sorry, I spilt about half of it. I’m a little nervous.”

“Who are you? Who are you?”

Wonwoo sets the tray down shakily on the table next to the armchair, a dizzying, heartbreaking ache echoing across his chest and sending tingles down his arms and legs until his fingers feel numb. “I knew you’d forget me before I forgot about you,” he whispers, with a near-hysterical laugh. “Didn’t I tell you, Junhui?”

Junhui lets out a desperate sound, wild and almost terrified, something very close to a sob, and Wonwoo nearly starts crying just from the sound alone. “Am I dreaming? Am I dreaming?” His hands move, flitting about and unsure of themselves, as though he doesn’t know whether to try and grab hold of Wonwoo or to cover his face, hide his rough scars and fogged-over eyes from him. “Is it not enough that you haunt me every night? Have I finally started to hallucinate you, too?”

“You’re not dreaming, Junhui.”

“I can’t see,” he whispers, growing frantic now, breaths coming out in hitching gasps. He gives up on trying to shy away from Wonwoo’s line of sight, instead reaching out with wandering scarred hands that tremble pitifully. “Please—I can’t see—I need to, need to, please, I swear, I’ll die if I can’t
Wonwoo reaches for one of his hands. The moment his fingers make contact, Junhui grabs it and clings to him, carefully clasps it in his own, fingers entwining together.

“It must be you,” he says, unseeing eyes flickering this way and that, “it must be. I’d know these hands anywhere. It’s—it’s—” He pulls insistently, and while he looks like he’s been wasting away a little after his injuries, he’s still as strong as ever, steering Wonwoo closer to him so his hands can search blindly. His shoulder, his neck, his waist—Wonwoo loses his balance and ends up half-fallen into Junhui’s lap, although he struggles to keep as much weight off of him as he can, worried he might hurt him. “Wonwoo? My Wonwoo? My love?”

“Yes,” Wonwoo chokes out, and he reaches out too, brushes Junhui’s messy dark hair away from his face, runs his fingers delicately along his scarred jaw. “Yes, it’s me. My Junhui. I’ve found you.”

“I’ve been dreaming of you,” Junhui whispers, and it’s so breathtaking, he’s breathtaking. If his hands are a little too rough when they press and jostle him, Wonwoo doesn’t complain. He just can’t believe he’s back in Junhui’s arms again. It feels like he’s meant to be there, like he belongs there. “I dreamt that I was holding you, and you loved me, and I dreamt that you would never leave me. This feels like one of those dreams. Too good to be true.”

“I dreamed of you, too,” Wonwoo says, hiccupping around a sob. His decision is made. It was made the minute he got on that bus and came back to Seoul. “And I’m not leaving you, never again.”

“Don’t fuck with me, you have to be a dream. Wonwoo—my Wonwoo—left me. I fucked up and hurt him and he left me, and I could never find him. Then there was that fire, and I gave up, because he—he must not want to be found by me, if he was trying so hard. And I couldn’t let him see me like this, anyway. I always wake up from the dreams, you know, I wake up and I’m alone.”

“You really think I’m a dream?”

“Maybe a hallucination.” Junhui’s fingers tighten around his waist. “You feel so real. My brain wants to torture me more than usual, I guess. At the very least, you can kiss me before I wake up.”

Wonwoo gathers his face into his hands and firmly presses his lips against Junhui’s. Then he does it again, on both of his eyelids, on his forehead, his cheeks, everywhere he can reach. Junhui lets out a ragged, melancholy intake of breath and it seems as though the reality of the situation has hit him all at once. “I’m not dreaming,” he breathes. “It wouldn’t feel this good if I was dreaming. You’re really here, Wonwoo? You’ve come back for me?”

“I have. Not as a childminder, not as your employee. As myself, just me.” Wonwoo’s words are muffled, unable to quite get his sentences out without kissing him again. It’s almost physically impossible for him to pull away now that he’s here. “I’ve got one and a half million dollars to my name, Junhui. I had a rich uncle who died, and he gave me all he had.”

“Holy shit,” Junhui wheezes, and even though it’s an entirely inappropriate moment Wonwoo’s lips curl against his and he laughs brightly at his response. “Fuck, you’re independent now. You’re wealthy. You don’t—you don’t need me.”

“Maybe that’s true. But if you won’t let me stay with you, I’ll use all that money to get a house right next to yours, wherever you decide to live, and I’ll come visit you every day.” He leans in to press a kiss to the very tip of Junhui’s nose, and is intensely pleased when Junhui closes his eyes and shudders like it’s a blessing, a gift. “I am rich and I don’t need anyone, and I can choose to do whatever I want. And what I want to do is be with you, and look after you.”
“Are you seriously saying you’ll stay with me?”

“I will stay with you for as long as you want me to. And even if you don’t want me to, I’ll stay with you anyway, keep an eye on you. You won’t be able to tell, it’s not like you’ll be able to see me doing it.”

Junhui chuckles weakly at that, but he moves to rest his head against Wonwoo’s shoulder, still clinging tightly to him like he’s afraid Wonwoo will dissipate into mist and drift away. “I’m blind,” he says bitterly. “I’m scarred all over. I’m all mangled. You said you didn’t find me handsome when we first met, Wonwoo, but I think we can safely say I’m even worse now, aren’t I? Fuck, I can’t see you. I want to, so badly.”

“It’s okay if you can’t see me, Junhui.”

There’s a moment of silence between them. Junhui eventually looks up at him and says, a little grumpily, “Are you only saying you want to stay with me because you pity me? When you say you will never leave me, do you mean you want to take care of me like a, a nurse or something?”

His blank eyes are troubled, and Wonwoo instantly feels self-conscious. Maybe he had presumed too much—maybe their chance for reconciliation is long gone—he moves to get away, but Junhui’s hands clench down harder, hold tight and don’t let up. “I can just be your nurse, if that’s all you want of me,” he says hesitantly.

“That’s not what I meant. You can’t just look after me forever. You deserve to be happy. You—you deserve to settle down with someone nice, someone who can treat you right. Have a family and a home.” He sighs, and he looks so defeated. The Wen Junhui Wonwoo sees before him really is just a broken shell of something that once existed beneath his skin. “If this was before the fire, I would’ve done everything I could to convince you. I would’ve been able to make you care. But look at me—I’m not the man I used to be, I’m not someone who can convince … anything. I’m blind. I have trouble using my left hand. I need a cane to walk. I needed so many skin grafts for the burns along my back that it looks like I went at myself with a fucking chainsaw.”

He looks gloomier and more depressed than ever, but on the contrary, Wonwoo feels himself only get more hopeful. So it’s not that Junhui no longer wants to be with him—it’s that he thinks Wonwoo won’t want to.

“You hair has gotten so long,” he muses fondly, running his hands through the heavy locks and feeling his heart thud even harder when Junhui closes his eyes and presses into the touch. Wonwoo loves him so much. “We really should cut it.”

“You’re changing the subject, Wonwoo,” he grumbles, even as he preens like a pleased house pet when Wonwoo scratches lightly at his scalp. “Look at me. I can’t take care of you anymore. I can’t even see you. My right eye is slightly better, but it can only see lights, like some sort of faint hazy glow. Nothing else. Be real for a moment—what can you do with something like me?”

“I can love you,” Wonwoo says simply. “I don’t need you to take care of me, I can take care of you. And if you don’t believe me, then I’ll love you even more. And I’ll stay with you for the rest of your life until you can believe that I’m here for good.”

He sits with Junhui and eats dinner with him, utterly at ease and perfectly happy. He was happy working in Morton, of course, but this is different, this feels like all the tension and tragedy has just left him, relaxing his shoulders, taking away its weight and disappearing into the shadows. There’s no need for him to be anything other than himself around Junhui, no need to push himself to do or be anything he’s not in order to please him—in fact, everything he does seems to only do good, his
words and actions just naturally consoling Junhui’s low spirits and bringing him back into a better mood.

By the time dinner is finished, and Wonwoo is sitting as close to Junhui as he can on a stool, their hands pressed tightly together, Junhui is smiling hopefully and his features are all softened. He tries to ask a bunch of questions about what Wonwoo has been doing all this time, but Wonwoo only gives small, brief replies and promises to tell him the whole story another day, it’s already too late.

“Are you sure you’re real?” Junhui insists as Wonwoo helps him get ready for bed. “You come here out of nowhere, telling me you love me, but what if I wake up tomorrow and you’re gone again?”

Wonwoo has a feeling that just simply reassuring him he’s here to stay won’t do any good. Instead, he decides to act as normal as possible, as if to try and prove to Junhui that he’s planning on being here for a very long time. He helps Junhui brush his hair, work out the little tangles, and once again remarks that they should get it cut.

“What’s the point if you’re going to leave again?”

“You’re worrying about nothing, Junhui, I’m not leaving. Do they do haircuts here? They should, given how big this place is and how many people work here. I’ll ask about it tomorrow morning.”

“Am I really that ugly?”

“Didn’t I tell you? You’ve always been hideous.”

Junhui snorts, a sound that feels so much like his old self and eases Wonwoo’s heart and mind. “I don’t know who you’ve been hanging out with lately, but they’re making you say terrible things.”

“I’ll have you know that I’ve been staying with good people, who are way better than you, and they’ve taken good care of me and really opened up my eyes to a lot of things I’ve never thought about before.”

Junhui twists up to face him and scowls, hard, and it’s just so like him that Wonwoo needs to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. “Who the fuck have you been staying with?” he blusters out.

“Junhui, if you turn your head like that you’ll make me pull your hair. Sit still.”

He refuses to turn around, still glaring half-heartedly up at him like he can actually see his face.

“Who have you been with, Wonwoo?”

“I’m not telling you tonight. I’ll tell it to you tomorrow, so there—I won’t leave without finishing the story, so you know I won’t disappear.”

“Why you—you teasing little—” He lets out a frustrated sigh, both affectionate and irritated. “Christ, you drive me crazy. I love you so fucking much.”

His heart melts. He leans down to press a firm kiss to his forehead. “Yeah, and I love you. Go to sleep, okay? I’ll see you in the morning. I’m going to go find Minghao.” Wonwoo leads him carefully towards the bed and gently pushes him down to sit in it.

“Won’t you stay with me?”

“I think if I did, you’ll never fall asleep. Tomorrow, I promise.”
Junhui doesn’t look happy about it, but he reluctantly does as he asks. It seems like the shock of this evening had been too much for him anyway—he’s sinking down exhausted into the pillows as Wonwoo closes the door. With a quick-beating heart and a small skip in his step, Wonwoo makes his way back to his own room, wondering how he’ll be able to fall asleep after everything that happened.

Very early the next day, Wonwoo wakes up to hear faint voices and clumsy footsteps. He hears Junhui wandering from room to room down the halls, asking the Ferndean staff, “Where is Jeon Wonwoo staying? Which room? Is it clean? Does he have a good view outside? Is he up yet? Can you ask him if he wants anything, when he’ll come down?”

He enters the dining area for breakfast and sees Minghao grinning at him from across the room. There’s an empty chair right next to Junhui, who’s looking restless and expectant, his features fallen back into the same deeply ingrained sadness Wonwoo had seen the night before.

“It’s a beautiful day out, Junhui,” he says casually, taking a seat right next to him and resting his hand reassuringly on his knee. “We can go out for a walk later, if you’d like.”

And just like that, it’s as if all the dark clouds have parted. Junhui’s expression clears up instantly, and he beams in his direction, hand fumbling forwards to grab his own. Minghao and Anmei look ridiculously satisfied. It must have been hard for them to see Junhui so beaten down for months, given up on the whole world. Anmei looks like she wants to sit with them, but she holds herself back, letting them have their space together alone—she’s grown up a lot in the past year Wonwoo hasn’t been with her, and the pride he feels when he sees her young maturity feels distinctly paternal.

Wonwoo takes Junhui out into the warm sunshine, out towards a pretty little white-painted gazebo with creeping flowering veins along its pillars. There, the two of them sit, and Junhui instantly demands to know what Wonwoo’s been doing for the past year. He tells him about leaving early in the morning, getting help from Hong Jisoo, taking a bus to Gangneung.

Junhui listens patiently, although he does get very upset when he hears about how much Wonwoo had struggled before finding Seungcheol.

“I wouldn’t have forced you to stay with me,” he says dejectedly, grasping in the air until Wonwoo holds his hand. “I was really upset back then, and I said a lot of things I shouldn’t have said, but I wouldn’t have forced you. I love you too much to make you unhappy. If you told me to, I would have given you half of everything I owned without asking for so much as a kiss goodbye. Anything other than you wandering the streets with no money or friends to take care of you, fucking homeless.”

“It’s okay, Junhui.”

Junhui lifts their clasped hands up and presses a clumsy kiss to Wonwoo’s knuckles. “My love,” he whispers, overwhelmed and affectionate.

“It was only for about a day.” And then he tells him about Gangneung’s tiny neighbourhood of Morton, of the Marsh End Apartments, of Seungcheol and Mingyu and Seungkwan’s boyfriend Hansol. Of the discovery of Wonwoo’s newfound wealth, and the day care, and everything he’s been up to. Seungcheol’s name was brought up more frequently than the others in his story, something Junhui picks up on immediately. When Wonwoo finishes, that’s the first thing he latches onto.

“So, this Seungcheol guy. Was he good to you?”
Wonwoo raises his eyebrows, amused, and he’s glad Junhui can’t see it or he knows the poor man will only get even more surly about this. “He was, actually. He was very kind, and very friendly. A good man. I liked him a lot.”

“That’s good, that’s good. So, when you say a ‘good man’, do you mean a man in his fifties with a lot of wise words to give, or what—what’s that supposed to mean?”

“He was your age, actually.”

Junhui’s eyebrows furrow together and he grits his teeth. “Fuck that,” he says venomously, and Wonwoo can’t stop a giggle from leaving his mouth. “Was he ugly? Was he boring? Was he a good man only because he stayed inside all the time and didn’t do anything particularly awful?”

“Nope,” Wonwoo says happily. “He was very handsome, and very active. He works for several volunteer organizations and shelters of all kinds throughout the city.”

Junhui curses rather creatively. “Is he smart? Does he talk too much? How are his manners? Was he rude?”

“He’s intelligent and has nice, friendly manners.”

“God dammit. Did you like him?”

“I already said I did.”

He’s impossibly jealous, Wonwoo can see giddily, it’s painfully obvious. Normally, he’s not the type to want to make this linger, to draw this out, but the jealousy is a welcome emotion in this case. It creates a change in Junhui’s mood that brings brightness to his clouded-over eyes, makes him energetic and passionate again, and keeps him away from dwelling too much on his old sorrow. Wonwoo lets it play out a little bit longer.

“So, this Seungcheol guy helped get you a job and a place to stay even before you gave him and his family money?”

“Yes.”

“How often did he come to visit you?”

“Every day, more or less.”

“In the day care?”

“Usually. Also at my house a couple times, before we all moved back in together.”

“You lived with him.”

“Well, not alone. His brothers were there, too.”

“You said he asked if you would travel the world with him for some charity disaster relief thing.” Junhui is struggling with his word choice, jaw clenching as he tries to keep calm and sound uninterested. It’s not working at all. “Did he mention anything about—about feelings towards you or anything?”

“I dunno,” Wonwoo teases. “Maybe. Once or twice he may have alluded to it, yes.”

He growls low in the back of his throat. “Now you’re messing with me,” he complains. “Is this
revenge because of the whole Im Bora thing? Okay, I deserve it, I know, but really, you’re a terrible person. Go on, get up and leave me if you want, I’m not stopping you.” Despite what he’s saying, the arm wrapped around Wonwoo’s waist goes even tighter. “Go and be with your Seungcheol if you want, leave me be. I don’t need your pity if you love someone else.”

Jealousy is a surprisingly cute look on him. “Too bad, I’m staying right here.”

“You just want payback for the Im Bora thing, I know it. Don’t do this to me right now, please—I know you’re fucking with me, but I still think you might actually leave me for him.”

Wonwoo decides to take pity on him and stop his teasing. “Choi Seungcheol doesn’t have feelings for me,” he says truthfully. “He was interested in another person for a long time. His version of us being together was just being … well, being intimate, a result of us travelling together in difficult conditions and having no one else to turn to, I guess. He’s a good man, and a very nice person, but he wasn’t the one for me and never was.” He tries to think if Seungcheol had ever expressed any sort of attraction to him beyond that sudden offer, and adds, “I don’t think he even finds me good-looking.”

“Then he doesn’t have fucking eyes. Are you telling the truth?”

“I am.” When Junhui doesn’t look super convinced, Wonwoo wraps his arms around him, nuzzling against his jaw. “I’m sorry, I just wanted to see you jealous for once—and mess with you a little so you’d forget to feel sad.” It’s embarrassing to voice this out loud, but his voice drops to softly say, “My heart has always been with you.”

Junhui is finally satisfied, and leans in to kiss him. He misses his mouth at first, but neither of them particularly care if he has to follow a path with his lips three or four more times in order to kiss him properly. “I’m a miserable wretch,” he mutters against Wonwoo’s lips. “And I know I don’t deserve you. But here you are, driving me crazy again, like you never even left. You just—just make me want to be with you forever, make me want to steal you away from people who are better than me, people who deserve you more.”

“Deserve me more? I think I know what I deserve,” Wonwoo says, keeping his voice light and playful even as his heart beats frantically, desperately in his chest. “I’ve seen someone else’s definition of love and relationships, Wen Junhui, and so far, not a single person in this world has ever proven that they can love someone as much as you love me. I think I deserve nothing less than that.”

“Mmm.” Junhui looks peaceful and happy, basking in the warm sunlight. His cane, which had been propped up by the side of the gazebo, slides down and clatters to the floor, but neither of them care to pick it up right now. “I may not be able to do much right now, but I can definitely do that.”

“Good. I’m going to kiss you now.”

“Please. Please do.” Junhui’s hand curls around the back of Wonwoo’s neck, holding him in place. It’s a welcoming, familiar touch, boiling hot against his skin. “And don’t stop.”

While Junhui is technically free to be married again, the topic never really gets brought up between them. Not now, at least. Maybe one day they will, they’ll travel to France like they planned and have a honeymoon touring the best museums in the country. But right now, it just doesn’t seem all that important. Just being together is enough for them.

They remain in Ferndean for a little while longer, in love with the peace and quiet of the country, but
eventually Junhui is recovered enough—both physically and mentally—and it’s time to join the real world again.

They move back to Seoul.

Thornfield is being fixed up and rebuilt, according to Jeonghan’s constant correspondence through email, but Junhui refuses to live there again. Too many memories, both good and bad. Wonwoo secretly thinks it’s for the best.

Instead of living in the hotel, they find a nice apartment in the city, a penthouse bright and open and beautiful, close enough to still drive up to Thornfield whenever they want but also close enough to Seoul for Anmei to be able to go to school. Wonwoo finally gets himself a cell phone, sets up his laptop, and sends messages to Mingyu and Hansol, both of whom are delighted with what Wonwoo tells them and are eager to take some time off to come and visit sometime. Seungcheol has left for his NGO volunteer job by now, but whenever he’s able to check his email he responds with happy words and eager stories that Wonwoo loves to read, much to Junhui’s constant disapproval.

Anmei’s Korean really has vastly improved, and while she may stumble over a few unfamiliar words and pronunciations, she seems to be doing well in school and even enjoys it, being able to interact with kids her own age for once.

Junhui is still clumsy with her at times, never quite getting the hang of being a parent, but his affection towards his daughter has grown in the time she stayed with him in Ferndean Retreat, having found a gentleness and considerate heart in her that he had never seen in her mother. And, of course, she seems delighted to find another parent in Wonwoo; the transition from thinking of him as her childminder to thinking of him as her father is not difficult to do at all.

Minghao stays with them too at first—he has long since been considered a part of the family, and Wonwoo gets lonely without him around—but he eventually moves out to get an apartment very close by on his own, claiming that the way Wonwoo and Junhui act around each other is disgusting and lovey-dovey and terrible and he doesn’t need that right in his face, thank you very much. He works jobs as a translator and is very comfortable doing so, although he’s thinking of going back to school to finish his education. He can take his time—he has the support of Junhui and Wonwoo’s combined wealth to fund him in any of his pursuits, after all. His mother, living happily with him and enjoying a life of luxury, is proof of their backing.

For the first two years or so, Junhui struggles with his blindness, with having to use a cane in a busy city, with the knowledge that people will stare at him when he walks about. He’s not used to feeling so weak and having to depend on others so much, and it makes his temper just as fluctuating and inconsistent as it’s always been, which is strangely comforting for Wonwoo instead of making him difficult. He’s used to this kind of Junhui, and he knows how to deal with it. Junhui never loses his temper at him, anyway.

One morning, Wonwoo wakes up to the sight of Junhui squinting intensely at him, a strange sense of clarity in his normally blank eyes.

“What’s up?” Wonwoo yawns, trying to move closer to his warmth, but Junhui keeps him at a distance and continues straining his eyes at him.

“Your hair is black,” he finally says.

“Yeah, it’s always been.”

“Yeah, but I can see that now,” he insists. “and you’re wearing a grey shirt—hey, I think that’s my
A visit to the doctor later that day informs them that Junhui’s right eye is miraculously improving, albeit slowly. In a couple months, he’ll be able to see completely, they’re told, and although it won’t be very clear vision and it’s likely he’ll never be able to read or write again, he’ll at least be able to find his way and not have to rely on his cane so much.

The day Junhui is able to look at Wonwoo and see all his features in one of his injured eyes, however indistinct or blurry they may be, he gathers Wonwoo up in his arms and kisses him until neither of them can breathe, and muses that maybe there’s some sort of god up there who’s willing to grant him mercy after all.

Years pass. Seasons come and go. Thornfield is just as grand as ever, the fire becoming something of a legend, only increasing the popularity of the hotel. Hong Jisoo never again steps foot near Thornfield, but he does keep a steady correspondence with Wonwoo and they occasionally go out to have lunch together if he’s in the area. His relationship with his family has grown steadily worse since the death of his sister, until eventually he cuts himself off from them entirely. Junhui’s interactions with him continue to be rather strained, but when he hears that Jisoo has disowned himself he (in a surprisingly considerate moment for him) quietly tells Jisoo that if he ever needs anything, they’re there to help.

And as these years go by, Wonwoo and Junhui’s comfortable, spacious home finds itself almost always bustling with activity.

Sometimes it’s Minghao, with his affectionate mother that treats the parentless Wonwoo and Junhui like they’re children of her own, cooking Chinese food so authentic Junhui laughs with delight and looks years younger the moment he tastes it. Sometimes Minghao brings with him a giggling Chan and they take up space on the living room couch, saying that if he sees Junhui kiss Wonwoo one more time he’s going to throw himself under a bus.

Sometimes it’s Anmei bringing friends home from school. Even as she grows older, from elementary school to middle school to high school, she’s as beautiful and vivacious as she was as a child, but with a warm smile and a good heart that might have made her birth mother proud if she cared. It bothers her, sometimes, once she’s old enough to learn from her fathers about Watabe Seiko. But she has doting parents, an adoring older brother, and she’s still the spoiled little princess to everyone in Thornfield, and she eventually grows to discover that whatever Watabe Seiko thought about her honestly didn’t matter.

Sometimes it’s Jeonghan and Jihoon, still running the hotel, dropping by for dinner with easy smiles on their faces. Wonwoo can’t stop grinning when he notices Jihoon treats Jeonghan with a softness he’s never seen him use with anybody before, when he sees Jeonghan casually rest his arm around Jihoon’s shoulders like it’s natural, and Jihoon doesn’t do a single thing to push him away.

Sometimes it’s Seungkwan and Hansol and their matching gold rings, hand-in-hand, as happy and cheerful and loving as they’ve always been, practically soulmates. Sometimes it’s crowded tables piled with dishes cooked to perfection by Seokmin and Mingyu, and Junhui snorting so hard he nearly chokes when he hears Mingyu, embarrassed, hesitantly ask Seokmin if Soonyoung is seeing anybody at the moment.

Sometimes it’s Seungcheol, who pops by whenever he has time off from globetrotting, tanned and happy and proud of what he does. Junhui never does quite trust him, which Wonwoo continues to find hilarious, but it’s very difficult to dislike Seungcheol. Eventually, even Junhui looks forward to
hearing about his stories, about his travels around the world—and maybe Seungcheol rekindled his old thoughts and hopes because one night he softly asks Wonwoo, when they’re getting ready for bed, if he’s still interested in going to France.

Fairy tales can be absurd and tragic and ridiculous, but even these kinds of stories can have a happy ending. Wonwoo wakes up to early, sleepy sunshine and his husband fast asleep beside him, Junhui’s black hair fanning out along his pillow, tanned skin perfect against crisp white sheets.

Wonwoo sleeps well these days, soundly even, with no ghostly wails or memories of his childhood trying to wake him up and rattle him. He hasn’t dreamed of Lowood or the Red Room or any part of his childhood even once in the past ten years.

He leans in to brush his lips lazily against Junhui’s cheek, receiving a sleepy groan in response. “Good morning, sir,” he whispers with a laugh, and the soft, amused smile Junhui gives him is the feeling of coming back home.

Chapter End Notes

- Jane Eyre is one of my favourite novels, and I absolutely love the idea of making a modern AU out of old classics. There were some things I had to retcon or rewrite, of course -- like, for example, the way Mr. Rochester's wife is portrayed in terms of both her race and her mental illness, as well as the fact that Jane Eyre almost married her cousin -- but overall I wanted to be as true to the original story as possible.

- Tons of love for Lee, who listened to my rambling and read pages and pages of shit that I sent to her. Thank you for all your advice and encouragement, and you're totally right: leptospirosis is WAY better than whatever the fuck I was planning for Lowood before.

- This is the longest fic I've ever written and I'm rather proud. I was planning on it being at least 100k (move over Acte de Foi!!!!) but I think I wrote everything I needed, and I think it ended exactly the way I wanted it to.

- Finally, lots and LOTS of love and thank yous to all the lovely people that have supported me writing this shit!! Thank you for listening to me rant about it on twitter and being so excited for it!!! That's all, folks!!

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