Summary

It is with the introduction of a mischievous, red-haired wildling that Chanyeol’s loyalty to the Night’s Watch really starts to crumble.

Notes

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Warning(s): Explicit sexual content w/ rimming & barebacking, graphic depictions of violence, minor character death, swearing & animal hunting
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Author’s Note: To my prompter, I hope I do not let you down with this. I have been working on it for what feels like an age, and although the struggle has been agonisingly real, the...
reward is even more so. To my beta, who swooped at the final hurdle to pull me from my grave, my love for you stretches from the southernmost deserts of Dorne to the frozen plains of the Lands of Always Winter. I am forever thankful for all your help. To my readers, I truly hope you enjoy reading this!

Credit to George RR Martin for the world map, certain nouns/titles/creatures and the Night’s Watch oath; this work is inspired by the storyline of one of Martin’s main characters.

You do not need to have watched or read Game of Thrones to read this story. I wrote it with you in mind and tried to explain and describe everything as best as I could so that you would still understand everything that’s going on! While I admit that the plotline is similar to the original story, remember that the words are my own and I struggled with this fic greatly (wah TT). If you have any questions at all, do not hesitate to ask me (@butabrit on Twitter)! I will do my best to answer them as clearly as possible!

Thank you to everyone who has read this fic and everyone who is coming to read it now! I really hope you enjoy it!
If you enjoy this, please leave a comment!♥
~Amy(“.•.”)

(This story is also available on AFF)

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

(First part of the story)

(ALWAYS DOUBLE-CHECK THE WARNINGS AND TAGS BEFORE READING)

(Second part of the story, continuing)
Eight thousand years ago, Brandon the Builder built the Wall, aided by magic and the deft hands of over three thousand craftsmen. Crossing plains of one-hundred leagues and standing proud at over seven-hundred feet tall in the northern air, the Wall is made of nothing other than pure ice, ice that gleams in the sunset and blinds at midday. All year round, it emanates a frostbiting chill that makes even the thickest layers of clothing redundant. It is what splits the North into two, discerns a wildling from a citizen, segregates the civilised from the uncivilised. Though, the purpose of the Wall was not to keep out brothers and sisters, but inhuman creatures that descended upon the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros in the War for the Dawn: a vicious battle between starved man and White Walker in the longest winter ever known. Eight thousand years it has been since the Long Night, since the White Walkers came down and destroyed everything in their path – slaying men, women and children in their beds. And yet the Wall still stands, an impenetrable barricade, keeping all those on the other side frozen out of civilisation, marooning them in a place where the White Walkers still dwell, even if they are only a legend.
Calloused hands wrap around a pewter mug, the metal bringing much-needed warmth to a pair of icy palms. Inside is mulled wine, the heat of it sending swirls of steam through the air to reach Chanyeol’s nose, causing it to run and him to sniffle. The air is definitely getting colder as the days crawl on; it was three years ago when Maester Kluse received a white raven from the Citadel, the scroll pinned to its leg declaring that autumn had begun. Summer lasted for eight years – the upcoming winter will be longer.

In the North, though, it is always cold. The season matters not, as the snows and the bone chilling winds have no care for what time of year it is. It could be the hottest day on the calendar in the south, but Winterfell – the home of the Warden of the North – would still be covered in a light dusting of frost. Chanyeol has grown numb to it all. Even though he was not born in the North, he has spent the last eleven years of his life growing accustomed to the severe lack of direct sunlight and the even greater absence of warmth. Somehow, the weather has become his temperament.

The wind whistles into the dining hall when a group of four men come stomping in, laughing obnoxiously through the stagnant silence resting over the other brothers present. Chanyeol casts a wary glance over his shoulder, confirming his presumption that it is his ‘friends’ who have entered what he had thought to be a safe haven, albeit temporarily.

Rather obscenely, a couple of them decide to imitate the moans of a woman, high pitched and whiny, while their smug and self-satisfied eyes stare in his direction. The four of them only look away when they are overcome in another bout of laughter. Chanyeol sulks into his mug, convincing himself that he doesn't care, and he proceeds to flinch at all further offensive noises.

Now that he is seeing them from the perspective of an outsider, he finally realises how disgusting they all are. He supposes that it just goes to show how desperate he had been for friends. It is not like he has been spoiled for choice – most people either scare him or creep him out, and the rest are not even interested.

He can sense their eyes even from across the room, the fact that he is sat alone not helping. Being the only person in this direction, he is the only one they could be looking at (and laughing at), his insides involuntarily shrivelling at the confirmation. Chanyeol has never been someone suited for the spotlight – or any kind of light, really. He prefers to be on the sidelines, though not necessarily in the background either; he will participate, involve himself, yet not be overbearing. He does not want to disappear completely. Nonetheless, it feels like he is letting himself slip away. Damn them, he curses inside his head, daring to peek by the corner of his eye at where they sit, huddled over the table and sniggering at crude inside jokes. He should not let them make him feel so small.

At least he has not broken his oath to the Night’s Watch. The words echo in his head, as clear as the day he swore them: “I shall take no wife, hold no lands, father no children.” He is no expert when it comes to fathering children, of course, being as innocent as a maid, but he is quite certain that pulling out before one sows his seeds does not always work. In fact, the only way one can know for definite that one will not conceive any bastards is to steer clear of women entirely.

It had been last night when his four friends – Peter, Vince, Lofty and Bags – had suggested that they all sneak out and ride to Mole’s Town for a little “hanky-panky” with one of the “fine
women”. It is the world’s worst kept secret what goes on down there. Ever since he came to the Wall, Chanyeol has heard whispers concerning a nearby brothel, of how “no one will ever notice we’re gone” and “I need myself a northern woman to warm my bed for the night.” They are lucky, really, what with the Night’s Watch being so desperate for men that even if they were caught doing the do, the repercussions would be something pathetically menial like scrubbing the armour clean rather than the more severe alternative, also known as execution.

The Night’s Watch used to be an admirable force, occupying eighteen different castles along the Wall’s length. Now, with its dwindling numbers and lack of coin, it is starting to verge more on pitiful, fifteen of those fortifications left to rot into ruin.

The Night’s Watch is like the Wall’s younger sibling, brothers sworn into its service in order to maintain its structures and forts, protect the realms of men against the White Walkers, and any other magic that may seek to cause harm. They are the swords in the darkness, the watchers on the wall, and they have all pledged their life, desertion punishable by death.

Chanyeol had joined the Night’s Watch as a boy, scrawny and sickly from life as a neglected child, ready to do his best to guard the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros – ready to protect people who would not even bat an eyelash if he died. Still, the way he sees it, he is of more use up here making sure the Wall stands true than begging on the streets of Seagard, his home town.

Upon his arrival, he was stationed at the headquarters for the Night’s Watch, Castle Black, which is not only falling apart, but low on resources as well. In truth, it is not a real castle, barely a mere collection of stone towers and timber keeps with no real walls – only fences – defending it from the east, south and west. All materials used to build it are either black or very, very dark grey, meaning it truly is a dull place to live; thankfully, though, it is warm enough, the covered walkways and wormwalks – which are tunnels below the ground – keeping the brothers out of the brunt of the snow when moving between localities. Outside in the training yard is where one can really feel the Wall’s omniscient presence, though Chanyeol has long since been used to its glacial breath, lucky to have grown up with an affinity to the cold in his eleven years of living at Castle Black.

People used to see taking the black as a blessing, a chance to start anew and leave their criminal pasts behind them, yet now it is seen as more of an easy getaway. Of course, there are people who join the Watch because they want to, not to get away from a death sentence for raping the neighbour’s daughter. Chanyeol had been one of those people – or, children – and had been proud to put on the thick, black cloak, a hand-me-down from an older brother and much too big for him. He thought he would be respected for wearing all black. Instead the brothers of the Watch are resembled to birds, ‘crows’, and rarely given the time of day by southern leaders.

It is a crow’s caw from the rafters over his head that brings Chanyeol back into the room. He peers anxiously up through his eyebrows at one particularly large bird relocating to another beam – one directly above his head – and he closes his eyes in a silent prayer. Please do not shit on him, not while they’re watching.

His friends – or rather, his old friends – are laughing at him, all because they managed to put their cocks in some women they paid to enjoy it and he didn’t. What a wondrous thing to boast about. Chanyeol frowns. Why not just use your fist like everyone else? Save the money? He would rather be virtuous than sleep with a common whore riddled with lice and other unthinkable diseases. It just goes to show, really, that their friendship has always been superficial. Where real friends would respect his decision of not wanting to commute to Mole’s Town with them, his false friends are taking the piss out of him for it, and have proceeded to isolate him from all group activities. He is better off without them, he reminds himself, albeit unconvincingly as he stares glumly down into the contents of his mug. The wine mocks him when it reflects his lonely expression. He supposes
that things have finally run full circle. He always ends up alone somehow. Is this the life that the 
gods really want him to lead? He worships the Seven, and not one of them has taken pity on him. 
Where is the Mother’s mercy?

The door to the common hall creaks and Chanyeol swings his head around to glance over his 
shoulder, watching as Lord Commander Kim Junmyeon and his five followers enter the dull room 
laid out with long wooden tables and benches to match. This is where Chanyeol and the rest of his 
brothers come to eat three times a day, food freshly prepared by the cook, Martin Moors. If 
Chanyeol had to describe said meals in one word, he would call them ‘watery’; everyone knows 
that if one waters things down, they stretch further, and although the force here in Castle Black 
isn’t exactly huge, their storerooms are mostly bare. There are more mice than slabs of meat down 
there. At the moment, it seems like they are exhausting their cabbage and potato supplies. But, who 
knows? Maybe that is all they have left.

As his keen eyes examine the Lord Commander’s grim face, Chanyeol makes the assumption that 
he is not here to eat anything and instead is about to make a proposal. Intrigued, Chanyeol strains 
his ears to hear over the general buzz of his surroundings, following the Lord Commander’s 
cloaked form as he strides up to the high table at the head of the room and splays his palms on its 
surface, adopting his ‘I mean business’ pose. The crow straightens in his seat, rising to attention as 
he squints through the murky air, attempting to see clearly, what with the Wall’s dark shadow.

Lord Commander Kim clears his throat once, garnering the attention of the room, before he takes 
on a hard-set frown to try and overcome his deceptively youthful face. “We need volunteers,” he 
announces gruffly, sizing up the brothers with authoritative once-overs. “I am sure yer all aware 
that the party of rangers who left Castle Black three weeks ago were due back five days past. We 
have seen no sign of ‘em since. I am sure that yer also know that this is the fifth rangin’ party to 
have gone missin’ since the start of the year; we have lost over fifty brothers. So, we are proposin’ 
to go out, beyond the Wall, to find out where our brothers have gone. We need to form a party of 
our own to take ‘em back. Who is with me? Who will help find our lost brothers?”

Chanyeol takes one look at his ‘friends’ and another at the serious expression on the Lord 
Commander’s face, his mind a battlefield of ‘what if’s and ‘maybe’s. The room is silent yet his 
mind is in uproar, one half campaigning for him to do something with his life and the other half 
retaliating with I am of better use when I’m alive. It is safe to say that it takes Chanyeol a while to 
gather and organise his thoughts, his conclusion being, there is nothing for me here, and thus, he is 
the first person to get to his feet.

Setting himself a brisk pace, Chanyeol crosses the courtyard, heading for his bunk in the Flint 
Barracks where most of the brothers reside – save for the commanders and their stewards. A light 
snow is insistently sticking onto the blackened, almost charred-looking wood of Castle Black’s 
weathered scaffolds. Moreover, it clings onto the jarred pieces of stone used to build the six towers 
surrounding him, Hardin’s Tower still leaning on a precariously dangerous angle, threatening to 
fall and swamp the whole courtyard at any moment.
The Wall weeps under the sun, glistening trails of water dribbling down its sheeny surface and moistening the air, making Chanyeol feel as though he is walking through a dense mist. Beyond the Wall will be colder, he reminds himself, as he cranes his neck to look seven-hundred feet in the air to where the shadow is born. The chain lift trailing up the face of it clatters noisily, transporting his brothers to the top of the Wall, the edge of the world, so they can be on the lookout; what they are looking for, though, Chanyeol does not know. They have not seen any wildlings for months, and the White Walkers are only a distant legend, bedtime stories told to children over candlelight when they’re tucked up safely in their furs.

To Chanyeol’s delight, he had not been the only brother to stand in the common hall and volunteer. That relief had subsequently blinded his curiosity to find out who those other brothers were, so he knows not who he will be sharing the company of when they travel. Not that it matters in the grand scheme of things: he would rather be with strangers than bullies, and his old friends definitely did not get up out of their seats.

Bags has always been the instigator of the group, coming up with the stupid ideas and the even stupider plans to enforce them. It had been his idea in the first place to go to Mole’s Town. He was the one who arranged all the horses in the moonlight, taking them from the stables under the common hall when the man in charge hadn’t been looking. It comes as no surprise, really, that the other three have stretched to meet his will; Peter, Vince and Lofty are all weak sports, desperate to be accepted, yearning for some semblance of recognition. Bags makes them feel special, wanted, and so they bend over backwards to do whatever it is that he asks, as though it were the will of the Seven. Lofty used to tell Chanyeol about how he didn’t like Bags, thought he was arrogant and up his own arse. Clearly, he is too much of a coward to admit that to the man’s face.

As he nears the barracks, the crow does not know why he failed to anticipate being ganged up on by his old friends, because that is exactly the type of thing for an impudent, self-proclaimed know-it-all like Bags would do. Just to prove it, when Chanyeol steps into the Flint’s Barracks they are all there, having been loitering around as they waited for him to finally arrive and give them a show. With snow everywhere you look, the ghastly yellow stains on their teeth are much more apparent.

They are dressed in the typical black boiled leather of the Night’s Watch, large, metal-capped snow boots and dusty, old tabards, no doubt unintentional hand-me-downs from people who met their unexpected ends too soon. The colour of black used to be a symbol of pride, of protection, yet now it lies mocked. The three men stood before Chanyeol are not brave, nor are they strong or valiant. They are an insult to all those who have gone before, undeserving of their titles. At least Chanyeol knows how to fight and would actually give his life for the Watch. The same cannot be said for them, veneration a thing of the past.

“You tryin’ t’run away from us, Rivers?” the instigator leers, stepping out before his minions and crossing his arms, probably trying to make his biceps appear larger when in reality the so-called muscle is all just fat. Chanyeol’s bastard name, Rivers, is used like an insult. “By goin’ off ‘n’ findin’ some dead brothers? What are they t’you?”

Chanyeol’s heart races in his ears, a sense of dread washing over him as he panics at the confrontation. Throw him in front of a charging wildling and he’ll be fine, put him in an argument with someone supposedly on the same side as him and he crumbles. He does not understand why his brain is wired in such a way; he supposes that it has something to do with the fact that a wildling is his enemy and they are not made to like each other, whereas conflict in his own ranks leaves him perturbed. Should they not all be looking out for each other instead of knocking one another down? Why can they not just put all arguments aside and focus on the main reason that they are here? Chanyeol really wishes he held the answer. It would save him a lot of grief.
He finds it funny how certain things just happen to repeat themselves. This is just like when he was a boy living in Seagard; his tormenters never left him alone then either.

“I am just doing it to find my brothers,” he objects, voice shaky and not as strong-sounding as he had hoped. “They are out there somewhere.”

“They are out there somewhere,” Bags mocks him in a posh accent, a direct insult to his origin. He is a southerner in their eyes, even though the Riverlands – his home – make up the central regions of Westeros; still, he does not speak like the northerners do, with that thick, brawny accent that misses out letters and has the habit of using the wrong words in the wrong places. “They’re dead ‘n’ you know it,” Bags crows, scratching the stubble of his beard as if to prove just how much of a man he is. “Yer just bein’ a little coward. Yer can't stand to be around proper men, ‘n’ yer can’t stand to be around women neither! My gods, Rivers, yer gonna die a maid at this rate.”

They all have a little cackle at that joke, the other three endorsing their leader – even Lofty, to Chanyeol’s disappointment. Chanyeol, on the other hand, grits his teeth to try and collect himself. He is a sworn brother of the Night’s Watch, and he intends to remain true to this oath. Why is he being ridiculed for refusing to fuck a whore in the middle of the night? That, and why can these poor, bored bastards not just leave him alone? He is not going to give them the satisfaction of providing the response they want, so they should either find someone else to bother or do something useful for once.

In order to avoid any and all kinds of conflict, Chanyeol simply turns and leaves. He decides to hide out in the library for a little while, practising his reading, and return to his bunk when Bags has gotten tired of taunting him and waiting for him to reappear. To him, it sounds like a good enough plan. The search party is to set off tomorrow morning, he just needs to hold out until then, and what better place to do so than in the library? When dawn breaks, the Wall will be in his dust for a good many months, a perfect amount of time for Bags and his cronies to calm down and shove their cocks in a number of different women, maybe find another victim to play with too.

“Yeah, tha’s it! Run away, Rivers! Yer not one of us anymore!” are Bags’ parting words, making Chanyeol’s skin crawl. He may have avoided a clash with his old friends, but inside he battles with himself ferociously. He is midway between commending himself and scolding himself, congratulating himself on his resolve and cursing himself for being too prude. But, his oath. He wants to keep his oath; yet in a time where the oath just seems to be a few rhyming verses you say to get out of a death penalty for raping and pillaging somewhere else in Westeros, Chanyeol does not know how much value it holds anymore. And if he should ever make it back to Castle Black alive, it is unlikely that he will have anyone to lean on. He will be one of those lonely old men that try and befriend the young boys who come in because he’ll be desperate for some kind of human interaction. Just thinking about it sends chills down his spine.

Still, perhaps that’s what is so good about going beyond the Wall. Maybe that was what had compelled him to stand up in the first place. People die out there in the wilderness, for there are multiple ways to do so, and maybe his subconscious longs to meet the same fate. On the other hand, he could achieve something great once he’s past the Haunted Forest and deep into the Frostfangs. He could even be the first person to map out the Lands of Always Winter, where explorers have ventured but never returned. Suddenly, the future holds so many different possibilities, a chance to learn the world he lives in just a little better before he dies, and with that, he manages to quell his raging thoughts for the night.

Quite happily, the crow spends a grand total of five hours holed away between the stacks, poring over a history book and stuttering out broken syllables of the words he believes to be on the page. He knows all the letters and their sounds, but even so, sometimes he struggles with matching them
When he was younger, he had never been taught how to read or write, hardly tutored on how to speak either. To be quite frank, he had never even had the need to know how to recognise the Common Tongue on paper, yet the life of a Sworn Brother is much different to that of a child. It is only since he joined the Night’s Watch that he has actually seen a book.

Raised as an orphan, the woman who looked after him worked most days and most nights. She was the mistress of his real mother, who worked as a whore in her establishment. Too busy being busy, she never had the time, nor the knowledge herself, to teach Chanyeol the abilities that most people struggle to live without. Nevertheless, Maester Kluse is a kind, old man, willing to offer him assistance every so often. He was a great help in the beginning when Chanyeol first arrived at the Wall aged ten, but since he has grown older the maester has either gotten busier or seen him as less of a priority. It does not bother Chanyeol, though, as he believes he knows just about enough to teach himself the rest. All the learning keeps his mind busy.

Someone who is not kind, however, is the brother who helps Maester Kluse in his duties. When Chanyeol first came to the Watch he had wanted to send a letter home to tell his adoptive mother that he was alright, that he had made it safely and had settled in alright. It was only a small ask, a task that would have taken less than a few moments. Despite that, the brother had spat in his face and thrown him from the rookery, proceeding to slam the door in his face and make him burst into tears. Sometimes he wonders how much that has had an impact on his willingness to ever ask for things, to ever seek out another person’s company. It had shaken him to the core back then.

So he has learned to find solace in the silence, comfort in his own company, and feels rather at peace with the fact that no one is here to judge him for whatever he chooses to do. He can sit and read all day if he likes, or he could just stare at the pictures and no one would be able to say anything. Despite this, going it alone also means he is isolating himself; being in the library, where hardly any of the other brothers ever step foot, causes him to block himself off from more than just people. There could be a fight going on out in the courtyard and he would never know about it, or the horn may sound and he might not be able to hear it. People say that ignorance is bliss, but in reality, ignorance just fuels anxiety, especially if it is a voluntary type of situation. The speculation brought on by it turns him insane.

Hunched over his latest book, he adopts a nervous anticipation for tomorrow morning. Yet with that and the howling wind, Chanyeol hardly sleeps at all. He is restless in his bed, tossing and turning, flinching at anything that sounds remotely like footsteps. His paranoia is cruel to him, managing to convince his fearful mind that Bags is going to come and smother him while he slumbers. With weeks of weary travelling ahead of him, it is not the best mindset to have. There are worse things than Bags north of the Wall.

Being a natural early riser, at the first crack of dawn Chanyeol is out of his bed and sorting through his things, deciding what to take and what to leave behind. Admittedly, he has little in the way of personal belongings, retaining only a couple of handmade whistles and a small wooden fish he keeps as a token of good luck, so it takes him hardly any time at all to gather what he believes to be necessities. After having packed an extra pair of clothes and a mat to sleep on, Chanyeol heads out for breakfast, finding a few other volunteers already in the common hall over steaming bowls of soup.

About an hour later, he receives the call to come to the courtyard, and there he finds Lord Commander Kim loading up his saddlebag with Ser Whimfrey. As Chanyeol is only a brother of no notable station, he will be walking the trails of footsteps and dung, soldering on through the feet deep snow without permission to complain. He is alright with it, though; he did volunteer for this.
To ease his thoughts, he just tells himself that he’s getting ‘the full experience’, or something of the sort, at least.

On his shoulders is his bearskin backpack, filled only halfway with the basic things he will need on the journey. He has a few wineskins of ale, able to refilled with water once they are drained, and several pouches of food from the cook. Poking out of the top past the lid flap are his iron prongs, used for roasting meat over a campfire, and he has some flint from the blacksmith which he can scrape against his sword to catch a spark. There are a couple of pewter pots and pans in there too, for ease of consumption, and a long coil of rope. It’s true, he might not own many things, but it sure is light on his shoulders, and he thinks somewhat cheerily that he is very sensibly equipped.

As other brothers gather around him, he notices the familiar face of Zhang Yixing, who wears a leather coif and a dopey smile as snugly as a glove, humming quietly to himself while swaying questionably in the wind. Yixing has always been one of those people who ‘aren’t all there’, one of the people who never really seem to fit in, yet Chanyeol has never had a problem with him in the past. In fact, Chanyeol thinks him to be rather sweet, and his close friendship with a ranger named Luhan often has him boiling with envy. Luhan had gone out beyond the Wall with the most recent ranging party, so it comes as no surprise that Yixing is coming along to look for him.

The command to move out is given just as Chanyeol starts to shuffle himself towards the familiar face, and Yixing sends him a vacant smile as they begin passing under the Wall. The inner portcullis shimmies noisily out of their path, wound up on clinking chains that are hundreds of years old. Yixing’s humming tune of ‘The Bear and the Maiden Fair’ distracts Chanyeol from the imaginary weight pressing down on his shoulders, a result of seven-hundred feet worth of ice threatening his head as they move beneath it.

With a chill as suffocating as smoke, Chanyeol’s throat starts to ache and constrict. His eyes focus solely on the light at the end of the tunnel, a growing symbol of relief, while his ears listen intently to the soft words of Yixing’s song. Over their heads, the Wall groans like a straining ship, cracks and creaks echoing and magnifying until Chanyeol is convinced that it is all going to come crashing down to crush them. That would be just his luck, he thinks, to finally try and do something with his life and get killed before he has even started.

When they emerge north of the Wall, a convoy of ink blots against a blank canvas, Chanyeol takes one huge gulp of air and swallows down its icy bite. They made it, the Wall still intact, and for Chanyeol that is an achievement in and of itself. He has walked the top of the Wall plenty of times, being a builder and all. In spite of that, he has never gone beneath it, and he finds that there was a horribly ominous atmosphere in that tunnel. Still, the small success of making it out alive rejuvenates his resolve and assures him that he can do whatever it takes to make himself and his brothers proud. He can do this; he can make a change, do something important with his life and be remembered as a hero. He could even become immortalised in italic script, people writing of his renowned achievements beyond the Wall and putting him up there with the greats of Westeros.

Nevertheless, saving the lost rangers is easier said than done. They have a long walk ahead of them, a journey that will take months upon months to officially complete. Bring it on, Chanyeol urges, clenching his gloved hands into fists as he stomps on through the snow, treading in the indents made by the brothers ahead of him. Being athletic, it is no trouble for him to wade through frozen water, but about two hours in, with the sun blindingly low in the sky and the trees of the Haunted Forest all around them, Chanyeol begins to hear Yixing panting beside him. He casts a wary glance in his direction, finding the man flush-faced and breathing fire, and he reaches out to clap him on the shoulder, asking him if he is alright.

“Good enough,” is his response, followed by a little, breathless chortle. “This is hard work for
someone who only helps the cook. Don't really take on this kind of activity, only walk back and forth in the kitchen and the like.”

That is the morbid reality for all of them. They are not rangers, but brothers who were put into lesser taxing posts. Their party consists of stewards and builders, jobs that keep them tucked up and away from the world outside. The majority of them have never even been this side of the Wall in their life; Chanyeol has seen it, though, stood atop the Wall with his thick, black fur cloak billowing in the wind behind him as he treads gravel into the ice, creating gripping walkways for himself and the other brothers to use when patrolling the trenches. From his job, he has built up a considerable amount of muscle over the years, more so than those who run the hospitality side of things: cooking, cleaning, and tending to the Lord Commander.

Chanyeol had wanted to be ranger when he first arrived. At only ten years old, he was stationed as a steward instead. He brought the Lord Commander his meals and poured him his ale, even scrubbed his armour clean before he turned fourteen and was repositioned as a builder. He refused to see it as a promotion and would not accept that he was to be a builder for the rest of his life, and he retains the same notions to this day. Selfishly, he wants the glory of being a ranger, the fame of returning to Castle Black having killed a hundred wildlings single-handed. This is his pride talking, not necessarily his sense, yet he likes to let it babble away, creating delusional fantasies inside his head about him becoming Lord Commander and leading the Night’s Watch into a victorious battle against the savages.

They are merely a boy’s dreams, and they will most likely remain that way.

He is intuitive, though, and has a knack for working well under pressure. Not two months ago the Wall split several hundred metres down the south side, subject to vigorous sunshine and a surprising spell of heat blown up from the south. It was then his idea to mix water with gravel and wait until the coldest hour of the night, when the moonlight made the Wall glow a foreboding blue, to pour the solution down the crack and watch it instantly freeze. The crack had, for the most part, been filled, albeit the Wall will be forevermore weaker in that area that it had been before. Chanyeol sometimes wonders whether he is too good at his job, whether the Lord Commander will make him First Builder rather than a ranger when Clifford Banks, the current First Builder, passes on. He does not want to be stuck dealing with ice for the rest of his life, lest his fingers freeze off.

From maps he has seen, Chanyeol knows that they are following the route that the rangers tend to take on their patrols, heading through the forest and looping around Yifan’s Keep before travelling east towards Eastwatch-by-the-sea, another Night’s Watch fortification along the base of the Wall. It is likely, Chanyeol guesses, that they will stop at Yifan’s for provisions and information, as Yifan has been a friend of the Watch for years, helping out rangers in their time of need and sending warnings of wildling activity back to the Lord Commander at Castle Black. He lives in a small settlement with his six wives and fourteen children, the only wildlings that the brothers do not attack on principle.

Each night on their way to Yifan’s Keep, they stop to make camp between the trees, erecting tents to protect themselves from snowfall and starting fires to keep the cold at bay. Chanyeol chooses to share a tent with Yixing, and together they strap some ropes between two pairs of trees and drape their cloaks over the top, laying out their sleeping mats over the tree root riddled ground.

“S’pose everyone is expecting me to cook, aren’t they?” Yixing sighs as he rubs his palms together before removing his coif and ruffling out his flattened tawny hair. “That's the curse of the cook’s assistant,” he jokes, making Chanyeol smile as he finishes dropping his bags from his shoulders.

“I’ll light a fire,” the crow announces, leaving for some alone time as he finds the driest wood he
The further away he walks, the louder his lonely footsteps become, snow and ice crunching under the thick skin of his soles. Around him, the sun is setting, sky glowing amber through the greyscale trunks of the trees as darkness soon drains everything of its colour. There are hardly any signs of life around him, save for the glow of his brothers’ fires a way off behind him, and he stops for a moment to just listen to the silence.

Where others would find it eerie, he finds it calming, as the comfort of knowing that he is quite far from other human beings makes him feel energised rather than isolated. He has always been this way: not much of a person person. Conversations are hard to maintain, and knowing what to say next is a gift that Chanyeol does not possess; even thinking about what to say is a most draining task, and generally, he still tends to say the wrong thing whether he has a period of deliberation or not. This is probably why he is no good in the event of an argument either, so pressured for success that he stumbles over his own thoughts, let alone his words. Perhaps, he is too ambitious for his own good.

Around the campfires, he sits in the shadows as he listens in on other brothers’ stories, Yixing humming cheerily beside him, a kind reminder that he is not alone. Thankfully, Yixing does not seem to be much of a talker either, so all in all, his company is alright. The cook’s assistant roasts them a rabbit over Chanyeol’s crackling firewood, and together they enjoy tearing the supple meat from a few spindly bones, the muscles making Chanyeol’s insides feel warm. He would thank Yixing for the meal, but he feels too awkward to do that.

The Lord Commander makes an announcement just before bed, declaring, as Chanyeol had suspected, that they are going to make a stop at Yifan’s Keep to see if he has any information on the missing rangers. Not only that, but apparently the Shadow Tower in the west has also been losing ranging parties, and they are to meet up with their commander, Huang Zitao, later on. Chanyeol guesses that the rendezvous point will be the Fist of the First Men: a huge stone hill beside the Milkwater river that rises high into the air, dominating the treetops and breaking the bleak horizon. It is commonplace.

Privately, he does some quick calculations in his head and works out that it will probably take them another two weeks, at most, to get to the Fist. He finds himself sympathising with Yixing, who is mumbling complaints about how his thighs just won’t stop aching.

With Yifan’s Keep being sixty miles away from Castle Black, it takes them further three days to reach the point where they can see it through the trees. Night has fallen by the time they arrive, Chanyeol urging himself towards the golden lanterns of the homestead in the distance with the promise of good food and warmth, excited to eat chickens and not squirrels. His body is feeling the effects of starvation, and just like Yixing, his muscles are sore all over. Four days of nonstop trekking will do that to you, Chanyeol is sure.

The homestead is a collection of three huts, the main one almost triple the size of the other two, with the pinnacle of its roof just shy of the lowest branches on the surrounding pines. Lichen clings onto the bark like a parasite, staining the trees with white, green and sometimes orange patches. The clearing itself isn’t overly large, Yifan’s Keep having been built around the nature rather than on it, and Chanyeol finds it to be a cosy establishment. With frequent fire pits around the perimeter and the welcoming smell of roasting meat, it is the last shred of comfort they will have for weeks.

There are dirt tracks trodden into the snow, winding this way and that to extra bunks and stables. Pigs snort and laze about in muddy pens whilst chickens cluck in the yard; they skip after a scruffy looking girl who is throwing handfuls of seed into the air, trying to lure them back into their own
enclosures.

The black brothers descend upon the homestead like hungry crows, gathering around the fire in the centre of the main hut, a dusty and gloomy space, to soak in the heat. They congregate to sit on the upturned trunks of axed trees and the occasional solid stump, with roots still intact and lurking in the shadows of the floor, waiting to trip up unsuspecting passers-by. Without a chimney, the smoke gets caught up in the rafters, turning clear air into a hazy grey fog that clouds vision and disrupts their breathing. The fog is warm, though, so Chanyeol’s not complaining.

On the upper level, supported by scaffolds and boarded by planks of spruce wood, is where the beds of Yifan’s wives reside. As Chanyeol and his fellow brothers are handed fresh ale by three of Yifan’s eight daughters, the wives peer down over the edge to gawp at them, only their eyes clear through the relentless intertwining funnels of smoke.

“I expected yer sooner, Junmyeon.” Yifan greets the Lord Commander with a firm handshake, a signal of bonded brotherhood that has been built up over the past years, and a smile. They have been solid friends since Lord Commander Kim assumed his position twelve years ago, one of the youngest to lead the Night’s Watch in history.

Wu Yifan is over double the age of the Lord Commander, but that does not seem to have hindered their relationship; he stands tall at over six feet, dressed in a fading black tunic and breeches which are just about long enough to reach the rim of his dusty leather snow boots, head covered in an abundance of golden locks that he has tucked behind his ears from a middle parting. Chanyeol looks at him with something akin to envy, shrinking under the man’s intimidatingly good looks, and he thinks it comes as no surprise that he has six wives.

“We’ve been waitin’ for yer to get here. Got somethin’ of yours,” Yifan says, appearing smug in the upward cast shadows.

“Something of mine?”

Instead of replying, Yifan cups his hands around his mouth and calls up to the rafters, the undeniable shout of, “Come out, baby crow!” leaving his lips. The word ‘crow’ piques everyone’s interest, Chanyeol’s slouch mutating as he straightens out his posture as if that will help him see better through the fierce pollution, the firelight emitting shadows of trickery and deceit. He watches intently as a shadowy figure begins to climb down a ladder from the ramshackle upper floor. There is a moment of silence, even Yixing stops humming, but soon the man’s face is revealed and people are bounding from the logs in shock.

“Luhan!”

Yixing is up and running in less than a second, taking the gaunt ranger into his arms and squashing him in one almighty hug. The Lord Commander goes over to check if the ranger is alright, spending only a little while on pleasantries before he is asking after the other missing brothers in his party. The Lord Commander has never been one to rule with his emotions.

“I... I don’t know where they are,” the recovered ranger admits shakily, eyes wide and troubled as if trying to see around painful memories. He steps out of Yixing’s embrace to look over the room, stood on the opposite side of the fire to Chanyeol where the crow struggles to see him. Distinctly, though, his eyes glisten.

“There was... There was a storm and we... we all got separated. I was alone in the snow and it was so dark, the fog was so thick that I could hardly see anything. My horse spooked and threw me off so I was running blind. I called out to them but I got no answer, and then I saw... I saw a blue glow
in the distance. I had nowhere else to go so I started towards it, somehow I thought it might be Cain or—or Joe, but it wasn’t. Oh gods, it wasn’t.”

“What was it?” the Lord Commander presses, taking a threatening step forwards as if scaring the information out of Luhan is the best course of action. Nevertheless, the brothers share the same avid fixation. Time is of the essence, and they need the facts as quickly as possible.

“It—He was a man,” the ranger stammers. “A skeleton with white hair and bright blue eyes. It was so cold, my limbs almost froze up in place. I screamed but I couldn’t hear myself over the wind, he was reaching out to me so I bolted. I remember looking over my shoulder and realising that he was following me. He wasn’t running but his steps were huge, like he was gliding over the snow. I just remember thinking that I was going to die.”

“It’s alright now, it’s okay,” Yixing smiles, taking Luhan into his arms and tucking the ranger’s head under his chin. His eyes betray him, just as horrified as everyone else at the stirring tale.

“I don’t understand what he was but he—it wasn’t human,” Luhan sobs into Yixing’s cloak, clinging onto him with vigour as if he is afraid of being alone all over again. “I swear it by the old gods and the new, he wasn’t human. I thought I was going to die, I really did. I thought it was the end. I think it took the others.”

“All of them?” another brother asks from over the fire, receiving an answering nod from Luhan who peeks up over Yixing’s shoulder just long enough to deliver it.

“I have scouted the area since and found no trace of them,” he admits, tone inked with regret. He eases out of Yixing’s hold to face the brothers single-handedly. No doubt he blames himself for all of this, as if he could have somehow prevented the storm and kept his brothers safe all by himself, but Chanyeol is sure that he and everyone else in the room do not share the same views. How could Luhan be at fault? Sure, the thing about the skeleton with blue eyes sounds a little crazy but he probably went into shock and had multiple seizures of panic at the time. One cannot always be brave.

“I don’t know where they would have gone,” Luhan shrugs hopelessly, apologetic. “We always said that if one of us got separated from the others we would come back here to regroup. But I woke up here alone. The others, they’re… gone. They’re all gone.”

There is a scoff in the room, apparent in the silence. “All six?” the Lord Commander asks shrewdly, clearly not impressed, and the look on his face makes Luhan burst into tears again.

“You think I’m mad!” the ranger cries hysterically, being ushered back into Yixing’s arms as tears gush down his face. “Lord Commander, I swear it! There was something out in that storm! Something evil! Something truly evil! Why would I lie about this? They were my brothers! My brothers!”

Yet no matter what Luhan says, it will all still sound like the deluded story of a man who was terrified and alone in the woods. The Lord Commander does not believe him, probably thinks it all to be a panicked hallucination, and so he quickly turns the conversation onto other prospects; namely, dinner.

Around the campfire, the brothers tuck in to several helpings of chicken broth, washing down the boiled clumps of meat and soggy carrot slices with their ales from earlier. It is nothing spectacular, no great feast to rave about over a game of cards, and so Chanyeol stays completely silent throughout the whole thing, speaking to no one and only listening to the hushed words of reassurance shared between Yixing and Luhan who are sat beside him. He stiffens when he hears
the whisper, “Not here,” and speedily flickers his gaze to the right to see Luhan puckering his lips. He is surprised further still to discover that they are practically sat on top of one another, their bodies melded together so much so that it becomes hard to identify where Yixing ends and Luhan begins; what he assumes to be the latter’s hand turns out to be Yixing’s when it bends at a peculiar angle.

As Chanyeol observes further, he notices soft caresses placed carefully on cheeks and gentle whispers spoken intimately into ears, lips so close they brush against skin. Feeling way out of his comfort zone, Chanyeol flushes and looks away, clinging onto his mug of ale to distract himself. That is one way to get around breaking the oath, he then realises. Relieving sexual frustrations with the means of another man is definitely not likely to give you a son. Still, turning that way is not for everyone, conclusively not Bags. But, him? Chanyeol cannot help but be curious. He joined the Watch and left women behind before he even went through the change, before he felt the urges and became a man. They are urges that a secret part of him wants to quell, yet intimacy has always been near impossible for him to obtain. If he struggles to make friends at Castle Black, he is even less likely to make those sorts of friends.

When the Lord Commander reemerges from a dark corner, the place where he has enjoyed his own meal in private with Yifan where eager words were exchanged over the flicker of a candle, Yixing and Luhan successfully disentangle themselves from one another. Of course, lying with a man is a sin, or so the gods claim. The Lord Commander might have them put to death if he knew.

“Yifan doesn’t know anythin’ else other than what Luhan has said,” their commander announces, gesturing to Luhan with a half-hearted point. It is clear that he is unhappy with the results of their stay here. They may have found Luhan, but he knows just as much as Yifan does about the other rangers stranded in the woods – if there are any. Still, Chanyeol would assume that the Lord Commander should remain upbeat and enthusiastic about their search rather than moan and groan. Apparently, that is not the case. By the way things are going so far, it really does seem like all the other rangers have died one way or another, so would the Lord Commander not be adamant on trying to persuade the brothers otherwise? It all just seems like a lost cause.

“He is givin’ us provisions to go on to the Fist of the First Men,” he says stoically, gloved hands on his hips as his eyes move beadily around the room, “and there I’ll talk with Zitao before we continue any further.”

Beside him, Chanyeol hears Luhan gasp. “Y-You mean—” he breathes, voice catching in his throat. “You mean you are going after the others? The other rangers?” he asks, alarmed once again.

“Y-You can’t! It’s not safe out here anymore! They’re wandering in the woods! They’ll bring a storm down upon us and swamp us all! We won’t stand a chance!”

Petrified of the mere idea alone, Luhan crumbles into a blubbering mess, hurling appearances aside and burying his face into Yixing’s leather chest again.

When Chanyeol thinks of Luhan, he pictures the strong, confident ranger that used to stride through the Castle Black courtyard nodding to all his platonic admirers like he was the human embodiment of the Warrior. He had been the youngest ranger of the Watch at one point, his skills outdoing the men who had been riding out beyond the Wall ten years before he was even born, and he knew it. Joining the Watch means a man forsakes all his previous lands and titles, but even with the clean slate, Chanyeol and the other brothers could tell he was a nobleman, probably some lord’s bastard. He used to be so level headed, so calm, yet that is a far cry from the man Chanyeol sees before him. What exactly happened out there in the woods? Did he hit his head?

“Yixing,” the Lord Commander says, grabbing the man’s attention. “In the mornin’, yer’ll escort
Luhan back to Castle Black. He is in no fit state to continue our mission.” It is a surprising bout of empathy from a man so out of tune to people’s feelings, and Chanyeol finds his jaw going slack.

All his life, the Lord Commander has ignored the signs that he might need some reassurance or human company. Chanyeol thought the man incapable, but apparently he just does not care. What makes Luhan so special? Why does Luhan have the Lord Commander’s favour? How is he any different to anyone else? And is it selfish to crave the same understanding from a man who he used to – and still does – look up to? As much as he respects Luhan, he starts to scrutinize him.

They are useless questions, yet Chanyeol lets them consume him anyway.

Immediately, Yixing encloses Luhan in his arms protectively, and for some reason it makes Chanyeol jealous. He watches them with this annoying jitter in his chest, like his heart is anxious to have the same.

“Yes, Lord Commander,” Yixing nods fervently. “I shall do as you ask.”

Well, there goes Chanyeol’s familiar face; but as he looks tiredly from man to man, all of them huddled around the smoking fire for a sense of warmth, Chanyeol worries for another reason. They are still a week away from the meeting point, a journey that will not be easy and is going to lead onto yet another journey which will be more than trying. There are only nine of them now, Chanyeol included, and he starts to ponder on whether or not it is actually worth trying at all. The Night’s Watch is losing men; they simply do not have the strength or the numbers to track down those who have gotten lost so they might as well be throwing their own lives away. He could be dead before he has even lived, never to experience the glory of a great victory or, as oath-breaking as it is, the warmth of a woman in his bed – or a man. He could very easily die before he gets a taste of what Yixing and Luhan have. He will never love or be loved, he will never bear witness to someone’s affections for him. Chanyeol supposes that he might have already thrown away his life anyway, by joining the Watch in the first place.

His teeth chatter, invisible to the eye, as he debates whether or not to go up to the Lord Commander and voice his thoughts. After all, their leader could be thinking the same, but out of moral duty is refusing to give up. What a farce it would be, to come out beyond the Wall in some brash bravado of strength and power, only to come crawling back a week later with tails tucked timidly between their legs, like the winter has scolded them.

“We had all best get a good night’s sleep,” are the Lord Commander’s final words before he leaves the hut at Yifan’s side, and Chanyeol takes that as his cue to claim the most uncluttered spot on the floor.

He sets his cloak down against the back wall, lying with his face staring at nought but the plaster in the hopes that it will literally bore him to sleep. It does not have that great of an effect, though, when his ears are still very much awake and listening to the suspicious lip-smacking noises of a certain duo who are resting out in the corner closest to where he has staked land. It feels wrong to be listening in on something so private, but then again, he can counter that with the argument that they shouldn’t be doing such things in a place so public.

“‘We had all best get a good night’s sleep,” are the Lord Commander’s final words before he leaves the hut at Yifan’s side, and Chanyeol takes that as his cue to claim the most uncluttered spot on the floor.

He cringes when the ‘I love you’s are exchanged, wondering why he has to put up with this when all he really wants to do is sleep. He cannot find it in himself to tell them to put a sock in it though, and so he listens to their sleepy whispers, a conversation of fear and blue eyes, and of Yixing promising Luhan that he will keep him safe, without an outward complaint.

Approximately six hours later, before dawn has even broken the horizon, the loudest rooster in Westeros decides to stalk into the hut and scare them all awake with the most ungodly squawk
Chanyeol has ever heard. He has to stay lying down for a while just rubbing his chest in order to get his startled heart to settle, nursing himself with thoughts of how it’s all alright and it’s just a bloody chicken. Near him, he hears the gentle coos of Yixing getting Luhan to wake up, and once a breakfast of bread has been consumed, he is watching his two brothers disappear between the pines, retracing their steps back to certainty.

They are a pitiful movement now, nine weak, and Chanyeol clenches his fists as he stands out in the blaring sunshine, the snow on the ground glaring in his eyes. The Lord Commander is shifting about the stables, selecting a pig that they can take with them because there will be next to no game in the woods the further north they get, and Chanyeol decides that he has finally had enough. He has laid his life down for the Watch, yes, but he refuses to abandon his life altogether.

“Lord Commander!” His voice is wobblier than he would have liked, yet it is a direct result of confrontation and it would be futile to try and dispel it. Already, Chanyeol feels queasy and has the desire to run and hide, pretending he never said anything; this desire increases tenfold when the Lord Commander actually looks up at him and meets his eyes. He already appears irritated enough from running around in a pen of mud, and here comes Chanyeol about to make it worse. What great timing he has.

“Lord Commander,” he says again, panting against his heartbeat once he finally comes to a stop by the wooden fence separating them, having tracked around clucking chickens and his brothers leading their horses from the stables. “I have to ask you, do you think this is worth it? There are nine of us out here, risking our lives for people who are most likely dead. Do you not think this is a little pointless? We would be of more use defending the Wall, surely.”

The reproach that then mars the Lord Commander’s face makes Chanyeol’s insides curdle. The commander looks half surprised and half repulsed, disgusted by Chanyeol’s defiance. In his mind, Chanyeol starts to curse himself out. This was not a good idea.

“Listen, Chanyeol,” the Lord Commander says, exasperated, and turns away from his pig catching endeavours to deal with another problematic animal instead – him. “Our rangers are trained men. They are rangers for a reason, because they know how to survive beyond the Wall, out here in the wilderness. They don’t drop down dead at the first flurry of snow or cower in fear at a patch of fog. I thought Luhan to be made of stronger stuff, but I was wrong. He is an anomaly, not a representative for the rest of the rangers we have.”

For some reason unbeknownst to Chanyeol, he think it a good idea to keep going, rambling himself deeper and deeper into the ground until he is six feet under.

“But the storm he mentioned, we could be hit by one of the same, separated from each other. And with winter rolling in, it will be near impossible to find any game in these woods. We cannot rely on Yifan’s provisions alone if we do not want to starve.”

“Rangers have been going missin’ for months now, Chanyeol,” his leader counters with an agitated tone, face flushed a little as a scowl overcomes his passive features. Clearly, Chanyeol’s berating is not going down well. “Not just from Castle Black, but from the Shadow Tower and Eastwatch-by-the-sea. To kill a weed, Chanyeol, yer have to take it out by its root, and if the root of our problem is here, beyond the Wall, then this is where we must be.

“What good would we be if we sat in Castle Black doing nothin’, leavin’ our brothers to die out here when they could be saved? I shall live and die at my post, I pledge my life and honour to the Night’s Watch, for this night and all the nights to come. Do yer not remember the oath yer made, brother? As Lord Commander, I am inclined to remind yer of it. We, the Night’s Watch, are a part of the realms of men. We protect our brothers. But tenfold is our responsibility to protect all those
livin’ south of the Wall. If there is somethin’ stirrin’ out here, it is our job to find and identify it.

“My judgement is final, Chanyeol. I have been in the Night’s Watch for longer than you have, and have been Lord Commander for twelve years of my life. It is not yer place to meddle in our affairs. I give yer orders and you obey them. I don’t need advice from the likes of a green boy from the south who knows nothin’ of winter. What knowledge could you possibly provide me when yer can’t even read a bloody piece of paper? Now go and help yer brothers pack, we’re movin’ out before noon and I expect yer to be cooperative, otherwise we might have a problem.”

‘Offended’ does not cut it, not now. Chanyeol stares wide-eyed as the Lord Commander turns away from him to resume his pig catching, rolling his eyes as he goes as if Chanyeol is some annoying little brother who will not leave him alone until he has nagged his tongue away. It is just like Seagard, he cannot help but think, fingers beginning to tremble as he tries to grab at the dislodged shards of his mind. It is Seagard all over again. In Seagard he had been nought but a boy.

He is a man of the Watch now. He needs to be strong. He cannot cry at a little telling off, a little declaration of his (almost non-existent) worth. His chest thinks otherwise, physically aching at such slander spoken from nothing less than his idol’s lips, and with a heavy heart, he leaves to do as he is told.

Once all is in order, the brothers of the Night’s Watch continue on. Chanyeol, alone and at the rear, is now coming to regret his decision of volunteering. He realises that he had only done so as a way to get away from Bags and the others; he had never really taken into account the fact that they would be basically hunting for corpses which have probably long since been buried under humungous drifts of snow.

When they had first set out, this mission had not seemed so bad. Yixing was with him, humming songs, and for some reason he had been foolish enough to hope that saving his brothers could be achieved. They have found Luhan, yes, but only because someone from Yifan’s homestead had found him first. The others he had been with remain undiscovered, lost to a storm, and the chances of them being alive are very slim indeed.

Still, to save his own head, Chanyeol goes along with it all anyway. He trudges through the knee-high snow, goes plunging forwards when tree roots ensnare his numbing feet and endures the blatant divide that has settled between him and the rest of the group. He does not talk to anyone, does not even know their names, and he is clueless as to whether it is his fault, their fault, or the Lord Commander’s fault. Yes, he does not talk much; yes, he is a bit awkward when it comes to other people, but he does not mean to be. He was cursed from the moment he was born, bred to be an outsider, the nomad lone wolf that was discarded from the pack for getting in the way. Raised by a woman who had seven children of her own flesh and blood, it is no revelation that Chanyeol had been the black sheep of the family – if he could even be considered a part of the family at all.

* * *

For six days they trek through a forest that looks the same at every turn, Chanyeol entertaining the idea that they are lost for what could be perceived as a crazy amount of time. The novelty of being
beyond the Wall has worn off completely, he finds, as he stumbles about blindly through the trees, failing to gather his bearings without making himself dizzy. He had been silly to think that such a place would harbour opportunities and possibilities unknown, when all it is, is a barren wasteland of ice owned by savages – savages they have yet to come across. No great things await him here. Only death and an unmarked grave.

Silence is broken up by ragged breaths, the panting of his brothers as they trudge off ahead of him. He follows in their footfalls, legs aching with every step now that he has been walking for almost a week straight with no sight of the end. Each night they stop to make camp, and as Chanyeol watches the moon in the sky from his perch on the snow, he realises just how much of an outcast he has become. Not even the Lord Commander would care if something happened to him, for he is meddlesome and gets in the way, and all would be better if he were not here.

“What am I doing?” he asks himself, voice just below a whisper, as he blinks up through the blue treetops to where the stars reign. A defeatist sigh follows as he replays the words of his oath in his head: Night gathers, and now my watch begins. It shall not end until my death. Eleven years he has spent here, under the pretence that he is doing good, serving a purpose. Yet now his life feels empty. His faceless brothers are going out beyond the Wall and falling victim to whatever it is that’s out here, and it all feels like they have just walked into one gigantic trap. What makes them any different from the rangers, if not their skillsets being less colourful? Surely they will be picked off too, when the time comes. There are only nine of them.

Every day, he has his eyes peeled wide in search of a white, skeletal man meandering about the woods. He does not know what to make of Luhan’s panicked recount, does not know whether Luhan had just been seeing things in his terror, but it still strikes fear in him. It would be disappointingly feasible if the reason behind Luhan’s chilling tale were that his mind had been worked up into a frenzy about how he was separated from his group and was going to die alone without anyone ever recovering his body. His description, however, sounds a lot like a certain mystical creature that has not been seen for over eight thousand years, and Chanyeol finds himself gripping the pummel of his sword with renewed vigour. No White Walker is going to catch him unprepared.

The trees faze out on the sixth day of travel since the homestead, making way for huge plains of pure white stretching out before them. The plains guides them easily towards the colossal stone hill, its form rising up and out of the ground in a tall, thick column before expanding to create the fist-like shape it is known for and named after. The outline dominates the skyline, a jagged black structure with rivers of white bleeding down from where its mountainous fingers clamp down around the frosted heart of the north.

They climb on the east-side where the slope is less steep, and chug along like stinking pack horses laden with Yifan’s provisions and equipment for tents. Chanyeol slips multiple times on the rocky surface, for even though the incline is the shallowest here, it is still an unfavourable walking spot. By standing on ground loosened by the boots of his brothers, Chanyeol finds the rocks he walks on crumbling away under his feet. Ice bites at his face, stinging his eyes, and his teeth feel fuzzy, all side effects of being in the uncivilised part of the world that he wishes he could leave.

From somewhere up above, a howling horn sounds throughout the skies, a loud and clear blast of “Uuhhhooooooo” sending shivers down Chanyeol’s spine. It announces their arrival, and when Chanyeol finally reaches the top of the hill, panting and exhausted, he is greeted by the sight of men dressed in black everywhere, brothers from the Shadow Tower come to join their cause.

He enters a campsite erected amidst the snow, pegged black tents nestled firmly against the bases of rock formations to shelter them from the merciless wind that rolls in from over the Frostfangs to
the west. Around them for miles is the treetop sea and the shapes of mountains carving their way upwards into the aquamarine sky. Clouds brew further in the north, raging like demons on the horizon.

Sentries guard their temporary settlement, lined up along the outskirts of the precipice, keeping a keen eye out on the surrounding flatlands for any incomers; a few of them wear horns tied to ropes over their shoulders. Within the scurrying brothers hauling sleds of resources back and forth, Chanyeol spies out the Lord Commander as he embraces the Shadow Tower’s commander, Huang Zitao, an older man with over thirty years experience in the Night’s Watch, all sallow skin, deep set wrinkles and piercing eyes.

Over the gusts of wind and the shouts of men around him, Chanyeol struggles to hear their conversation, and goes about his own business following the brothers from Castle Black to their section of the encampment. He drops his things, helps to build a fire, and begins to pluck three chickens that they can all eat for dinner, his brothers finally noticing him now that he has food in his hands. Perhaps he should carry a chicken around with him permanently, people might like him more.

With food in their bellies and the warmth of fire fighting back the brunt of the cold, they are all gathered to hear the words of the Lord Commander and his deputy.

Their way forward comes in the form of splitting into smaller groups in order to cover more ground. “We can travel faster and lighter this way,” Zitao points out, voice deep and rough, northern at its roots. “Our rangers have either gone off track to chase wildlin’s, or ‘ave been taken captive by ‘em, so we’ll be scoutin’ wildlin’ territory to try ‘n’ get ‘em back.”

Chanyeol does not like the plan at all. Together, they have strength in numbers, but split into little groups like this, it is as though they are asking to be picked off one by one with ‘please’s and ‘thank you’s. He sympathises with their lost brothers, knowing that they will probably never be recovered, but he feels even more sorry for himself. He should have stayed at the Wall in Castle Black, far away from all of this nonsense and its poor planning and preparation; now he is going to have to trek around mountains with nought but a snowy wasteland surrounding him in the company of two or three other people who will not even acknowledge his existence. It would be alright if he knew this was only temporary, if it would be over soon, but the uncertainty looms overhead like the grey clouds threatening a snowstorm. He could die out here, cease to breathe and feel, and he will be doing so alone and lost. No one would carry his body back to the Wall.

They all have a couple of days rest while the two commanders lay out and organise plans for all ten different ranging groups. Like a tutor controlling a child, Chanyeol is placed with Lord Commander Kim. He does not see it as a compliment, for the Lord Commander does not want him at his side because of his great fighting prowess or his tried and tested acumen. He does not see it as a chance to prove himself or to get on the man’s good side either. He resembles it to having a collar around his neck, his leash in the Lord Commander’s hands as the man trains him to be a well behaved dog and not speak any more of how their mission is likely to be a fruitless failure. Just like a hound, he is too scared to bite back. But one day, he might just be hungry enough.

On the third morning of their stay, they are given the command to start packing up necessities. A group of fifteen men are to remain behind at the Fist, ordered to wait for the rangers’ return once they have successfully made their thirty mile round trips through different sections of the wildling territory. They are also instructed to hunt game in the surrounding woods and collect safe water for the long journey home, once all of this is over. It is an optimistic plan, Chanyeol muses bitterly.

There are ten groups in total, consisting of the nine men from Castle Black and the five-and-thirty
from the Shadow Tower. Hope is not all lost, for their paths will intertwine over the course of the next several weeks and the individual groups will not be cut off completely from one another. Still, hope remains slim, faith a slither. Chanyeol actually prays before he leaves, just to gain some kind of spiritual backup. If his brothers do not look out for him, perhaps the Warrior will.

Alongside the Lord Commander, he is with another brother from Castle Black, one who indirectly (though, probably unintentionally as well) introduces himself as a total kiss-arse. His name is Harold and he looks as pompous as he speaks, one of those goody little two shoes from down south who reckons himself an admirably rebellious vagabond for stealing a loaf of bread once and stabbing the baker who came after him. Chanyeol wonders how the Lord Commander can stand him, for he never shuts up, drawling on and on like the long plait of smoky black hair that runs down his back. As more time passes and he anticipates Harold’s next sentences more and more, knowing that there is always another quirky anecdote waiting around the corner, Chanyeol realises that Harold is probably doing this to make him feel left out. Divide and conquer, as it were.

It’s working.

Chanyeol’s chest aches at the feeling of being so wilfully ignored. Is he really that annoying? For the love of the gods, what did he do? All the way along, he shoots daggers into the backs of their heads, the two of them walking in tandem ahead of him as if he is not here at all.

What is the point of this? What is the point of any of this? He has never had mutinous thoughts before, the idea of desertion in his head, and it scares him. All he wants is to feel needed, valued, and not even his Lord Commander, a man who is supposed to guide him and care for him, inspire him, can make him feel that way.

Their path leads them west towards the Skirling Pass and the Frostfangs, a ten league journey that will take them weeks to complete – weeks spent alone with them. The Skirling Pass is nature’s pathway between the rocky landscape, leading travellers directly into the smooth terrain before the mountain range known as the Frostfangs. Jagged peaks are scattered all across the west side of the north in messy and unpredictable patterns. Just thinking about how far he has to walk makes Chanyeol want to turn right back around and go home – wherever home is.

Why did Yixing have to leave him all on his own? Why did Luhan not man up and be the ranger he set out to be? It’s just his luck, really.

The small group mainly keep to the higher ground, lest they be spied on and shot from above, and Chanyeol finds himself traipsing over more craggy mountains, struggling through yet more snow on the desolate landscape. Stamping indignantly in the ditches left by the Lord Commander’s boots, he soldiers on behind them, forever in their shadow. His two companions will laugh and joke, doing so in a deliberately extravagant fashion just to make sure he can hear; on several occasions they have looked back at him before sniggering, as if to analyse that the joke – the insult – is true. He freezes when the Lord Commander even makes the remark of “Yer right,” to Harold before he chuckles away, laughing at Chanyeol’s expense. He would slide his sword between the man’s shoulder blades if he had the chance.

It carries on like this for much too long, in Chanyeol’s opinion. Backstabbing comments that blow towards him from ahead, ruthless words of mockery and taint. He wants to bury himself in the snow and never come out again, even if he would catch a cold and die a coward’s death. He will do anything at this point to save himself from this constant ridicule.

The monotony changes, however, about three days into their stretch. They are tootling around the side of a rock face when the Lord Commander puts his hands out to stop Harold from walking any further. Alert, he avidly hisses the words, “Wait! Wait! There’s someone there!”
Chanyeol scowls, because that is what Chanyeol does best, looking rather blankly between the Lord Commander’s face and a small funnel of smoke up ahead, filtering out from a cave in the side of the cliff face. To his left, a handful of rocks crumble from the side of the path, scattering down the twenty foot drop to the ground; it is always reassuring to know that death is only a couple of inches away.

Considering how dull their journey has been so far, without another human being in sight, Chanyeol’s first assumption is that it is another ranging party from the Fist. Perhaps they have stopped to eat or rest before carrying on in the night when the wildlings are more likely to appear – they have always been nocturnal creatures. However, when a figure steps out from the cave dressed in camouflaging light grey fur, the perfect disguise against the snow, Chanyeol’s heart palpitates in fear.

He does not believe it at first; how have they managed to come across a wildling in broad daylight? And by accident? Blinking like a mad man until multi-coloured spots disrupt his vision, Chanyeol tries to gather his wits and make sure that he is not hallucinating like Luhan. It could be a brother of the Night’s Watch in disguise. Their black cloak could be covered in so much snow that it has turned a cloud grey! These are all useless attempts, however, made by Chanyeol’s reluctance to believe what he sees before him. Confrontation will follow their discovery, and although the wildlings are on the opposing team, the dispute on his own side has left him feeling unsure of himself. That, and he really does not want to have to willingly put his life at risk for the shitheads he is currently with. They can be killed by the wildlings for all he cares. Good riddance.

The wildling is heedless to their presence, not having a reason to turn to the left and see them precariously pressed against the rock, failing to blend in. Instead, they look out to the plains of snow where the mountains are shallower and nothing more than large snow drifts built up around stone hills. It is all so painfully tense, the atmosphere then broken when Chanyeol’s ears tune in to Harold panting like a dog in the middle of summer. There is even drool running out the sides of his mouth. How disgusting.

His attention is swayed back to the wildling when they raise their arms above their head and stretch, the possible sound of a yawn reaching his ears. Chanyeol hates to admit that he had flinched at the act, somehow expecting an arrow to come shooting out of their sleeve to pierce his heart or an explosion to go off; he even hits his head on the rock behind him. Luckily, the Lord Commander and Harold are too busy being indifferent to notice, so at least he can deal with his embarrassment alone.

“How many do you suppose there are?” Harold tries to whisper, his attempt admirable but ridiculous due to the fact that his whisper is louder than his regular talking voice – and Chanyeol has heard that voice a lot over the past few days.

“There can’t be many,” the Lord Commander murmurs in response, hunched and squinting his eyes to get a better look. They are still about twenty feet away from said wildling and said cave, however, so Chanyeol does not know why he is bothered. It is not like they can see anything other than the one clueless wildling stood out in the open performing what looks to be a ritual dance because of how much they are stretching. “The cave looks no bigger than a wagon, and wildlin’s are known to travel in small groups of three or four when they’re out on scout duty. I say we take ‘em down.”

Chanyeol closes his eyes and prays for Harold to rebuke, to suggest anything other than engaging the wildlings in combat. But alas, he does not, and Chanyeol prays that his death will be painless. He does not trust himself to succeed anymore, not since he has been half starved and led around like a donkey in one of the most unforgiving climates. Every single muscle burns, even muscles he
did not know he had, and he has gotten so used to hearing his stomach growl that he has started to have conversations with it. There is no way he has enough strength for a fight right now, not when he can barely hold himself up.

“Yes,” Harold nods eagerly, desperate to impress while flicking his plait over his shoulder. Chanyeol’s eyes fall closed in dismay. “They might know where our brothers have gone. They could have seen them or… or taken them captive, yes! We should get them for their crimes!”

Oh gods, shut up. Chanyeol accidentally groans out loud and he receives two looks of disgust in response. The Lord Commander purses his lips as he glares, looking like he wants to say something before he second guesses himself. Chanyeol, on the other hand, clears his throat and awkwardly averts his eyes. He might be pissed off with these people, but he wants to keep all that anger inside his head. Who knows? They could make his life even more difficult than it already is. Right now, they are putting it in danger.

“Good thinkin’, Harry,” the Lord Commander nods in total confidence. “Let’s go.”

Chanyeol does not bother offering his opinion on this mistake because he knows they will not listen to him anyway. Instead, he gathers a deep breath in his lungs to the sound of his sword’s battle cry, the metal singing as he unsheathes it from the scabbard at his hip, then he turns to conform.

Creeping along behind the others at an awkward crouching level, he spares a moment to quickly reposition the glove covering his right hand before retaking his sword and bracing it in the air. His sight of the wildling is partially blocked by the brothers in front of him, their shoulders and heads getting in the way as they prepare to pounce side by side. If they were nice to him and he liked them in return, Chanyeol might have the audacity to feel left out, but seeing as neither of those things are the case, he is rather grateful that the Lord Commander and Harold have elected themselves to be his meat-shield.

Another ten steps in, the wildling doing his afternoon stretching routine seems to hear their footsteps. From over the tufts of the Lord Commander’s fur collar, Chanyeol sees the side profile become a front-facing shot and eyes growing to the size of apples. The lone thrumming of Chanyeol’s heartbeat against the silence is disrupted by the alarmed clamour of the wildling screaming “Crows!” at the top of his lungs, his two companions then lurching out of the cave just as Harold and the Lord Commander start charging.

Chanyeol brings up the rear, glad to be the last to the party, and is immediately jumped by a man with an arming sword. Their blades shriek as the edges grind against each other, the noise ceasing when Chanyeol pushes his sword down to distract his opponent and kick him in the stomach. It is a foul move on Chanyeol’s part, but these people are savages and are subsequently known to have done much worse.

The wildling stumbles back into the Lord Commander’s waiting sword, catching himself even more off-guard when he comes across the sensation of having something sharp pointed towards the centre of his back. While he is confused, Chanyeol steps forwards to strike his sword from his hand, noting unwittingly that he has accidentally sliced off his thumb as well, so it comes as no surprise when the man starts to yowl to the heavens. Chanyeol is about to kill him, deliver justice (and maybe bring him peace), but then suddenly someone is roaring like a lion behind him and leaping onto his back, clawing at his face and scratching at his eye sockets as if they hope to blind him. He yells rather pathetically, staggering backwards as the leech throws them both off balance and sends them tumbling towards the floor, sword lost from his grip.

The roaring stops when the wildling becomes Chanyeol’s cushion, softening his fall. Clearly, he
had not anticipated that happening and is dazed for a moment while Chanyeol picks himself up, dragging himself on his hands and knees before his feet touch ground. He is about to reach for his sword when one of his legs is pulled abruptly from under him – a meticulously savage move – and he falls all over again. His knee takes the brunt of the impact as he topples forwards, a throbbing pain starting to bleed from his kneecap into the rest of his body, yet he has not the time to sit and sulk over how much it hurts because now there is a bow wrapped around his throat.

The person behind him continues to roar, an archer by the looks of things, as he presses the wooden curve of his bow further into Chanyeol’s windpipe until folds of the crow’s skin rise around its edges. Chanyeol claws as it helplessly, his eyes watering in fear as his neck bruises and breath comes in short, sharp bursts. A part of him starts to think that this is it. He will die at the hands of a growling wildling who reinvented archery at the same time, but then the Warrior blesses him from up above and Chanyeol’s breath comes back to him with a loud snap.

The bow has broken, freeing his airways, and Chanyeol immediately swivels around to grab his attacker by the collar. In one swift move, arm muscles tearing in protest, he hauls them off the ground and slams his enemy against a rock half his height. He is about to drive his sword through the layers of thick, grey fur to end their life, when the hood falls back to reveal a small boy. Everything freezes at that point. The world goes silent, the other two wildlings having been killed off by his associates. Chanyeol finds himself stuttering, his blade suspended in mid-air. The end is still bearing down on the frail thing underneath him, yet he is not prepared to swing in the slightest. Rebelliously, the wildling wriggles slightly, fruitlessly, stuck in place courtesy of Chanyeol’s fist bunching the scruff of his neck. Chanyeol does not know what to do now. For whatever reason, his brain has disassociated the boy with being an enemy, yet he is not on the same side as him either. Not having a set out category or a list of rules for that, Chanyeol is suspended in place.

What strikes him first is the fiery red hair, ruffled and unkempt from being tousled beneath fur and through fight, such a stark cherry shade that it brings out the yellow flecks swimming within his soft caramel irises. Once Chanyeol has gotten over the blazing hair and the eyes that glow golden under the sun, he takes in the quartz skin, so clear and unblemished that it looks like the face of a doll, and the perfectly sculpted shape of it only proves further so. The boy sure doesn’t look like a savage to him, but then again, what does a savage even look like? Even though his clothes are a clear indicator of which side he fights for, Chanyeol is reluctant to finish him off; he is barely a man grown, he cannot take away the life of a child.

“Kill him, Chanyeol,” the Lord Commander grunts urgently, appearing simultaneously at his shoulder and glowering down his nose. With the commander breathing down his neck and the pressure mounting, Chanyeol’s rationale starts to disintegrate.

“But…” he falters, at a loss, for surely the Night’s Watch do not kill people this young. Can they not be recruited or something? Can they not take the black? “He is a boy,” he manages, words almost lost on the wind as his throat is sore and bruised, visibly red from the contusion; he finds his voice to be on the way out too.

“He’s a wildin’,” growls the Lord Commander in response, edging closer so that the hairs prick on Chanyeol’s neck. He sounds bloodthirsty, like the moment he kills someone or sees them killed is the only time he feels truly alive, and Chanyeol starts to wonder what his past-self ever saw in him. He may have been the youngest Lord Commander to lead the Watch in however many years, but deep down, he seems to be a serial killer who likes to go after wildlings like they are game. It is the perfect cover, really, when killing wildlings is practically mandatory. “He is as bad as the rest of ‘em, don’t matter how young he is. Bet he’s got some kills under his belt.”
He has a point though, Chanyeol realises. Wildlings are all brought up in the same environment and are groomed to sniff out crows and pick them off the same way they’re taught how to feed themselves. Just because this one in particular looks innocent and young does not necessarily mean that they have never murdered anyone – and the fact that he just strangled Chanyeol with a bow means that the wildling is not entirely against the idea of killing.

So Chanyeol nods, allowing himself to be counselled by the person who called him meddlesome and implied much worse, and he tightens his grip around the hilt of his sword and steadies its position.

“We’ll leave you to it,” the Lord Commander then casually says, patting Chanyeol on the back before stalking off ahead with Harold. “Yer can have yer first kill to yerself.”

Completely taken aback, Chanyeol gapes at their exit because, what the fuck? Why are they just leaving him here with a wildling he has no assurance he can kill? What is the point of walking off and letting him stay behind? The wildling could overpower him at any moment and flip the situation on its head! He has just put his life on the line for those people! He has just fought with them to defeat their common enemy, and now they have abandoned him! How is that fair?

“Bastards.” His throat immediately throbs, voice only a whisper to the ears.

The wildling chuckles, eyes alight with amusement as he grins up at Chanyeol. The crow stiffly looks down his nose at the boy underneath him and swallows dryly. “Nice friends yer got there,” the wildling remarks smugly, biting his lip afterwards. Chanyeol homes in on the sharp incisors he has, imagining how they could tear the flesh from his bones. Some wildlings are cannibals, after all, and Chanyeol cannot allow himself to be deceived by appearances. The boy may look cute – cute? – but he could still eat people. Chanyeol would like his body to be kept in one piece when he dies, not laid out over a banquet table.

His mouth dries up at his predicament. This is confrontation, and he has never been good with arguments – or even words, for that matter. So he decides to keep mum and stares down at the wildling, trying to transform his view. The boy is not cute, he is beguiling, and he is not harmless, he is a murderer. He deserves this. He deserves to die. It is the right thing to do.

“Will yer do it in one blow?” the boy asks innocently, staring cross-eyed at the sword which threatens his throat. “Make it quick? And burn me afterwards?”

Chanyeol’s frown hardens, indignant. This is a wildling he is talking to, a savage, so why should he be merciless and kill the boy with a single strike? What has he done to deserve benevolence? Not only that, but he wants him to light a fire? There must be at least a dozen other wildling scouts nearby. The smoke would attract friends, backup, and considering that Chanyeol has just been ditched by the Lord Bloody Commander of this whole shoddy shit show, he is not in a position in which he can effortlessly fight off a small army without even breaking a sweat, so damn the wildling’s fire!

“Do you think I’m stupid?” Chanyeol asks flatly, voice low and scratchy. He winces with each syllable, despising the wildling for making him talk and silencing him at the same time. His insides rattle, realising that he might have just fallen into a trap.

The boy laughs, eyes gleaming even without the sun in the sky. “If yer don’t burn me,” he starts, voice deeper than before, “I’ll come back and haunt yer, yer know. Make yer pay for this. I don’t fancy goin’ out all quiet like.”

Chanyeol deadpans, fully aware that the wildling is stalling him deliberately – and trying to get on
his nerves. The more the boy talks, the more human he seems; with every question, he comes across less and less like a brute. It’s not good. Not good at all, as in a few minutes he will have to watch this boy die and he will not even get to that point if he does not have the guts to do it.

“Oh,” the wildling grins sneakyly, rosy cheeks balling up under his eyes. “Sorry. Am I distractin’ yer?”

The crow says nothing.

“Ah,” the boy gasps, feigning innocence as he widens his eyes and pretends to feel guilty. “I didn’t mean to. Go ahead.”

The wildling then smirks like a pixie and proceeds to stare at Chanyeol without blinking. Not only is it frustrating that the boy looks so convinced he will not be killed, but the smug expression on his face makes Chanyeol doubt himself as well. Can he really do this? Can he kill a little boy? Watch the light in his eyes blow out like a candle in the wind? Being a builder in the Watch, he has never killed a man before. Is it really time to start now?

Come on, Chanyeol, he chides himself. Just stab him in the throat. It’s not that hard.

He decides that skewering the wildling through the neck is definitely the best option. It would cause him to bleed out and there is not much bone that he needs to push through – meaning there will be no gross crunching noises to deal with. So long as it is all convenient for him, Chanyeol is willing. Now all he needs to do is put his method into practise.

Then, as if to scorn him even more under the pretence of being completely willing, the wildling chips: ‘I’m waitin’.”

Chanyeol glowers at him so ferociously that his eyes physically start to ache. He wants to kill the boy for his remarks, but he also does not want to kill the boy and that is what eats away at his insides. Can he really do it? He has not killed another person before and it scares him that he has no idea how he is going to react. What if he never sleeps again but he keeps reliving this moment in his nightmares? What if he has a mental breakdown and ceases to function in the middle of nowhere? He could starve, freeze to death. Or – even worse – what if the wildling does come back to haunt him for the rest of his life? How does one rid themselves of a vengeful spirit?

But he is a sworn brother of the Night’s Watch, and the Lord Commander himself has instructed him to carry out this task. He cannot disappoint, even at this own expense. Maybe this will change things. Maybe killing this wildling will show the Lord Commander that he is not a charity case. He could become the ranger that he has always wanted to be, ever since he was a boy of only ten years old. So he braces his hand around the handle of his sword and perfects his aim.

“I’m going to do it now,” he tells the boy mercifully, allowing himself to prepare for death. He says it for himself as well in an attempt to believe. He can do it. He will do it. And he is going to do it now.

“Okay,” the wildling’s eyes glimmer, overflowing with so much disbelief that the expression leaks into the cracks of Chanyeol’s resolve, ‘yer goin’ to do it.”

The wildling can read him like a book, Chanyeol ultimately realises, and starts to fret over how much the wildling knows. He may be coming off as cold at the moment, maybe even indifferent, but on the inside he is a mess. Dutifully, he is trying to look strong, admirable, and be a truly noble brother, but he doesn’t know whether it’s convincing or not.
“Ooooh, the suspense!” The wildling seems to be enjoying this more and more, basking in Chanyeol’s discomfort and hesitation as though he is a cat stretching in the sun. There really is no fear in his eyes, not even the tiniest fraction.

An icy wind starts to roll in from around the mountainside, picking up loose flakes of snow and blowing them into Chanyeol’s eyes. His face and fingers start to freeze, numbing, and he senses that he is going to have to move quickly before he cannot feel his body anymore. That just adds to the pressure already swallowing him whole. Already, there is so much weighing down on his shoulders. He has been abandoned, ridiculed and bullied. He feels lonely, despairing and upset. He wants to do well. He wants to prove everyone wrong. But maybe they were all right in the first place. Maybe he really cannot do anything useful after all.

“Are we plannin’ on stabbin’ me neck in any time soon?”

Brought back to the disaster at hand, Chanyeol stares into the sugary eyes below him. The wildling’s tongue laps over his dry lips in the blink of an eye, testing.

“Yes,” Chanyeol replies lowly, tone slightly more uncertain than it was in previous sentences. Not that it matters – the boy already knows everything he is thinking anyway, by the looks of it. He tightens his grip around the handle of his sword, the weight of the blade only just starting to wear out his arm, and he narrows his eyes at the pale patch of skin he is aiming to pierce. The boy has no stubble, not even an Adam’s apple, and Chanyeol is reminded again of how young he is. He might as well be killing a baby at this rate.

“Alright. Let the neck stabbin’ commence, eh?” The wildling winks, grinning, and it throws Chanyeol completely off his axis.

He cannot do it, nothing commences, and he detests the look of satisfaction the wildling adopts, so pleased with himself that he was right about Chanyeol’s weak disposition. Oh, how Chanyeol loathes that confident gaze, the eyes that read “I know you won’t do it” and mock him for being so frail of heart. He wants to thrash him against the rock with his hands to get him to look anywhere but at him, but in doing so he would have to put his sword down and he cannot afford to take that risk; although the wildling appears to be unarmed, they are exceptionally shady creatures, and this one probably has a dagger hidden up his sleeve, delaying using it for the sake of enjoying the show. Chanyeol finds himself half-heartedly hoping that he is portraying an adequate protagonist, or antagonist, depending on whose point of view this is from.

“Can you stop looking at me?” he rasps, and realises he has made yet another mistake. He does not even realise the question has slipped from his mouth until the wildling replies.

“Why?”

When the wildling raises his eyebrows, oblivious, Chanyeol wants to go on a rampage. He sucks on his teeth to withhold an angered growl and bites his tongue before he can say anything else that will put him at a disadvantage. The wildling drinks in the obvious warring emotions that dance across his face like it is the finest Arbor wine, and in all his one-and-twenty years of life, Chanyeol has never felt so exposed.

“Do yer not like it when I look at yer? Am I puttin’ yer off?” the wildling wonders, ignorantly choosing to maintain his look. “Or do yer just feel bad that yer killin’ such a beautiful bein’?”

Chanyeol sighs, exasperated, and closes his eyes to take a moment for himself. His jaw is clenched, as is his fist, and his nostrils are flared so wide that they look like tunnels burrowing up through his nose. Fighting to calm his breath, heartbeat and pulse, he tries to block the wildling out of his
world. It does not work, of course, but in his defence, it was worth a shot.

“Sorry,” the wildling chuckles, “I’m just tryin’ to remember yer face, so that when I come back after yer don’t burn me, I’ll be able to recognise yer.”

Chanyeol’s jaw goes slack, irate as he strains to cry, “What are you even talking about?! Just shut up!”

The wildling pouts like a baby, downturned lips puckering against the frosty air, and he blinks up at Chanyeol in thought. “Alright, keep yer hair on,” he relents. “Yer can’t blame me for wantin’ to know my executioner. These are my last moments alive and yer makin’ them pretty dull.”

“Just—” Chanyeol pauses for breath, a deep inhale to calm his jittering insides— “keep quiet, I’m going to do it now.”

“Hrm, where have I heard that before?”

“Shut it.”

In all his life, Chanyeol has never met a more self-obsessed, egotistical, annoying, excuse for a human being. Why is the wildling not scared of him? Why can he not be quaking in his boots, terrified? At least Chanyeol would be more sure of himself, then. He would know he was making an impact.

Come on. All he needs to do is move his arm forwards and it will all be over. Yet with the power of life and death in his hands, Chanyeol balks. How can he do this? He cannot watch another person die, that would be sadistic! He would be no better than the wildling he is attempting to kill! And yet he is not doing it for himself. He is doing it for the Watch, and he needs this. When he catches up to the Lord Commander and presents to him a red sword, the man will no longer question his loyalty or allegiance; he will be beheld with great esteem as a man who acts well under pressure and can follow orders no matter how costly they may be to his own person. He will be admired, idolised, promoted to First Ranger.

Before his eyes, Chanyeol sees a bright future of success and popularity. A future where his choices will be respected and even replicated by the brothers around him who want nothing more than to get on his good side. Brothers who want nothing more than to have the right to say: “I am friends with the great Chanyeol Rivers.”

It is all waiting for him, the glory and the fame, on the blood-stricken road back to Lord Commander Kim. All he needs to do to get there is skewer this boy’s neck, a single blow straight through the middle. He is the only thing that stands in the way of Chanyeol finally grasping what he deserves, what he has earned, and yet—

“Aarggh!” he roars, maddened, and he stumbles back a few steps whilst lowering his sword – though, thankfully, maintaining enough brain power to recognise the need to continue his hold on the wildling. “I can’t do it, you’re like—twelve!”

The wildling squints him, calculating, and then smirks all over again. “So are yer sayin’ that if I were twelve, yer wouldn’t kill me?”

Chanyeol stares blankly at the boy as he closes the distance between them, raising the tip of his sword to once again press at the swell of his barely-there Adam’s apple. “Well, you have just proved that you aren’t twelve,” Chanyeol reveals, feeling slightly better about himself. For a moment, he feels like he has the upper hand, but he can never be too sure. Still, it would have been
much easier for him in the long run to have gone after one of the bigger, older wildlings; then he
wouldn’t be having this problem. Though, to be fair, it is not like he had much of a choice. This
wildling is the one who decided to strangle him with a bow.

“No, I’m fourteen actually,” the boy replies matter-of-factly, no hint of hesitation about him, and
Chanyeol feels his stomach shrivel. “What a waste my life has been!” the wildling thus starts to
wail dramatically, throwing his head back against the rock and closing his eyes as if he cannot
stand to look at Chanyeol any longer. “What have I accomplished in my years? Nothing! Nothing, I
tell yer! Yer can’t let me die a mouth maiden, little crow!” he then cries, opening his eyes like a
crazed lunatic and straining to lift himself off the rock face. “Kiss me before I die! Deliver me the
kiss of death!”

Chanyeol’s eyes are wide with delirium and he forgets how to function. All of a sudden, his mind is
a warzone and he freaks out, completely out of his league. He cannot do this. “Are you mad—wait,
fourteen? Fourteen? I—but—no—I—fourteen?!”

“No man has ever touched me! My hole shall remain unclaimed for all eternity! Why, oh why,
have I spent the last fourteen years of my life followin’ orders instead of chokin’ on a thick cock?
There are so many things I have yet to do! So many goals I had in mind that will go unfulfilled
because a crow came and got me in its claws! He got me! Oh isn’t this awful? Father I have failed
yer! I never became a man! Oh! Kiss me, little crow! Give me somethin’ before I die!”

“I’m not kissing you—”

“OH! Yer so cruel to me, little crow! Yer can’t even do this for a poor boy who is about to die! A
poor boy who is only fourteen years old! All I want is to feel another mouth on my own, is that too
much to ask? A dyin’ boy’s last wish?”

“Oh gods, oh gods,” Chanyeol freaks out, covering his eyes to give himself some peace as he
thinks things through. The boy is a wildling, a person whom they are sworn to kill. But he is just
that, a boy, of fourteen! He cannot possibly—No, he has to, for the Watch. He has do it for the
Watch.

Except when he opens his eyes again, all he stares at is a blank rock.

The wildling boy is gone.

Chanyeol immediately whirls around to try and find him, but the area of their fight is empty – save
for the corpses of his bluing friends. “Shit, shit, shit,” Chanyeol hisses, squinting his eyes and
staring directly into the sun by accident. “Argh!” It hurts but he does not have time to be blind, so
he fights against the throbbing pain and stares out over the edge of the mountain side, finally
spotting a blurry grey figure running off over the hills to the west of him and making a getaway.

“Fuck” is his eloquent response before he dashes off after him.

The wildling’s lithe body is moving agilely across the landscape, footsteps so light that they barely
leave imprints in the snow. If it were not for the fact that this wide area is mostly flat, save for a
couple of low rising hills, Chanyeol would have lost him already. But with the clear view and easy
terrain, it only takes him minutes to make a beeline towards his runaway captive. His heart comes
up in his throat and he tastes blood, but he sprints on, his future hanging in the balance as he
watches his eternal glory girlishly running off towards the horizon.

Quick to analyse his surroundings, Chanyeol continues to dash downhill at a speed he has never
reached before, the fuzzy grey figure of the wildling just vanishing behind a hill on the terrain;
brazenly, he makes the split-second decision of cutting the corner, subsequently risking losing the wildling forever, and he finds himself running blind with his breath rattling down his throat. He runs over the peak and starts downhill again, the wildling about twenty feet below him, scuttling up a little rocky path near the Giant’s Stairs – another route one could take to reach the Frostfangs. As a result of desperation and the fear of defeat, Chanyeol practically lunges himself forwards, smacking into the wildling’s side and knocking them both to the ground in one sharp hit.

The boy yelps like a puppy on the way down, swearing colourfully (“Oh fuckin’ hell! Fuck me, yer bastard, get off!”) when his body is squashed against the jagged floor by Chanyeol’s heavily cloaked physique. The latter proceeds to straddle him, pressing him further into the snow so he cannot get away. Adrenalin is sprinting laps in his brain, his whole body abuzz with triumph.

“Let me go!” the wildling screams shrilly in his face, writhing under his hold and releasing little grunts when his pushes and pulls prove futile.

Thinking on his feet, Chanyeol grabs the roll of rope from his backpack and starts wrapping it around the wildling’s body and hands, ignoring the vulgar protests sent his way, fuelled by pride and dignity. It is a hazardous rush, trying to keep the wildling in place long enough to tie his limbs together, but with the size advantage it is manageable.

Once all knots are tight and secure, Chanyeol hauls the wildling to his feet and tugs on the reins to make sure they are unyielding, the wildling stumbling forwards towards his outstretched, rope-holding hands as consequence. The boy’s panting breath stains the air in frequent plumes, his face flushed and dewy with sweat. Chanyeol would like to think that the perspiration is due to his enemy being unfit, but he knows that not to be the case. This is the one who had roared and clung to his back during the fight, the wild boy who had almost killed him. He is not likely to get out of breath from a little jog through the snow.

“What are yer gonna do with me?” the wildling asks coldly, all hints of playfulness left at his old alcove. “Take me back to yer crow friends and have a little peck, hmm? I’ve got more fight in me than yer give me credit for, little crow. I can take all of yer down single-handed.”

“Shut up,” Chanyeol spits menacingly, striding up to his face and effectively silencing him. “Yes, I am going to take you back to my brothers, and we’ll question you.” With the upper hand, Chanyeol allows his victory to get the better of him. His captor is tied, weak, submitting to his wishes, and it feeds his ego.

“Question me about what? As far as I’m aware, me, myself and I have been stayin’ out of yer business,” he objects, screwing up his face while edging it forwards in contest. He looks like he is about to spit, lips poised in position, glistening under sun when the clouds pass by up above.

“You’ve been killing our rangers, taking them captive.”

The wildling narrows his eyes, his knitted brows casting shadows over his face. He then chuckles darkly, the sound leading Chanyeol’s confidence to waver. “Yer think that was us? What would we want with a bunch of green crows?”

Chanyeol glares in distaste, unsure of why the wildling is trying to evade him. Why would he lie? Are wildlings not proud people? Do they not like to brag about all the crows they’ve killed in the past, all the animals they’ve hunted and ships they have plundered down by Deepwood Motte and Bear Island? He cannot understand it, and it is this lack of comprehension that leads Chanyeol to lose his superiority. He is no longer in the know. The Lord Commander had always insisted that it was the wildlings taking their rangers, but if it is not, then who is it? Or, what is it?
“I don’t know,” he growls, hoping he does not come across as clueless as he knows he is. “That’s why we’re going to question you and find out. Come on,” he grunts, giving the wildling another tug and setting them off back up the hill towards the mountainside.

“Somethin’ far more worse than me took yer brothers, little crow. Yer’d better realise that before it’s too late.”

“Quiet.”

“Suit yerself. It’s no skin off my nose when yer killed by somethin’ yer can’t kill in return, can’t even hope to kill. Takin’ me back to yer brothers is pointless.”

Chanyeol rounds on him in the blink of an eye. “Shut it! I say what’s pointless and what isn’t, so keep quiet!”

The wildling smirks in return, well aware that he is pushing all the right buttons. “Alright then. Didn’t realise yer were such a god. My mistake, yer godliness, please forgive this mortal subject of yours.” He bows melodramatically, quite frankly taking the piss, and Chanyeol’s fist clenches around the bundle of rope wrapped around his palm. He pulls harshly, gaining a little satisfaction from the way the wildling staggers over the uneven terrain, and he gets them walking again.

Unfortunately, after having chased the boy across the plains, Chanyeol has lost all sense of direction. All around him are identical mountains with identical patches of snow, and he cannot see beyond the triangular tops that disappear into the ever shifting blanket of clouds up above. He strides confidently in what he hopes is the right direction, leaving no room in his appearance that would let the wildling pick up on his uncertainty, and he crosses his fingers. He needs to be respected, obeyed, and he cannot have the wildling walking all over him.

“Are yer goin’ to tell me yer name? Or are we goin’ to be like this forever?”

Chanyeol almost looks over his shoulder to glare at the boy again, but realises that that is probably exactly what he wants. He needs to make sure that he does not fall into any traps, succumb to his will, so he instructs himself to be as uncooperative and unpredictable as possible. Still: “I do not see any point in telling you my name.”

The wildling huffs, as if Chanyeol is such a bother that he is exhausting him. Clearly, this goes both ways. “Fine, fine, I’ll call yer ‘little crow’ then. I would like yer to call me by my name, though, if yer please. It’s Baekhyun, see. Byun’s son. So if yer could call me Baekhyun I would very much appreciate it.”

Scowling at the view in front of him, Chanyeol asks, “Why should I do anything for you?”

He hears a chortle. “Because I’m yer damsel in distress, aren’t I? Yer glamorous hostage? I deserve to be acknowledged with a name. Yer could even make me one up if yer like, so long as it’s not too offensive.”

They start up an incline, Chanyeol digging his toes into the bank and watching as his steps sink a foot below snow level. It quickly drains him, but he still finds the breath to reply. “You don’t deserve anything, you’re a wildling.”

“And yer a crow,” Baekhyun retorts, as if being a brother of the Night’s Watch is some kind of crime. “We’re mortal enemies destined to despise one another, and yet I want to call yer by yer name still. Does this not make me an exception to it all?” Chanyeol rolls his eyes as he stumbles about in the snow, his feet sliding down the bank and taking him two steps back for every one step
forwards. “I’m not that much of a savage, I’ll have yer know.”

“Listen, you—” he gives in, whipping his head around to deliver a death glare he hopes will paralyse the wildling in fear.

“Baekhyun.” If he could, Chanyeol imagines the wildling would be crossing his arms around about now. Or maybe his hands would be on his hips. Either pose would fit the pursed lips and the raised eyebrows going on on his face.

“Baekyon.” Again, Chanyeol gives in, calling the wildling by his stupid name. “I am trying to concentrate, so please, for the millionth time, shut up.”

To his surprise and equal delight, the wildling actually does as he is told. He does not let another word slip for what feels like the next twenty or so minutes, and boy, is it a blessing. Chanyeol had almost forgotten the joys of silence. Until—

“Yer said my name wrong, by the way.”

Chanyeol pauses in the snow. They are now approaching the side of a mountain, the shadow cold and foreboding, and Chanyeol’s anxiety is rising up and up like the rock formations before him. He has been trusting that this was the mountain they fought on, but now that they are up close he really is not so sure anymore. He could ask the wildling for help, but he really does not want to do that. Maybe if he had been actively looking at his surroundings rather than shooting daggers into the back of the Lord Commander’s skull, he would actually know where he was going right now. Infuriated at himself along with everything else – Baekyon included, Chanyeol’s patience starts to wear thin.

“It’s Baekhyun, not Baekyon.”

“Do you really think I care?” Chanyeol exclaims, enraged, whirling around with so much strength that he slides several metres down the bank again. “Do you think I give a single shit about how to say your name properly?”

He is alone in the middle of nowhere with a savage who won’t shut up. He has no map, no compass, no sense of direction, and his backpack is horrifyingly sparse of food and safe drink. He has no idea what route he is supposed to take, let alone what direction to go in, and has not the slightest knowledge of where the Fist of the First Men or even the Wall is from here. The weight of it all is crushing him, and yet this Baekhyun is more bothered about how he pronounces his fucking name!

Reproached, Baekhyun starts to sulk – as if he has the right to be upset.

“That’s what I thought,” Chanyeol scowls as he sneers, jerking his head back around and giving the wildling a punishing tug forwards.

Chanyeol trudges bitterly through the drifts of snow that now come up to his hips, wading his way back towards what he thinks – hopes – is the right mountain path. But in all honesty, every single mountain looks the bloody same and he really has no idea where he is going.

They have just made their way up a rock face, walking on a flat path with a few open spaces here and there, when Chanyeol makes the decision to stop and rest for the night. With the sun sinking lower and lower in the sky, he does not want to push his luck any further and let the wildling shove him off a cliff under the cover of darkness; he has already made it this far without provoking an attack, so it is best to keep it that way.
“We’ll rest here,” he tells the wildling, Baekhyun, with a brief glance over his shoulder in the boy’s general direction. The wildling *hmphs*, shoulders slouching before he shrugs and mumbles an unenthusiastic, “*Mmkay.*” Chanyeol narrows his eyes at him as the wildling sits down on the floor cross-legged, looking more eight than fourteen.

To be quite frank, Chanyeol does not even know if Baekhyun is fourteen or not, or whether the boy just lied to guilt-trip him. In any case, it worked, and here they are: Baekhyun alive, Chanyeol split off from his group, trekking through the wilderness without any equipment to guide their way. He cannot even see the stars with all the clouds blocking his view. The horrifying thought that he might die out here with this savage crosses Chanyeol’s mind in a fleeting moment of insecurity, but he pushes it back in rebellion and inwardly declares, *no, I will not die with the likes of him.*

It is one thing to say something, and another to do it, though, and Chanyeol is starting to doubt himself. Either he is terrible at navigation or his brothers actually ditched him for good and ran off as fast as they could when they left him to execute the wildling alone. He takes one look at the boy staring at the sunset, face aglow with golden hues, and wonders what he has let become of himself. Gods. He needs to pull himself together.

As his best decision of the day, Chanyeol ties the wildling’s legs together to stop him from running off in the night, ardently ignoring the constant gaze aimed at him like an arrowhead. When he recalls that the boy is an archer, he pats down his furs in search of arrows he might have hidden in secret pockets. Thankfully, he does not find any.

“I still don’t know yer name, little crow,” the wildling quips, smirking when Chanyeol’s eyes falter and skit over to him for a moment while he is tying the knots around his ankles.

“What a shame,” the crow grunts in response, breathing heavily as he tightens the ropes and tests their give. When he deems them punishing enough, he removes his hands.

The wildling lets out one huff of a laugh. “‘Little crow’ it is then,” he says for a second time.

Chanyeol frowns, glaring up through his eyebrows at the wildling from where he is crouched by his feet. “I hardly see how you can call me ‘little’ when I am a whole head taller than you.”

“*Ooooh,*” the wildling hisses, pretending to be in pain. “That hurt, that did. Playin’ the height card, you savage.”

Rolling his eyes, Chanyeol just moves away, setting himself down in a place that puts about three feet of distance between them. He lies down quickly, staring up at the darkening sky and wondering whether his brothers will stop and make camp until he catches up with them. He doubts it, though. For now, his best chance is to just return to the Fist. With Baekhyun. Yes, that ought to go down well. Still, the boy could hold useful information about the missing rangers, so at least there is that.

“Are yer goin’ to sleep all the way over there?” Baekhyun calls, voice soft and sweet as if he is a young child afraid of what lingers in the dark. “Want to die from the cold, do yer? We’ll be warmer if we stick together.”

Chanyeol glares at the sky, hating that the wildling is right, and begrudgingly gets up to drop himself down again behind his companion. As much as he hates the boy, he doesn’t want to die from something as mundane as the cold. Nevertheless, that does not mean he has to like the boy either. He winces at their new position; they are practically cuddling like lovers, and when the wildling sighs happily, he cringes, skin crawling and face flushing. He has never been this close to another person before, and it would be a lie if he said he was happy about it. His mind thinks back
to Luhan and Yixing, recalling how closely they had lain against one another – on top of each other, more like – and he has to bite back a pitiful laugh. He will never have something like that, and now that he is so alone, isolated and broken, he realises that he actually wants it.

There have only been very few times in his life when he has been given affection. Distinctly, he can remember three, all of which happened with Nora, the woman who looked after him once his mother passed – also his mother’s mistress. Sometimes when she had the chance, she would read him and the seven other children a bedtime story, and if he was lucky she would come over to him specially and ask him how things were going. He remembers the one time he got a forehead kiss like it had been yesterday. He had been four years old.

The second and third times happened when he was six and seven. They were both hugs, the long kind where you cling onto the other person and breathe them in until everything else melts away. Each time he had been crying and breathless, once because his adoptive siblings locked him in a cupboard for seven hours and once because they threw all his clothes in the Green Fork river. However upset or traumatised he had been didn’t matter though, not once he got into Nora’s arms and all his woes were cuddled out of him. After that, though, summer had started to roll in. The higher temperatures meant more travellers, from both the sea and land, and Nora became too busy to wrap him up in her arms again.

He does not blame her for anything though. Not her neglect, not her constant absences, not her jealous children. She did her best with what she had, and if it wasn’t for her, he would not even be here. Sometimes he wishes he had stayed around longer to give her a proper thank you, but it is too late to do that now. He will die out here, beyond the Wall, and no one will ever know what happened to him. No one will even care. Not even the wildling.

“This is nice.” Baekhyun murmurs, the smile apparent in his cheery tone of voice. “Isn’t this nice?”

“Be quiet,” Chanyeol cuts in sternly, struggling to find a place for his arms to go where he does not have to touch the wildling. In the end, he folds one under his head and rests one precariously down his side, resting on his hipbone. It is uncomfortable but it will have to do. “Get some sleep.”

Baekhyun tuts at him disapprovingly. “Yer are a bossy one, aren’t yer? Gods, this’ll be no fun at all if yer carry on like this.”

Chanyeol chooses to remove the satisfaction of their nugatory banter and remains silent. Baekhyun can talk to himself all he likes, Chanyeol is going to get some sleep and postpone all his misery until the morning. Resolutely, he shuts his eyes and surrounds himself in darkness, trying to lose himself to oblivion before the wildling decides it is time to attempt another conversation. However, when said wildling starts gyrating his hips back towards him, Chanyeol realises that he would have much preferred for him to start babbling.

With an almost inaudible groan, Chanyeol opens his eyes and shoots full-blown spears at the back of the wildling’s head, imagining those scarlet locks on fire. “Stop it.” His voice is a little weak, a tad strained, but at least he gets the words across.

“Stop what?”

Chanyeol closes his eyes, counts to ten, and reminds himself that he needs the wildling for questioning. It is funny how he was so reluctant to kill the boy a few hours ago, yet now he wants to thrash his head against a rock just to shut him up.

“You’re moving your hips.”
“Oh, was I?” he gasps, the pressure against Chanyeol’s groin lessening as he wildling ceases to move. “Sorry, I’m just tryin’ to get comfortable. There’s just so many rocks around here. Promise I shan’t do it again.”

To no one’s surprise, Baekhyun does it again, and too tired to fight it, Chanyeol lets him have his way.

He does not sleep all too well that night. The cold claws at his skin, sucks it of its moisture while the darkness plays tricks on his mind. His ears strain into the silence when his bleary eyes open every half hour like clockwork, working overtime to hear any footsteps or distant shouting, anything that would indicate an ambush. From exhaustion and exhaustion alone, he drops dead around the start of the sunrise, snoring gently against the sharp aggregate beneath his cheek. When he opens his eyes next, he finds himself being stared at, the wildling’s eyes sparkling like honey under the midday sun.

“I thought yer’d never wake up,” he murmurs with a smirk, speaking low out of a surprising consideration for Chanyeol’s hazy, sleep-ridden mind. “Yer look so peaceful when yer asleep, yer know,” he says thoughtfully, almost as if talking to himself. “Then yer open yer eyes and it all goes downhill.”

Chanyeol grunts in annoyance, rolling onto his back, away from the wildling’s intense gaze.

“Yer must be frustrated, bein’ stuck with me in the middle of nowhere where yer can’t find a woman to lie with. But I must admit, I was very comforted with yer bone pressed against me arse. Haven’t had that in a while. Reminds me of Hayder.”

Instantly, Chanyeol is plunged into an icy flush and he cranes his neck to look down at the barely noticeable bulge between his legs. Of all the times he has to wake up with hard wood, why does it have to be now? Why has his body betrayed him so?

“Want me to help yer out?” Baekhyun wonders, shuffling closer across the gravel to a chorus of scraping noises. “Man to man? I wouldn’t mind havin’ a look, I bet it’s big—”

“Right then.” Chanyeol’s deep morning voice cuts in as he swings up into a sitting position, gathering himself on his feet afterwards without a moment to lose. “We’ll carry on walking today. Come on.”

The wildling laughs at him from where he is laid back on the ground, rolling around like an infant. “Did yer forget yer tied me legs together, little crow? Or do yer just like to see me struggle?”

Chanyeol glares at the boy as he unties his ankles, knees and thighs promptly. The sooner he can get back to the Fist, the sooner he can pass this boy onto his higher-ups. Someone else can suffer the wildling’s antics for all he cares; he itches to be rid of him.

It is tiresome, though, walking for hours and hours on end without the final goal in sight. Chanyeol really has no idea where they are going now, but every time Baekhyun questions him on it he will stubbornly insist that he does, just because he does not want the wildling to have a hold over him. Whenever he looks around, the boy is staring at him like he is trying to read his mind, and sometimes in mid-walk he will just sit down and refuse to carry on in the direction they are going.

Chanyeol is already weak enough as it is from all the walking; he does not have either the strength or the will to drag Baekhyun along on his arse just so they can make progress. He gives in and turns to head in a different direction. It will not make much difference anyway, Chanyeol thinks, to excuse his actions. They are already walking in circles, why not walk in ovals instead?
“Do yer really know where yer goin’?” the wildling asks for the nth time, hollering out from where he trails after Chanyeol’s footsteps. At least that is one thing – the wildling walks behind him so he does not have to stare at his face all day. If he did, Chanyeol would be well over the brink of madness.

“Yes,” Chanyeol responds bluntly with a fleeting glance over his shoulder, then pondering why he even bothered to look in the first place. If the wildling catches a single glimpse of his queasy expression, features bound together with uncertainty and apprehension, he will become as transparent as the air around them. Of course, the wildling’s ceaseless stares probably pick up on most things. It is likely that he has been see-through for a while.

Baekhyun hums, clearly not believing him. “Are yer sure?”

“Positive.”

“Are yer willin’ to stake yer life on that positivity—?”

“Please, for the old gods and the new, shut up.”

It is all hopeless. The further they walk, the less Chanyeol recognises his surroundings – not that he recognised them in the first place, if he has to be honest with himself. He finds himself spiralling out of sense, wandering in circles, and when the sun is starting to sink in the sky once again and there is not another soul around them, he announces that they will pause for a little while. He drops dejectedly onto a rock and mopes at the ground beneath his numbed feet, brooding.

How long can they go on like this? How long can he aimlessly walk to nowhere before his feet are taken by frostbite and his legs drop off? Surely there must be some way to navigate these mountains. There could be a constellation in the sky that people refer to as a compass, or there could be a mountain with a distinctive feature, like a crooked peak. Yet even if these things were visible to him, even if they did exist, he would be none the wiser. He was never trained for this sort of thing. He was not supposed to guide their group around their route, it was the Lord Commander’s job. Hell, he does not even know the route they were supposed to take, so how can he get himself back on track when he doesn’t know where the track is?

Maybe he is useless. He could not kill the wildling and now he is lost, walking into Death’s arms. What can he do but make mistakes and poor decisions? What can he do but fail?

“Are yer alright, little crow?” comes a voice from beside him. “Yer seem a little down,” Baekhyun says nonchalantly, as if he expects Chanyeol to be the spryest spring lamb in the valley.

What form of joy can be found out here? All Chanyeol has found are dead ends and disappointment.

The wildling comes to sit next to him, too close, and immediately begins to smirk again. The distance between them is in negative numbers, Baekhyun’s thigh half lodged on Chanyeol’s own, yet at this moment in time, the crow is too exhausted to care. “This is relaxin’, isn’t it? Just the two of us in the middle of nowhere, no one to disturb us. We’ll be able to see the stars soon, ain’t that lovely?”

Chanyeol glares discreetly through his peripheral vision at the wildling who looks all too happy about being in his company. His words about the stars make him think about constellations, and that makes him irate.

“Yer should turn that smile upside down, little crow, yer brothers would want yer to be happy.”
Now that irritates him more. He scoffs. “Not likely.”

“Oh, do I sense trouble in the ranks?”

“No. I... It’s just,” he sighs deeply, deflating into a slouch. He says ‘so long’ to his cool demeanour, and sheds his outer layers, giving up his tiring façade to just speak the truth even if he’ll be made a mockery of for it. “It’s just that they don’t really care. About me. Not a single shit.”

“Awww! Is little crow feelin’ sorry for himself? Yer should get over it, yer know?” He nudges Chanyeol’s shoulder, as if they have reached that level of intimacy. “It won’t do yer any good to worry about what people think of yer when they don’t give a fuck. You do yer own and that’s that, little crow.”

If only things were that simple, Chanyeol mopes. He does not have enough assurance in his character to be himself and not care what others think. Ever since he was born, he has been picked on simply because of who he is; for just as long, he has found the walls built up around his soul to be near impossible to knock down. His personality is stuck inside a tough shell, and no matter how hard he kicks or punches at his confines, there is never a crack in the surface. A little recognition would help. Praise, too. Even just a little reassurance that he can do something right would boost his confidence. People are so unwilling to hand out compliments, especially men of the Night’s Watch. But here he is, sat with a wildling, and he cannot believe that the boy is nicer and more vocal than anyone he has ever met.

“Gods, I can’t believe myself,” Chanyeol laughs aloud, shaking his head as he looks up at the white-hot sinking sun. “I never thought I’d end up here, sat beside a wildling who is pretending to be my priest.” He never thought he would end up here thinking that a savage is making an ounce of sense, either.

The wildling chuckles, clearly not offended nor affected by Chanyeol’s insult as he wonders how he has gotten to his lowest point yet. “That’s it, yer just have to talk to me. Come on, little crow, tell me all yer woes, I’m a great listener.”

Snorting, Chanyeol finds himself smiling as he sighs, deflating his body completely. “This is ridiculous. This whole thing is ridiculous.”

He has probably said more words to this wildling than he has said to any brother in the Watch for all his eleven years, and if that is not something to cry about, Chanyeol does not know what is. He might have had some friends, but most of the time he had been too scared of rejection and humiliation to ever say anything to them that was true to himself. It had been dysfunctional and toxic, pathetic even, but it is not nearly half as bad as him sitting here with his arch nemesis pouring out his heart.

“What am I even doing? I should have killed you yesterday!”

Baekhyun stiffens. “Yeah, alright, steady on, let’s not get ahead of ourselves—”

“You’re a wildling!” Chanyeol abruptly cries, the wildling flinching. “We’re sworn enemies, so why couldn’t I kill you? Why?” he laughs, hysterical, wiping his eyes as they start to tear up. “I am so pathetic. What a coward I am. Gods have mercy on me when I die, I’ll end up in one of the seven hells.”

“Yer’ve gone mad,” the wildling sighs, knowing. “I thought this hour was comin’, little crow. I always tend to drive people up the wall.”
Well, he has got that right, Chanyeol thinks, but only offhandedly. His mind is preoccupied with thoughts of failure and notions of misfortune, and as he thinks of the Watch more and more he realises just how much he has come to hate it. There have been some good times in Castle Black, yet he can count them on less than one hand. Eleven years and only three highlights to show for it. He has wasted his life, his youth spiralling away from him faster and faster, and it seems like he has poisoned his future. He will forever be tied with the Night’s Watch, forever be known as a black brother, will never be anything more than the builder who stamps gravel into the ice. Beyond the Wall he sought freedom, but even his captive reminds him every minute of who he really is. A crow.

“Can you stop calling me ‘little crow’, please?” His voice is small and pitiful, not that he cares at this point. He is too far gone to pretend that all is fine and dandy. If these are his last days alive, he wants to spend them as himself.

Baekhyun looks pensive, folding his legs and resting his elbow to his knee, chin to his fist. “Why?” he wonders, voice just as quiet. “Does the little crow not like it?”

Chanyeol fights past the lump in his throat. “As I’ve said, you can hardly call me a little crow when I’m taller than you.” He almost laughs at himself for saying a tenth of the truth. It seems his height is the only thing going for him, the only thing he has beat the wildling at. His father must have been a tall soldier, maybe for the Tully army – the leading house of the Riverlands.

“I’m callin’ yer little on more of a strength standpoint…” the wildling protests, as if that makes it okay, “and… an ego standpoint.” He grins cheekily. “Shall I call yer big crow, then? Big, to go with yer package downstairs?”

Groaning, Chanyeol wipes his brow and bows his head. This way, whatever tears come can fall straight to the ground rather than trail down his face. “I’d rather you not call me a crow at all,” he admits, sounding like a scolded child. Beads fall from his eyes, his tears shining like ice when the sun breaks through the clouds over the mountain tops. The heat prickles Chanyeol’s skin and he can feel his cheeks flushing, the redness of his crying now disguised.

“Then what shall I call yer?” the wildling asks, curious.

“Just, anything but crow.”

“Hmm… How about I call yer by yer name then? Now there’s a novelty, eh? Callin’ someone by their name. That’s never been done before, has it?”

The crow does not know why he laughs. “What is your obsession with wanting to know my name?”

“Well, isn’t the name the first thing you ask of a person? Especially if that person is your attractive captor who likes to hump you in his sleep.”

“I...” Chanyeol gulps as his skin starts to crawl, colour draining from his face as the sky goes pale. “I do not hump you in my sleep,” he objects quietly and pointedly, as if afraid someone else will hear even though they are the only two people for leagues around. The wind is their only companion, it seems. And the cold.

“Well, how would yer know? Yer were asleep, but,” he smirks, leaning in closer until his lips are right beside Chanyeol’s ear, “I’m not sayin’ I didn’t like it, am I? I’d love it if yer did it again, without clothes on.” Excitement rises in his voice and Chanyeol shudders uncomfortably. “You can put your body parts in my body parts—”
“Alright, that’s enough!” the crow cuts in, pushing Baekhyun away by the shoulders until there are a good few inches between them. He will do anything to keep the wildling’s distracting suggestions out of his head. Disturbingly, he seems awfully horny for a boy of fourteen. “Let’s keep some distance between us, okay?”

The wildling pouts in distaste, but shrugs nonetheless. “If that’s what yer want, but I can assure yer, it’s not what I want. And I like to get what I want, little crow. Mark my words.”

Chanyeol sighs, defeated, and stares off at the mountains in the distance. The wildling is so sure of himself – and he is jealous. His experience would explain it; the boy is probably well travelled and knowledgeable in the things he enjoys. In all his fourteen years, he must have mastered the art of seducing a man, and if the wanted to, he could probably survive out here in the wasteland with nothing but himself, drinking his own piss and scavenging for bugs in the cracks of the rocks. The wildling has been truly living his life to the full, whereas he, Chanyeol, has been frozen in time for over a decade, naivety weaved into the seams of his skin.

“Chanyeol,” the crow eventually says into the quiet, capturing the wildling’s attention.

Baekhyun blinks at him, the muted yellow in his eyes catching Chanyeol’s attention when he glances. “Hmm?”

“My name,” he elaborates. “It’s Chanyeol.”

The wildling smiles, and for once it is not teasing, mocking or lascivious. Chanyeol’s eyes may be deceiving him, but it almost seems like genuine thanks. “Chanyeol.”

“Yeah,” he nods shyly.

“Well, Chanyeol, it is nice to finally know yer name. Yer really know how to make a person anticipate, don’t yer? Such suspense I’ve been waitin’ in for the past thirty-or-so hours. What a build up there has been to this…” Before Chanyeol can stop him, the wildling is back to whispering hotly in his ear again. “Climax.”

“What did I say about space? Distance? You said you were a good listener!” he all but shrieks, voice so high pitched and out of character that he really sounds like a blushing maiden as he shoves the cackling wildling boy away.

“Gods, yer do make me laugh! I told yer we’d have more fun if we actually spoke! This is great, isn’t it? Aren’t we just like one of those forbidden romance stories? Oh, little-big-Chanyeol-crow! We cannot possibly be together! I am a member of the Free Folk and you are a Sworn Brother of the Night’s Watch! What would our families say if they ever knew! Oh, the scandal!” Baekhyun pretends to faint against Chanyeol’s shoulder, the back of his palm placed dramatically over the expanse of his forehead as if he is too nauseous to breathe any longer, and he continues to pant heavily to create the illusion that he is on the verge of some heartbroken tears.

At the mention of family, Chanyeol disregards the need to uphold their distance. What family?

He does not have a family. His surname proves so. Bastards from the Riverlands take the family name Rivers. It is neither an honour nor something respected, so from the word go it seems he has been set up for failure. He is the son of a whore, his father a soldier who was passing through the town. He was – *is* – an accident.

Baekhyun notices his silence and slowly turns to look at him, expression a mixture of confusion
and hesitance. “Ah, have I struck a nerve there? Didn’t mean to, Chanyeol. I pray yer accept me most humble apology.”

Of course, the wildling’s apology is not solely sincere, and instead of rising to the bate of banter, Chanyeol finds himself bereft and upset, meekly stating that they should walk on in order to try and reach his brothers by nightfall.

They do not, of course. The Fist remains an elusive dream that night, and the night after that, and the night after that, too. Chanyeol leads them uselessly down wrong turns and erroneous paths, taking them further and further into what is the unknown, the Fist of the First Men but a distant memory in his head. It is a wonder they have both survived and kept their strengths up on the rations in Chanyeol’s backpack. It is nearly void of food now, their window of opportunity shrinking. The cold would probably have taken them already if they did not sleep sewn to each other every night, Baekhyun adamant on hogging his body by the miniscule fire they sometimes dare to light. Either they make it back to the Fist in the next couple of days or they starve out here. Or he could kill Baekhyun and eat him, but he really does not think he has the stomach for that.

“I hate to say it Chanyeol,” Baekhyun calls out around midday, his tone of voice a juxtaposition to his words, “but I think we’re lost.” He sounds like he is enjoying this – watching Chanyeol amble about like a lost lamb.

The crow immediately stops walking, staring off ahead into nothingness, and accepts what he has known all along. He really has no idea where he is going, and Baekhyun has seen straight thought his false confidence.

“I know where we are,” the wildling then declares, snow crunching under his boots as he comes to stand beside Chanyeol and meet his eyes. His skin has a sheen of perspiration on it and its almost blinding in the sun, a bit like his personality.

Chanyeol gazes back, unsure whether to trust his enemy, for the boy could be planning to lead him straight into a trap; be that as it may, he decides to relent and asks, “Where are we then?”

“Crossing the Giant’s Stairs. Towards the Milkwater.”

“Where is the Fist from here?”

“Well,” Baekhyun starts to examine his fingernails, “if we were where we were two days ago, we wouldn’t be that far from it, but takin’ into account the fact that yer’ve had us walkin’ in the wrong direction ever since, we’re about a week away on foot.”

Chanyeol’s eyes flash with anger and his mouth almost starts foaming. He takes three decisive strides up to the wildling and prods him square in the chest, snatching his attention away from his fingers upon impact. “You mean to say you’ve known where we were going all this time and never thought to say anything? You have me walking away from the Fist without a single inkling that maybe you should have told me?!”

Baekhyun has the audacity to look mistreated. “Yer seemed so confident, yer see. How was I meant to know that yer were completely in the dark? I thought yer were tryin’ to find those brothers who abandoned yer a few days past, how were I supposed to know what route yer were takin’? I didn’t even know yer were plannin’ on goin’ to the Fist.” He crosses his arms. “See? This is why we should talk more, crow.”

Incredulous, Chanyeol freaks out for a moment before he turns on Baekhyun. “Let’s make a deal, okay? You get me back to the Fist with no funny business and I’ll let you go.”
Baekhyun scoffs. “Let me go? Let me go when I’m surrounded by yer brothers and I don’t have any weapons or food? Yer must be havin’ a laugh! Gods,” he cackles, shooting a look to the sky, “what an idiot yer are. No wonder they left you behind.”

“Right. You listen here,” Chanyeol growls, grabbing his captive by the scruff of his neck. “I have had it with your snarky little comments, do you not know how to shut that hole in your face?”

“Well, excuse you,” the wildling spits back, baring his gritted teeth while his eyes narrow. “Yer hardly in a position to take the piss out of me when it’s my help yer need, or do yer want to die out here and never make it back, hmm? Is that what yer want? I could kill yer in my sleep if I really wanted to, even with the ropes tyin’ me together. Yer’d better watch yer tongue—”

“I’d wake up and cut you with my sword before you got the chance.”

“Oh I doubt it,” he laughs complacently, eyes narrowed. “Yer’ve had plenty of times to skewer me on yer blade like a ruddy piece of meat and yer haven’t. Yer can’t do it, little crow. Yer don’t have the stomach for it. I don’t have to take yer anywhere if don’t want to. Yer should be careful of what yer say.”

Chanyeol realises that fighting isn’t going to get him anywhere, so he forces himself to calm down. It’s a tough thing to swallow. “Fine,” he grunts, voice strained. “When we get to the Fist, I’ll give you what provisions I can and find you a dagger of some sorts—”

“I want a bow and a quiver of arrows, actually, seein’ as yer neck broke mine back at our outpost when yer brothers killed me friends.”

Guilty as charged, Chanyeol grits out another agreement. “Alright then. Take me back to the Fist and you’ll get your bow and food.”

Baekhyun crosses his arms. “Sounds good to me.”

Chanyeol copies him. “And me.”

There’s a pregnant pause, and then, “Are yer goin’ to untie me now?”

“Arghhh!” the crow roars, exasperated, before shouting out a breathless, “Fine!” and doing as the wildling says. Once the rope is hooked in a loop around Chanyeol’s forearm and the wildling is free, Baekhyun takes a moment to rub the raw skin around his wrists before he starts walking off.

“It’s this way, little crow!” he cockily calls over his shoulder. “Best keep up. Wouldn’t want yer to get lost!”

Together, they scale down the icy mountainside and end up by a river, the wild Haunted Forest decorating the opposite bank. Chanyeol contemplates its meandering body, current weak and easy to wade across if necessary. The babbling water flows tranquilly to the south back towards the
Wall while Baekhyun spurts all sorts of nonsensical conversation topics, ranging from the order in which he gets dressed every morning to how he shaves his facial hair.

“The trick is to cover yer jaw in oil, it softens the hairs, see, and then yer take yer blade – I like to use Hayder’s dagger – and yer just start scrapin’ away; but yer have to go in the direction of the hairs otherwise yer get irritation.”

Chanyeol sighs, lugging three steps behind the wildling as they head further north. Oh, how the tables have turned. Now it is him who is the captive and the wildling who’s the captor. Turns out, Baekhyun’s favourite method of torture is to talk his ear off. Chanyeol finds it to be very effective.

“I know how to shave a beard. I get one too.”

“Really?” Baekhyun asks, genuinely surprised as he glances over his shoulder and pauses a moment to wait for Chanyeol to catch up. “But yer jaw is so clear! Do yer actually get a beard or do yer just get little patches of fluff here and there? Yer know, like bum fluff?” He grins, reaching up to scratch at the underside of Chanyeol’s chin like you would a dog.

“Get off me,” he grunts, swatting the wriggling fingers away to Baekhyun elated giggle.

The wildling shrugs. “Don’t tell me yer didn’t like it. I know where a man likes to be petted, little crow.”

Scoffing, Chanyeol walks on, Baekhyun levelling out with him in no time. Considering that they have both been walking for half a week non-stop, Chanyeol is flabbergasted. How have they not fallen over in exhaustion yet? How have they not died? How hasn’t Baekhyun driven him so close to insanity that he has thrown himself off a mountain? Talking about how to shave facial hair – what idiocy. Baekhyun is only fourteen, he shouldn’t get a beard.

Wait…

What?

“Wait a second,” Chanyeol says a few moments later, stopping. “You can grow facial hair?”

Baekhyun looks at him like he has grown an extra head. “Uh, yeah.”

“But… But you’re fourteen, aren’t you? How can you grow a beard at fourteen?”

There is a beat of silence before Baekhyun is slapping him on the arm and guffawing with his head tipped back. Well, something appears to be very funny. Chanyeol’s not sure what until Baekhyun delivers his explanation – not without the mockery.

“Oh gods, yer believed me! Yer actually believed me! Wow! I always knew crows were stupid but I didn’t know they were gullible as well! I’m eighteen, yer halfwit! Did yer seriously think I was fourteen? I don’t know whether that’s a compliment or not, but I don’t really care considerin’ I guess it saved me life.”

Chanyeol cannot believe what he is hearing, and he cannot believe that he cannot believe it either. He should have expected the wildling to be like this. He is a wildling, after all. Since when have they ever told the truth?

“You mean you lied to me?”

“Oh, come on, crow, don’t tell me that you wouldn’t lie to save yer own skin? I value my life, aye,
and I’ll do whatever it takes to keep it. Gods, yer ridiculous,” Baekhyun laughs breathlessly, walking on before stopping and pivoting around again. “Did yer believe all the other stuff as well then? About me bein’ a ‘mouth maiden’ and all that? About my hole bein’ untouched?”

Chanyeol burns red against a backdrop of snow. “Well, forgive me for thinking we trusted one another.”

“N’aww,” Baekhyun pushes him lightly on the arm, “don’t be such a sop about it. It was only a little white lie. No harm came from it – quite literally. In fact, less harm happened because of my lie, so I really don’t see why it’s a problem. What does it matter to yer anyway if I tell a few fibs? Did yer want to take my first kiss or somethin’?” he wonders, creeping closer. “Be the first to claim my hole? Fuck it open with that fat cock yer won’t let me have a look at?”

Chanyeol feels hot under the collar, sweat gathering at his nape that leaves him vulnerable to the cold. Swiftly, he averts his eyes and stares directly into the sun by accident. Now blinded, as least he cannot see what a catastrophe this has all ended up becoming.

“I lost my maidenhead when I was thirteen, little crow. To Hayder. We were together until he got himself killed. Not even from a crow’s hand either, but by a fuckin’ avalanche.”

Panicking, his brain backfires when he hears how this Hayder person died and Chanyeol finds himself apologising. “I… I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Pfft.” Baekhyun does not look impressed. “Is that what they teach you down in the south? How to be all polite and courteous? How to kiss arse?”

“No—”

“You southerners are all such pansies. Yer too worried about bein’ proper and playin’ by the rules, yer forget to have fun.”

“We aren’t southerners. The Night’s Watch is based in the North—”

“This is the real north, little crow. And the real north is much harder than your petty excuse for a kingdom. Do yer want to know why it’s hard?” he asks, starting to scare Chanyeol with his bite. The crow wants to know where all this sudden anger has come from, but then he realises that it has probably been bubbling under the surface for quite a long time. Now it is coming out all at once, and Chanyeol is the target. “’Cause some filthy fuckin’ southerners built a wall to keep us out. What have we done wrong, eh? What did we ever do?”

These are the spiteful grudges that every wildling holds; it is common knowledge and understanding, written in almost every history book to condition the future generations into keeping them out of the Seven Kingdoms. They will rape your women, kill your livestock, take your children as slaves. They will trample your crops and set your houses on fire, all because they are jealous, unruly, and hateful savages. Let them pass through the Wall and you will pay the price.

“The Wall was built to keep out the White Walkers,” Chanyeol murmurs.

“Aye, yet do I look like a White Walker to you? We try and pass through your gates at yer fancy castles and yer don’t let us in. Why is that, little crow?” Baekhyun starts to come closer, fury burning in his eyes, the caramel colour of his irises turned to flames. “Why won’t you let us pass?”

“Have you…” Chanyeol swallows thickly. “Have you tried asking the Lord Commander—?”

“Fuck, have we tried askin’, Chanyeol! We’ve been askin’ ever since I was born, so yer would’ve
thought they’d have let us in by now if they wanted to. But no.” The wildling shakes his head, a movement so rigid that it sets Chanyeol on edge. “What the fuck have we done to be exiled like we are, Chanyeol? To be stuck out here in a fuckin’ wasteland no better than an icy hell?”

Baekhyun searches Chanyeol’s eyes for a moment, but when he gets no response, he answers his own question.

“I’ll tell yer what we’ve done, seein’ as yer strugglin’ to pick it out yerself. Our one and only crime is bein’ born on the wrong side of the fuckin’ Wall. Forgive us for that, Chanyeol. Forgive us. Guess we should’ve been born someplace else, not like we can even choose.”

With a final glare, Baekhyun spins on his heel and stalks off up the river, anger so hot that the snow runs away from his footsteps.

There is tension between them now, and Chanyeol realises that he much preferred being teased above the deafening silence; Baekhyun being such a chatty character makes it that much worse, and it feels like there is a gaping hole in the universe where his random comments use to lie, burning like a star against the bland landscape.

The wildling does not even give him any directions, so Chanyeol walks in constant fear of blinking and finding him nowhere in sight. He plods after the wildling, desperate and helpless, as they tread up through the snow. They cross the river into the Haunted Forest once again, legs taken by the cold, and fall into the shelter of the trees. Thankfully, the branches provide an adequate amount of protection from the sun, preventing the usual glare on the snow from stinging Chanyeol’s eyes.

When night begins to fall and the fading light becomes a distant glow on the horizon, Baekhyun takes them to make camp in a cluster of bushes, formally announcing that he is going to go hunting before pulling a dagger from his sleeve and wandering off. Chanyeol makes himself useful by lighting a fire, as well as digging them a pit to sleep in so that they can blend in with the terrain, even if he will be wearing a black cloak against the snow and they are arguably the two most contrasting colours on the spectrum. There are bushes all around them, high and thick, with a thinner section to the north acting as their way in and out. This area of the forest is fairly dense with vegetation, so Chanyeol acknowledges that this is a good place to rest and be covered from unwanted eyes. Baekhyun seems to know his stuff. Chanyeol wonders how many times he is done this before. Wonders if he is killed any crows in the process.

Once the fire is smoking, Chanyeol plops himself down on the ground and warms his hands against the flames, looking up at where the grey smoke blends in with the indigo sky. Baekhyun re-emerges a couple of minutes later, four rabbits with slit throats hanging over his shoulder, their hind legs tied in a loop of rope. In tandem, they work on skinning and gutting two of Baekhyun’s catch before skewering them over the fire and digging in.

Baekhyun says nothing to him, not a single word. He only speaks when they have stamped the fire out and settled down against one another in the ditch Chanyeol had made earlier, their bodies close.

“Did yer then?” the wildling asks out of the blue, and Chanyeol splutters a meek response of, “Huh?” After all, his mind is somewhere between consciousness and unconsciousness, so now is not really the time to be asking him ambiguous questions.

“Want to be my first kiss, I mean. Claim my arse.”

Oh gods, they are back to that, are they? Chanyeol cries inside, grimacing and beseeching the gods for help.
“Are you a good kisser, Chanyeol? I feel like yer would be with a set of smoochers like that. Just thinkin’ about it makes my body tingle.”

Trying to calm himself, Chanyeol takes in a deep breath. Then he bluntly asks, “Are you in a rut or something?”

“Hey,” the wildling boy laughs lightly, “stop tryin’ to change the subject. I’m just tryin’ to get to know yer better, aren’t I? What a nice savage I am, guess I’d fit right in down south with all you Kneelers.”

Chanyeol rolls his eyes, a barely audible grunt getting strangled on the end of his tongue. So that is what this is about. He should have seen it coming: for some reason Baekhyun has always struck him as a bitter soul.

“Just… get some sleep,” is all Chanyeol can really say, and thankfully, Baekhyun takes his advice.

It takes Chanyeol longer to do the same. When sleep does not come, he stares up at the moon and stars framed by the swaying treetops, wondering what the future holds. He just needs to get back to the Fist, back to his brothers and the Lord Commander and everything he knows, and then all will be fine. Even though his brothers do not talk to him and the Lord Commander could not care less if he lived or died, things will be better.

Before he can even stop himself, Chanyeol is already hell-bent on thinking: Baekhyun talks to me, and that seems to be all it takes for him to be a fraction more reluctant to go back to the way things were. Yes, Baekhyun might not have spoken with him much today and they might have argued a little, but the boy still fed him when suppertime came. He did not leave him to get lost, did not leave him to starve or sleep alone in the cold.

So Chanyeol starts to wonder, who is the savage? The wildling or his brothers?

Somewhere through it all, he falls into a restless sleep, dreaming of Baekhyun walking ahead of him through the darkened forest, his footsteps creeping along the snowy ground that crunches beneath his boots. There is something wrong with him though, something off about the stiffness of his posture and the light hues of his fiery red hair in the darkness.

He passes under a ray of moonlight, doused in glistening white, and Chanyeol realises that the crimson colour of his locks is now an icy sapphire blue. When he stops beneath the stars, he turns to face Chanyeol and begins to walk back towards him, steps almost floating above the ground. With his face completely shrouded in shadow, Chanyeol can only make out the blue tones of his hair; the wavy strands seem to have absorbed the light from above as they glow like he is some kind of mystical being. Even though Chanyeol should be scared, he finds Baekhyun more beautiful than terrifying. Then the boy opens his eyes, and the sheer amount of light behind them startles Chanyeol into waking up.

He gasps for breath rather pathetically, watching as it plumes out above his face in the darkness. It is still night, the stars and moon shining from up above. And then Chanyeol hears it: the footsteps. They sound the same as Baekhyun’s had in the dream – painstakingly slow and measured, each grinding of snow grating away at his nerves. Except Baekhyun is still lying beside him, blissfully unaware in a land of peace, and Chanyeol starts to panic.

“Hey,” he hisses frightfully, grabbing a handful of Baekhyun’s shoulder and jerking him awake. “Baekhyun, Baekhyun there’s someone here!” The wildling groans in his drowsy state, getting smacked by Chanyeol as consequence, and when he finally comes to his senses and is blinking
himself awake, he stares with Chanyeol at the entrance to their bush shelter.

Chanyeol wants to protest when the wildling boy gets up to go and see who it is, but at this point he is too scared to talk. A feeble whine escapes him, though – the noise a dog makes when it gets kicked – when Baekhyun turns around and looks just as scared as he is.

“Lie down and don’t move!” the wildling hisses urgently, rushing back over as silently as possible before dropping to his knees.

“What? Who is it? Who’s out there?”

“Shhh!” Baekhyun whisper-shouts, smacking his hand over Chanyeol’s mouth to clamp his lips shut, forcing him to lie back against the snow again. In the quiet that follows, Chanyeol’s heart comes up in his mouth, eyes, and ears, the realisation that the footsteps are getting louder – closer – petrifying him. The steps are so agonisingly slow, unhurried, and Chanyeol blanches when they come to a stop right on the other side of the bush. His eyes widen when he hears something that resembles breathing, a hoarse, rattling noise that definitely does not sound human enough for a creature whose footsteps imply that it only has two feet.

To protect himself and Baekhyun, he moves to grip the handle of his sword, subsequently making the metal of his blade clink against the inside of his scabbard; it sounds so loud in the silence, deafening even, and Chanyeol cringes with fear. Baekhyun stares at him, lips parted in exasperation and sending huge white plumes of his breath against his face. The bush starts to prickle, as though someone has reached out to touch it and pull it aside, and the both of them turn to stare into the darkness. Goosebumps course up Chanyeol’s spine and out across his shoulder blades, heart racing so loud that it is probably giving their position away. There is someone on the other side of the bush trying to come in, and by the look on Baekhyun’s face, it isn’t another wildling.

It has gotten so cold, Chanyeol’s limbs numbing and falling asleep, and he is certain that his mouth has frozen shut what with the chill coming off Baekhyun’s fingers. A few twigs snap, Chanyeol’s heart leaping out of shock, and then there is another footstep, so close, almost penetrating. Chanyeol swears he can see a bluish sort of light between the bracken. Baekhyun’s hand ever so carefully starts to peel his fingers from the hilt of his sword, taking hold of the weapon for himself. Too overwhelmed with fear to do anything about it, Chanyeol can only watch with wide, watering eyes as the wildling leans up and meets eyes with the bush, whole body poised as if he is about to run off and fight whatever is on the other side. The crow wants to tell him to stop moving, to stay put, but he cannot find it in himself to open his mouth.

He squeaks like a mouse when there is shouting and laughter in the distance, tersely breaking the atmosphere in a single strike. Chanyeol does not have it in him to believe they are off the hook, even with the sound of the footsteps retreating and disappearing into the night. There is a song being sung through the trees, the coarse voices of rugged men chanting out words in rhyme to slander wildlings and their women, and Chanyeol realises with a hammering heart that they are men of the Night’s Watch.

In a split second decision, he throws Baekhyun’s hand off his mouth and hauls himself up into a seated position, about to get to his feet when Baekhyun shoves him down by the shoulders and climbs on top of him, replacing the hand on his mouth.

“What are you doing?!” Chanyeol cries, voice strangled, as he stares back at the harsh expression on Baekhyun’s face. “They are men of the Night’s Watch!”

“Do yer want to die?!” Baekhyun whisper-screams in return, getting close to his face so that he can
decrease the volume even more. “Yer friends are as good as dead! There’s no point in you dyin’ too.”

“They are my brothers—”

“Fuck yer brothers, little crow! They’ll be screamin’ in a minute, just go to sleep and keep yerself out of trouble. Yer asked me to take yer to the Fist, and that’s what I’m gonna do. Yer not dyin’ on the way!”

Chanyeol gives up, letting his head sag back against the snow. Baekhyun is restraining him well and true, settling his entire weight over his torso and preventing him from even lifting his shoulders off the ground. He falls asleep eventually, a deeper slumber than before, and wakes later on in the day to the sight of red beneath his nose. He gives the wildling a nudge, and Baekhyun is soon blinking himself awake and rising off his body. He stretches his arms into the air and groans in a freakishly sensual way for someone who’s just woken up. With their position, Chanyeol prays that he does not have another morning wood, and ponders whether the wildling used last night as an excuse to feel him up.

“Gods, yer not a very comfy pillow, are yer? All lumps and bones and knobbly bits,” Baekhyun complains, sliding off Chanyeol and landing in the snow. “Didn’t even get to cop a feel of the knob I actually want.”

“What happened last night?” Chanyeol gets straight to the point. “Who was that outside?”

Baekhyun cracks a few of his joints when he stands up, doing a whole body stretch before he decides to give Chanyeol the answer he seeks. “It was a White Walker.”

Chanyeol laughs heartily, voice scratching his throat. “A White Walker? You expect me to believe that? The White Walkers are gone.”

“Believe what yer want to believe, Chanyeol, but that was a White Walker. They’re comin’ back, slowly but surely, and if yer don’t want to take my warnin’, feel free to die. But only after yer’ve sent me on my way back to the Free Folk.”

Rolling his eyes, Chanyeol stands and dusts the snow from his black cloak. The colour makes him remember about his brothers, and soon he is rushing off out of the bush in search of them, pine needles lashing against his hands and face on the dash through.

“Oi!” Baekhyun calls, scrambling out after him. “Be careful, you fuckwit!”

Somehow, it does not take long for Chanyeol to find the scene of the murder, and he discovers his brothers in scarlet snow. They have been diced into little pieces, arms and legs, heads and torsos, and designed rather sickeningly into a spiral pattern, a severed hand just shy of his feet. Naturally, Chanyeol turns around, keels over, and throws up whatever he has in his stomach.

“Pansy,” Baekhyun sneers, approaching the dismembered men on the forest floor. “I told yer so, Chanyeol. Are yer gonna say yer don’t believe me, still? Or have I managed to convince yer? No bear could do this, and even if there were a bear someone would have shot it for food. Come on. Be logical here.”

“You—” Chanyeol groans, tears streaming down his face from the force of his gags as he chokes on the bile that comes sloshing from his stomach. His vision has darkened significantly and a cold flush has shaken his bones to the core, but somehow he manages to stay on his feet. “You want me to be logical and yet you tell me that magical beings have come back from the dead? Who is—
Who is the most logical then? I bet it was your wildling friends. Y-You were just trying to scare me."

“Oh, fuck you, Chanyeol,” Baekhyun retorts. “Do yer think I would’ve looked ready to piss meself if it were a wildling on the other side of the fuckin’ bush last night? Yer want to know what I saw when I looked out? A man with bright blue eyes and a white skeleton body, not a fuckin’ wildling in grey fur or a gods be damned bear. We Free Folk may be savages to you but we wouldn’t do this, we wouldn’t come this far out of our territory just to kill – what? – three of you? Judgin’ by the fact that there’s six legs here. Looks like your brothers slit their own throats anyhow before anything could get to them. Cowards.”

Chanyeol rubs his mouth free of spit with the back of his hand and looks around to where Baekhyun is examining one of the heads, holding it up by the hair. Blood trickles down from its neck, splattering on the ground, and when Chanyeol sees chunks of what he thinks to be brain he starts to gag again. What sends him off a second time, however, is when the wildling pulls apart the slash in the brother’s throat to examine it.

“A White Walker wouldn’t have killed ‘em so cleanly, see,” Baekhyun mutters thoughtfully, coming over to rest his palm on Chanyeol’s shoulder as he wretches, slobbering all over the ground. “Come on. Get it all out, that’s it.”

Chanyeol does so, spitting and coughing on the ground before shrieking when he looks back to see Baekhyun holding one of the dead men’s arms and touching him with it, blue fingers – blackened at the ends – raking through the fur of his cloak collar. He screams like a girl, running off through the trees while Baekhyun guffaws and chases after him with it, waving the ghostly appendage around in the air as if it is the most hilarious thing in the world.

And yet they say they are not savages.

They travel for another day at least, taking what Chanyeol hopes is the most direct route possible to the Fist. As is to be expected, Baekhyun’s conversation topics take a turn for the inappropriate, and he starts complaining about how one of Chanyeol’s brothers killed the man he was boning back at the outpost.

“He wasn’t that big. Nothin’ special. But he was better than me fingers,” he says sadly, sounding genuinely upset. “Yer’ve got no idea how horny I am, little crow. Please let me have a look at yer bone.” He turns back to Chanyeol with an innocent pout on his lips, as if expecting the crow to fall at is feet and offer him anything he wants “Just a little peep-peep?”

With a dry throat, Chanyeol croaks, “No.”

Laughing darkly, Baekhyun sashays over and links their arms together, the two of them walking in tandem with identical footsteps against the snow. With each step, the wildling eccentrically sways his hips, bashing into Chanyeol’s left thigh. “Sometimes I wonder, Chanyeol,” he starts up again, “how many girls yer’ve actually put yer bone in.”

Chanyeol cringes, face prickling with heat. They have finally come to that question.

Baekhyun reads the response and lets out a knowing, “Oohhh.” He grins, as if he has finally uprooted something worthwhile. “I see. Yer put yer bone in little boys instead, is that it? How many then? Come on, tell me who I’m competin’ with for ye mighty meat. Is there a cute little crow back at Castle Black waitin’ for yer?”

“The way you speak is vulgar, you know,” Chanyeol remarks in a way to divert the conversation
elsewhere, but Baekhyun sees straight through him.

“Oh, little crow, don’t tell me yer’ve never boned anyone?”

Chanyeol looks away a little too defensively, averting his gaze to the ground.

“How old are yer again?”

Clearing his throat, Chanyeol focuses his eyes ahead, looking out for low hanging branches or thorn bushes as they tread through the forest. “One-and-twenty.”

“Surely yer’ve shoved yer cock in somethin’?” Baekhyun demands, apparently outraged. “A whore, at least?”

“I swore an oath,” Chanyeol exclaims in frustration. “An oath that prohibits me of doing anything like that. I can father no children, alright? That’s the line I had to swear, along with many others.”

“Yeah,” Baekhyun smirks, leaning closer, “but men don’t make babies, do they? At least, I’m pretty sure they don’t. I’ve had a cock up me over a hundred times and never shat out no baby. Women are for babies, men are for fun, right?”

Chanyeol glares at him, but says nothing.

“Still, I guess I can’t shit on yer for tryin’ to be noble and all that. Yer admirable, really, little crow. But just in case yer didn’t get the hint: I’m a boy with a needy hole—” he starts backing Chanyeol up against a tree, eyes inexplicably intense— “and I want a good fuckin’, alright? Become a man with me, Chanyeol,” he eggs his chin up to line their lips together, breathing hotly over Chanyeol’s face as he fervently says, “Let me scream yer name until everyone – your brothers, my brothers, all the White Walkers and the Children of the Forest – can hear me. I want to sit on yer bone and ride yer up to heaven.”

Baekhyun bites his lips, staring so sultrily at Chanyeol that the latter almost creams his breeches. Who gave Baekhyun permission to look so… so appetising?

“We’d better drink plenty of water, eh?” the wildling murmurs intimately, the fair hairs on his nose grazing against Chanyeol’s and sending jolts through the crow’s face and body. “We’ll need all the spit we can get to push your fat cock inside me. Wouldn’t want it to hurt. Unless yer’ve got some oil hidden somewhere in that big bag of yours. In which case, it’ll be an easy slide, won’t it?”

Chanyeol gulps, finding his eyes glued to Baekhyun’s so securely that he cannot bring himself to look away. There is something disturbingly mesmerising about the wildling that he struggles to pinpoint. Essentially, he is trapped. “B-Baekhyun—”

“Mmmm,” the wildling hums, pressing their bodies against each other so much so that Chanyeol swears he can feel the boy’s own erection nudging against the juncture of his thighs. His eyes roll up into his head in a way to detach himself from reality, but Baekhyun is consuming his mind just as much as he is consuming the present. There really is no escape. If it were not for the tree, he would have collapsed by now. “Yer should say me name more often, little crow. It gets me all hot and bothered. Yer’d like that, wouldn’t yer? To see me all hot and bothered?”

Chanyeol yelps when a sturdy thigh presses against his groin, Baekhyun grinning triumphantly at the sound as he backs away. “Thought so,” he quips simply before sauntering off with a skip in his step. Chanyeol, on the other hand, remains stuck to the tree, almost completely certain that if he moves, the friction between his cock and his clothes will lead him to come all over himself, and he really has no means of washing his furs.
“Come on, Chanyeol!” calls Baekhyun spryly through the trees. “Yer Fist awaits!”

Wincing at the lewd innuendo, Chanyeol waddles after the wildling with a permanent grimace. To his dismay, the waves of release are rushing in his stomach; yet thankfully, after several awkward steps, the tide goes out.

Baekhyun does not come onto him again for a while. Instead, they meander through the trees in a surprising sense of calm, not really in a rush to be anywhere any time soon. Chanyeol is a little perturbed by his lack of urgency, but he learns to embrace it – just as he should learn to embrace more things in his life. Believe it or not, the wildling’s morals are rubbing off on him, even if they both did start off trying to kill each other.

Nothing much happens for the next couple of days. They do not run into any more White Walkers or brothers of the Night’s Watch. In fact, they do not see or hear another being at all – not even an animal, which is why it comes as a shock to Chanyeol when Baekhyun suddenly stops walking and turns to show him his finger pressed against his lips. The signal is supposed to hush him, but in actuality it makes him scared shitless. All he can think is: What is out there now? Who else wants to kill them?

The alarm must be apparent on his face, however, because Baekhyun rolls his eyes and smiles before mouthing the word “Deer.” Instantly, Chanyeol wholeheartedly understands. Gods forbid they scare the deer off, he is fucking starving.

The wildling walks back towards him, steps extra light, and breathily asks, “What weapons do yer have on yer?”

Chanyeol gestures to his sword with his index finger, seemingly displeasing his companion. Though Chanyeol must agree, hunting a deer with a sword is not very effective. One cannot creep up on a creature with enhanced hearing and double the number of legs without being seen and outrun.

“What’s in yer bag? Yer have the rope still, don’t yer?”

“Yeah…”

Rubbing his chin, Baekhyun looks back through the trees. This time, Chanyeol follows his line of sight until he too comes across the deer, eyes bulging when he sees the thick muscles around its thighs and the crazy antlers on its head. This is not just some little, lithe deer. This is a stag. A meaty stag. And Chanyeol’s mouth starts to water.

“We’ll have to make some kind of trap, then,” Baekhyun whispers, frowning in thought. “We can use the rope somehow, and I can slit its throat with my dagger. I would need to get behind it though, otherwise it’d probably stab the fuck out of me with those mega horns. Any ideas?”

“Uhh…” Chanyeol grunts unintelligibly, then suggests, “We could tie its legs together? With the—
With the rope.” Baekhyun does not look impressed. “Or… maybe not?”

“How would we get to the tyin’ part? We can’t just go up and ask it to lie limp because we want to eat it.”

Biting his lip, Chanyeol scowls at the deer. Why has that silly creature made itself uneasy prey? Why can it not go to sleep and be defenceless for a little bit? And maybe be deaf, too? After surviving on the last of their rations for the past day and a half, Chanyeol’s stomach could definitely use a huge chunk of meat like that.

“Okay. I have an idea,” Baekhyun whispers, looking up at him with determination. Chanyeol finds it funny how serious and vehement he looks, then finds it funnier how the deer has managed to lure them into working together. All because of the promise of food. “If we trip the deer up, I can jump on it and stab it through the head.”

Chanyeol pulls a face, mushing his mouth up. “Are you sure that’ll work?”

“Well, it’s goin’ to have to. It’s not like you have any bright ideas, is it?” Baekhyun pouts, eyes hard before he turns to survey the area. “We’ll have to tie the rope around the surroundin’ trees to cage it in. Will it be long enough?”

As quietly as possible, Chanyeol unhooks his arm from one of his bag straps and opens the flap at the top, taking out the huge hoop of rope he has stored away inside. “I guess so. We would have to choose the trees that are closest together though. But that might risk scaring it off.”

“Oh, what’s life without a little risk, eh? We’ll never catch the deer if we stand here dillydallyin’ all day anyways.”

“Alright then. You take this end,” Chanyeol mutters quietly, handing Baekhyun one end of the rope. “I’ll take this end and we can both go around the trees at the same time.”

Nodding, Baekhyun cracks his neck from left to right and lowers into a half squat. “Agreed. And then when we’ve tied the rope, you get behind the deer and throw a rock at it or somethin’. Send it runnin’ in my direction so I can jump it.”

Chanyeol does not really know much about hunting, or deer, but jumping on one with ginormous antlers does not exactly sound safe. There is a tickle in his stomach, one that tells him he is worrying for the boy, but he puts it down to the reason that the wildling is his map and compass. If Baekhyun dies from being stabbed with an antler, Chanyeol will be lost forever. And hungry.

“Are you sure jumping on it is a good idea?”

“No,” Baekhyun shrugs, wrapping the end of the rope around his palm a couple of times to get a good grip. Naturally, his answer does not really instil that much confidence in Chanyeol. “But it is the only idea we have, so.”

“Right,” the crow murmurs, not sure how to carry the argument on further. It is not that he wants to fight Baekhyun or anything, it is just he wants the boy to be, well, safe. “Shall we go then?”

Again, Baekhyun nods, starting to sneak away. “Don’t fuck up,” he whispers over his shoulder, no hint of a joke in his voice. Chanyeol cringes. That was definitely the motivation he needed.

Tiptoeing closer to the stag, Chanyeol is too afraid to even breathe. His eyes shift restlessly between their prey and his fellow predator, watching Baekhyun like a hawk for any random signals he might make as to where to go and what he should do. When they are close enough to start
wrapping the rope around trees, Chanyeol makes an impromptu silent prayer to the Warrior (and all
other six gods out of desperation) for help. He is just a hungry man, is that so wrong?

He feels like he is walking on egg shells around the deer which, thankfully, has not looked up from
where it grazes on a cowberry bush. Baekhyun is opposite him, looking much more sure of himself
than he himself is, as is the Baekhyun way, and when ends meet, they tie the rope together at the
last tree. Chanyeol almost sighs in relief before he remembers that doing so would cause the deer
to bolt – he has always been a heavy breather.

“Get behind it,” Baekhyun mouths at him. “Throw a rock.” Deftly, the wildling unsheathes his
dagger from where it lies hidden up his sleeve and he brushes past Chanyeol on his way to hide
behind a large tree. Alternatively, Chanyeol moves in view of the deer’s backside, where he then
struggles to find a rock because of all the snow. There are very few rocky things around this area,
as Chanyeol comes to find out, so why would there be a convenient stone here now? Apparently,
the gods want him to suffer as much as possible.

Regrettably, he ends up throwing the snow aside with his fingers, trying to find something
that he can launch at the deer, yet all he discovers are soggy leaves and a couple of twigs. Cursing through
grittled teeth, Chanyeol turns around to keep searching, accidentally putting his hand directly into a
clump of nettles and letting out a girlish yelp. It stings and burns, then his skin itches, but once the
initial shock has passed, Chanyeol realises what he has done.

Ever so slowly, he turns around, and that is when he meets eyes with the stag. There is a pregnant
pause, Chanyeol deafened by his own heartbeat (and stupidity), before the deer shoots off in the
opposite direction. Its legs jump so abruptly that the surprise knocks Chanyeol off his feet, and the
next time he looks up from where he has fallen on the ground he sees Baekhyun triumphantly
pulling his bloody dagger out from the back of their dinner’s skull.

So relieved that all has gone to plan, Chanyeol sags back amongst the snow and does not get up
until Baekhyun prods him with his boot.

“Come on, little crow. We’ve got to cook the beast.”

By late afternoon, they have set up a little camp for themselves tucked up against the base of a
short, earthen cliff. Tree roots winding out of the vertical ground prove to be useful shelving units
to hook cloaks and bags on, while an upturned trunk makes for a rather good couch. With meat
sizzling over the open fire and the deer’s guts buried several feet away in the ground, Chanyeol
relaxes for what feels like the first time in a century.

“We don’t make a bad team, eh?” Baekhyun smiles to himself, Chanyeol returning the gesture.
“Done much huntin’ before?”

Rubbing his palms together before warming them on the fire, Chanyeol looks down to where
Baekhyun in sat cross-legged, slowly turning the meat on the iron spokes Chanyeol had brought
from Castle Black.

“No.”

The wildling looks startled. “Never? Not even once?” Chanyeol shakes his head. “My gods. Have
they holed you up in Castle Black yer whole bloody life?”

Chuckling, Chanyeol nods, reminiscing as he stares into the flames. “I’m a builder in the Watch. I
fix the Wall when it cracks and I make sure it’s safe to walk on. I had no need to hunt, let alone
come north of the Wall.”
“Ahh, so this is yer first time in Free Folk territory then?” Baekhyun nods, as if finally understanding something. “I thought yer were a ranger. Makes sense now, why yer couldn’t kill me. Good choice, if I do say so myself.” Baekhyun smirks, eyeing Chanyeol playfully. “Anyway,” he chirps, “what do yer eat at Castle Black if none of yer hunt?”

“Well, at the moment, we’re eating a lot of cabbage.”

“Oh, how lovely,” Baekhyun says flatly, voice thick with sarcasm. “I’d kill meself if I had to survive on cabbage. Wait—scratch that, I’d fuckin’ go out to find me own food. Yer should do the same, when yer get back,” Baekhyun murmurs, the last sentence quieter than the others. “Back at camp, we all eat meat. Yer can’t grow vegetables out there ‘cause it is too cold, see, so we live off mountain lions and bears. If we’re lucky, we’ll catch a few mountain goats in the summer months and breed them for winter. That’s how it’s always been. We Free Folk like our meat.”

Chanyeol guesses that the last line has a double meaning, but does not make to comment.

“Still, not bad for yer first hunt, eh? And considerin’ we didn’t have any bows or arrows or nothin’, I think we were pretty clever. I remember my first huntin’ trip, yer know? I was with me mother, nine years old I think I was, and I caught an elk with me bow and arrow. Shot it right in the eye.”

“Wow,” Chanyeol genuinely gasps, sitting back a little. “That’s impressive. And you were only nine?”

Baekhyun grins proudly, chest swelling as he turns the meat over again to cook the other side. “Doesn’t matter how old yer are, little crow, so long as yer have a good teacher. My mother was the best, and she was one mighty spearwife. Everyone was so jealous of both my mother and father, and they all started to be jealous of me after I grew up as well. We were the ideal family.”

Chanyeol smiles fondly, somehow endeared by the image of a younger Baekhyun skipping through the trees with a quiver of arrows strung over his shoulder. He tries to imagine the mother too but it does not quite work out. Perhaps she had long red hair and golden eyes, just like her son. Then Chanyeol realises the choice of tense.

“You… were?”

“Yeah,” Baekhyun breathes, taking the iron rod away from the fire and its Y-shaped prongs to slide a thigh muscle each onto two different plates. “I was ten,” he says, approaching Chanyeol with dinner in hand before giving him his portion of the reward. “My mother and father went out on a scoutin’ mission to look for other clans. They were with a group of five other people so I know what happened. They went too far out of our territory and were picked up by crows. And when I say picked up, I mean killed.”

Chanyeol stills, not touching his meat. His brothers killed Baekhyun’s parents? That’s awful. As a crow himself, he cannot help but feel responsible. “I... I’m sorry.”

“Yer don’t have to apologise, Chanyeol. It was a long time ago.” Then he chuckles and casts a wistful gaze up to the peeking stars. “I wonder what they’d think of me now, sat here sharin’ supper with a crow.”

Unsure of whether to smile or not, Chanyeol presses for an answer just so he can be sure. “What do you reckon they would think?”

“Hmmm,” Baekhyun sighs, slouching his back before looking across at him. “Probably somethin’ like: We raised yer to be better than this, Baekhyun Byunson.”
Smiling lightly, Chanyeol looks down at his meal. “And…” he finds himself saying, his mind feeling extra daring now that there seems to be some common ground between them. “What do you think?”

The wildling pauses for a moment, taking a while to ponder. He taps his chin and looks into the fire, its heated glow dancing in his eyes and over his hair, and then shrugs. “I think this is okay. Believe it or not, little crow, I don’t actually mind yer. Yer seem alright to me.”

“Almost sounds like you like me,” Chanyeol teases thoughtlessly, his risk proving to be fruitful.

“Ahh, don’t get too cocky now, little crow. I’m tryin’ to make yer believe in yerself, not think yer better than everybody.”

That catches Chanyeol completely off guard. The wildling wants what? Him to believe in himself? Where did that come from?

“We’re not all bad, Chanyeol,” he mumbles, hands busy tearing the fat off the meat, grease dribbling down his fingers before he noisily slurps it off. “Yer didn’t kill me when yer could’ve, which I suppose means not all crows are bad either. And definitely not crows with big bones. They are totally fine.” The earnest moment is sent into the middle of a hurricane and comes out suggestive, and Chanyeol rolls his eyes. “Eh, don’t give me that look, Chanyeol. I haven’t spoken of yer bone in ages!”

“Why are you even obsessed with it?” he cries, pretending to be more irritated than he actually is. In all honestly, he finds Baekhyun’s love for his ‘bone’ rather funny. It is just harmless fun, isn’t it? Still, he does pinch his thighs together to protect his modesty.

“Because it’s big and I want it!” Baekhyun whines, lowering his chin so that he is staring at Chanyeol through his eyebrows. “At night I lie there awake and think of how long it is, whether my lips would have to stretch around the head just to fit it in my mouth.” Baekhyun wets his lips on purpose and Chanyeol shuffles uncomfortably. Oath be damned, the wildling is too tempting for his own good.

“Baekhyun, I hate to say it but I do not think I am ever going to let you come near my cock.”

Smirking as if he already knows something dirty, Baekhyun gazes at him with dripping eyes and hooded lids. “Yer say that now,” he declares smoothly, “but just you wait. I’ll have that bone in me in no time.”

A hot flush creeps down Chanyeol’s neck as though someone has scratched him. Although the conversation topic may be a little out of his comfort zone, Chanyeol still tries to be a good sport. “Do I not get a say in this?”

Chuckling menacingly, Baekhyun shakes his head. “Of course not. Since when is a man in control of his own bone? It wants what it wants, Chanyeol, and judgin’ by how hard it got the other day when I put you up against that tree, I’m guessin’ it wants me.” He says it so casually that Chanyeol colours red. Then Baekhyun giggles. “Be vigilant, little crow.” It sounds like a warning. “I’m comin’ for yer.”

Chanyeol, admittedly, goes to sleep that night with filthy fantasies in his head, mainly revolving around all the sinful things Baekhyun could do with his mouth. What would his tongue feel like? Are his lips as smooth as flower petals? How far down his throat can he go before it gets to be too much? He wakes up confused, conflicted, and reserved, distancing himself from Baekhyun so that these weird urges will go away. The boy is a wildling. He is a crow. They are polar opposites. It
would never work – not that he even wants it to.

Another three days pass before a light snow starts to fall, just a thin flurry that dances evenly towards the ground. Chanyeol finds himself staring at the pretty scenery in front of him – namely, Baekhyun walking amidst all the sparkling crystals. He enjoys watching the flakes land on the boy’s cherry red hair, and finds himself smiling, endearing, when Baekhyun raises a delicate hand to shake them off. The crow then mentally kicks himself and wonders why he is being so abnormal. He feels so strung out, so tired, and all he wants is to go back to the Fist and never see this boy again.

Yes, that is what he tells himself he wants. They may have killed a deer together and shared too many personal things over the fire the other day, but that does not change anything. The deal is still on. They will part ways eventually and never see one another again.

The snow picks up a few hours later, however, along with the wind, and with the darkening sky Baekhyun turns back to suggest that they find somewhere to take shelter from the oncoming storm. With one glance at the moody grey clouds billowing above, Chanyeol hastens to agree. They hurry up the slopes of the forest as the snow gets thicker around them, mist building and creating a cloak to the senses. Eventually Baekhyun spies the opening to a cave in the side of the incline and calls Chanyeol over, voice piercing through the haze. Adamant to be safe and away from the crowd, Chanyeol almost trips over his own feet in an attempt to reach him. Baekhyun finds that rather funny.

As it turns out, the cave goes down quite a way. It is not just a hole in the floor, but a tunnel that winds towards the earth’s core, trailing deeper between rocks and tree roots until it reaches an opened area. On the way, Baekhyun makes a torch, using a handy large stick they find on route and wrapping an unwillingly given strip of Chanyeol’s black cloak around one end. He then coats the fur in tree sap he finds dripping from the roots above, and brings it alight with what looks to be flint and steel. Where all the resources have magically come from and how Baekhyun managed to find them so deftly, Chanyeol knows not, but he does not want to question it because he is just thankful they have them. In hindsight, the most feasible explanation is that the wildling actually has all the survival necessities tucked away safely in his undetectable pockets, and no matter where he is, his eyes are searching his surroundings for required tools and equipment. He has a keen eye, resourceful in a way that outshines the general hunter.

They track down the cave together, Chanyeol distrusting of the shadows. He has to hunch over slightly so as to not scrape his head, but he still gets attacked by low hanging branches and spider webs; Baekhyun cackles madly when the crow shrieks, having found a long-legged spider crawling over his knuckles. It is enough to give Chanyeol the shivers for days. Now every tickle and itch he feels will be associated with an arachnid.

The deeper they go into the unknown, the hotter and more humid it becomes. In due course, the atmosphere becomes a little suffocating and claustrophobic, and at one point Chanyeol swears the walls are closing in on him. If it were not for Baekhyun’s rippling torchlight, he would be a nervous wreck right now. To his relief, he is not alone, and although his company is a wildling, he manages to remain calm.

Out of nowhere, Baekhyun squeals, dropping the torch against the floor and running off into the gloom. Chanyeol first instinct is to check around his feet in case there’s a rat or a mole, maybe even some rabbits who have burrowed through the cave walls, but he finds nothing but his own shoes. He looks up next, pacing forward at a crawl until he emerges into a large cavern. He hears gushing water before he sees it, squinting a little to his right before seeing the shadowy figure of Baekhyun wandering around by a waterfall spewing out from between the rocks and into a sunken
In the shaky light of the torch, Chanyeol can just about see Baekhyun dropping to his knees and sticking his hand in the water, swilling it around for good measure and sending ripples across its surface. He hums in content, glancing back over his shoulder with a beaming smile. “It’s warm,” he tells him, hair iridescent under the shadows and flame of the fire at his feet.

“What is this place?” Chanyeol wonders, crouching down to pick up the torch to better his vision as his backpack slides off his shoulders, thumping to the ground.

“It’s a cave, little crow,” Baekhyun grins, voice deep. His tinkling laughter bounces off the stone walls when Chanyeol deadpans at him. “Hey, you’re the one who asked what this place was. Not me.”

Narrowing his eyes, Chanyeol clenches his fist around the stick. “I know what a cave is, genius.”

“And how was I supposed to know that?” The fire dances in Baekhyun’s eyes, captivating. “Why don’t we light this place up a little more, eh? I can’t see shit down here.” He rises effortlessly to his feet, taking the flint out of his pocket and holding it in the same hand as his dagger. “The sap seems to be pretty flammable, so we can use that to maybe set some of these tree roots on fire? What do yer say?”

“Yeah, sounds good,” Chanyeol replies, eyes searching for the materials they need. “A fire in each corner, then?”

Baekhyun rubs his knuckles and nods. “Uh-huh, I’ll start over here. All the better to see yer bone with, little crow.” He sashays away with a devilish smirk that makes Chanyeol’s insides twitch – and not because he is irritated.

Together, they arrange small pit fires in the five different corners of the cave, discovering other pools and pitch black tunnels that seem to dig much further down than this one. The walls seem damp when Chanyeol's hands graze them, busy with dismembering tree roots with his sword, and he wonders whether the cavern floods completely at certain times of the year. Spring time would be most probable, what with the deep thaw.

The ceiling occasionally drips and in some places the jagged floor is slippery, but the space is contained and keeps them shielded from the storm outside. In summary, it’s perfect.

When they are finally done, Chanyeol does a pan of the room, intending to appreciate their temporary accommodation with ease in his heart. But there by the waterfall is the wildling, shamelessly starting to remove his clothes. The sight leaves him astounded, frozen in place, and he cannot even try to convince himself that Baekhyun is just taking an innocent bath because of course he isn’t.

The crow almost can’t believe his eyes as he watches the wildling remove his thick fur coat and then untie the string that holds up his trousers, revealing beige undergarments that are quick to follow their predecessors. Chanyeol averts his eyes out of modesty, spiralling like a coil into a deep pit of heat.

He only looks back when he hears the splash of water, signalling that Baekhyun has jumped directly into the pool without inhibitions – not even a single thought that it could be too shallow for jumping in or poisonous somehow. It must be a hot spring, that would explain it, and even though it has brought on a provocative display by a horny little wildling, at least it will provide them with some warmth and a way of washing the sweaty grime from their clothes.
“Why aren’t yer joinin’ me, Chanyeol?” Baekhyun grins, turning around in the pool and resting his forearms on the rocky ledge around it, grinning from ear to ear as he shows all his milky white skin to the world. Chanyeol sees his feet kicking up behind him, legs pale against the dusky water. “Are yer that shy? We’re both men here. We’ll see nothin’ we haven’t seen before. Although, I might not have seen a cock as big as yours before, but if yer never let me see it, I’ll never know, will I?”

Chanyeol clears his throat and looks at the dirt on the ground instead, anything to get away from the sight that has his cock waking up. He made a vow, an oath, he pledged his life to the Night’s Watch, and he will not desert for a wildling. Even if that wildling is Baekhyun. And is incredibly attractive.

“Come on, we haven’t washed for days. I’ll scrub yer back,” Baekhyun offers, teasing tone hinting at him wanting to do more than just scrub. Chanyeol refuses to raise his eyes. One look and he knows he will give in to something, whether that be joining the wildling in the pool to do nothing or to comply to the boy’s wishes. “Dig my nails into yer skin until I leave marks. Let everyone know yer mine under all those furs, even if yer try and resist.”

Water trickles and splashes, and Chanyeol assumes that Baekhyun is just rinsing the water over his shoulders and hair instead of dunking himself beneath the surface, yet when he sees a naked figure in his peripheral, he panics. And in that state of shock, he just so happens to look up from the ground to see a fully naked Baekhyun stood proudly before him, glistening trails of water lining rivers of gold down his skin as they reflect the firelight.

“Like what yer see?” the wildling boy asks, raising a single eyebrow as he stares at Chanyeol with eyes full of cheek.

The poor crow cannot find the words to reply to the wildling’s question. Baekhyun’s body is flawless, skin unblemished alabaster that wraps around an angelically carven frame. His shoulders are broad, just as wide as his flaring hips, and above strong, thick thighs lies a v-line that tapers up into the indents of abdominal muscles all across his middle. Then there is his cock: hanging limp between his legs – though Chanyeol swears he sees it twitch – at around seven inches long, surrounded in a wild mane of onyx hair.

Posed with his hands on his hips and his head tilted just slightly to the side, Baekhyun is the incarnation of sin come to drag him under.

“Hmm, yer do like it. Look how red yer’ve become. I’ve liked what I’ve seen ever since I saw yer, little crow,” he drawls, ostentatiously coming closer at a gruelling pace. “Look at what the old gods gave me. A big meaty man for me to enjoy, delivered right on my doorstep. Stop playin’ hard to get, Chanyeol. Stop backin’ away. Yer want me, I can smell it on yer.”

Chanyeol averts his eyes swiftly, as if not looking at Baekhyun will make him go away. He quickly tries to eradicate all thoughts of the wildling from his mind, yet no matter what he does, nothing works. His mind only stores more images of Baekhyun when the boy comes sashaying closer, swaying his hips on purpose and causing his flaccid length to swing ever so slightly. Chanyeol doesn’t know why he finds it so erotic. His eyes flicker down without his consent.

“Is yer cock bigger than mine?” Baekhyun asks, voice too innocent for a situation like this. “Thicker? Longer? Hairier? For these past few days, I’ve been wonderin’ what colour the tip is. Is it pink? Or red? Or peachy? How many veins have yer got snakin’ down the side? How much work is my tongue gonna have to put in?”

Chanyeol winces, staring straight back into Baekhyun’s eyes as though he is staring down the length of a blade. Baekhyun grins, incandescent, and comes to a stop right before him. All the
teasing and suggestive comments have built up to this moment – the climax of Baekhyun’s lust. Clearly, the wildling cannot keep it bottled up any longer, and seeing as their new environment is so private and appropriate, he has decided to let go.

Chanyeol does not want him to let go. He does not know how he’s going to react to it. At the moment, he is simultaneously battling the wildling and himself, because even though he hates to admit it, he is foolishly curious. He wants to know what it’s like, just once. He wants to feel another body pressed against his own before he goes back to the Watch and wastes his life away. And Baekhyun is so willing. So eager. How can Chanyeol keep him at bay?

“Can I have a look now?” The wildling’s fingers ghost across his hips. “Seein’ as we’re inside and away from danger. No White Walkers are gonna jump out and yer cock won’t freeze off from the cold. Just let me have a little peek, yeah?”

Heart palpitating in his chest, Chanyeol fights to draw breath into his convulsing lungs. “N-No—”

“Oh, come on, little crow,” Baekhyun goes on, edging their faces closer and closer together until he is breathing directly into Chanyeol’s mouth. The crow pants in return, heart rate hard and pounding all around his body, senses hyperaware of everything Baekhyun does. Even his breath makes him ecstatic. “I know yer want me just as much, don’t try to deny it.”

Baekhyun is so close now, too close, and if he were to push forwards a mere fingers width, Chanyeol is certain they would be kissing. Even as the boy talks, Chanyeol can already feel their lips skimming each other. He has not kissed anyone before, never thought he would, but now, he wants to. And the want is killing him.

“This—This isn’t right,” he protests, but Baekhyun pays him no heed. It is not like there is any power behind his statement anyway. For one, his voice wobbles and sounds unsure, and two, he is stood there like a board, stiff and jumpy just like a maid.

“Says who?” Baekhyun’s eyes are hooded now, his gaze so intense that Chanyeol wants to cower. How can he so easily make all of Chanyeol’s arguments seem so pointless and irrelevant? It is like everything he says is invalid. Baekhyun knows the ways of the world, not him. “Who says it is not right?”

His lips are inviting, his tone is alluring, his eyes are captivating. There is not a single hair on Baekhyun’s body that misses the mark, and the longer Chanyeol stares, the more lost he becomes.

Baekhyun wants him. He wants Baekhyun to want him. But, why? Why does he care if Baekhyun wants him or not? Why should it matter if Baekhyun thinks he is alright and likes having him around? What makes the wildling’s opinion of him so important?

“My—My oath—” the crow emits a strangled noise akin to those words and closes his eyes for a second time. He cannot bear to watch his sanity crumbling away. Why is he seeking validation from a savage? Is he losing his mind?

There is something swarming in his stomach and his heart feels like it is on fire, and he does not understand why. His body wants this to happen, it wants to submit, but his mind is telling him not to. He has obligations, responsibilities back at the Wall. His oath—

“Fuck yer oath, little crow,” Baekhyun growls, seizing Chanyeol’s eyes again, “and fuck the Watch. Tonight,” he goes on at a whisper, “yer belong to me.”

Chanyeol tenses when Baekhyun closes the distance, even though it was inevitable. His whole face
scrunches up as the boy presses their lips together, sucking ever so slightly on different parts of his sealed mouth.

Chanyeol involuntarily loses himself somewhere between the start and the finish, lips gone and replaced with molten eyes that behold him with meaning, Baekhyun ordering him subliminally to let go of everything and kiss him back. So he does, he does and he likes it, but before he can get a good enough taste, Baekhyun is retreating with a heavy look in his eyes.

“Normally,” he says, voice a lot raspier than before, “the Free Folk don’t kneel.” He nuzzles their noses together, maintaining lustrous eye contact, before he says, “For you, though, I just might.” Then he is sinking to his knees and routing around for the ties on Chanyeol’s clothes, fingers adeptly navigating the ropes until Chanyeol feels the material come loose. In little less than a minute, Baekhyun manages to have his trousers around his ankles and his hard cock springing free, keening when he holds his tabard out of the way and watches Baekhyun’s mouth devour him.

The wildling has the audacity to laugh at his expense while his mouth is full of meat, and Chanyeol’s eyes roll into the back of his head as he comes right there and then, having only been in Baekhyun’s mouth for about twenty seconds. His legs violently shudder and his abdominal muscles tense, and for a moment he forgets everything as he is utterly consumed.

Yes, he has brought himself to completion before, but it has never been as powerful as that.

He regains his senses though, when he realises that the boy is still suckling on him, licking everything up and swallowing it before he pops his mouth off with a satisfied “Ahh”, a sound which resembles the noise one makes when he is parched and has just drank a full flagon of water. There is spittle running down his chin and making his baby pink lips sparkle, some of Chanyeol’s release hiding in the junctures of his fingers.

“Delicious,” Baekhyun grins, fondling the softening cock in his hands while biting his lip. He plays with it as if it is a toy, swinging it this way and that while one of his hands reaches back to squeeze Chanyeol’s stones. The crow gasps and lurches forwards, further being robbed of air when the wildling asks, “When can yer get it up again?”

At the question, Chanyeol feels himself hardening already. The wildling wants him so badly and it feels too good to stop.

Baekhyun gets to his feet, rolling his shoulders and swaying his hips in tandem before he takes Chanyeol’s hands and winds them around his waist. The skin now under Chanyeol’s fingertips is searing, and his inexperienced mind struggles to come to terms with the fact that the flesh he is touching is not his own, but someone else’s. His hands are then ushered down to cup Baekhyun’s lush behind, and Chanyeol abruptly breathes in spit down the wrong hole and starts to choke.

“I’m proud of this arse, little crow,” Baekhyun grins, swinging his pelvis back and stamping Chanyeol’s hands down harder. “Do yer like it? I stretch every day just to keep it tight.”

There is still a tickle in his throat, persistent, air now obsolete and traded in for Baekhyun’s breath. As his fingers mould into the fat of the wildling’s ample arse, his heart beat spikes and his mind empties of all thoughts now deemed useless by his conscience; Baekhyun is the only thing worth thinking about.

“Hmm,” the wildling hums, arching his eyebrows upwards in an extremely lewd way while his whole body almost keels forwards. Chanyeol feels the sharp clench of the boy’s buttocks and kills a whine behind his teeth. Baekhyun’s body is all thick muscle hidden beneath a fleshy exterior, deceptive and intriguing all at the same time. “It feels so good when yer touch me, little crow. Can
I touch you too?”

Chanyeol’s hands are left clamping down on their own, Baekhyun’s now dancing up his arms, over his shoulders and around his neck. “Show me all yer skin please,” he asks coquettishly. “I’ll undress yer if yer like. *Piece by piece* until yer all naked, just for me.”

Too hot in his boiled leather, Chanyeol vehemently nods. The wildling then giggles, tinkering fingertips skipping to locate straps and buckles, and Chanyeol closes his eyes when he has to pull his tabard over his head. To his dismay, being naked is just as hot as being clothed, but then he sees Baekhyun’s ravenous eyes all over him and the air grows stifling.

“I like this,” the wildling growls, scraping his nails down Chanyeol’s torso until he reaches his hips. “Yer so lean, little crow. Yer muscles are so…” Baekhyun’s sensual expression drips, “hard and manly.” A rumble gathers in his chest, his sharp caramel irises meeting with Chanyeol’s dark ones, damp spikes of cherry red hair draping over his eyes in an ethereal fashion. He resembles an intricate illustration on the crisp page of a history book, an insight into past mythical creatures and their abilities. If he were to be an otherworldly being, Chanyeol decides that Baekhyun would be a mischievous pixie, reeking havoc throughout the Seven Kingdoms in the ancient days of the First Men. The character fits him quite well.

“Can you fuck me now? Yer can fuck me on yer cloak. We can turn it white.” He licks his lips, and then he licks Chanyeol’s.

And all the crow can think is yes, yes, yes. There is a carnal desire throbbing in his gut, asphyxiating his sense. He is not even ashamed of himself when his lecherous need expels his anxieties and doubts as if they are nought but flecks of dust on his shoulder, brushed off without much thought at all. Inhibitions gone, Chanyeol backs Baekhyun to where his cloak lays strewn on the ground and ungainly lowers them both to their knees. His eyes are fixated on the wildling’s slack jaw, his vibrant, drizzled tongue teasing him every step of the way.

He does not really know what he is doing but he goes with his instincts, and his instincts tell him to ravish Baekhyun until the wildling regrets teasing him for all that time. It is going to take some doing though, if the wildling’s elated giggles mean anything. Evidently, Baekhyun is enjoying this a lot. The wildling has wrapped all his limbs around Chanyeol’s body like a needy child, causing Chanyeol to expand with pride. Here is someone who needs him, a person who is happy because he is here. It is nice, although foreign he realises, to actually feel wanted. It is nice to be liked. Even if it is by a wildling.

Kissing Baekhyun sends judders through his body, a previously unexplored region awakening to ache and thrum, to *want*. The wildling’s physique is crafted of hard muscles and strong veins, a plethora of scars marking his body – none of them ghastly – and visible now that Chanyeol is close enough to spy them out. There is one the shape of a crescent moon over Baekhyun’s left hip, and another like a lightning bolt hiding on his ribcage under his arm. Chanyeol finds himself yearning to know the stories behind them, needing to know whether whoever it was who inflicted the wounds is dead and gone.

They break apart for air much too soon, and before Chanyeol can dive back in again, Baekhyun is already sucking his own fingers into his mouth. In awe, the crow’s jaw drops at the sight of the wildling’s lips stretching around three of his digits, saliva making the whole ordeal glisten in a satisfyingly crude way.

Chanyeol, luckily, has just enough brain power left to surmise what Baekhyun is doing, and sits back on his heels to push Baekhyun’s legs up by his thighs, revealing the waiting rosebud between. It is adorable: the way it clenches every so often, the wrinkled skin around it going tense; it is such
a pretty pink colour as well, and Chanyeol licks his lips, wondering and wondering just what it would taste like. Alas, he has now used up all his brain power, and thankfully forgets that he is putting his mouth and tongue in a place that sees shit every other day, so he pitches forwards to suck it into his mouth.

Baekhyun stutters around him, a hand coming down to claw its way through Chanyeol’s raven locks and tug on his scalp, making it burn. It is the first time that Chanyeol hears Baekhyun make a noise, an involuntary one, at least, and even through the distance between them Chanyeol still feels the vibrations running shivers through the wildling’s body. It was a mixture of a gasp and a whine, a shocked, pleasantly surprised whimper that had knocked the breath out of him, and Chanyeol works fervently to make Baekhyun do it again.

Instead, what comes out is a sharp, “Fuck,” and Chanyeol leans back a moment to gather his breath, finding the taste of Baekhyun’s intimates a little sweaty but otherwise not a problem – he has just rinsed himself in the water, after all.

“Chanyeol,” the boy then gasps, voice hoarse, “put it in me – yer tongue, put it in me.”

Still panting, Chanyeol’s tongue automatically flops out of his mouth like a heaving dog, and he presses forwards to lick a stripe over the twitching skin before he puts some force behind his muscle and drives through the rosebud’s centre to uncover the stigma. Baekhyun groans, long and loud, Chanyeol matching the sound with a whine in the back of his throat when his own length drags unexpectedly against his cloak; the head explodes in testing tingles, the sensation striking him right in the gut like hot wax.

Baekhyun is gracing the cave with his dirty words and phrases, a mixture of curses and, “You stop now and I’ll cut yer fuckin’ cock off,” then describing how he will fuck himself on it while Chanyeol bleeds to death. That comment actually concerns Chanyeol a little, and he pulls back to respond, probably retort something about how he is more than just his cock and actually has feelings as well, yet he’s cut off when Baekhyun pulls on his hair and forces his face back down between his arse cheeks. Chanyeol doesn’t mind, not really, because Baekhyun is enjoying himself against his inexperienced tongue and it is all Chanyeol could have hoped for – that something he is doing feels good. He is clueless, really, when it comes to all this. He does not even know where to put it in a woman, let alone how to do it with a man, and Baekhyun seems high maintenance.

His tongue laps feverishly, dousing the crevice in his own drool until it is slick and glistening. The hole shudders unconsciously, winking to him when it pushes past a contraction to open ever so slightly. It pulsates and writhes of its own accord, the high-pitched, gratified moans released through Baekhyun’s pleasure enough to get Chanyeol off without even being touched. He claws at the wildling’s cheeks, dragging them apart until all of him is exposed, red scratches like tiger stripes blazing on his skin.

Eventually, the wildling recedes and lets Chanyeol’s head go, the latter looking up to see him furiously sucking on his fingers. He grunts accidentally, capturing Baekhyun’s attention and surrendering himself to the most enrapturing eye contact he has even been witness too; he feels himself melting under the strong gaze, turning into a pile of goo that Baekhyun would probably fuck into himself with his fingers.

He watches, amazed, when Baekhyun’s digits finally sink into his own body, forcing their way past the tightest ring that is only supposed to send things out and not take things in. Chanyeol’s arousal strains between his knelt legs, so desperate to be relieved that when Baekhyun looks at him scarily and threatens, “If yer don’t last more than at least a minute, I’m gonna fuckin’ murder yer,” he actually blanches and quakes a little in fear. He has no idea how he can make himself last
longer, or even how he can make himself last at all. There is a very tight hole awaiting him and he has never put his cock in anything other than his fist – except for Baekhyun’s mouth a few seconds ago – and his fist definitely will not be the same as that.

And it is not.

It is a whole other world of different.

Chanyeol chokes when he first breaks through, only the head inside the wildling who is hot and bothered, sprawled out atop his cloak. It feels suffocating, intoxicating, dangerous where addiction is concerned, and Chanyeol is too bloody scared to move. He feels no relief, not yet, for his body is tense and all his muscles are pulled so tight that they threaten to rip apart, but watching Baekhyun’s eyes rolling into the back of his head is enough to make him satisfied.

It is hot inside. Wet. And Chanyeol vulgarly spits down onto their seam just so he does not have to force his way past. Baekhyun is so tight that it is a wonder he fits at all, and then there is his length to worry about. How far in can he push before it starts to hurt? The wildling’s rim has reddened already, stained like a fine wine, and Chanyeol involuntarily finds it to be most attractive thing he has ever seen, even though it is bruising.

“Oh gods,” he groans, pressing his hands down on either side of Baekhyun’s head before swinging his hips to push in the rest of the way. “Oh gods.”

“When yer say that, it makes me feel like people are watchin’ us,” Baekhyun laughs breathlessly, enjoying Chanyeol’s tormented expression. “Talkin’ to the gods like they’re here in the cave.”

The crow does not know how to deal with all this naked pleasure. He feels ready to burst, ready to blow up like wildfire, and it is so hot that he can feel the flames licking at his neck. His muscles harden and he makes his first thrust, Baekhyun’s insides hugging him so tight that it takes all his energy just to get back in. They massage him, envelope him, caress him like a mother welcoming her child home from a long trip away, and Chanyeol wants to let go already.

His eyes find Baekhyun’s, purely unguarded, and he tries to convey all his emotions through his heavy gaze. Relief takes over when the wildling flashes him a faint smile, and Chanyeol feels himself sag. He has done it, finally. Baekhyun, of all people, has taken his maidenhead for safekeeping, and for some reason he could not be happier. What a beautiful being, he reflects, to have entrenched on him forever.

It seems as if the gods are on his side too, as he lasts a grand total of about a minute and fifteen seconds once he properly gets going.

Baekhyun definitely looks a little miffed then, but jerks himself off hastily with Chanyeol’s cock going limp inside him. As soon as his release has finally washed over and he has been sated, he announces that, yes, Chanyeol is bigger than Hayder. Chanyeol does not know why he feels relieved.

Even though Hayder is dead, he finds himself wanting to outdo him. His bigger cock is one pace in the right direction.

Fifteen minutes later, they are going at it again, Baekhyun on his hands and knees with his head bowed between his arms. Chanyeol cannot do anything coherently, let alone think, as he actually lasts a reasonable amount of time before he climaxes. It feels good, damn good, and he decides that Baekhyun’s arsehole is his new favourite thing to do. The wildling’s moans are as equally appetising, high and breathy with the occasional swear word thrown in, reminding Chanyeol that he
– Baekhyun – is definitely the manlier between them.

When Chanyeol comes again, he takes his time in fucking his seed back into Baekhyun’s hole while he spasms, the wildling groaning and grunting before going limp against the cloak and sagging. He seems to be exhilarated, the notion holding the same feeling Chanyeol would have if he’d just been crowned king of the Seven Kingdoms.

The boy rolls over, flushed and dewy with a sleepy grin on his face that makes Chanyeol’s heart ache. He swings his legs through the air, stretching his toes to the ceiling of the cave and moaning as Chanyeol goes to lay down beside him, physically exhausted.

“No one’s ever done that to me before,” Baekhyun says breathlessly, catching Chanyeol’s attention.

“Not done what?”

“Stuck their mouth up me arse.” He grins, knowing he is being too blunt for Chanyeol’s liking. The latter grimaces. “Do yer feel any different? Feel like a man? Yer not a maiden anymore, yer bone’s burst now,” he chuckles, leaning over to speak in Chanyeol’s ear. “It burst right up my alley, it did. I’m flooded.”

“Lovely,” Chanyeol remarks, edging away from Baekhyun’s mouth to the sound of him laughing. They return to silence a moment later, regaining breath and staring up at the shining ceiling, tree roots winding in through crevices in the rock where the dirt is hidden, crawling with insects hiding from the approaching winter. “I did enjoy it, though. And too much not to do it again.”

Baekhyun laughs triumphantly. “Well, there yer go.Fuck yer oath, little crow. Why spend yer days guardin’ a glorified block of ice with a wrinkly willy when yer could be livin’ with me and puttin’ yer meat to good use?”

Chuckling, Chanyeol admits, “It does sound appealing.”

“Then why don’t yer? I don’t know why yer even bothered joinin’ the Watch in the first place, but seein’ as it brought us together I guess it’s not that much of a problem. Yer can’t sit there and tell me yer not enjoyin’ yerself.” Effortlessly, the wildling rolls onto his side and props himself up with his elbow, smiling down on him with pleasantly squinted eyes. “Bet yer haven’t had this much fun in yer whole life, eh?”

Smiling, Chanyeol lazily bends his closest arm at the elbow and grazes his knuckles across Baekhyun’s shoulder. “I haven’t even spoken to someone this much before,” he confesses faintly, pondering Baekhyun’s incomprehensibly smooth skin. For a wildling who often throws himself into combat and withstands the forces of nature, he takes good care of himself. “No one ever gave me the time of day.”

Baekhyun’s lips curve into a cheeky grin. “Oh, don’t think about them. Think about you. In my opinion, anyway, I’d say they’re missin’ out. Yer not half bad to talk to, little crow.”

“Well,” Chanyeol begins wryly, “thank you very much.”

The wildling snorts, knocking his head back. “Oh, yer welcome, little crow. Now, would yer say I’ve flattered yer enough to get to ride yer bone again? That’s what all this is about, see.”

Chanyeol positively erupts, face splitting in half with his laughter at the wildling’s words. The boy seems to be desperate for him, feeding his confidence one needy sentence at a time. “You devil,” he cries, mirroring the wildling’s position and holding himself up. “You’re right, you know,” he
says in the aftermath of his chuckles. “This is the most fun I’ve ever had.”

“Mmmm…” Baekhyun waggles his eyebrows up and down, flopping back against the black cloak beneath him and laying his arms above his head, his double chin so sweet. “Care to have some more fun?”

Laughing away, Chanyeol presses a smooch on Baekhyun’s collarbone and then the second chin, rousing a giggle. “I don’t think I can get it up again,” he says apologetically. “Not for a while, anyway.”

“Aww, come on, Chanyeol Junior!” Baekhyun pouts adorably. “Don’t spoil my night!”

“Don’t talk to my cock!” Chanyeol feigns outrage, bulging eyes shifting between Baekhyun and his lax member.

The wildling is quick to refute, however. “But it’s misbehavin’, Chanyeol!” he all but screams. “Look at it! It’s all floppy ‘n’ not inside me arse! That’s treason if I ever saw it!” He turns his attention back to Chanyeol Junior. “Want me to suck yer off again? Will that help?”

Groaning, Chanyeol drops onto his back and blinks at the ceiling. “Chanyeol Junior says no. Chanyeol Junior says he’s too tired.”

“Chanyeol Junior is being a party pooper,” Baekhyun grunts into his ear, his hot breath sending shivers through Chanyeol’s body. “Baekkie Junior wants to play.”

“This is getting a little weird, Baek.”

Baekhyun cracks up again, turning onto his side and throwing an arm over Chanyeol’s torso. “Yeah, I think yer right. Gods, yer’ve driven me mad.”

A fond smile takes Chanyeol’s mouth before he can even stop it. “How so?” he wonders, easing his arm behind Baekhyun’s head so that the wildling can use it as a pillow. Aimlessly, he finds himself tracing patterns on the wildling’s back, fingertips following scars he cannot see along with the knobs of his spine. He feels muscle too, hard and thick.

“Believe it or not, Chanyeol,” he murmurs, sounding drowsy, “I like yer for more than just yer bone.”

The serious tone has Chanyeol’s loving touches drawing to a halt. “What do you mean by that?” he asks, voice void of any kind of emotion. In truth, he does not understand where this sudden confession has come from. He has always been under the impression that Baekhyun just wanted someone to get off with, not anything more.

“Well, for one,” the boy goes on, his palm splayed across Chanyeol’s heartbeat. “I actually think yer quite good lookin’. Then second, I like makin’ yer flustered. It’s pretty funny watchin’ yer turn all red and start stutterin’. Yer older than me as well, and I like an older man.”

Only by three years, Chanyeol wants to point out, but he thinks twice on it. This is a side of Baekhyun he has never encountered before; if he interrupts, he might not see it again for weeks.

“I don’t know. It’s silly, isn’t it? You come along, yer try to kill me and then… and then I end up fancyin’ yer just a little. That day at the outpost when I was stranglin’ yer with me bow and then yer manhandled me like I was nothin’, I actually kind of liked that.” He chuckles to himself, lost in thought. “It put me down a little, to see yer so… Hmm, I don’t know how to put it. ‘Low’, maybe? I know yer had that big, scary act on at first where yer pretended to be the big bad crow, but I kind
of saw through it. Made me sad that people aren’t treatin’ yer like yer deserve.”

There’s movement, and Chanyeol meets Baekhyun’s eyes when the wildling raises his upper body to look at him.

“I want to treat you right, little crow.” His cheeks darken to the colour of his lips. “As stupid as it sounds, I want yer to be happy.”

He sounds so sincere that Chanyeol starts to frown. Baekhyun seems like he is telling the truth. Then again, what reason would he even have to lie? He is exposing himself at such an intimate moment in such an unexpected way that Chanyeol is a little overwhelmed by it all. He doesn’t know what to think.

“I know I argued with yer a lot at first, but that was just because I was confused. I couldn’t understand my own feelin’s. Isn’t it funny how they don’t make sense sometimes, even though they’re yours?” He smiles to himself, eyes focused on his finger as it traces a line down between Chanyeol’s pectorals. The crow freezes in place, unsure of how to proceed. He had never anticipated this happening; it seemed more likely for a heatwave to melt the north before the wildling ever confessed to him.

“Yer gonna stay with me, right? Yer not gonna leave me to go back to them, are yer?” Baekhyun sounds unsure, a little scared even, and Chanyeol tenses where he lies.

What is he supposed to tell him? The deal was that Baekhyun took him to the Fist and they parted ways. This was never supposed to happen. He likes Baekhyun, sure, but he swore his life to the Watch. He cannot desert and be damned. The gods were watching him when he spoke the sacred words. A part of him used to believe that maybe the Faith of the Seven was just a farce, that there were no real gods watching over them from castles in the sky and never had been. But now he knows that there are White Walkers lurking around in the north. Who knows what other mystical beings there are? Who knows what could come after him?

Without a proper answer, Chanyeol sticks to the middle ground. “I… I don’t know.”

His words make Baekhyun frown.

“I can’t break my oath, Baekhyun, I really can’t.” It pains him to say it, his heart starting to throb as he watches the joy seep off the wildling’s face.

The torment of admitting how big of a coward he is makes him nauseous. He is not saying this because he does not like Baekhyun; he is saying this because he is scared of the consequences if he were to stay. “I swore it before the gods,” he tries, as if that will make Baekhyun understand.

“Fuck the gods—” spits Baekhyun.

“It is not that simple, Baekhyun,” Chanyeol then snaps, letting his frustration take over him. “If someone caught me, even years from now, I’d be killed for desertion.”

“You think I’d let them kill you?” Baekhyun almost yells, clearly getting angry before he fights it down and contemplates Chanyeol with a weak smile. “We’ll fight them together. You and me, yeah? Us.”

The crow can only sigh, his chest pained as it fights with his mind. “Baek—”

“Why are yer makin’ this complicated?” Baekhyun’s voice wobbles accusingly, and Chanyeol looks over to where he is fully sat up with newly-glassy eyes. “It is simple, little crow.” He blinks
furiously, willing the tears away. “If there’s somethin’ yer don’t want to tell me, just say it. Say it now and get it over with. I’m not some helpless southern princess. I can take rejection, yer know. I have the right to know what yer meanin’ by all this.”

Incredulous, Chanyeol lets out a breathy laugh and looks up at Baekhyun, unsure of how to continue. What does Baekhyun want him to say?

The wildling, on the other hand, takes his silence as an answer, and bristles. His eyes shift nervously over to the pool in front of them, glazing over. “D’yer even like me, little crow?” he wonders, small. Everything about him shrinks within the instant – his confidence, his presence, his strength. Suddenly, he is a little boy asking his mother if she loves him. It breaks Chanyeol’s heart. “Or is this all just… one-sided?” His head hangs low, as if he is ashamed of himself for appearing so weak. “I thought I made it obvious enough… I mean, I stare at yer all the time. And even when yer pissed me off I gave you dinner. I told yer to sleep by me because I was worried yer’d get sick from the cold. I… I was about to fight that White Walker on the other side of the bush that night. I was gonna tell yer to make a run for it while I held him off. Even at the start, when yer had me all tied up, I made sure we wouldn’t run into any other Free Folk scouts. That’s why I kept stoppin’ and makin’ yer turn someplace else. They would have killed yer if they saw us, little crow. I didn’t want that happenin’. I know I came on a little strong but doin’ that has always worked with other people. You didn’t just fuck me to get me to shut up. You fucked me—Well,” the wildling laughs, self-deprecating, “yer fucked me because I forced yer too but… at least yer didn’t do it the first moment I talked about yer bone.”

Baekhyun looks back at him, salt water clinging to his lower lashes. “Please, Yeol. Please. Say yer like me back.”

Chanyeol opens his mouth to reply, except no noise comes out. His syllables get stuck at the back of his throat, sounds on the tip of his tongue, and he gapes at the wildling with a lost expression. Oh gods. What is he supposed to say? How is he supposed to explain—?

“Wait—Where are you going?” Chanyeol finds his voice when Baekhyun abruptly stands to his feet, the crow then startling himself and asking, “You’re not going out into the storm, are you?”

Baekhyun glares at him as if he is nothing but vermin. “I’m not fucked up in the head, you idiot,” he grunts over his shoulder, grabbing his undergarments off the cave floor and hurriedly struggling into them, throwing his limbs through holes and hopping around on one foot when he loses balance. The regular Baekhyun is back. “I’m gonna go and be on me own while you make yer fuckin’ mind up. I’m not really into these mixed signals, Chanyeol, if yer hadn’t already noticed. Figure out what yer want while I’m gone, and then tell it to me straight. I’ll be somewhere down here for when yer done, yer fuckin’ twat.”

He leaves Chanyeol alone in the main section of the cave, the latter watching him sink into the shadows down a descending tunnel. The crow feels a piece of his heart follow, torn through his flesh.

An empty silence fills the space in Baekhyun’s absence, Chanyeol shivering pitifully as he slowly gets up and starts to redress himself.

Now that Baekhyun has pointed out all the signs, this whole ordeal makes a lot more sense. It seems like the signals had been there but Chanyeol’s interpretation was not, and really, it is his own fault. He has never been very good at reading people even since he was young, and he has never really had the opportunity to recognise another person’s emotions and tendencies because he never succeeds in getting close to them. All his life he has been shunned, bullied and laughed at; what cause would he have to believe Baekhyun wanted to treat him any different than all his other
peers? Baekhyun is a wildling, isn’t bullying one of his tendencies anyway?

But as it has been proven, Baekhyun is not the savage the Lord Commander had made all wildlings out to be. Who knows? The name savage may have derived from the commander’s own bad experiences with one person in particular, and he has just decided to generalise an entire clan of people to make it easier to distinguish between prey and predator, friend and foe. Wildlings are always the prey in the eyes of a crow.

So far, Baekhyun has done nothing remarkably animalistic at all. Yes, he chased him around with a severed limb and has given him blue balls on a couple of occasions, but other than that, Chanyeol has not awoken to find a knife pressed against his throat or a pile of rope cut to shreds in the place where the wildling should have been sleeping. He has not been led into a trap where other wildlings would kill him and he hasn’t actually been forced to do anything he does not wish to do at all. Baekhyun has only teased, hinted, and somehow managed to coerce him to meet his will. There was no force, no one taking advantage of the other when vulnerable; and it is not like Chanyeol was reluctant anyway.

Baekhyun makes him feel like he is necessary, like he is not just a part of the furniture. He talks to him, respects his decisions, appreciates what he has to offer. He relies on him, laughs with him, collaborates with him. He also has his best interests at heart, and Chanyeol struggles to believe that the wildling is only keeping him safe so that he can get his hands on food and a shiny new bow from the Fist. Wildlings are experts at surviving out in these environments, he would have survived just fine if he had broken loose in the middle of the night and run off home. Yet, he did not. He stayed. He stayed.

Nevertheless, none of that changes the fact that Chanyeol has made an oath. Night gathers, and now my watch begins. He slides himself towards the edge of the pool, looking down as his murky reflection ripples when droplet of sap falls from the ceiling. Having not seen his own face in a while, he is surprised by the amount of fat he has lost around his cheeks and chin, and his jaw is now covered with a healthy amount of stubble.

“It shall not end until my death,” he murmurs to no one in particular, thinking back to the day when he had sworn his vows and given up his life for a cause he thought noble. Back then, a boy of little experience, he had had no idea what he was sacrificing. He remembers having trouble memorising the lines; as a boy who couldn’t (and, for the most part, still can’t) read, he had to learn them through repetition with the help of the maester. He had gotten tongue tied and stumbled over his words, yet he had been so determined to do something worthy of praise that he tried and tried until he succeeded.

“I shall take no wife, hold no lands, father no children.” What things to forsake. “I shall wear no crowns and win no glory. I shall live and die at my post.” He cringes, eyes welling up as he realises what his heart wants to do.

It wants to stay. So, so very badly, it wants to stay right here and never leave.

“I am the sword in the darkness. I am the watcher on the walls. I am the shield that guards the realms of men. I pledge my life and honour to the Night’s Watch, for this night and all the nights to come.”

His scales have been thrown off balance, one side offering a life of boredom but stability, and the other side offering a life of adventure and free will. The latter, however, has a more potent death threat. It is true that he could die doing anything – a brick could fall on his head or he could fall down some stairs, maybe even fall off the top of the Wall while trying to fix another crack in its defence; but if he were to desert, people would be more adamant in coming after him. He would
become a wanted man in all of the north. Nowhere would be safe.

But.

No one knows he is still alive.

For all the others know, the wildling has picked him off or he has died from the cold. They have no way of knowing his fate, even if the Lord Commander and Harold ever go back to search for him. Maybe their abandonment was nothing to condemn in the first place, but a blessing, an opportunity to change his life for the better. And maybe he should do something for himself for a change, be selfish and greedy and think only of his own happiness. He deserves it after all the shit he has been through at the hands of those who failed to see his potential.

And, for some reason, Baekhyun makes him happy. He is glad to have met him, but is that enough? Is it enough to stay? Chanyeol stares at himself without breaking concentration, trying to see himself properly and figure out what he wants. He likes Baekhyun, but he does not trust his own feelings. Their appearance may be out of gratitude. It could be possible that he only feels this way about the wildling because he is the first person to treat him differently. Although, if that is the case, he is damn well ashamed of himself. Baekhyun deserves better than that. Better than him.

So he sits for what feels like hours, running his right index finger back and forth through the water as he tries to make his mind up. It is possible that he may have better judgement after a good night’s rest, but can he really afford to leave it that long? The longer he stays away from Baekhyun, the more distant the wildling will become.

Yet limbo persists.

He dreams of the harbour, his younger self sat with his legs dangling over the edge of the wall, swaying backwards and forwards towards the horizon. The sea is only a couple of metres below his toes, green with algae as it splashes against the limpets suctioned to the stone side. In his hand is fishing twine, the end of it looped around his finger as he waits for a tiny tug. So far, his bucket is empty, only filled halfway with a fair amount of seawater. He hasn’t managed to catch any crabs yet; every time he feels the pull and he starts to wind his string back in, the crab falls off somewhere between the seabed and the sea surface, taking his bait with it. On the end of his line is his last scrap of fat.

It takes a while, but after a good ten minutes he feels the undeniable twitch of his finger. Jerking to life, he excitedly starts to pull the twine from the water, eyes widening when he realises the extra weight that has been added to the rock at the bottom.

When his catch finally breaks the surface, however, his heart falls. It is not a crab, but a giant piece of wood he has managed to pick up. Then he looks closer and sees that it is not just a random plank that was floating along the seabed, but a two-dimensional carving of a fish. Bewildered, Chanyeol reaches to take it off the line, ready to throw it back into the green sea and try again, but as soon as he touches it, it transforms in his hand. It shrinks down to the size of his palm and grows in depth, and it is only when he narrows his eyes does he realise that it is his good luck token – the one that Nora gave to him the day he left for the Wall.

Transported back to reality, his eyes open calmly, aimed out across the water inside the cave. His dream comes back to him a minute later, mostly in fragments, and he goes from pondering crab fishing to remembering his token. He had brought it with him when he left the Wall, as one of the only things he truly owns. The day he was given this was the day he heard the black brother in the main square, calling out for volunteers to join the Night’s Watch. He had been oblivious back then, running home to pack his bag with a few items of clothing without informing Nora about his plans.
It had not been until he had one foot over the threshold that his adoptive mother realised he was leaving, and with the words “Be safe” she had handed him the small wooden fish, carved from real oak.

Ever since, he has kept it close by. In Castle Black, he had kept it under his pillow and blindly clutched it in the darkness on rough days. It serves as a reminder that there had been one person in his life who had cared for him, even if it was only a little. And now it is buried in his backpack somewhere, lying at the bottom, forgotten and unloved.

It is only the size of half his palm now, his hand having grown around it, and he smiles at the puckering face of the fish, grazing his thumb over the detailed scales of its body and tail. This is his, and only his. He has never had to share this with anyone, never had to give it back to its rightful owner. Nora had it made for him, so when he turns it over and finds the phrase “Be happy, my boy” inked faintly onto the back, his eyes well with tears.

As quickly as that, Chanyeol has his answer.

Brash it may be, stupid it may become, and as foolish as it may seem, he goes in search of Baekhyun with a newfound determination to make his life worth something.

His chest cramps when he finds the wildling sat down the tunnel he has trekked in the darkness, hugging his knees and drawing patterns into the dirt with his fingernails. As Chanyeol gets closer, he strains his eyes through the pitch and makes out the movement of the boy lifting his head up to meet his gaze, even though they are both unsure of where the other’s eyes are. The tunnel is not a long one, so some of the light from their fires back in the main cave are managing to flicker down to meet them, but it still isn’t enough. It is not enough for Baekhyun to see the remorse on Chanyeol’s features, or for Chanyeol to try and read what Baekhyun is feeling.

The crow has no idea how to approach this, so he starts off with a “Hey,” getting no response as he awkwardly feels around with his hands before plopping himself on the ground. He can see Baekhyun now as clearly as he can see the future.

“I’ve… thought about it.”

Even that does not rouse a reaction from the wildling, who remains as shielded as humanely possible. The grainy sound of his fingertips against the rocky dirt beneath them speaks in his place. It is a defence mechanism, even Chanyeol knows it: closing oneself off and convincing yourself that you do not care, when in actual fact you could not care about anything more.

“I used to live in Seagard when I was younger, in the Riverlands,” Chanyeol begins. “My mother was a whore who worked for a lady named Nora, and my father was probably just a passing soldier who came by and bought her for the night. My mother died in childbirth, though, and usually people leave a whore’s child out to die when that happens. There’s no one to look after them or anything, so why drag out their suffering? But Nora took me in, she became my mother instead, and I helped to earn my keep by doing chores in the brothel my mum worked and died in. It sounds alright, doesn’t it?” He smiles fondly, watching the shadows of Baekhyun’s hand making spirals in the ground. “Having a woman willing to take you in and look after you, raise you as her own.

“Only problem was, she already had seven children to look after, and they didn’t like me at all. They’d steal my food, make messes or mistakes and blame them on me, lie about me hitting them or taking their things. Trouble is, Nora was too busy to ever look into things properly. She never scolded me, but she never scolded her own children either, so they continued to try and get her attention.
“They used to hit me sometimes, even the girls did. They tried to make me run away by locking me out of the house or shutting me in a cupboard all night, but I never ran, and that provoked them even more. They would soak my clothes in meat and let the dogs loose, they hid needles and pins in my bed covers… They wanted me gone so badly that if I’d have stayed longer than I did, they probably would have killed me. When I wasn’t doing chores, I would try and leave the house as much as possible. Usually I fished for crabs out in the harbour, and one day on my way back through the town I heard someone shouting in the main square. They were recruiting for the Watch, so I joined. I was only ten years old, and I felt like the bravest ten-year-old there was. Look at me, going off alone when I’m not even a man grown to slay some wildlings and make a name for myself.

“I didn’t fare any better there, though. I wanted to be a ranger but they made me a builder, and I ended up spending my time with a group of men who didn’t give a shit about me. I was a steward before that, basically treated like a slave. The only reason I’m here now is because I fell out with all my supposed friends. They wanted me to go with them to Mole’s Town to fuck a whore, and I told them no and they didn’t like that very much. Then I came out here to find our missing brothers, only to realise how pointless the whole trip was because they were probably already dead. I told the Lord Commander just that, and he said he didn’t need lecturing by the likes of me. Said I didn’t know what I was talking about, implied that I was stupid.

“Sometimes I used to sit in the library at Castle Black and just get struck by the thought that this is all my life will ever be. I’ll be alone forever with no one I can rely on or trust, no one who would die for me as I would die for them. You start to wonder whether it is your own fault, whether you’ve done something or are something that people just don’t like or don’t want, but if I don’t know what that is then how can I change it? How can I change myself? And, should I? Should I have to change myself just to make other people happy? For a long time, I thought it was because I couldn’t talk to people. I never had any friends when I was younger so I never knew what to say, and usually I ended up saying the wrong thing.

“I can’t read people either, Baekhyun, unless it is evil glares or they’re laughing about me. When you were staring at me, I thought you were trying to figure out the best way to kill me in my sleep. It felt like you were sizing me up to see if it would be easy. Then when you fed me, I thought it was because you felt sorry for me, and I thought you were only doing it so we could uphold the deal. When we slept side by side, I thought you were just using me for body heat, and every time you made me change direction I thought it was because you wanted to torment me.”

Baekhyun inhales slowly. “You shouldn’t think like that, Yeol,” he says, as if that one sentence will change the entire way his brain is stitched.

“It’s the way I am, Baek!” he cuts back, frustrated. “I can’t change myself, I’ve tried! I have grown up assuming the worst of everyone and I don’t know how to think any different. Maybe my whole perception on things has warped my life, I don’t know. What can I do to change it? My body, it’s—” he deflates, slumping back against the rock wall behind him. “It’s like a prison, Baek. And I am so, so jealous of you. You’re confident but not in an obnoxious way, and you know how to make jokes without actually hurting someone’s feelings. You’re a strong fighter but you know that it is okay to be scared, and you put your own happiness before anything. You’re selfish but pragmatic and you always seem to know the right thing to do, and you’re honourable— gods, Baekhyun, you’re not a savage at all. Meeting you has been one of the best things to ever happen to me, Baek, and I don’t just want to be you, I want to be with you. Please. Please, for the love of the old gods and the new, forgive me for being such an idiot.”

The hand cupping his face saves him from a breakdown. He leans into Baekhyun’s touch like it is his air and cries his tears into the pads of his thumbs. “It’s okay,” Baekhyun whispers, mouth so
close to Chanyeol that he can feel his breath chilling his tear tracks. “Chanyeol, let me be here for yer. I won’t leave – so long as yer don’t lose yer cock, that is.”

“Oh gods, don’t joke with me now,” Chanyeol whines, bowing his head into Baekhyun’s shoulder as the wildling climbs effortlessly onto his lap. He chuckles guiltily, cradling Chanyeol’s face as if he is made of the most fragile glass, and angles it upwards so he can claim his lips from above. A chaste kiss that carries more reassurance than words ever could.

In the dark, Chanyeol can sense Baekhyun’s mischievous grin, feeling something bubble inside his chest. There are butterflies in his stomach and crabs nipping at his fingers and toes, proving to him that this is not just a dream, though it feels like one. His reality is now so surreal. It feels like he could blink and it might all just disappear, like the gods decided to give him one small taste of what could have been before they condemn him to waste away by the ice. Yet if that is the case, Chanyeol swears he will never blink again.

“I never realised you liked me,” the crow whispers insecurely, straining to see the glint of Baekhyun’s eyes.

“Yeah, well, yer don’t realise a lot, do yer?” the wildling teases, nosing Chanyeol’s cheek before moving over to his ear and pressing a kiss against the start of his jaw. “But that’s alright. I can do the thinkin’ for the both of us. Yer lucky I’m not one to hold a grudge, little crow. Not like some of the other wildlin’s I know.”

Baekhyun’s forearms rest on Chanyeol’s shoulders, his fingertips brushing lightly in the tendrils of the crow’s black curls. In their position, Chanyeol can feel Baekhyun’s bare skin under his palms as his hands caress the wildling’s svelte hips, his undershirt having ridden up around his waist. Skin on skin contact with Baekhyun makes up for all those years Chanyeol went without. It is like touching himself in another person’s body, like they are both one being now, sharing blood, air and energy – a sacred synergy.

“I like bein’ close like this,” the wildling whispers like it is a secret, nuzzling their noses together until Chanyeol cannot feel his face anymore from the tingles. “It’s been a while since someone held me, little crow. I’m glad I get to be held by you.”

Chanyeol kisses where he thinks Baekhyun’s lips are, puckering partially against Baekhyun’s chin until the boy ducks his head to set it right.

“I’ve liked the look of yer ever since yer decided not to kill me,” he laughs breathlessly, not letting Chanyeol respond. The wildling occupies his lips like he is starving, sucking Chanyeol’s tongue into his mouth until they are both melded together. “I’m glad me bow broke, little crow.”

Smiling, Chanyeol causes Baekhyun to kiss his teeth. “What did I say about that nickname?” he asks quietly, following Baekhyun’s face with his own when the wildling goes to kiss behind his ear. He learns quickly that it is a sensitive spot, and he shudders when Baekhyun suckles onto it like a newborn.

“Yer said yer didn’t like it,” the boy says in his ear, breath stifling. “Said yer wanted me to call yer anything but. But let me tell you a secret, Chanyeol: I rather like it. Yer my little crow, and yer important, and yer wanted, and yer needed, and I’m gonna stay with yer ‘til yer make me want otherwise.”

Chanyeol swoops his mouth around, impassioned, and takes Baekhyun’s in one swift move. His arms come up to cage the boy against him, pressing their torsos together until Baekhyun is up on his knees and towering over him, pressing down into his mouth with a tongue so eager. With a
secure hold, Chanyeol lowers Baekhyun down against the dirt, placing him with care and attention while brushing aside any stubborn rocks. The way that Baekhyun clings to him on the way down sets his heart alight; the wildling cannot stand to be parted from him for even more than a second.

Their skin kisses and breathes together, heartbeats racing through both their bodies until it becomes a chorus of drums. Moisture steams off their flesh and their limbs move without choreography, yet every move appears fluent and predestined, like they know exactly where to touch next and when their lips will meet mid-dance.

“Fuck me slow,” Baekhyun breathes, heaving heavily as Chanyeol rubs his cock against his thigh. “Fuck me like yer mean it,” he pants. “Like yer goin’ to stay.”

“I’m staying anyway.” Chanyeol bites into his neck, earning a high pitched cry.

“Y-Yer know what I mean,” Baekhyun hisses, biting his lip and purring when Chanyeol lathers over the bruise. “Just shut up and fuck me.”

Chanyeol pulls back for air and instantly feels too far away, a cold washing over his face now that it is not in the fan of Baekhyun’s burning breath. He rubs his cool nose along the crook between Baekhyun’s neck and shoulder and blows a line up to the wildling’s ear, igniting the fire in his gut as he builds himself up to hardness. The boy is at his mercy, aquiver in a bliss hard to come by. It’s beautiful.

He fucks Baekhyun slow to a breathless melody of “Just like that” and “Good boy”, empowered and confident, sure of himself for the first time in his life. He fucks Baekhyun carefully and dotingly, pushing in past the lax rim and gyrating his hips until he receives the squeaky “Right there” which signals he has hit the desirable spot. He fucks Baekhyun until the wildling is gaping open, a vast chasm between his cheeks that he decorates with yet more white, ivory fingers coming back to imprison its sides to keep it from closing as Baekhyun whines about just how fucked open he feels. When the wildling pushes down and the flushed walls of his insides come to kiss his rim, even blooming out past it like the budding rose it is, Chanyeol chokes on what’s left of his spit and watches in awe as his pearly seed comes dribbling back out, the rest of it lodged in the ridges of his walls like glistening tributaries over a landscape.

Baekhyun looks so mesmerising that Chanyeol struggles to find the right words to describe him. Or maybe, there just aren’t any words that do him justice. The Common Tongue has failed them, irrevocably.

They wind up in the spring, caressed by hot water and hot hands. The natural chill of the air is warded away by the rising steam blowing up around them, dampening the strands of their hair that are lucky enough not to have been doused when they first jumped in. With Baekhyun kissing him, Chanyeol feels strange. The future he had imagined for himself has just been obliterated. He has deserted the Night’s Watch and broken his oath, will be a wanted man should the Lord Commander and the rest of his brothers ever realise he is actually alive and kicking. He does not know how his new life will start or how it will end, but the constancy Baekhyun promises to provide is enough to persuade him into taking the plunge. The both of them may be headstrong and irrational, but they are both young. Mistakes can be made and learned from, the best memories they will have will be from the plans that went wrong, and Chanyeol thinks he deserves to have one great love in his life, even if it may be forbidden.

“Let’s never leave this cave,” Baekhyun whispers against his lips, their bodies entwined above and below the water as they mould together, connecting in as many ways as they can. “We can forget the world outside, Chanyeol. It’s just you and me. We’re all what matters.”
Chanyeol kisses his breath away in agreement, knowing that although they will not stay in this cave forever, they can uphold the mindset they have adopted in its presence. They will live for themselves, seek their own happiness, be ready to object if something goes against what they believe in. Chanyeol should be his own person, not just another crow in a group of thieves, murderers and rapists.

He should not be a brother, but a master.
With no sight of the sun from down here in the depths of the earth, Chanyeol can only assume that they spend another day in the cave. The hours do not drag on, however, as the conversation never ends. Determined to get to know one another better, they start to ask after each other’s favourites – favourite food, favourite season, favourite animal. It is child’s play and menial, but it opens up an entire corridor of new doors.

Chanyeol learns that Baekhyun loves himself a cock(erel), likes mating season the best, and envies rabbits for their stamina. Of course, everything comes back to sex with him so Chanyeol does not know why he had expected anything otherwise. He answers earnestly, though, telling his naked wildling friend (lover?) that he likes to eat lamb, enjoys spring because it is neither too hot nor too cold, and that he has always wanted a puppy, preferably a golden Labrador.

They learn other things about each other too during their little getaway. Chanyeol notices that Baekhyun falls asleep on his left side and that his right eye does not close properly once he is deep in slumber. He also realises that Baekhyun is not that big of a fan on clothes, as he takes to walking around the cave in nothing but what he was born in without any shame at all. Not only is it distracting as hell, but Baekhyun tells him that they cannot have sex because he ate a big breakfast and will need to shit soon. Safe to say, Chanyeol isn’t really aroused after that.

“Did yer think that just because I bottom, I don’t shit?” Baekhyun teases him as he struts about the cave, hanging up his freshly washed furs to dry by throwing them over the rope they have tied between two perpendicular cave walls, utilising the tree roots. His skin shines in the light from the mini campfires Chanyeol had rearranged last night, while his limp cock dances freely between his muscular thighs. The crow reckons he is making it jiggle on purpose. “It happens all the time.”

Chanyeol looks at him from where he is lounging in their bed – Chanyeol’s cloak laid over the mats from his backpack – and narrows his eyes. “What happens all the time?”

Baekhyun grins wickedly over his shoulder at him and Chanyeol instantly regrets asking. “Well, as I said, I lost my little maidenhead when I were thirteen. I’d say since then, I’ve accidently shot on a man’s bone about thirty times. It’s just somethin’ that happens, a part of nature. I can’t help it, me man and his bone can’t help it, it’s all just a natural function. If the gods didn’t give us a hole specific for fuckin’, we just have to make do with what we’re got. Some guys are even into it, yer know, they came straight away at the sight of me soolin’ meself. Apparently, it was sexy because it makes me look like a needy baby who can only survive on their ‘milk’, as they’d call it. I take it yer not gonna be one of those men, then?”

Baekhyun laughs when Chanyeol adamantly shakes his head.

“Thought not,” the wildling hums, coming to crouch before him and gripping his chin. “Sex is a dirty business, little crow. Women sometimes piss themselves, and we can all bleed if not treated right. But it feels good, better than good, so that’s why we do it. That’s why you do it. That’s why I want yer cock so fuckin’ much. But sex is also patience and respect, so if yer don’t want me to shit on yer, we’ll have to wait a while first,” he explains flippantly, starting to pick hairs and bits of
fluff off Chanyeol’s shoulders before dusting it for good measure. “I bet yer I’ll have diarrhoea when the time comes, my hole has never been stretched so big before. I can’t wait for yer to do it again. But in the meantime, I’ll wash yer clothes. Look at me, bein’ the perfect spearwife. Come on, sweetheart, dress down like yer ancestors did one upon a century ago, whip that flaccid bone out for me to look at while I take the seed out yer furs.”

Chanyeol grimaces once again at Baekhyun’s choice of phrasing, but obediently does as he says. The wildling comments as he removes his clothes, exclaiming things like, “Oooo, we have a shoulder,” and “Gods, look at that cock!” Baekhyun even slaps him on the arse before he retreats to the hot spring, leaving him a little confused and a lot dazed as he rubs the reddening handprint now smouldering on his rear.

“There’ll be more marks than that when I really get my hands on yer, little crow. Just you wait!”

The crow cannot work out whether that is a promise or a threat, so he tries not to think about it too much.

When Baekhyun returns from checking the weather conditions the next morning, he is happy to announce that the storm has passed over. Together, they start working on preparing themselves to leave, gathering their provisions, arming themselves, putting out the fires and erasing all traces that they have ever stayed in here. Chanyeol feels bereft as they leave their unconventional home behind, but he is more concerned about where they are going than where they are coming from.

“Where are we headed?” he asks, squinting as he steps out into the light of a sun he has not seen for two days, maybe more. When they had first entered the cave at the start of the storm, there had only been a light frosting of snow on the ground, so thin that footprints wore it away. Now though, it comes up to Chanyeol’s knees, which subsequently means that it comes up to the middle of Baekhyun’s thighs. In the coming days, hopefully it will thaw nice and slowly, lest the forest be flooded.

“Home.” Baekhyun grins at him, excited. For no reason at all, Chanyeol’s heart thumps when he looks at Baekhyun. Now they are back in natural daylight, he can see every detail on the wildling’s face with the utmost clarity. There is a faint mole above his lip, and one on his cheek and on his temple, and there are shadows around the outer corners of his eyes. He can see every eyebrow hair and each individual eyelash, and when he looks closer – too close – he can see some earwax in his ears as well. Chanyeol doesn’t know why that makes him want to smile.

“Home?”

The wildling, who walks ahead of him, turns to move backwards instead, facing him as he outstretches his arms and declares, “To the King-Beyond-the-Wall, little crow! I’m takin’ yer to see me lord and liege. Feel honoured yet?”

Chanyeol’s steps falter. “The King-Beyond-the-Wall? You mean—You mean a wildling king?”

Baekhyun frowns. “We don’t call ourselves wildlin’s, little crow. We’re the Free Folk, and the King-Beyond-the-Wall is the king of us. We don’t bow to no one, but we’ll follow when push comes to shove. Don’t tell me yer havin’ second thoughts again. What did I say about mixed signals? Cold feet? Hmm? I don’t do any of that nonsense. I thought you’d make up yer fuckin’ mind—”

“I have! I have! Calm down, alright? I just—I didn’t know you had a king, I was surprised, that’s all.”
“Psgh,” Baekhyun rolls his eyes, but his relieved grin is crystal clear. “Surprised that we’re actually organised? Those men – yer fellow crows – feed yer lies about us, Chanyeol. We’re not brainless idiots who kill anythin’ what moves. We’re people too.”

“I know, I know, Baekhyun, I know.” He walks up close to the boy, clasping his hand on his shoulder to get his attention. “You do not have to kick off every time I ask a question. You’re right. My brothers fed me lies, so I’m only trying to understand now what you’re all really about. I’m sorry.”

A ghost of guilt glides across Baekhyun’s face as he sighs, then reaching up to peck him on the lips long and slow. “Fair enough,” he whispers when they part. “Yer can’t blame me, Chanyeol. I don’t trust anyone these days.”

“Trust me—”

“Chanyeol—”

“Trust me.”

They stare at each other, intent, until Baekhyun closes his eyes again to kiss him. Hot tongues shiver against the cold when their lips are not sealed, and when Baekhyun retreats a second time, he steels his gaze and stares at him.

“I’ll try,” he says confidently, making Chanyeol smile before they get going again.

A light snow continues to fall even with the storm having moved on, the fruits of it laid bare across the forest. Some trees lie askew or capsized, and there are huge snow drifts as tall as giants banked up against trunks and rock formations. Their footprints leave deep trenches in the snow, romantic in the way that they imprint side by side for the whole time they walk. Sometimes, Chanyeol will deliberately fall a little behind just so he can watch Baekhyun’s hips swaying from left to right; he cannot help but imagine the boy naked now that he knows what lies under his clothes.

“I have to admit something, Chanyeol,” Baekhyun smirks as they start moving downstream, steps slipping as the ground dips. “We’re actually further away from the Fist than we were when we made that deal.”

The crow freezes. “What?” He stares at the back of Baekhyun’s head before the wildling spins around to face him.

Baekhyun shrugs. “What can I say? I were curious about yer, so I lead yer in the wrong direction just so we’d have more time together. No harm came from it though. In fact, again, I think less harm came from my little lie.”

“You took me even further away from the Fist?” Chanyeol grits, then sighing in exasperation.

“Don’t see why it matters. Yer not goin’ back there anyway, are yer?”

“You’re a little minx,” Chanyeol remarks, shaking his head, albeit laughing. Baekhyun lights up like a child who has just been praised and latches onto Chanyeol’s arm when the crow walks past. “Can’t believe I made a deal and expected you to hold up your end,” he chaffs, earning a playful slap from the wildling who makes a choked noise of reproach.

“Well, excuse you,” Baekhyun cries shrilly. “I’ll make yer pay for that! You just wait ‘til I’ve had my shit.”
Chanyeol roars with laughter, admiring Baekhyun as he cutely stalks off through the woods, trying to leave him behind even though their footprints will always lead them back together.

They stop for lunch by the babbling brook, perched on stones with a small campfire ablaze beside the water, the carcasses of two squirrels – skinned and gutted – skewered over the flames. Baekhyun crafts himself a makeshift bow and a few arrows, gently carving owl feathers and chipping away at a selection of sticks he has been accumulating along the way, while Chanyeol sits and admires him, almost letting their food burn as he succumbs to his stupor. By chance, Baekhyun found a perfectly curved stick bowing down from a tree branch when walking past, and with a spare piece of yarn in one of his pockets, meant as a replacement for the string on his old bow, he deftly crafted his weapon.

As the path to the Free Folk camp will take them deep into the Frostfangs, Baekhyun shoots any game he sets his eyes on, bossing Chanyeol about and threatening to shoot him too when the crow is too tardy at getting things done. At least five times, Chanyeol has found himself staring down the shaft of an arrow, Baekhyun’s intimidating stare intensifying the action tenfold, just because he hasn’t preserved the meat properly or found him enough things to shoot.

Mainly, he collects water in their skins, flails to catch any dead animals Baekhyun flings over his shoulder at him – he is hit on the head with a squirrel once – and tries to spy out any berries or natural grown food that he can forage from the surrounding vegetation. Seeing as it is almost winter, he does not find much, though a few berry bushes have prevailed the weather.

Their duties are narrated by laughter and jokes, thrown back and forth through the misty air as they trudge on through the snow, gathering what resources they can and leaving what they can’t. Mostly, Baekhyun complains about how he is going to have to have his shit soon, and Chanyeol does not really fancy seeing, hearing or smelling any of it, even if it does come out of the hole that brings him so much pleasure. When Baekhyun notices this, the wildling teases the crow incessantly, boasting of how he’ll save a little bit just for him and his bone.

“Yer welcome, little crow. Not everyone gets a taste of me inner doin’s. Yer can piss on me too, if yer like, that way we’re even.”

Chanyeol blanches and squeaks out a croaky rendition of “No thank you,” while Baekhyun jeers at his suffering, parading around him with jigging steps and a merry giggle.

“Oh! How I want ye bone again, little crow!” he exclaims histrionically. “I’ve missed it so much! Do yer reckon it remembers me face?”

Ignoring him, Chanyeol strides on into the trees, Baekhyun’s giggling bounding through the air in pursuit as the sun goes down.

When it comes to finding a place for the night, Chanyeol learns that Baekhyun is picky alongside his average stubbornness, and finds himself trailing after the wildling while he examines bushes and weighs up the advantages and disadvantages of every site he sees. It almost feels like they are house hunting or something else absurd, and Chanyeol surmises that this is a little unnecessary when all they are looking for is a place to lie their heads for the night, for night it is. The world has gone dark around them, the last breaths of sunlight fading in the east like diluted blood as the sunset dissipated into indigo, and Chanyeol really could not care less anymore about whether a bush has prickles or if an overhanging branch looks a little iffy. He just wants – no, needs – to sleep.

Except, just when Baekhyun decides that they can make camp in the hollow of an oak – how they are supposed to sleep horizontally is beyond Chanyeol considering there is no space to do so – they
spot a small light through the trees. It is a small campfire, a beacon of prey, sending out its mating call in the form of drunken male shouting. It is men of the Night’s Watch, foolishly seducing death.

Chanyeol expects Baekhyun to complain because now they will have to move, the brothers could bring people to the area, after all; but when the crow looks over he sees the boy silent, eyes wrought with concern as he stares in the direction of the distant flames. When he turns back to Chanyeol, he is surprised for a moment, clearly not having expected to be stared at in his moment of deep thought, and he forces a smile. He forces one, and Chanyeol then understands.

“Shall we play around with them?” he suggests, rousing a shy grin from Baekhyun who nods.

“What did yer have in mind, little crow?” he queries, settling back into his normal self, no longer worried that Chanyeol is going to rush off and re-join his brothers, abandoning him in his dust.

Chanyeol bites his lip, shooting Baekhyun a look as he strides a little closer towards the men in black and cups his hands around his mouth. Then, he howls. The signal of the wolf echoes in the chill, and the silence that follows is so prominent that Chanyeol believes he can even hear his old brothers’ breathing. They have stopped shouting in favour of looking out, most likely squinting through the murky shadows and readying themselves to fight off a pack of wolves, and Chanyeol laughs once Baekhyun has howled and the men start shouting between them, arguing over whose stupid idea it was to light a fire.

Yowling again, the two share an amused glance as the crows freak, scuffling between themselves while Baekhyun comes over to steal a kiss or two. Their lips are only broken apart by the screams of terror, and Chanyeol’s head snaps around so fast that his neck cracks in three different places. He cannot see the fire anymore, cannot make out the shapes of his old brothers or hear anything coherent.

“What’s going on?” he hisses, as if Baekhyun will know the answer. “Did we attract real wolves? Shit!”

The screams of the men die down a second later, the two of them bracing themselves for the snarls of feral dogs and the padding of charging paws, but it is all quiet. The atmosphere is so still that Chanyeol dares not move, so frightened of the unknown that he flinches at Baekhyun’s remark of how cold it has suddenly gotten. Then, “What’s that?”

Chanyeol strains his eyes, his blood freezing in his veins when he sees something floating far ahead: two icy blue orbs that blip behind and in front of trees, growing closer and closer every time they disappear. It is almost like they are a pair of eyes, bright blue lights belonging to a creature homing in on them, and Chanyeol subconsciously reaches out to grab Baekhyun’s elbow.

“Baekhyun…” he whispers, terrified, fumbling around with numb fingers when the wildling tries to take his hand. “Baekhyun I think that’s a—”

“White Walker!” His sentence is finished for him and suddenly a tidal wave crashes through the silence, causing them to sprint unbridled in the opposite direction. All Chanyeol can think about is the White Walker coming after them and Baekhyun’s safety, and he throws several brisk glances over his shoulder to monitor the beast’s progress.

“F-Fuck!” Baekhyun chokes, sounding to be already out of breath. “We—I—I—H-How—”

Chanyeol ignores his rambling and focuses on running faster and faster, lunging through the snow and dragging Baekhyun along after him. The thickness of white slows them down massively,
pushing back against his shins every time he fights to throw them forwards, and when he looks back over his shoulder again he bears witness to magic he never thought he would see. The White Walker has a hand stretched out before it, an invisible force blowing the snow from its path so that it can walk on solid ground. Despite its relaxed walking pace, its steps are long and steady, and he is quickly gaining on them.

They aren’t going to make it. The cold is too much and Chanyeol is starting to lose feeling in his toes. The White Walker has already beaten them in so many ways in its immunity to the freezing temperatures and its absence of breath. If it cannot tire, it does not matter how far they run. It will chase them forever – or, at least until something better comes along. But, would it? Would it give them up? It has already let them go once; it is probably just here to tie up loose ends, tie the noose around their necks.

Chanyeol looks back again, the White Walker only a handful of paces behind them now. With strips of muscle making up its exterior and with shadows gathered in its hollows, it makes for a terrifying creature. Its eyes burn and its thin white hair blows ghoulishly in the wind, a storm brewing around its footsteps. With every stride, the distance between them closes, and Chanyeol realises that they do not stand a chance.

“Baekhyun, run!” he shrieks, letting the wildling go to whip out his sword as he hurls himself around, raising the blade to defend himself. Baekhyun screams his name but the adrenalin clouding his senses makes it seem like the boy is far, far away, which tricks him into believing he is safe. So long as Baekhyun gets out of this alive, he will pay whatever price.

The White Walker stops before him in surprise, the muscles where its eyebrows should be mangling on its forehead before Chanyeol charges at him with his pride on his sleeve. His blade swirls with a bluish tinge as he slices it up through the air, ready to bring it down on the unarmed Walker’s shoulder with an almighty roar. But before he can get the chance, he becomes airborne and flies into something rock hard. The pain is so much that he cries out, spine having curled backwards around what he suspects to be the trunk of a tree, and just when he thinks it is over, gravity is dragging him back down again. His face smacks into something tough and his body follows in a heap, and all he can hear for a moment is a deafening ringing in his ears. His vision comes back to him in stages, yet when it is fully recovered he does not find relief. He is staring into the eyes of his killer and knows that it has more to offer.

He struggles onto his hands and knees, head spinning, and starts the expedition for his sword. The pain in his shoulders and hips has been reduced to a dull throb, pushed to the back of his mind, and he watches through the blur as his bluing hands dig around in the snow. His gut instinct tells him that he is running out of time, for the White Walker is stood right before him, watching his valiant attempt at fighting back. It feels like death is squeezing his lungs of the air and life it needs to survive, but leaving just enough in his system to keep him alive for the fun of it, like a cat playing with a mouse. Yet it matters not. When he sees the White Walker raising its hand again, Chanyeol becomes aware that this is it.

As a blind man grovelling around in the snow, Chanyeol can only feel the magic that grips around his throat and starts to lift his body off the ground. It makes him feel weightless, like he is nothing but a rag doll, and it calms him for a moment to feel the pain alleviated in his limbs. Then, he starts to choke. He can physically feel the fingers around his throat, but when he claws at them to let go he finds himself scratching only at his own skin. He mars himself until he bleeds, then he is released to the sound of a scream and the floor rushes up to meet him.

When he next looks up, it is to see Baekhyun brandishing his dagger through the air, staring into the eyes of the White Walker with a look that could kill. Chanyeol does not have the energy to
He throws himself at it, but he is too late to save Baekhyun. As soon as he gives way onto his weapon, Chanyeol glances up to see the wildling being transported through the air at an ungodly force, whisked back between the trees in a perfect arc. Baekhyun screams for a moment, airy and thin, then he goes quiet. It fills him with fury to see Baekhyun treated that way, and with all the strength he has left, Chanyeol wobbles to his feet, clasps his sword in both hands and raises it above his head. The blade feels so heavy and his arms ache, but the adrenalin brought on from watching Baekhyun being snatched back into thick trees makes him unsusceptible to all kinds of pain. He refuses to accept that they are going to die, refuses to admit that this is probably the end, and with the tip of his sword aimed directly between the White Walker’s gaunt shoulder blades, he throws himself forwards.

Chanyeol watches with wide eyes as his sword disappears into thick grey skin, the metal glowing blue as the creature lets out an earthshattering shriek which has him knocked backwards onto the ground. He has no idea what is going on. No idea where Baekhyun is or what the White Walker is currently doing, but the ear-splitting screeching is enough to debilitate him and he curls himself up in a ball against the snow, fists stamped over his ears as he prays with tears in his eyes for it to end.

It sounds like ice is cracking into jarred pieces, as though the Wall itself has started to crumble and the sheer volume of its splinters has carried the noise across the thousands of northern leagues to meet them. A wind howls as it blows a gale, lashing his hair this way and that and until Chanyeol can feel his scalp prickling alongside the goose bumps that have scattered across his flesh. It is so deathly cold. No longer can he feel his toes, hands, face. His lips and eyes have been mangled of their moisture and his ears are buzzing. Just when he does not think it will ever stop, it stops.

Metal clangs to the floor, and then there is nothing. Body stiff and joints seized, Chanyeol struggles to roll over, greeted with the sight of ice crystals glittering in the moonlight as they are swept away on a delightfully light breeze. All that remains in the clearing is his sword on the ground, laid serenely on a bed of snowy dust that hadn’t been there before.

“B-Baek—” His voice has been reduced to a hoarse croak, nought but a sickly whine that one would usually associate with an old man on his death bed. “Baekhyun!” He blinks and strains through the darkness but he cannot see anything, only the few trees that the moonlight has graced with an eerie glow. Where is Baekhyun? Is he hurt? What happened to him? Chanyeol’s thumping heart starts to ache in unimaginable ways.

He is on the brink of tears when he hears a profound “Fuck” a good way away, a word produced not of his lips. Then he flops back against the snow, dead with relief, feeling like he has just dodged an arrowhead and barely escaped by the skin of his teeth. Baekhyun is alive, maybe not in the best condition, but alive.

“Chanyeol? Chanyeol? Where are you?”

In response, he groans, nondescript, and waits for Baekhyun to find him. He feels boneless; all his energy had run off from the White Walker and left him to die. How thoughtful of it.

“Shit! Chanyeol, are yer alright?” The wildling comes rushing over, dropping into a kneel at his side, and Chanyeol’s heart warms at the display of concern. “Where does it hurt? Tell me where it hurts.”
“Ugh… Everywhere.”

Baekhyun’s eyes bulge out of their sockets, hysteria brewing behind his logical complexion. “Okay, tell me where it hurts the most.”

Attentively, the wildling starts to wipe the blood from Chanyeol’s face with a torn segment of his undershirt, and he dresses his wounds in snow to numb the pain, all before helping him stand on his own two feet to test out what Baekhyun suspects is a sprained ankle.

“Yer so fuckin’ stupid, I hope yer know that,” he complains as Chanyeol limps around the clearing. It takes the crow by surprise to hear a remark like that, especially from someone who is only alive because of him, and betrayal inks his blood quicker than it would water as his anger sprouts from confusion. Again, the pain is pushed to the background. He has more important things to deal with.

“Excuse me?”

Baekhyun glares at him, grabbing his sword and examining it before throwing daggers again. “I said, yer fuckin’ stupid!” he grits angrily. “Yer don’t turn around and try to fight a White Walker, Chanyeol. What kind of bloody suicide mission are yer on? We could have been killed! Yer could have died! Do yer not understand that? Did the cold shrink yer brain to the size of a pea and make yer forget that yer don’t get a second fuckin’ chance out here?” He is yelling now, prodding the sword in Chanyeol’s direction as he does so. “My gods,” he cries, incredulous as his arm comes to rest at his sides, “you crows are all idiots.”

“Well, what did you want me to do?” Chanyeol explodes, flapping his arms about to portray the hopelessness of the whole situation, as if trying to grab answers out of thin air. “We couldn’t have outrun it! We wouldn’t have been able to hide! It was either fight or die, Baekhyun, and I would rather fight than just give up completely!”

“Yeah,” Baekhyun bites back sourly, “but yer didn’t even ask me about it, did yer? Yer just turned around and raised yer sword like all you stupid southerners do! Yer can’t just race into a fight when yer have no idea if yer gonna win, Yeol! Damn yer pride and damn yer honour, it’s alright to be a coward and run away! But fuck, Chanyeol! Yer do not get to decide for the both of us! I deserve a say in my fate, I deserve to decide on whether or not I feel like dyin’ today, and yer do not just get to come into my life, make me feel all this mushy crap inside my stomach and then throw yerself in front of the most dangerous bloody animal in the forest! Are yer off yer head?! Have yer gone completely insane?! Yer can’t just throw yer life away, Chanyeol! Not now!”

To Chanyeol’s regret, Baekhyun is actually making sense. In his defence though, consulting him would have delayed his attack further, and the outcome may have been very different. The longer they had talked it out, the less time they would have had, and it is not like they were in any position for a healthy debate anyway; the White Walker would not have waited for their chat to end. Chanyeol does not voice this, of course. There is no point. The threat has been eliminated and there is nothing to worry about for now. All that matters is that they are safe.

“Alright, alright,” the crow sighs, burying his face in his hands. “I’m sorry, Baekhyun. I’m sorry.” After giving his face a vigorous rub to bring some feeling back to it, he blinks with pink eyes back at Baekhyun, the cold prickling his tear ducts. “I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“Damn right yer weren’t thinkin’ straight, yer fuckin’ braindead bag of bones. I have half a mind to smack yer round the face.”

“Smack me then,” Chanyeol urges, coming to stand before the wildling and offering his face. “Get your revenge. I’m sorry I risked our lives like that, Baek, but I was just trying to keep us safe.”
“Yeah, well.” Baekhyun’s voice is suddenly wobbling, eyes swimming as he stares up at Chanyeol and half-heartedly reaches up to pat him on the cheek — the smack. “Serves you right,” he says emotionally, dropping his hand to hold the edge of Chanyeol’s cloak as he snuffles noisily. “Yer never doin’ somethin’ like that again, you hear me? I’m makin’ all the decisions round here from now on. I’m not havin’ you pullin’ anymore stupid stunts, alright? I think I’ve had enough for a lifetime.”

Chanyeol just smiles, understanding that Baekhyun was just scared to lose him and gathering the boy in his arms. “Mushy feelings, eh?” he questions, getting punched in the chest by a wildling not happy to be showing their inner feelings on the outside when they are technically not in private.

“Shut up. Yer lucky I like yer cock so much, little crow.”

Laughing, the crow pulls Baekhyun into a hug and squeezes him tight. “Had that shit yet?” he grins, feeling a failed attempt of a pinch just by his hip.

Baekhyun whines, keening into his chest and burrowing his face into his shoulder. “Would yer be disgusted if I said yes?” he mumbles, voice vibrating through the leather of Chanyeol’s doublet. “I proper shit meself just then, and it is all your fault. Yer payin’ for this when we get to camp, Chanyeol. Gonna ride yer cock until it drops off, I swear it on me ancestors.”

Biting his lip to hold back a laugh, Chanyeol jokes, “I look forward to it.”

“Oh-ho-ho-ho,” Baekhyun laughs tipping his head back to lock their gazes, “yer don’t know what yer gettin’ yerself into, crow. I might tie yer to me bed and come and fuck yer whenever I like. Might shit on yer as well. Got to return the favour and put you through shit too.”

Sighing, Chanyeol starts to caress the wildling’s face in the hopes of appeasing him. “Baekhyun,” he starts off softly, “I understand that you’re upset but at least we’re alive. If we’d have tried to outrun the White Walker you probably wouldn’t be feeling anything right now.”

“Stop tryin’ to be clever, little crow,” Baekhyun scowls, unimpressed as he shakes off Chanyeol’s hands. “I know your game. Just shut up and look pretty. Yer scared me half to death, yer know.”

Remorseful, Chanyeol nods. “I know, and I’m sorry.”

“Never mind, eh? At least yer alive and kickin’, sort of. How are you feelin’?”

“Alright. Could be worse, could be better. I imagine that the pain will come back to me soon.”

“Well, that’ll have to do for now,” Baekhyun decides, releasing himself from the embrace and hugging his arms around himself. “Let’s just find somewhere to sleep tonight and figure everythin’ else out in the mornin’. Sound good?”

With a smile, Chanyeol concurs.

After that ordeal, Baekhyun is surprisingly less picky about where they make camp. They end up back at square one when he decides that they will sleep in the hollow of that oak after all, walking languidly as if he is about to totter over any second. When they settle down to sleep, Baekhyun clings onto him incessantly, claiming that it is so he can mooch off his body heat when, in reality, Chanyeol reckons he just does not want to risk losing him again.

Although they have spent the last half an hour arguing with one another, Chanyeol feels more alive than ever. Baekhyun’s constant chiding and scolding is a result of worry and concern, and he is only dong it because he cares. Plus, Chanyeol just took down a White Walker, and that is definitely
something to brag about.

He goes to sleep with a big grin on his face, just lucid enough to register Baekhyun pecking him lightly on the lips and whispering, “Sleep well, little crow,” against his jaw.

In the morning, they start up travelling again, meandering through the remainder of the Haunted Forest towards the Milkwater. Their injuries slow them down, cutting away half the speed of their normal walking pace, and frequent rest stops are required to keep Chanyeol from fainting and faceplanting the floor. He is lucky that his back is not broken, only bruised, yet he is certain that that does not mean it hurts any less. He feels a bit like he is dying, Baekhyun tells him he is being dramatic.

“Stop bein’ a baby,” the wildling grits out, clutching onto his right hip as he limps on ahead. He too had been thrown through the air by the humanoid creature, so Chanyeol is not the only one who came out scathed. In all fairness, Chanyeol rarely ever hears Baekhyun complaining, so he strives to be the same as best he can. It’s not easy. “All this stoppin’ and startin’ is murderin’ our pace. Best to just keep goin’.”

The crow’s foot gives out at soon as Baekhyun has finished talking. “I cannot switch off the pain, Baekhyun,” he then complains, contradicting his aspirations as he presses his fists into the ground so he can push himself back up. “I can barely put any weight on this leg, let alone walk on it.”

The wildling presses his lips together and looks back at him, contemplating. “Fine,” he sighs, casting a look up to the morning sun. “Let’s just rest for today then. Hopefully we’ll be a little better in the mornin’. We’ll put some snow on that ankle.”

“Are you alright? You’re limping, don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

“Don’t mind me,” Baekhyun smiles, retracing his footsteps and lending his shoulder to Chanyeol for support. “I can hardly feel it.”

Just like Baekhyun suggested, Chanyeol spends the whole day with his foot buried in the snow. The Haunted Forest is colder than it has been since the start of his journey, and Chanyeol finds himself shivering into his cloak for warmth, the furs wrapped around his shoulders not enough to lock the heat inside. Baekhyun does try to light a fire several times, but all the surrounding wood is wet with melting frost and damp all the way through, so they make do by following the sun around and soaking in its rays instead. It is unconventional and they do not end up getting that much rest, but they save themselves from death by frostbite.

The true north really pushes them to the limits the next day, as they reach the point where they have to cross the Milkwater river to get to the Skirling Pass, which will then take them down towards the Frostfangs. Chanyeol takes one look at the icy gushing water and refuses to cross, so Baekhyun pulls him by the furs and drags him onto some conveniently placed stones that help to break up the current. His sprained ankle makes everything all the more difficult, and he grunts and groans with practically every step until Baekhyun sympathises and offers him his shoulder again.
Together, they hobble up the opposite bank, treading deep into the snow, and look ahead at the looming mountains that disappear into the clouds, specks of rock peeking out from beneath their white overcoats, decorating the otherwise peaceful giants with jagged lines. The sky is a glacier blue, fluffy stripes of cloud dispersing towards the west as the wind carries them towards the setting sun; occasionally, the ground will rumble, the intense light sparking avalanches in the distance.

“You alright?” Baekhyun grunts, Chanyeol’s weight on him making the trek all the more tedious. With his injuries, Chanyeol feels twice as heavy and twice as sluggish, and he is offloading all of that onto Baekhyun who hasn’t moaned about it once, except for the, “I guess it just means yer cock got heavier too, so it’s fine by me.”

Chanyeol takes in a breath to build his response before letting out an airy “Yeah”, accompanying it with a sure nod. He is functioning on willpower alone.

The wildling pats him on the back, comforting him and encouraging him at the same time, and then they start to climb their way into the Skirling Pass, a flat valley between the highlands, craggy peaks puncturing the sky at irregular angles.

“How long will it take to reach the camp?” Chanyeol asks, breathless, as they tackle the side of a mountain to try and reach what Baekhyun had called a footpath moments before. When Chanyeol imagines a footpath, he pictures a nice flat woodland trail that has no lumps or bumps or a threatening verge. Considering that this footpath runs along the side of an unpredictable mountain which could dump a thousand tonnes of snow on them at any moment, the word ‘footpath’ loses its usual charm.

“Well,” Baekhyun grunts, their steps staggering for a moment as they start veering off to the right, “takin’ into account the fact that yer can’t walk and yer don’t have as much stamina as me, it’ll probably take us about two days, maybe a day and a half if we push it.”

Chanyeol groans.

“Hey,” the wildling chirps, “what’s so bad about that? It means we get to spend more time together, cuddlin’ up in the snow and the like. Up for some frottage, Yeol?”

Chanyeol groans again. He just wants to sit down and never get up again, to be honest, but there is a fat chance that that is going to happen. Still, Baekhyun makes the journey somewhat bearable, especially now that he is offering his support and helping him walk. He strides with newfound determination, stomping towards the darkening sky in the hopes that nightfall will greet them sooner and he can lay beside the wildling under the stars.

The route they take is painfully monotonous. At least ten times a day, Chanyeol thinks he recognises the view as somewhere he has ambled before, but then kills the idea in his mind because: a) he is probably wrong, as everywhere around here looks exactly the same, and: b) Baekhyun would most likely laugh at him and not with him. He knows that Baekhyun cares for him in some rash, quickly founded way, but he is still worried about putting the wildling off, should he do or say something inexplicably stupid. Rejection has always been his worst enemy and his peers his toughest critic, and it would all hurt so much more from a certain redhead who claimed he was worth something in a moment of vulnerability. The last thing he wants is for Baekhyun to take back or regret what he said.

Before long, they are set on a path towards the summit of the nearest mountain, one Baekhyun has nicknamed "The Mushroom" because of its rounded peak. The wildling drags him up the banks, stumbling along beside him as they tackle unsteady rocky walkways and uneven path widths; in
some places, the ledges they tread together thin so greatly that they have to go on in single file, and other times they even have to walk sideways like the crabs Chanyeol used to catch in the harbour of Seagard. One gust of wind could send him vaulting over the edge to certain death, which is always an uplifting possibility.

They stop to make camp once the sun has finally gone down, choosing to rest in a fair sized bay which is just large enough for both of them to stretch out in. Tucked away inside the rock face, they are protected from the howling wind and the eyes of predators, safely nestled against one another to keep warm as the heat slips out through the cracks in the clouds up above.

Chanyeol is awoken several hours later by an ivory hand ruffling his hair, a cheeky grin materialising behind it once his eyes focus on more than just the foreground, and he sleepily manages a faint smile as he drags himself away from his dreams of sailing along the River Trident with wooden fish following his rowboat.

Neither of them seem to be avid talkers in the morning, and they take pleasure in a quiet breakfast of roasted squirrel together, the smoke from the fire gathering in Chanyeol’s furs and hair until it feels like he is covered in some sort of slick solution; at least there is warmth to be gained from it. Baekhyun cooks for the both of them, twisting the sizzling meat over the starved flames before feeding it to Chanyeol with his own hands. The crow relishes in the attention, rejoicing at every trace of Baekhyun’s fingers.

"We should reach the camp later today. We’re just under halfway there,” Baekhyun tells him as he scrapes some snow into their wineskins, the water they collected from the Milkwater long drained; it will melt while they travel and should be reasonably clean. Having been out here for so long and prevailed, Chanyeol likes to entertain the theory that they are invincible.

He nods, focus split equally between Baekhyun and where a few chunks of squirrel meat are at risk of burning over the fire. "Are you not eating that?"

"No. Already had my share. Why? Do yer want it?" he calls back without looking over his shoulder, busy rummaging through their supplies and packing what they need to take on into Chanyeol’s backpack.

"Uh… No, but…” Chanyeol gapes, wondering how Baekhyun could have had his share when there is still food left over. By the looks of things, he has only had a few mouthfuls. “Why are you not eating it? That’s part of your share, isn’t it?"

Once Baekhyun has found what he wants: a section of rope, he turns around and starts to loop their cooking pots together, tucking the flint safely inside one of his pockets. "Well, as I said, we should be reachin’ camp by nightfall," Baekhyun grunts, tying a hefty knot. "I don’t want to be all shitty on the inside when we finally have a bed to bone on."

Chanyeol chokes on his squirrel, but then the perverted side of him makes a comment on what a good, well-thought-out idea it is. After all, he does not fancy being defecated on while he is trying to enjoy himself, and the image of Baekhyun doing that in real life might just be enough to put him off laying with him forever. He tries not to think of such things as he reaches for the extra pieces of squirrel still on the skewer, reasoning that if Baekhyun isn’t eating to keep himself clean, he can keep eating to make himself stronger – for the boning.

His ankle is better this morning too, albeit still hurts when he puts too much weight on it. The pain is tolerable though, and at every turn, Baekhyun promises that they are almost there. Of course, the wildling is lying, but the optimism and ambition is definitely beneficial for the morale; Chanyeol feels triumphant already.
Just as his bones start to ache and his lungs start to burn, and the sun is blazing low in the sky bleeding scarlet through the streaky grey, Chanyeol trudges his final steps towards the top of the mountain. As Baekhyun had said, the top is fairly rounded, and so they stroll around the mushroom perimeter until they come to stand on the other face, staring directly into the sunset and the blinding rays of the sun.

Momentarily without vision, Chanyeol does not see what lies beneath the horizon. He squints his eyes and holds out his hand to protect his sight, and then he sees it – the dwelling of the King-Beyond-the-Wall. The sheer size of the encampment takes his breath away, steals it right out of his lungs and hides it in the depths of the sea. People move like ants through a gigantic colony of tents, a settlement that stretches on for miles and miles across the flatland territory encompassed by mountains, out of the view to anyone who would wish to come down the Skirling Pass and hope to catch them.

"This is where I live," Baekhyun says wistfully, smiling fondly at the sight of his people, the Free Folk. He is flushed with what Chanyeol can only interpret as joy, a sheer happiness at being back where he belongs. "It’s home. For now, anyway."

Chanyeol nods, jaw slack, as his eyes roam over the different styles of tents and awnings erected by what he presumes are different clans of people. There are thousands, tens of thousands, maybe even hundreds of thousands here. He sees giants and mammoths as big as warships, both of which were believed to be extinct for a good five hundred years, and he sees people, so many people, that he starts to feel like he has made the right choice. If all of these men, women and children have conjoined for one purpose, it must be a damn well good thing to fight for.

Baekhyun is watching him with satisfaction, enjoying the view of him so in awe, no doubt, and when Chanyeol turns to meet his gaze, there is affection swelling in his eyes. The wildling steps forwards to kiss him, lips as gentle as the hands against his jaw, and when Baekhyun whispers "Welcome home" against his breath, Chanyeol thinks yes, he has definitely made the right decision.

Thankfully, the way down the mountain is much easier than the way up. Surrounded by cushions of snow, slips, trips and falls no longer matter, and on several occasions, the two find themselves sledding down the icy slopes on their behinds, laughing and crying as singular flakes sting their eyes. With every drop, they grow closer to where the encampment is scattered across the earth like the pebbles of a river bed, stretching out vast and wide over a region so grand that it even goes beyond Chanyeol's peripheral and the tracks of the surrendering sun.

"Fire. A warm bed. Some hot broth. Yes, please," Baekhyun shudders as they grow nearer, rubbing his palms together in anticipation for civilisation.

By the time they have reached the base of the mountain, Baekhyun is practically running through the drifts, footsteps marking troughs on the otherwise unsullied ground. Chanyeol can only trail after him, heart thumping with a nervous excitement as his mind races. He is going to meet more of Baekhyun's people, and something tells him that they will not be as spontaneous.

Only the very top of the sun glitters over the peaks of the mountains now, beams fading as the world turns to night, camp blazing with the fire of the devil's eyes. The snow looks like slate in the darkness, Baekhyun soon a blurry figure in the distance with nothing indicating his identity but his voice crying out in greeting to several shapes that Chanyeol presumes are his friends. Baekhyun hugs them like they are his long lost brothers, a loud and emotional reunion, and Chanyeol feels an unjust pang of jealousy settle its weight on his chest. Guilt follows in succession, the fact that he has just subconsciously doubted Baekhyun's commitment dawning on him.
It is not a great way to start off his life in his new home, envious and insecure, but at least he has not made any first impressions yet. Things could still go well. To his inward glee, Baekhyun turns around and holds his hand out to him, facial features not visible through the impending gloom but his bright smile still manages to gleam, sucking in the light from the slowly emerging stars.

Chanyeol goes to him like a baby to its mother, in need of comfort, reassurance and support, and when he closes in on the group of three, Baekhyun cuddles up against his side with pride, reinstalling Chanyeol's faith, joy and confidence all at the same time. The gods, old and new, have blessed him kindly.

"Right, little crow, this is Jongin and this is Kyungsoo. Jongin, Kyungsoo, this is Chanyeol. Say hello." A gesture in the given direction is provided when names are stated, and Chanyeol's eyes follow the slender lines of Baekhyun's fingers in order to match names to faces.

Jongin is the one with honey brown hair, swept to the side over a pair of dark, piercing eyes. He sustains a very fresh appearance, skin dewy and clear like a new-born babe’s, furs the purest white Chanyeol has ever seen. His clothes must be crafted from the pelts of an arctic fox, most likely layered up for maximum protection from the winds and cool temperatures. Across his chest is a breastplate made of interlocking bones all strung together with twine, the same structures replicated over Kyungsoo’s shoulders.

Kyungsoo stands a few inches shorter than Jongin, making him considerably shorter than Chanyeol. He wears the typical grey furs of the Free Folk with the roped snow boots and a belt around his middle, but what sets him apart is the ring of owl feathers around his neck, sewn onto the hem of his jacket. They are long, a mixture of brown tones, and a couple of them are missing the ends – a quirky bunch for a man with an expression so placid. He has black hair to go with his black eyes, the whites stark and unnerving when his gaze turns on Chanyeol with a rather baffled look.

"A crow?" Jongin asks, displeasure deepening his voice. "What are yer doin' with a crow, Baek?"

"He's not gonna be a crow anymore, silly," Baekhyun chuckles, practically hanging off Chanyeol's shoulder. The touch grounds Chanyeol like an anchor while scrutiny stares him in the face, surging like a thunderous storm clashing against the raging waves. They do not like him, and it is so blatantly obvious that it prickles his heart.

"A turncloak then, not much better," the other man, Kyungsoo, speaks up, voice surprisingly level.

"Guys—"

"He's wearin' black, Baekhyun," Jongin interrupts angrily, jabbing a finger at Chanyeol as if he is a rabid dog. "Black means crow, crow means enemy, and yer bring him here? Right into our home where he can see us naked and deliver information back to his crow friends."

Baekhyun drops the lovesick act, letting go of Chanyeol in the process, and stands up square to face those who disagree with what he has done. "He might be wearin' black at the moment, but grey suits him better. I'm a good judge of character, yer know I am. Now, I don't want to hear any more about it. We're goin' to see Minseok."

"Baekhyun—"

"Soo, shut up! You too, Jongin. I'm eighteen, I can make my own decisions, alright? I don't need lecturin' all the time. Just because yer older than me doesn't mean yer better or smarter, just means yer'll both get wrinkly sooner."
Kyungsso sighs, Jongin rolls his eyes, and Chanyeol is teetering on the edge of tears, unsure whether it would be appropriate or not to burst out crying at a tense time such as this. Did he really escape one life as an outcast to come to another and be treated just the same? Baekhyun may be fighting for him, but even he can see it. He does not belong here. No one will accept him. How could he have thought that his first impression would be decent when he is wearing the colours of the enemy? He is a flagrant threat and a suspicious traitor; no one will trust him here.

"Fine. We'll go to Minseok and see what he says about this," Jongin sneers, spinning on his heel and striding off towards the beating heart of camp. Kyungsso follows, though not before flashing a cautious smile at Chanyeol and handing a sympathetic look to Baekhyun. He comes across as apologetic, yet he might just be another Lofty – thinking one thing and doing another out of fear.

"I thought they might react like this," Baekhyun murmurs, crestfallen as he drops his eyes to his boots. "Minseok was just like you, so they have no right to say that."

"Just like me?"

"A turncloak, I mean. He deserted the Night's Watch over twenty years ago." An amiable smile creeps across Baekhyun’s face. “That should give yer some confidence, eh? Two whole decades and no one's come to rid him of his head. Things bode well for yer, don’t they?” Baekhyun then grins, taking Chanyeol by the elbow and guiding him forwards. "Don’t listen to what others say, alright, little crow? What are their words worth? Yer remember what I said? We're all that matters. Say it for me."

"We're all that matters," Chanyeol repeats, though Baekhyun’s efforts fall short. He is not entirely convinced. At least, not yet. In his own mind, plenty of things matter; like the prospect of the wildling camp mustering to deliver him a slow and painful death, and Baekhyun losing his friends over his affable and devoted loyalty tying them together. He even spares a thought to ponder the possibility of an avalanche. But, “We are all that matters,” he says again, hoping his despairing thoughts will be put to rest.

"Exactly. Everyone else can go fuck ‘emselves, Yeol. Who are they to make judgements on us? It’s not like they’re the son of the gods."

Preparing himself, Chanyeol takes a deep breath and nods to show his understanding, and then he enters the lion's den.

A single black figure against a field of grey, Chanyeol is as much of a focal point as he is an eyesore. The Free Folk do not take kindly towards those who kill their kin, as is proven by the filthy looks sent Chanyeol’s way by men and women who shout out "Crow scum!" and curse his homeland. They spit at his feet, throw insults at his face, and the children come along to aim balls of ice right against his chest. It takes Baekhyun a great amount of breath to get them to stop, and even Kyungsso has to loop back to tackle some of the more stubborn folk, announcing to everyone that they are going to Minseok to sort things out, as if Chanyeol is a great dilemma for them all.

Chanyeol is hit in the face, neck, arms and legs, the cold sinking in through his clothes until it chills his bones, but he refuses to back away now. Although these people terrify him, he will not let them know that. He is not a scared little girl anymore; he has killed a White Walker and turned his back on his brothers. He has survived this far, why not now?

He straightens his posture, pushes his shoulders back and holds his head up high, the epitome of confidence and strength until he hears a grumble that shakes the ground. He is met with a giant on his left, glowering down his bulbous nose at him with a menacing scowl. The brute is over ten feet tall and decked out with a giant scythe, its long brown hair tied back in numerous plaits which run
down the armour over its chest. It makes indescribable noises, random grunts and syllables, and the fact that Chanyeol cannot understand what it is saying makes it even more terrifying. What if it is threatening to kill him? Baekhyun wouldn't let the giant stamp on him, would he? Chanyeol sure hopes not.

"In here, Yeol," Baekhyun says gently, taking him tenderly by the forearm and leading him into the largest tent he has seen so far. The tents all look like domes, layers upon layers of animal skin congregated over a thick wooden framework bound by twine, streamlined against the wind and held down by broad spruce pegs. It is like walking through a ghost village: everything is bland and insipid, and the people seem to meander around as if in a trance. The only lively thing about them is their eyes and their voices, their sharp glares and foul words bringing them back from the realm of the dead.

Inside what Chanyeol presumes is the king's tent, fire tangos with the shadows. There are stocky pelts hanging down from the beams of the ceiling to divide and discern different rooms, and the steady smoke from the blazing fire in the centre funnels through the whole in the peak of the dome's structure. It is quite dark inside, meaning that the five faces which belong to the men who turn in greeting remain hidden behind a veil; one of them is the King-Beyond-the-Wall, Chanyeol's new liege and lord, and the crow finds himself fighting to swallow his anxiety down. If he messes this up, it might as well be the end of everything.

Jongin shoots him an evil glare when he turns to face him, stood amongst the men who had already been inside. Kyungsoo, on the other hand, remains neutral, and stands equidistant between both groups with a blank expression. It is Baekhyun who steps forwards to speak first, greeting a man with a smile and a "Did yer miss me, Minseok?"

The man – Minseok, and the King-Beyond-the-Wall – chuckles, soft and light, and replies, "I was beginning to think you were dead."

When this man reveals himself, Chanyeol gets a good look at his appearance. His hair is fairly shaggy, falling spryly in raven strands from a middle parting to frame his face, eyes perforating through the dusk as if he can see in the dark. His gaze is keen and intent, never wavering from Baekhyun in his relief and gratitude except for when he directs a glance to the stars in thanks, suggesting that he is still a holy man despite his previous broken oaths. In the presence of his companions, he is neither the tallest nor the shortest, and it is his humble place in the middle ground that makes Chanyeol feel like he has a gentle, approachable soul.

"Well," Baekhyun sighs, forsaking his pride, "I would be, if it weren't for Chanyeol here. It feels a bit shit to admit it, but it’s the truth."

Attention shifts onto Chanyeol so suddenly that his heart skips a beat. They are all looking now, eyes curious and narrowed. They probably cannot tell he is wearing black because he is stood so far away from the fire, but when Baekhyun gestures for him to advance he notices how everyone suddenly goes stiff. Hands clasp around the pummels of scavenged swords and daggers, and with his nimble hearing, Chanyeol makes out the sound of a creaking bowstring. So, to show his loyalty and protect his life, he drops to his knees, bows his head, and greets his new king with a polite: "Your Grace."

His ears ring in the silence that follows, and it is the most painful silence he has ever succumbed to. Has he done something wrong? Is this not the custom here? That is how you greet royalty in the south, getting down on your knees to submit and bowing your head to obey. Are things not the same up here? Is anything the same here, or is everything just out to get him?

He gets his answer shortly when everyone bursts out laughing, Baekhyun positively cackling as he
comes over to drag him up to his feet by the shoulder. "What did I say about kneelin', you idiot?" he teases, no bite in the insult as he refreshes Chanyeol’s memory of their time spent in the cave. Alas, the Free Folk do not kneel.

"Why have yer brought a black brother here?"

Baekhyun looks across at the man beside Minseok who, from his silhouette, looks to have wavy hair and strong cheekbones, the fire from behind him further detailing his outline. His hair flicks up in different directions in a wispy sort of way, and he is just slightly shorter than the king, but his voice is stronger. It feels powerful and compelling, his words invoking confidence in his peers that he has chosen the right form of approach.

"He has left his black brothers behind," Baekhyun tells. "He doesn’t want to be part of the Night's Watch anymore. He wants to be one of us instead."

"And why should we believe him?" the same man asks, stepping forwards until shadows pool in the contours of his face, the flames licking at the air beneath him. Even though the man is scowling, the corners of his mouth naturally brush up in an eerie smile. "He swore an oath, why would be break it so easily?"

Baekhyun laughs. "For the same reason as Minseok, I imagine," he argues, all the insults delivered backhandedly. After all, who is this man to question Chanyeol’s loyalty when he comes from the same background as the king? “It’s a long story, really, but I trust him. We trust each other. He saved us from a White Walker by killin’ it."

That captures the interest of the majority, people blinking at Chanyeol in surprise as if they had thought him incapable of holding his own, let alone being able to take down something supernatural, something immortal. He does not know whether or not this calls for him to feel upset, that the first thing people assume about him from his appearance is that he is weak and helpless. In fact, he is the exact opposite now.

"And how did he do that?" the king asks, staring directly at Chanyeol without ever breaking his gaze. The man rarely even blinks, as if Chanyeol is not on edge enough already.

"My—" Chanyeol coughs the croak from his throat. "My sword," he says, unsheathing it as he speaks. "I stabbed the White Walker, and it broke into pieces. Then it became dust and blew away."

"Jongdae, check the sword, please," Minseok orders, and the man who had previously spoken moves forward to pry Chanyeol's weapon from his hand. At this, Chanyeol’s natural instinct is to hold onto his sword tighter, intensifying his grip around the hilt so that when Jongdae – the man with the permanent smile – comes to snatch it off him, it does not budge.

"Don’t resist, crow," the king speaks again. “We might think you’re up to something if you don’t want to part from it."

Realising that the man is probably right, Chanyeol relents, grip going lax at the other's insistence. Jongdae deftly takes the blade and holds it against the fire, bringing life to the swirls in the metal which move under the light, appearing to swim this way and that until the sword looks like it is alive with its own heartbeat.

"Why do you want to join us, boy?" Minseok wonders, coming around the fire to take in Chanyeol close up. From this distance, Chanyeol can see that his eyes have single lids, and that his smile resembles that of a pixie from an old story book. His face is more pointed than Chanyeol had
originally thought, too, with sharp cheekbones and a conical chin at the end of a strong jaw. So much for gentle. And even though the king is shorter than him by several inches, his eyes are so dark that he looks like a feral beast. Chanyeol dare not deny him the answers he seeks.

"I just—I want to do something with my life that means something. At the Watch no one really took me seriously and they never let me do anything important. I just want to prove myself and help people. I've seen a White Walker, and I've seen what they can do. You people don't deserve to share your home with monsters, and you're not the savages that the Watch has made you out to be. Baekhyun has completely changed my outlook on everything, and I see it now. I see everything for what it is. Let me join you, let me help you fight for whatever it is you're going to fight for."

Jongin scoffs off to the side, but Chanyeol is too focused on how Baekhyun melts at his words, a loving smile adorning his lips as they grow lost in each other's eyes. It is rude to look away while your prospective king is in front of you, because Chanyeol cannot remember where he is anymore. All he sees is the wildling with the red hair.

"Ahem," Minseok clears his throat, reclaiming Chanyeol's focus. "Is Kim still Lord Commander?"

"A different Kim. Kim Junmyeon," Chanyeol informs. "He—Uh— He thinks I'm stupid."

Jongin sniggers this time, and Kyungsoo cuffs him around the back of the head, the two having gravitated towards each other at some point during the interrogation.

"Kim Junmyeon became Lord Commander?" Minseok asks in genuine surprise. "I remember him," he mumbles lowly. "He was an annoying, squeaky little boy when I was there. Always pissed the bed because he had nightmares."

Chanyeol does not know if he is supposed to laugh or not, so he holds it in and end up looking quite pained.

"You saved our Baekhyun's life then, hmm? How ever did you do that?" Minseok examines him with narrowed eyes, looking him up and down as if to assess his muscles and physique, searching for traces of a lie.

"Valyrian steel," Jongdae calls out, coming back to hand Chanyeol his sword. "The blade is made from Valyrian steel. Where did you find it?"

Chanyeol retakes his weapon and stares at it as if he does not recognise it anymore. Valyrian steel? How can that be possible? "Well, I was practising in the courtyard once and the sword I was using snapped, so I went to the armoury to get another one and saw this one hiding in the back. I... I liked the pommel design so I took it."

Jongdae deadpans, disbelieving. "You mean you took this sword because of the pretty handle and not because it was made of Valyrian steel?"

"I—I—" Chanyeol gapes around, a little lost, "I don't know what Valyrian steel is."

Minseok smirks, clearly amused. "It's old, very old. There are only a few swords like that left in the world. Generally, they're owned by the rich southern houses who pass them down through the generations. I know that the Lannisters have one. Why would be lurking in the Castle Black armoury, I have no idea. I never saw it myself when I was there. I suppose you got lucky, crow. Or maybe the gods have a plan for you. Tell me, boy, which gods did you swear your oath under?"

"I grew up in Seagard, so I swore under the Seven."
The king seems pleased with his answer. “The Seven are all fanciful lies. They are not the real
gods, Chanyeol. The old gods are the real gods, and if you did not swear under them, consider your
oath revoked. I broke my oath, did I not? And the gods still spare an eye to watch over me. They
brought Baekhyun back to me safely. The same, of course, cannot be said for his companions, but
they were dead weight anyway. When the time comes, they would have been easy pickings.”

"Are yer goin' to let him stay?" Jongin interrupts, his arms crossed over the end of his tooth
necklace. His veins are straining in his neck, like he is itching to refute before Minseok has even
spoken.

"Well, we wouldn't want to turn our guest away."

"Because he has a rare sword?" he snaps.

"That's not the only reason, Jongin," Minseok intervenes, tired. “He saved our Baekhyun's life.”

"And he boned me, so he’s not allowed to leave," Baekhyun proudly overshares. "You know how
much I love a big cock."

Chanyeol cringes so hard that his stomach cramps up. "Baek—"

"Shut it." Baekhyun pouts at him. "I'm speakin' in your defence."

Chanyeol's face burns while everyone silently deliberates, talking with pointed glances rather than
actual words, glances that Chanyeol could not translate even if he hoped to. He feels like his life is
on the line, like he is about to be declared either guilty or not guilty, and he looks to Baekhyun for
help. The wildling looks confident, as is the norm with Baekhyun, and that quells his worries ever
so slightly. Baekhyun knows these people, has grown up around them, and he has just stated that he
is a good judge of character. Clearly, the boy must not predict the outcome to be a negative one,
otherwise he would be biting his lip and fidgeting instead of smirking with a cocked brow.

After what feels like an age, Minseok turns to speak his decision to Baekhyun with an undertone of
joy. "Best find him some greys. We can’t have him walking around here in all black."

“Consider it done, my Liege,” Baekhyun grins, coming to wrap his arms around Chanyeol's elbow.
"Come on, little crow, let's go play dress-down."

They leave an argument in their wake, Jongin bursting and blowing his wrath over the king about
how preposterous the whole ordeal is, but Baekhyun tells Chanyeol not to worry about it.

"Chances are, Kyungsoo won't let him bed him, that's generally when he’s the crankiest."

"Oh. Right..."

So Jongin and Kyungsoo are together? How can Kyungsoo put up with him? He’s mental.

Despite everywhere looking exactly the same, save for the people, Baekhyun seems to know where
he is going. He navigates them around the encampment like he has been treading these trails since
he first learned to walk, sporadically turning left and right without giving Chanyeol any prior
warning; it definitely keeps him on his toes.

The sun has fully descended by the time they reach a fair sized tent, the entrance way covered by a
huge cloth and strings of animal bones that clunk hollowly together each time the breeze blows.

"Here we are," Baekhyun rubs his palms together, stepping forwards to then hold the curtain out of
the way and let Chanyeol pass through. "I might have left it in a bit of a mess, I really don’t remember; it is been a while."

When Chanyeol enters, he cannot really see much at all. The hole in the ceiling, presumably for ventilation, only lets in a minimal amount of moonlight, and other than the vague grey glow it casts on the indistinguishable objects about the room, all dwells in the darkness. Still, the light is enough for Chanyeol to know where to walk without falling over something, so he successfully navigates himself to the centre of the tent unscathed just as Baekhyun mentions that there should be some flint around somewhere.

"You start a fire and I'll get yer fancy new clothes, eh?"

"Alright," Chanyeol smiles, invisible in the dusk, before he lowers to a crouch and starts to feel around the fire with his hands for the materials he needs. Sparks fly as he works the flint against his sword, focusing hard to get the previously laid out kindling to catch light. At the first burst of flame, Chanyeol actually gets a chance to observe his surroundings.

The floor is covered in the thick skins of stags and appears to be laid down over several layers of gravel, probably for drainage purposes for when the snow falls in unforeseeable leaps and bounds. There is little furniture around, only a few tables and a chair to go alongside the washing lines and wooden crates which hold the cooking equipment. Baekhyun had said it might be a mess, but it is not. In fact, there hardly seems to be that much stuff in here at all.

Aside from the general basics, there is a station to his left where several bows are strung and about fifteen quivers stand stacked against one another, stuffed full of arrows – the materials of such stored nearby on a desk in little wicker baskets. There are a few garlands of dead flowers lying around, mainly snowdrops and bluebells, and there are candles littered over every surface. Even with the fire, the tent is still quite dull, so Chanyeol takes it upon himself to grab something that can substitute for a splint and give life to the abandoned wicks around the room. With the birth of every new flame, the canvas walls start to glow in a marigold hue, and by the time Baekhyun emerges from the separate room at the back, concealed behind another curtain, the tent looks like it has been bathed in glorious sunlight.

"Well I never," Baekhyun remarks, looking around in surprise. "You've been busy."

Chanyeol smiles bashfully, blowing out his splint and throwing it into the central fire. "Just trying to make it homey."

The wildling nods in approval, walking past a bucket and stool to come and stand before him. "I've got yer some furs, they ought to fit. They were Hayder's, see." As he speaks, he shuffles the great abundance of game pelts around in his hands, separating each article of clothing from the other before draping them over his forearm. "I figured yer could just keep yer current undergarments for now, seein' as they fit yer well and good. In the future we'll get better clothes but this is what we have for now." Baekhyun smiles at him, triumphant.

“What fur is that?” Chanyeol ponders, stepping forwards to tangle his fingers in the thick strands.

“Bear fur. We dye it grey with bones so we can blend in with the snow. I shot this bear meself, two years back. Got it right in the eye, of course. We ate for days after, it was bloody huge,” he laughs lightly, stuck in his memories before he looks down at the clothes in his hands. “Anyways, yeah, they ought to fit.”

Nodding, Chanyeol unclasps his cloak and folds it on the stool by his feet, reaching out to take his new clothes with tingling fingertips. He convinces himself that he doesn’t care about how they
once belonged to Baekhyun's previous lover (or whoever Hayder really was), but he cannot really deny that he feels like a replacement. Or maybe, an upgrade.

He would like to know more about the man, though. It would be a futile competition from beyond the grave, wanting to beat an opponent who cannot make any more moves, but still. Chanyeol wants to make sure that he is up to scratch.

"Oh no, little crow." The wildling grins slyly and takes a step back, keeping Chanyeol's new wardrobe out of his reach. With eyes at half-mast, he starts to walk backwards towards the curtain that leads to the bedroom, drawling "We're not tryin' the furs on yet" as he flings them into a forgotten corner.

Suspended, not really knowing how to respond to that, Chanyeol is henceforth unable to stop himself from being dragged by the collar by a wildling harbouring too much lust for his tiny body. Then again, it is not like Baekhyun has sprung this on him without any warning. He should have expected to be jumped the minute they made it to camp, and in reality, Baekhyun has done a good job at holding himself back this whole time. Chanyeol almost feels proud.

In the room he has not yet explored, Chanyeol finds a million candles winking back at him as if they know exactly what they are about to do and are teasing him for it. A fire pit burns to the side, flames dancing within the bronze grating as Baekhyun shoves him down on the bed in the centre. Like a predator, he comes crawling on top of him, hips pushed back and torso lowered as he inhales a line up Chanyeol's body and plants a smooth kiss on his mouth.

"Gonna fuck yer on the bed I made," he says darkly, tongue peeking out between his teeth to wetly lap at Chanyeol’s lips. "Mmmm," he groans, swinging his hips down to press against Chanyeol’s length. "Why don’t we get that cock out?"

"Fuck."

Chanyeol has never been so hard so quickly in his life, and damn, it hurts. He is right there with Baekhyun, stripping himself of his clothes until his burning body is laid bare on a mattress of wolf pelts, crimson with desire. Blood gushes through his veins, bullying the cold into creeping back to the threshold where it stays a prisoner, barred by immunity, while his eyes forget to blink at the sight of Baekhyun starting to undress.

The wildling is knelt up over his hips, slipping out of his jacket and bringing his undershirt over his head to reveal a torso spoiled by bloomed bruises the size of hands; a similar palette is reflected on Chanyeol’s own body, the result of their White Walker encounter. Instead of gentle touches, Chanyeol reaches up to grab the wildling by the waist, wanting to create more bruises to complement the ones that are already wrapped around the boy’s ribs and hips.

Their tongues meet sloppily when Baekhyun pitches forwards again, now shuffling out of his trousers. He kicks them off his ankles with resolution, his length hanging low and drawing a glistening trail over Chanyeol’s navel before it sits itself in his bellybutton.

"Remember what I said about yer fat cock, little crow?" the wildling rumbles, starting to grind their hips together as he straddles him, hard and slow. "Gonna ride yer 'til it drops off, aren’t I?"

Baekhyun grins breathlessly, splaying his palms either side of Chanyeol's face and canting down to suck a harsh mark into his neck. "Yer look good in grey, little crow, but yer look even better in red." His hot breath practically knocks Chanyeol out, and he wheezes under Baekhyun's searing tongue.

"Don’t need spit this time," the boy breathes huskily as he sits back up, pressing two of his fingers
into Chanyeol's mouth and forcing his jaw open. "Guess what I've got."

Chanyeol blinks in the haze, struggling to understand anything that is going on now he is as hard as a sword between his legs.

"Go on. Guess," Baekhyun urges, leading Chanyeol to obediently struggle to mumble an incoherent "I don't know" from around his fingertips. He is on the brink of gagging, Baekhyun’s fingers tickling his at reflex mercilessly just to make tears form in his eyes.

"Bet yer want to know, eh?" he teases endlessly, bearing down to suck his ear lobe into his mouth. "Bet yer what to know what I've got, just for you. Just for you and your cock."

Like a dog, Chanyeol nods, and Baekhyun's fingers leave his mouth to reach for something on the nearby table. The crow occupies his eyes by staring at the wildling’s flushed length lying snugly beneath his pectorals, feeling his mouth water at the scent it gives off. It is a mixture of body odour and Baekhyun's natural smell: fur, wet grass and lightly perspiring skin; and for some reason, it intoxicates him. And then there is something golden falling on him in a solid stream, something that looks alarmingly like piss, and he would believe it so if it were not for the fact that it is cold and falling from the sky rather than Baekhyun’s bone.

"Look at that, hmm? Cookin’ oil, just so things'll be a little bit slicker."

The way he says 'slicker' has Chanyeol rutting up into nothing, Baekhyun’s glorious behind planted tortuously above his hips, and the wildling laughs at him while rubbing the oil into his chest, the solution reflecting the firelight like Valyrian steel.

"Mmmm," Baekhyun hums for no reason at all, and Chanyeol suddenly feels ten times hotter than before. "Yer so wet, little crow. So fuckin’ wet for me. So fuckin’ pretty."

"Oh gods," Chanyeol whines, closing his eyes and trying to contain himself. Baekhyun is making him want to explode.

"You like that?" the wildling chuckles menacingly, clearly enjoying himself, and Chanyeol just lets out a strangled noise in response. Feeling the boy's slender hands running over all of him has his every nerve on high alert. He is twitching and shivering and getting covered in goosebumps, and every time he moans, Baekhyun giggles at him.

"Oh, little crow," Baekhyun drones, "I can’t wait to have yer wet with somethin' else. I want to sew my seeds all over that pretty face. Would yer let me? I’d lick it off afterwards so it wouldn't make a mess. I’d get it out yer eyelashes and yer teeth, be a good boy and lap it all up."

"Baekhyun—"

"Gods. Finger me, Yeol. Fuckin’ finger me."

Chanyeol groans without restraint, clumsily taking the small bottle of oil Baekhyun has thrust in his hand and coating three of his fingers in the slippery substance.

"I'll talk yer through it, don’t worry. I trust yer," Baekhyun then coaches, gently taking his wrist and guiding it through his parted legs as he sits up on his knees, edging forwards until his cock hangs just shy of Chanyeol’s chin. "One at a time, alright?"

"Okay," Chanyeol breathes emptily, "okay."

He locates Baekhyun's hole, smearing oil around the taut rim which pulses in anticipation under his
fingertips, sometimes retreating, sometimes reaching out to kiss him. Baekhyun sighs and rolls his head back, the swell of his faint Adam's apple now on full display as Chanyeol glances up at the milky plains of discoloured flesh stretching out before him. Baekhyun's muscles bulge as they tense under the film of his skin, abdominal muscles threatening to break free and thighs hardening to create the rigid line of jarred rocks as he holds his own cheeks apart with clawed hands. And yet, there is still something beautiful about him; something beautiful in his manly smell, the hint of stubble along his throat and the overpowering bush surrounding his nether regions; something beautiful in the way that, even though he is stereotypically the submissive half of the whole, he is still taking control.

"Fuckin' put it in, Yeol. Come on," Baekhyun urges, pressing down against Chanyeol's finger which curls under his weight. "Don't tease me, yer fuckin' prat."

Chanyeol laughs, delirious, and then finally hardens the form of his finger so that when Baekhyun lowers himself down again, he actually breaches through. The wildling bites his lip and digs his fingernails into Chanyeol's torso, leaning forwards to press his weight just under Chanyeol's collarbones. It starves him of air, lungs crushed.

"That's it," the wildling sighs, suddenly clenching and sucking in the rest of Chanyeol's finger to an uninhibited moan. "Good boy. Fuck."

The praise, however derogatory, makes Chanyeol's heart leap with joy.

"Feels good," Baekhyun groans, rocking his head from right to left before meeting Chanyeol's gaze with an impish grin. "Am I tight?" he asks innocently, sending Chanyeol's heart into a frenzy. This boy is going to kill him at this rate, already his pulse is spiking. "Is it hot and wet inside, little crow? Bet yer glad I had that shit, aren't yer? Now you can fuck me open, yeah? I want yer to fuck me open until I can't close anymore."

Chanyeol almost passes out from how hot he feels, his stiff rod aching profusely as it begins to feel the strain. Eager to get going, he brings another finger to join the initial digit, slipping into Baekhyun's willing entrance with surprising finesse. Baekhyun lets out lewd moans of "Yes"s and "Fuck"s as he starts to grind down with more vigour, proceeding to touch himself with the same rhythm.

With his free hand, Chanyeol caresses the rigid muscles in Baekhyun's left thigh, watching as they tense through the up-and-down motion he undergoes in order to stretch himself for Chanyeol's cock, desperate.

Very meekly, Chanyeol makes a comment about how hot Baekhyun looks, and the wildling retaliates by reaching a hand behind him to take Chanyeol's length in his palm, still silken with oil. Instantly, the crow bucks up, not even ashamed at his needy behaviour, and he starts to fuck his fingers into Baekhyun with squelching sounds in more of a hurry.

"I can't wait for yer to fuck me," the wildling mewls eagerly, running his other hand up and down his body before tweaking a nipple. "Say goodbye to yer cock, Chanyeol. Yer won't be seein' it for a while. It is gonna be in me for a long time."

"Fuck—goodbye," Chanyeol actually wheezes, earning a playful slap from Baekhyun who is overjoyed at being so mindlessly obeyed.

"Good boy." Again with the praise. Chanyeol's heart soars.

It takes a little while longer before Baekhyun announces that he is ready, personally removing
Chanyeol's fingers from his insides before he reaches for the cooking oil again. Chanyeol is making grabs at his thighs, hips, waist, unsure of where to hold when he wants to hold everything, and Baekhyun chortles at his enthusiasm, shuffling back to line himself up with the bone he loves so dearly.

"Tell me if yer see the gods, Yeol," he winks. "I did say I was gonna ride yer up to heaven and I like to keep my word."

"Shit—Sure," Chanyeol grunts offhandedly, too focused on getting inside of him to really register what he is saying.

When the wildling sinks down, though, Chanyeol does think that he at least reaches the gates of heaven. Everything goes blank, white, and angels sing – Baekhyun moans, in reality – and once the wildling is fully seated, Chanyeol can hardly breathe anymore so he must be passing over. If he did die at this moment, he would be a very happy man. What a way to go.

Baekhyun growls like a savage beast, clawing angry marks all the way down Chanyeol’s front to stake his territory before declaring how he forgot how good this was.

"I could come just from this," Baekhyun snarls, part-excited, part-frustrated. It almost sounds like he is angry for being so aroused that he is at bursting point already, and Chanyeol feels the same. He does not want this ending too soon; it feels too good to end.

Plush skin balloons around his clamping fingers when Chanyeol squeezes Baekhyun's hips, wide and sturdy with just the right amount of fat for him to play with. The wildling whimpers and starts gyrating his lower body, swaying himself in delicious circles that have Chanyeol teetering on the edge of oblivion. Eventually, he clings onto the wildling for dear life.

"Oh, Baek, fuck." In the heat of the moment, it does not matter how shameless he sounds, and so he starts to ramble about all things Baekhyun. "You feel so good, so fucking good. Shit, Baekhyun. Shit fuck shit, shit shit shit—"

Baekhyun basks in the attention, purring like a cat as he takes a moment to torture Chanyeol by stopping to stretch his arms out above his head, smirking mercilessly down on him with malice inking his golden eyes. "I'm in control here, big boy," he states wickedly, pelvis paused by way of torture. "No bossin' me about."

“Arghh,” Chanyeol cries, immediately tensing and gripping Baekhyun’s body like he wants to break it in half. He is sure that his fingernails draw blood but right now he is in too much pain to care. “Please, please just go again.”

"Owh," Baekhyun pouts, tilting his head to the side and putting a single finger to his swollen bottom lip. “Does it hurt, little crow? Does it hurt really bad?”

"Ahh—Yes—Fuck—!

"Hmmm, what a shame." Baekhyun rolls his head back, arching himself to accentuate his hips and natural curvature, running his hands all over his own body like he has never felt it before.

"Baekhyun—" Chanyeol protests, cut off with a sudden gasp when the wildling heeds his request.

Baekhyun looks so satisfied that Chanyeol yearns to punish him. "What do yer say, little crow?" Baekhyun asks, dragging his fingernails down Chanyeol's chest and deliberately scraping them over his nipples. The crow hisses like raw meat over a fire and instantly digs his fingers into Baekhyun’s bruises.
"Thank you."

"Yer welcome." His voice is unstable now, pleasure wracking his body and wrapping its hands around his throat. "So good. So well behaved. My little baby crow."

Chanyeol goes to roll his eyes but they swing into the back of his head instead. He is pulled taut again, cramping up in places he was not even aware he could cramp, when the sensation proves to be too much. "Baek—"

"Calm down, I'm takin' care of it." Chanyeol feels doting hands on his face and tries to do as he is told, but it is hard when he is so strung out. All he wants now is release. "Just lie back, relax, and let me show yer how much I fuckin' love yer bone."

Chanyeol then complies unreservedly, surrendering himself, body and soul, to the siren riding his cock. A constant stream of fond cooing leaves Baekhyun's lips as he moans and sighs with the slow rhythm of his hips, the both of them savouring the heat and the weight of the other.

Chanyeol regains his senses and motor functions a little while later, taking to raking his hands over Baekhyun's body to appreciate his silken skin and get a real feel of the muscles that practically carried him here, revelling when they rise and harden beneath his palms as if they are nuzzling into his touch.

"Baek, I'm going to come soon," he warns, breaking the wildling out of his lust filled trance so that he is aware.

"Come inside," the boy replies, as if Chanyeol has not already been planning to do that. "Give me yer babies, Yeol." The wildling then winks, mocking, and Chanyeol is suddenly not so close to the edge anymore.

"Damn you, Baek," he groans, rubbing his palms over his face before retaking the other's hips and squeezing out his tension. "I was nearly there."

Baekhyun chortles. "It's almost like yer don't want to have children with me, Yeol. I'm hurt."

Baekhyun enjoys his discomfort, but thankfully is benevolent enough to drop the joke after that. "I'm goin' to come on yer face," he says instead. "All over those pretty eyes, all in that pretty mouth. I'm gonna get it in yer hair so it'll stay there for weeks and yer'll have no choice but to think about me."

"Guess we'll just have to go back to that cave so I can wash it out, then," Chanyeol grunts, starting to meet Baekhyun's thrusts halfway to chase his end.

The wildling seems momentarily stunned at what he has said until he starts to touch himself urgently, stroking so fast that his hand disappears into a blur. "Y-Yeah," he wobbles, "the cave. Let's go back to the cave. Fuck, Yeol, take me back there."

Chanyeol groans, feeling the cool gush starting to swirl in his stomach. "Baek—shit."

"Mhmm," the wildling bites his lip, only letting it go to release a sinful moan or two. "I'm comin', Yeol."

"On the face," Chanyeol reminds, knowing at his own smirk, and he must shock Baekhyun by his words, his fervid compliance, as the wildling forgets all about coming over his pretty eyes and doesn't even remember to aim. He spills over Chanyeol's chest in a fit of shivers, wails butchered by sudden breaths as he keels forwards and has to hold himself up by one hand, the other milking himself while Chanyeol finishes the job.
He comes inside Baekhyun, just like the wildling had wanted, and stays completely still through the process, relishing how all his length is being suctioned inside in something akin to contractions.

"I can feel it," Baekhyun whispers, eyes closed as he concentrates, held up precariously by a single limb on the mattress, body heaving. "I can feel you comin' inside me." He looks so blissful, no lines in his forehead and his jaw slack, that Chanyeol almost sheds a tear or two, awed at himself that he can make Baekhyun feel this way. "Gods, Yeol. I can actually feel it. Feels amazin'."

Baekhyun opens his eyes with the most radiant beam, leaning down to deliver a loud, smacking kiss to Chanyeol's lips in thanks. "Just leave it in for a while," he says, nestling down against Chanyeol's chest and making himself comfortable. "I like havin' it inside."

The crow wraps the wildling up in his arms and holds him close, breathing deeply against his fiery red hair and taking in the scent of sex and their many other sins.

"Nap time," Baekhyun murmurs sleepily, rising a chuckle out of Chanyeol who tenderly strokes his fingers through the cherry tresses. He watches affectionately as the wildling dozes off into a light slumber, committing to memory how their heartbeats feel thumping against one another.

The night is still fairly young when Baekhyun rouses, blinking lazily alongside a lengthy inhale as he cranes his neck back to meet Chanyeol's eyes. They share a languid kiss in greeting, tongues caressing only briefly before Baekhyun snuggles his face into the crook of Chanyeol's neck and goes lax again.

"What was Hayder like?"

He has been curious for a while, craving for information on the infamous Hayder straight from the horse’s mouth. It only seems right for him to have some sort of intel on the man now that he is wearing his old clothes and caring for his old lover. Maybe it is his insecurities talking, but it is more intrigue than anything.

The wildling hums long and low, thrumming against Chanyeol's throat and sending vibrations through his whole body. "Well," he sighs, sliding his arms around Chanyeol’s body where he can to hold him close. ‘He had brown hair and a beard down to his waist. He always refused to cut it which annoyed the fuck out of me. He was startin’ to look like a fuckin’ bear of some kind, the twat. Then his eyes were too close together and he had this huge nose, literally massive. He wasn't a very good talker or looker, but he was stubborn like me. Hot headed like me. It worked out in the beginning because we had a lot of things in common. I thought, yer know, here’s someone who understands why I get angry so fast, because they get angry fast too.

“But then it kind of backfired on me. He never compromised, was always throwin' fits and explodin' over the most stupidest things. In the end, I had to see the most ugly parts of myself in him every day, and I was disgusted. We'd argue over who'd do the huntin’, who'd flesh and tan the hides. He tried to slap me when I told him I wasn't goin' to be his spearwife, so I broke his arm. He
left on a scoutin' mission after that, and he never came back. That avalanche was like mercy. Even
if he did come back, I was ready to leave him. We were together because we were lonely and it
was convenient, not really because we actually liked each other. You're not a convenience, though.
I actually like you, little crow. Quite a lot."

Chanyeol smiles, rubbing Baekhyun's waist and then cringing. "Did you really break his arm?"

"I speak no word of a lie." Baekhyun then looks up at him mischievously. "When have I ever lied
to you, little crow?"

"Are you really asking me that?" Chanyeol responds flatly, greeted by laughter. It dies down, but
the smile remains, mirrored on Chanyeol's own face. "I like you too," he admits softly, heart
skipping a beat when Baekhyun's eyes fall to his mouth.

"Well, I should hope so. You likin' me makes it easier to bone yer when I fancy."

With a roll of his eyes, Chanyeol rests his head back and graces the ceiling. "I'm offended. I think
you like my cock more than me."

"Hmm, not necessarily. Yer tied at the moment."

"Ahh, that makes me feel so much better."

Baekhyun cackles darkly as he presses their lips together again. "Mmm," he hums, as if he has just
tasted his favourite food, "why don't yer go try yer fancy new clothes on then? Give me a little
show." With a pat to his chest, Baekhyun rolls away and sashays out of bed, giving Chanyeol a
beauteous view of his plump behind. It is mouth-watering, and Chanyeol decides that next time he
is going to bite it all over, deeply root his teeth marks into his skin so that Baekhyun is reminded of
him every time he sits down.

While the wildling is gone, disappeared behind the curtain and tinkering away in the kitchen,
Chanyeol grabs at his new furs and the underclothes Baekhyun threw back to him and starts to
dress himself. Things are admittedly a little baggy, which naturally makes Chanyeol wonder how
muscley Hayder had been in comparison to him, but the clothes are not so big that his trousers are
falling down. Just as he is fastening the leather belt around his hips to suck the fur in against his
skin, Baekhyun struts back into the room with a seal tusk in hand, sipping wine from the open end
as he sits down on the bed and lies back against the propped up cushions. He is draped over the
mattress like a banquet, enticing, appetising, sparking hunger.

"What do you think?" Chanyeol asks, opening his arms out and doing a little twirl; Baekhyun did
want a show after all.

"Very sexy." Baekhyun growls deeply, eyes gleaming as he observes Chanyeol from over the rim
of his tusk. The crow chuckles through his minor embarrassment, all the attention making him clammy. "I knew grey suited you better," the wildling says, eyes roaming up and down his form.

Chanyeol smiles sombrely, perching on the edge of the bed by Baekhyun's hips and playing with
the other's hand. "I'm really one of you now," he utters wistfully.

Baekhyun laces their fingers together in a sure move, conveying trust and confidence and all the
other things Chanyeol has been lacking through the years. "I think yer were one of us to begin with,
Yeol. Yer were never a crow, not even when yer wore black."

Still, he goes on, speaking his innermost thoughts like a monologue. "If I never met you, I would
still be someone I didn't want to be."
Baekhyun laughs lightly into his tusk of wine. "Yer bone is thanks enough for that."

"I'm being serious," he defends himself righteously. "You make me feel strong and powerful, and just like I'm in control. I haven't ever felt that before."

"See," Baekhyun grins wryly, "told yer yer were one of us all along."

Cracking a smile, Chanyeol looks up from their entwined hands. "I'm glad I didn't kill you."

"Yeah, me too," Baekhyun laughs heartily as he welcomes Chanyeol’s puckered lips with his own. They settle into a lazy embrace, Chanyeol tasting the wine inked on Baekhyun’s tongue and teeth. It makes him drunk with passion in an instant, and Chanyeol sucks it into his mouth to get a stronger flavour. This is the way he likes things the best: when it is just the two of them and they can enjoy their own company, undisturbed. Yet much too soon, they are disrupted by a voice calling out from the other side of the curtain.

"Baek? Minseok's invited you to dinner." It sounds like Kyungsoo, Chanyeol thinks, when their kiss is broken in favour of replying.

"Yer can bring the crow." Now, that was Jongin.

Baekhyun's lust turns to irritation, hands still laced at the back of Chanyeol's head to keep him in place, and he draws him down for another sweet kiss before he swats his shoulder to get him to move.

"He’s not a crow!" he yells, dawdling about the room to try and find his clothes again. After all, he threw them off in a moment of haste, eyes not following where they flew.

"Sorry," Jongin grunts. "I meant to say turncloak."

"Get yer blue balls out of my tent, Jongin!" Baekhyun demands sharply as he shimmies into his breeches. There is a scoff in the next room, followed by the sound of pots being kicked, and then all goes quiet. Their visitors have left them to brood. "Chanyeol. Chanyeol, look at me."

Chanyeol does so, revealing defeatist eyes. Jongin is really testing his strength, which is overrated to begin with. How can he prove to the man that he is not going to betray them? What can he do or say to earn his respect?

"What did I say? Hmm? What did I say?" Baekhyun coaches.

Getting lost in Baekhyun’s eyes, Chanyeol tries to think of the right lesson Baekhyun has taught him over the past several weeks. There are many, in truth; like, put your own happiness first and do not live for other people, and after racing through an entire library of morals and advice, he decisively settles for: "Don’t care what anyone else thinks."

"Exactly. Alright? We’re the only ones who matter." The wildling smiles reassuringly before his face disappears through the neck hole of his top. He ruffles his hair effortlessly back into place once his arms are encompassed by the sleeves. "Hungry?" he wonders as he laces up his boots, coming to sit on the bed beside him and hunching over to reach his ankles.

Chanyeol’s stomach rumbles. "Yeah," he admits shyly, flushing at the sound.

"Then you can eat Jongin for dinner, come on."

Baekhyun jumps up onto his feet and leads the way back out into the myriad of tents. Chanyeol
will probably never learn his way around, but then again, that is what Baekhyun's for. There is still something tickling his gut, an inkling that all will not last forever, but he refuses to acknowledge it. For now, he will be content that he is with Baekhyun, wearing grey and not black, and will not think too much into the future.

Less people stare at him now that he is one of the crowd, but those whose eyes linger long enough pick up on the fact that he is a face they have not beheld before. The Free Folk are made up of different clans, bound together by temperamental glue, so to pick up a lone ranger in the wild is a very rare occurrence. There is no explanation of where he came from now that he is changed his clothes, which arguably makes it worse. There are only so many death glares that Baekhyun can hand out before they start to become ineffective.

Back in the king's tent, a group of seven people bustle about arranging things on a long hemlock table, decked out with a dozen stools carved from pines. Kyungsoo turns around to greet them, his wide eyes staring as his smiles politely, and Baekhyun claps his on the shoulder.

"It’s been too long since I've had yer cookin', Soo," the wildling grins, rubbing his palms together in excitement. "What've yer made?"

"Jongin and I caught a few mountain lions this mornin'."

"Five," Jongin elaborates, deliberately glaring at Chanyeol as if trying to prove a point, one that Chanyeol despairingly finds to be valid. He would have no hope of catching a rabbit, let alone something with large claws and pointy teeth. With Baekhyun’s help, it’s still only a maybe.

"Gave a couple to Sehun's family and one to share out between Marge's lot, kept the last two for us. I would've saved the other one if I knew yer were comin' but," he shrugs, pointing to his temple, "can’t see what happens beyond our borders."

"No, that's my job," Jongdae calls out with a huge smile. Chanyeol is almost taken aback by the relaxed atmosphere – minus Jongin, of course. Suddenly, everything has become sickeningly domestic. There is Minseok, pouring wine for a woman with long brown hair, and Jongdae is setting out the crockery with the help of a young boy, scratching his crown fondly when he places the bowls upside down. Jongin turns to greet some new arrivals, the three children running up to hug his legs, while Kyungsoo carefully instructs his kitchen helpers where to set the meat and the vegetables. He even shouts when someone puts the cranberry sauce in the wrong place, Chanyeol did not even know there was a right place. He also didn’t know that cranberries could grow so far north, but then he hears someone make a remark about the latest smuggling haul and it makes sense. The food was stolen from a few southern trading ships that accidentally sail off course, taken by the clans on the coast before they moved in to join the encampment here. Chanyeol has to admit, it’s quite resourceful of them.

Still, Chanyeol almost cannot believe his eyes. These people are hardly savages. They are just people. People trying to make a good life for themselves with the inequitable circumstance they were involuntarily born into. If only the Lord Commander could see this. In fact, Chanyeol thinks the whole south should see it, all the seven kingdoms and the lords in their castles, even the orphaned boys ambling around the docks of Seagard with nothing but a crab bucket.

"Jongdae's a warg," Baekhyun supplies, stroking his hand up and down Chanyeol’s arm before he rests it on his elbow. "He would have been able to see us comin' if he’d have bothered lookin'." Of course, Chanyeol has no idea what a warg is, but he does not have time to question it because he is being cut off by Jongdae.

"Hey, I have better things to be doin' than lookin' out for you, Baek."
"Better things like Minseok, yer mean?" Baekhyun smirks like the devil, earning a few giggles and an indignant cry from the king himself. Chanyeol watches it all transpire: Minseok coming to drag Baekhyun by his ear to the table to sit him with the 'naughty children', Jongdae cackling and grinning like a drunken cat, guzzling down wine before shrugging and saying, "He’s right."

This is a far cry from the south where everything is prim and proper. Or boring.

"Chanyeol, why don’t yer come and sit down?" It is Minseok calling for him, even gesturing to the stool next to Baekhyun who looks up at him with starry eyes.

"Come on, Yeol, don’t just stand there. Food's over here," the wildling urges, waving him over with an enthusiastic hand.

"Yeah, right, okay," Chanyeol stammers, hurrying over and placing himself down, doing his best to ignore the glares from Jongin. Laid out in front of him is a wooden plate and a small piece of cloth, no cutlery in sight. Out here, Chanyeol supposes that metal is hard to come by, so it is not really worth using it to make knives and forks when it could be greater utilised to produce weaponry. From the looks of things, they will be eating with their hands, and although Chanyeol is a little hesitant to dig in with palms, unwashed since the cave, he ends up complying to the norm to save himself from making a spectacle.

"Who's this?" someone asks in reference to him, a man with wild ginger hair, and Baekhyun proudly announces, "This is my new bone."

"You could be a little more respectful, Baek," Minseok sighs, taking his place at the head of the table while pouring three cups of drink from a bronze jug. “A man is not just his bone.”

"Fine," the stubborn wildling huffs, planting his hand on Chanyeol's thigh and turning to look at him. "What shall I call yer, Yeol?"

"How about ‘Hayder's replacement’?" Jongin pipes up from down the row by the ribs, air going cold and stagnant as soon as his crisp words cut through. There is a long, uncomfortable pause where everyone turns to look at him, Chanyeol included, and Kyungsoo hangs his head in shame.

"Jongin!" he hisses, appalled at his partner, yet Baekhyun keeps his calm, choosing to pick his battles cautiously.

"He’s my lover, actually," he states matter-of-factly, turning back to the redheaded man who had spoken before. "His name's Chanyeol, and he is mine. No one else can have him, especially not his bone."

There are some forced smiles up and down the table, mainly accompanied by silence, before people start eating. They reach in with calloused, grimy hands, taking legs of goat meat by the bone and huge slabs of greasy breasts cuts, dribbling it all over the table without a care. To Chanyeol’s inward horror, people do not pour or spoon the cranberry sauce onto their plate either. Rather, they use their fingers to pinch out a dollop or two, almost everyone double-dipping. It is a hygienic nightmare, and if Chanyeol were to be picked off now by some disease he catches from another person’s bodily fluids, he will be very angry with the gods, old and new.

Aside from the scoffing and chewing noises that are painfully loud, the air is mostly quiet, void of talk. A few of the children hum as they eat, bouncing around on their stools and licking their fingers clean of oils while the adults do so on the rags provided, and all in all, it seems like an awkward family dinner.
Chanyeol does not really know what to eat himself, so for a while he just stares at all the food in front of him, stomach churning impatiently. With Jongin’s eyes on him, he feels too self-conscious to reach out and take a leg of meat, so he just refrains.

“What’s a bone, Father?” one of the children then asks, and to Chanyeol's relief, everyone bursts out laughing. “What?!” cries the child, bubbling with joyous laughter as she grins to the sky, grease guzzling down her chin. “What’s so funny?! What’s so funny about a bone?!”

“It’s nothin’ to concern you about,” her mother replies, holding her still as she quickly wipes her face free of mess.

The heavy atmosphere is infinite times lighter now, Jongin looking embarrassed in the corner next to a Kyungsoo who looks about to burst. Still, it is not the most enjoyable of dinners. The conversation skirts around him, as do eyes, and he sits there afraid to eat too much in case he comes across as rude. Baekhyun even grows frustrated with him, and after a while he starts piling things on Chanyeol’s plate for him to eat.

"Take what you want, Yeol," he hisses, irritated. “It’s not a crime to be hungry."

Baekhyun’s right, as usual, so Chanyeol starts to tuck into the wildling’s personal selection, munching away on big chunks of mountain lion meat, tender and succulent. Eating it with his hands proves to be a little tough as the meat keeps sliding around everywhere, but he is entertaining Baekhyun with his messy skills so in retrospect, it is alright.

“Gods, yer are a clumsy eater.”

Chanyeol only laughs, aware that Jongin is staring daggers into his side. The white fox is blatantly unhappy, probably scheming and drawing out plans in his head of how to dispose of him. Although Chanyeol does not want to break apart Baekhyun’s friendship group, he has also decided that he does not want to let himself be walked over and knocked down by a person who does not even know who he truly is. It is not his fault that Jongin saw him in his black cloak and refuses to see him as anything other than a crow. In fact, the fault lies with Jongin and only Jongin, really.

At the end of the day, Chanyeol just wants to do the right thing for himself and for Baekhyun. Jongin is the one who is making things overly difficult.

"So, Chanyeol," Minseok speaks, garnering his attention along with everyone else’s. "What made you take the black?"

Chanyeol clears his throat awkwardly, meeting eyes with the King-Beyond-the-Wall and trying to ignore the deafening silence that has consumed the table. Some things will never change – Chanyeol hates being made a focal point.

"Well, I was an orphan so I didn't really have much of a life to begin with.” He pretends that it is just him and Minseok having a conversation, eliminating the other beings in the room, and surprisingly enough, it helps. “I was ten when I took the black. I thought I could make something of myself by joining the Watch, but..."

Minseok hums, finishing his sentence. "It wasn’t what you thought it’d be?"

Chanyeol laughs, but it is bitter. It hurts to be reminded that he has wasted the past eleven years of his life, trying to impress people who did not even care for his existence. It was all he had ever really known, the only place he was truly able to associate with the word ‘home’. These people cannot criticize him for making bad choices when he did not even know half of the facts. He was
young and naïve and had no one to guide him. At the time, it was the only option his ten-year-old self seemed to have; either that or stay at home to be tormented by his adoptive siblings until they took it one step too far.

He was trapped. He has always been trapped.

"He's a crow?" a male voice sounds from further down the table, Chanyeol's insides curdling at the derogatory term. Still, he guesses he deserves it. They call him crow and he calls them wildlings, both names deviating from the official titles which are voluntarily ignored.

"He's as much of a crow as I am," Minseok answers confidently, putting down any further objections. "Just eat, Ornon." His eyes calculate those sat at the rest of the table who have also been blotched with hostility. "I said, eat."

After the coercion and people have returned to their meals, Minseok turns back to Chanyeol with a pleasant smile. "How fares the Watch these days, Chanyeol?"

Swallowing quickly, Chanyeol wipes his fingers on his cloth as he replies, thinking that he is getting the hang of his new eating style. "There aren't many men left, in truth."

"How many are mannin’ Castle Black?" Jongdae asks, wiping the grease from his mouth onto his sleeve.

"There was around seventy before we left. There should be around sixty now, and the Lord Commander isn't there either. I don't know about the Shadow Tower or Eastwatch. When we came here, the Shadow Tower brought fifty men."

Minseok nods, rubbing his chin. "What about Icemark? And Greyguard? How many men man those?"

The names fail to click for a moment, and then Chanyeol straightens in understanding. "They've been left in ruins."

Minseok and Jongdae share a look. "Ruins, yer say?" queries the latter.

"Only Castle Black, Eastwatch and the Shadow Tower are in use. The Watch doesn't have the money, men or the supplies to uphold any of the others. The most recently abandoned was Hoarfrost, and that was six years ago. All but the main three have been left to rot."

"Hmm… That's very interesting," Minseok hums thoughtfully, tearing through his meat while looking Chanyeol dead in the eye. "What kind of defences does Castle Black own?" he asks afterwards.

Chanyeol blinks in confusion, fingertips drowning in the gravy on his plate as he stops eating. "What exactly do you mean?"

Minseok casts a fleeting look to Jongdae before he sits upright and leans his elbows on the table, bearing towards him with a domineering aura. "I trust you, Chanyeol, so I will trust you with our plan." That makes a shudder go down his spine. "We intend to cross the Wall, you see. Baekhyun said you killed a White Walker, so you know that the north isn't safe for us anymore. It has taken me fifteen years of my life to band all the northern clans together, and now we're ready to make the move. I need to know what stands between us and safety, so what would we be up against if we attacked Castle Black? I left the Watch twenty years ago, for all I know everything is different from what I remember, defences included."
Chanyeol works diligently to arrange his thoughts, mind a mess until he is anchored by a hand on his thigh, fingers squeezing into his muscle to wake him up again. Baekhyun has hinted at this before, stating many a time that the north is no longer a habitable or stable environment for human use. He has also openly expressed his discontent in the way the Free Folk are perceived by the Night’s Watch, and accurately summarised the only thing they are guilty of – being born on the wrong side of the Wall. It is true that the Night’s Watch would never let them pass through, not even with negotiations, so it seems horridly appropriate that the Free Folk need to cross over by force. After having seen what they have to live in the threat of every day, Chanyeol agrees wholeheartedly with their decision, and thus does his best to provide more of the crucial information that they need.

"Castle Black itself doesn’t have many defences, it relies greatly on the Wall. Other than that, it’s protected by fences which are easily climbable. As long as I’ve been there, we haven’t been attacked so I’m not entirely sure what defences the Wall has, other than it being seven-hundred feet high and one-hundred leagues long, but I know that the brothers have crates of fire arrows up there and huge catapults for throwing boulders down. The gates would be the main barrier; but with how undermanned the Watch is right now, I’d say that Castle Black is fairly easy to take over so long as the gates open.”

Something flickers in Minseok’s fervent gaze, something akin to victory, as if he feels like he won already. He opens his mouth to speak, trying to contain a smile, when Jongin cuts in with his piece.

"I don’t see why Minseok is askin’ yer anyway. Yer probably lyin’, crow,” the white fox grunts, crossing his arms over his chest as he glowers through his eyebrows.

The hand on Chanyeol's thigh transforms into a claw. "Why don’t yer shut that hole in yer face, Jongin?" Baekhyun snarls, leaning towards his fellow wildling who sits on the other side of the table beside a fuming Kyungsoo who has gone as red as the cranberries he served.

"Why don’t yer keep yer legs closed, Baek?" Jongin bites back, enraged his own partner. "Maybe yer should shut that hole more often so the crows won’t come peckin’ at it."

In a flash, Baekhyun is brandishing an animal bone like a dagger, Jongin has climbed halfway onto the table, and everyone else has stood up to stop them from ripping each other to shreds.

“Yer a fuckin’ whore, Baekhyun!” Jongin growls, writhing rabidly against the hands that constrain him. “Yer get with anyone who so much as looks at yer!”

“Oh, fuck off, Jongin!” Baekhyun puffs, slamming the bone down on the table before retreating with his dignity still partially intact. “Is that really the best yer can do? Call me a whore? I’m so hurt, Jongin! Oh, please don’t say it again!”

“Why you—”

"Jongin, Baekhyun, please," Minseok sighs, wiping the corners of his mouth with finger and thumb. "Shut up, the both of you. Arguing is pointless."

The two wildlings drop back down onto their stools, and Baekhyun clamps a possessive hand down on Chanyeol’s leg again.

"I can’t believe yer takin’ advice from a crow!” Jongin barks at the king, scandalised. “As if he is gonna give it to yer straight!”

Minseok looks tired and bored, and he rubs his brow with one hand while holding out the palm of
his other. It requests silence and surrender, yet gets neither. "We have no reason not to trust him."

"No reason? No reason?! Have yer lost yer bloody mind, Minseok? He’s a fuckin' crow! What more of a reason do yer need? Just because Baekhyun trusts him doesn’t mean we should too! Yer know how Baek is! As soon as he finds a big cock, it’s over!"

There is a beat of silence, and then Baekhyun is saying. "At least I have a big cock."

Jongin turns to Baekhyun with wide, animalistic eyes.

"Together, Yeol and I are the length of an armin' sword. You though, yer the length of me fuckin' finger."

"Argggghhh!" Jongin rips up from his seat again, every blood vessel popping with rage as he starts to claw his way onto the table, knocking plates onto the floor and spilling wine over everyone’s laps. It takes Kyungsoo everything in him to wrestle Jongin into his seat again, the children at the table finally growing scared.

"Baek," Kyungsoo pants breathlessly, still trying to restrain his partner, “yer can’t sit there and say things like that and expect him to just take it." He sounds disappointed, and admittedly Chanyeol understands why. "Yer both as bad as each other, alright? And as for the cock comparisons, I find it really pathetic. We’re above this level of immaturity, aren’t we? Least, I thought we were. Come on, Jongin. I’m not hungry anymore."

With a lingering morose gaze, the two leave, Jongin having to be shoved through the door. Chanyeol cringes awkwardly. Should he have done something to make Baekhyun stop? Intervene like Kyungsoo had? It is too late to do anything about it now, but at least he can be prepared for the next time as, no doubt, there will be many next times.

"We're done too," Baekhyun grunts, noisily scraping back the legs of his stool and throwing down his rag with a flourish before stalking out of the room, not waiting for Chanyeol to even react to his statement. The crow trips when rising from his own stool, all eyes on him, and he suddenly grows very conscious of his walk on the way out without warrant.

"Chanyeol." Minseok is the one to stop him, and Chanyeol fearfully looks back. Is he about to be scolded for causing turbulence at the dinner table? Or is he about to be grilled for more information without Baekhyun at this side? But to his relief, Minseok smiles. "You're one of us now," he says. "Am I right in trusting what you've said?"

Rapidly, he nods, and Minseok offers him a kind nod.

"Take your plate with you, you'll need your energy for tomorrow."

Automatically, he moves to take up his plate, too used to taking orders that it is like second nature. "Um, what's happening tomorrow?" he wonders, glancing briefly at Minseok while trying to ignore the constant stares. The children are practically gawping at him like he is some exotic animal.

The king smirks, like he knows a secret, and waves him off. "I'll let you know in the morning."

"Oh… okay. Sorry about all this, by the way," he stutters, leaving the room with dinner in his hands.

Thankfully, Baekhyun has waited for him outside, but he does not acknowledge him, just starts stomping back to their tent. Chanyeol gets funny looks on the walk through camp for a different reason this time. He is carrying food after all, and he winces every time he meets eyes with
someone who looks like they are about to pounce on him and fight him for it.

Once they have made it back, he puts the plate down on the stool by the fire and is immediately ambushed by an eager pair of lips. Baekhyun is clinging onto him, hungrily pursuing his mouth like a starved dog, and Chanyeol takes a moment or two to actually respond.

"Jongin pisses me off so much," the wildling grumbles like thunder. "Fuck. The way he talked about yer. I'd cut his cock off if I could actually find it."

"Baek," Chanyeol tries, cut off when Baekhyun kisses him again. "Baek, stop."

The wildling retreats, betrayal flashing in his eyes. "What?"

Chanyeol takes a breath, his lips settling into a thin line. "I don't want you falling out with your friends because of me," he explains quietly, remembering the downcast look on Kyungsoo’s face and feeling his stomach swoop. He feels awful for turning Jongin into such a monster, Baekhyun too, but at the same time he is angry that he is being treated this way. He deserves respect, and Jongin is not giving him any. Still, it does not feel right to make Baekhyun have to choose between them. It would sit heavy on his shoulders like a cannonball shackled to his ankle, a constant reminder of what he has selfishly made Baekhyun give up just to be with him.

"What do yer mean?" The wildling places his hands on his hips, scowling up at him with a clenched jaw and twitching eyes. "Yer want me to let him walk all over yer? Is that yer want? Just because yer were a crow at some point doesn't mean yer like every other crow out there and he needs to understand that!"

"I know, I know, and I am really thankful that you're doing this for me, but don't you think you took it a little far? Baek, you called his man-parts a finger!"

"Wow." The wildling juts his head back, stepping back from him with an air of disgust. "Sounds like yer takin' his side, which, by the way, makes absolutely no fuckin' sense at all. Chanyeol, if yer don't want me stickin' up for yer, then you need to learn to do it for yerself. Yer don't deserve to be treated like that, get it into your head. Alright? Yer not just some crow, yer not goin' to rat us out, yer not a traitor. But if Jongin goes around tellin' everyone that, it’s gonna make this whole thing a million times harder. People are so quick to judge, Yeol. Even if they haven't met yer, they'll judge yer just because of somethin' Jongin said. I want ye to have a good life here. I want ye to fit in and have friends, I don't want ye havin' to deal with a prick like that when ye've not even done anythin' wrong."

Chanyeol’s head falls to the side and he beholds Baekhyun with a heartfelt gaze. "I know, Baek. But it was dinner. I didn’t want to make a scene when we were all trying to be civilised. I’m sure if we ignore Jongin, he’ll give up eventually."

Baekhyun scoffs. "Eventually," he grunts under his breath, disapproving but melting back into Chanyeol’s arms all the same and accepting a light kiss.

"Thank you, though," the crow murmurs against his mouth. "But the only person I really need to like me is you. I'm not taking his side, and I understand everything that you're saying, but I think I can hold my own when it comes down to it."

Baekhyun looks at him for reassurance, so Chanyeol smiles, earning himself a desperate kiss that has Baekhyun's tongue lingering in his mouth.

"He’s probably just jealous that he hasn't killed a White Walker."
The wildling laughs, eyes surprisingly misty as he nods. "Yeah, yer probably right." Chanyeol admires his face for a moment, appreciating the soft skin, slender nose and delicate mouth. Baekhyun is tastefully pretty for a rugged 'cave man' wildling. "Why don’t we finish dinner in peace, then? Just us two."

"Ok—"

"Naked."

"U-Uh, sure."

"Wonderful."

To Chanyeol's relief, Baekhyun was referring to the food as dinner and not him, so they eat peacefully side by side, watching the fire as it nips away at the frost. The wildling was not joking about the naked part though, so Chanyeol sits in what he was born in with only the thick canvas of the tent preserving his modesty. Baekhyun, on the other hand, is sprawled out leisurely, not a care in the world. Perhaps if the North were not so cold, he would make a habit of always sauntering around in the nude too. Yet, regrettably, the north is cold, so that habit will have to be put on hold. Dorne, though, the warmest of the seven kingdoms, would permit such behaviour. Perhaps they will have to travel there, admire the Water Gardens in the Sunspear palace and witness the glittering turquoise sea.

"Would yer like some wine?" Baekhyun asks, walking on his knees towards his little kitchen with his cock swinging obscenely between his legs. Again, Chanyeol feels like he is doing it on purpose, like it is some mating dance trying to attract him.

"How do you have wine here?" Chanyeol wonders, conflicted. This place is in the middle of nowhere, suffering from sub-zero degree temperatures, how the hell would the wildlings grow the grapes to make wine?

"We pillage and plunder, Yeol," Baekhyun smirks, looking back over his shoulder at him while his hand pops the cork from the wooden spout of a barrel. "A clan by the coast came to join us a few months past. Turns out, not long before that they went sailin' down to the Iron Islands and boarded a few trading galleys to steal their wares. Wine was one of those wares; gallons upon gallons of the finest Arbor gold."

Chanyeol perks up, senses prickling. "Arbor gold?"

"Nothing other than the real thing," Baekhyun cheers, sidling back over and handing him a hollow seal tusk before splaying himself down across the pelts, propping himself up on one elbow. "Tastes good, doesn’t it?" he asks when Chanyeol takes a hesitant sip. "Got meself five barrels, I did. Might as well drink it dry."

After a quick toast, Chanyeol takes three mouthfuls, pulling a sour face once he is swallowed. "Eurgh," he shivers, looking down at the liquid and wondering how something so innocent could be so foul.

"Not a wine person? What's yer poison, then?"

Chanyeol takes a moment to gather enough saliva in the hopes of washing the taste from his tongue; to spite him, it doesn’t work. "I like fruit juice."

"Fruit juice?" Baekhyun bursts out laughing, rolling onto his back and tearing up. "What are yer? A green boy?"
"Hey! I grew up in the last winter, I'm no green boy," he defends himself, thinking back to how all he had known for the first five years of his life was the equivalent of an ice age. It had been a wonder they had anything to drink at all back then. The ground had been covered with snow for so long that everything underneath had died, including all wheat, crops and fruit. If it were not for the gods’ mercy, they would have exhausted their food stores and starved before spring came.

"Alright then, so yer not a green boy, but fruit juice? I were expectin' yer to say ale or somethin' else manly."

Chanyeol screws his face up. "I don't like the taste of alcohol, it’s bitter."

"Hmmm, I don't think bitter's the right word, meself," Baekhyun muses, slurping down some of his wine noisily while locking his molten eyes on Chanyeol's. "If yer don't like the wine, I know somethin' else yer could try."

"You have fruit juice here?"

Baekhyun chuckles. "No. I have somethin' better than fruit juice, but yer have to work for it."

Precariously, Chanyeol hurries to put down his tusk, propping it up against the rocks around the fire. "What is it?"

"Come here," Baekhyun smirks, setting his tusk down with much more ease before curling his finger, beckoning Chanyeol to come closer. The crow follows like a dog, crawling over until he is right up against Baekhyun's face like he had wanted, and the wildling kisses him, threading a hand into his hair before pulling back. "Go south," he says huskily, eyes dripping.

Chanyeol's eyes drop to find a hardening cock under his nose, and even a green boy would understand what that means.

"Would yer believe me if I told yer it's the elixir of life?" Baekhyun bites his bottom lip, narrowing his eyes to intrigue and seduce. "'Tis the fountain of youth, right between my legs. Aren’t you a lucky one?"

Laughing a little, Chanyeol's nerves are calmed. He then takes the cock in his hand, surprised at how warm it feels, and pulls back the foreskin to reveal the blushing head before he meets it with a kiss.


* * *

"Wake up, yer lazy sod. Come on. I know yer can hear me, I ain’t thick in the head."

Chanyeol groans, unimpressed.

"Smushin' yer face against the pillow isn't gonna make me leave yer alone. Get up."

"Why?"
“Breakfast, idiot. What else would we do at this ungodly hour?”

Chanyeol frowns, sinking deep beneath the covers. "Let's skip it."

"No can do."

"Why’s that?"

"We're leavin' today."

Chanyeol opens his eyes for the first time, disorientated for a moment before they uncross and focus on Baekhyun. The wildling is perched on the edge of the bed, hunched over in the direction of the floor, hands busy with something.

"Leaving?" Chanyeol repeats blearily.

"Mhmm," Baekhyun murmurs, lacing his boots up.

"What—Why? Were we kicked out? Does Minseok not like me anymore?"

"Oh, get over yerself, Yeol," Baekhyun snorts, glancing at him to show his grin. “We're goin' to the Wall."  

Chanyeol rubs the sleep from his eyes, finger pads rough and oily. "What?"

"We're climbin' it, come on." Baekhyun has now moved from the bed and marches around the room, sipping occasionally from the hollow of his seal tusk. He heads towards a shelving unit made of thin tree trunks and collects what looks to be a scabbard.

"H-Huh? We're climbing the Wall?"

"Didn't I just say that?" he quips, giving him one last pointed look before leaving the room. "And get up!" he shouts back through the curtain.

After a quick breakfast of squirrel soup and hot wine in the comfort of their own home, Baekhyun and Chanyeol both leave the tent behind and head for the king. In the daylight, everything looks completely different. Somehow, the people look friendlier, as darkness if often a guise for the wicked, and when he looks around to see yet again more civilised home-life on display, Chanyeol begins to feel more at ease. The people who he thought would skewer him and eat him for dinner last night are now the people struggling to dry their children's hair and get them dressed. ‘Peculiar’ does not quite cut it, but this is somewhere in that region.

"Baekhyun, Chanyeol, good morning," Minseok greets them, smiling cheerily as he clasps his hands together. "We're just waiting on Kyungsoo and Jongin now, everyone. They shouldn’t be long."

At the second name, Chanyeol's face starts to heat up and it sets into a black look. Jongin is coming with them? Wonderful. He sends an irritated look to Baekhyun in order to convey his feelings, getting an eye roll as a reply. He is not the only one vexed by this, not that there is anything they can do about it now.

"Can’t change our plans,” Baekhyun says through gritted teeth, forcing out the words as if to try and convince himself that this will be okay. “This has always been what was gonna happen. When me and my friends came back from our patrol, we were to leave for the Wall with Jongin and Co.. I'm sure you had plans just the same."
Chanyeol nods, resting his hand on the pommel of his sword while he rotates his ankles one by one. "Jongin hates me, though," he complains offhandedly, saying it out loud for the hell of it.

"See it as a challenge, Yeol, hm? Make him fall head over heels for yer."

"Oh, yes, I’m sure that’ll work," he says flatly.

“Yay! That’s the spirit!” Baekhyun hip bumps him with feigned enthusiasm. Despicable.

The subject of their conversation slinks into the gathering before the tent, stood beside Kyungsoo who does not look like he had much sleep at all last night. There are dark circles under his pinking eyes, and he yawns like a lion every couple of seconds. He seems so passive and tame, so Chanyeol finds it odd that he would be with a firecracker like Jongin. Then again, they do cancel each other out quite handsomely.

"Right, everyone's here now," Minseok smiles. "I will remind you all of the plan. We're going to have three separate teams climbing the Wall in three different places. Sehun, Marcus, Dogir, Ellina, Freya, Darrell and Jiyda are going to be in the first team, you will be heading towards Sable Hall, an old Night's Watch fort…”

He goes on to explain where everyone is headed and when they will all meet up once the great hurdle has been put behind them. Chanyeol ends up with Baekhyun, Jongin, Kyungsoo, Jongdae and a couple of others, and they are to head towards Greyguard. He does not really pay attention to what Minseok is saying, as he knows that Baekhyun will be noting all of that down in his mind anyway. He is too busy thinking about how this is really happening, how he is really on the other side now (literally and figuratively), and soon he will come face to face with his brothers in combat when they take Castle Black from the south, easing the Free Folk's passage through the Wall.

“Chanyeol,” Baekhyun’s voice eases him out of this thoughts, “we’re leavin’.”

His backpack is handed to him, practically bulging with their equipment and basic living requirements.

“It’s got all of what we need,” Baekhyun says, helping Chanyeol to shrug into the straps. “Ice picks, rope, foot claws, food and wineskins. Even cooking oil.” He winks before sliding away, leaving Chanyeol to jostle the pack into a more comfortable position to the sounds of clunking metal.

They walk at the rear of the group, Chanyeol wheezing for breath as he staggers up another mountainside much too soon for his liking. It feels like it was only a couple of hours since his last trek, and if he had known he would have to retrace his steps so soon he would have camped out at the summit and waited for Baekhyun to circle back around with friends in tow. His thighs ache, his ankle feels like it is about to crumble with every step he takes, and Jongin keeps looking back to sneer at him, all things contributing to an unsurprising loss of will.

“Chanyeol,” Baekhyun calls out for the fourth time, “yer fallin’ behind.”

Chanyeol does not even have the breath to apologise anymore, clawing his way up the mountain on all fours with numb fingers and toes, leaving the pitiful semblance of home behind. They have only been walking (dying) for about five hours and are a mere halfway up the mountain, so Chanyeol is adamant on giving up and letting his body collapse.

“Maybe we should stop here for the night?” Baekhyun suggests, bringing the rest of the group to a standstill.
“We still have at least two hours of daylight,” Jongin replies sharply. “And there are no caves around here, we can’t hope to make camp on an icy slope, we’d freeze to death.”

Baekhyun looks conflicted, panting hoarsely against the glacial air before stomping down towards Chanyeol and hauling him up the bank with his own strength. “Alright, two more hours,” he replies to Jongin, giving the crow a tug.

“We could have made better time if it weren’t for him slowin’ us down.”

Thankfully, Baekhyun refuses to take the bait, and focuses his attention back on Chanyeol who is faltering on his feet.

“I… I really can’t walk anymore. I think my legs are going to drop off,” the crow croaks, flailing around for purchase on the ground.

“Just a bit more, Yeol,” Baekhyun grunts lowly, pulling him again. “Just a bit more.”

By the time the sun is going down, the group of seven have come to a stop in the rockier areas of the mountainside, two wildlings going by the names of Dunston and Calf busy trying to light a fire with sodden wood.

“It’s no use,” Jongdae sighs, looking on grimly over crossed arms. “Just leave it, I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

The other groups, of which there are six, departed the main camp in different directions, taking the shortest routes possible to their allotted positions along the Wall. It is a big operation, involving over fifty wildlings alone, to go with the thousands upon thousands who will attack the Wall from the other side when Minseok gives the signal. Chanyeol feels like he is a part of something constructive now, a futuristic movement, and he also feels in pain – his ankle is killing him.

“Drink,” Baekhyun tells him, bringing a wineskin pouch to his lips.

Obediently, Chanyeol opens his mouth and lets the liquid in, taste buds coming alive and dancing when he identifies raspberry and blackcurrant on his tongue. “You… You got fruit juice?” he gasps, staring at Baekhyun in awe as the wildling slowly grins.

“Course I did.” He tips his head proudly. “Had to make this journey somewhat bearable, didn’t I? Got it this mornin’ from Marge. She likes to take the fruit from our plunders for her kids to eat, see. Healthy eatin’ and all that.”

Too tired to form a response, Chanyeol goes for sliding his hand around the back of Baekhyun’s neck and thanking him with his mouth instead. Their lips stick together from the cold and are sore from being so dry, but the sentiments behind the kiss leave them ignorant. Baekhyun hums so sultrily that Chanyeol feels something stir between his legs, but then Baekhyun pulls back too soon and licks his lips, deliberately teasing. Nevertheless, this is neither the time nor the place for such extremities.

“Don’t start somethin’ yer can’t finish, little crow. I’m blue enough as it is. Actually freezin’ me cock off here.”

Chanyeol laughs, attracting the attention of Jongdae who comes over to enquire whilst handing them small cups of soup.

“It’s not warm,” he admits, gesturing to their supper. “We can’t get a fire goin’, but the meat was already cooked so it should be alright. I’m also obliged to say it tastes nice because it’s
“Chanyeol’s tryin’ to have me balls drop off,” Baekhyun announces bluntly, slurping obscenely from his cup while boring his eyes into Chanyeol’s soul. The crow is sure that the noise is an innuendo for something else.

“Oh right,” Jongdae nods, dropping from his crouch into a cross-legged position and making himself comfortable, his own mug of soup cupped in his hands. “Do tell me more.”

Baekhyun bursts out laughing, revelling in Chanyeol’s concerned and alarmed expression. “I wasn’t really,” the crow insists, eyebrows shooting up into his hairline.

Jongdae grins, reaching over to punch him lightly on the arm. “Course yer weren’t, I’m only playin’.” He drinks from his cup, sighing afterwards and staring sullenly down at the contents. “We would’ve had dry wood if Calf hadn’t fallen over in the snow. He was carryin’ the firewood, see. Bloody idiot.”

“Accidents happen, eh?” Baekhyun murmurs, the two wildlings nodding to each other as they take another mouthful of soup at the same time. “We’re surrounded by frozen water, things are bound to get wet.”

“Mm, you make a fair point,” Jongdae allows. “So tell me, how’d you and Chanyeol meet?”

Chanyeol freezes, looking up over the rim of his cup at Jongdae who looks all too happy for a man sitting on a frozen mountain drinking cold mutton soup. Their surroundings really are dismal.

“Well, it is a funny story actually,” Baekhyun slaps his knee, leaning towards Jongdae with a huge grin. “Chanyeol and his crow friends actually ambushed our outpost. His brothers killed Harg and Wicks and then left him to finish me off for them. He couldn’t do it in the end,” Baekhyun smiles fondly across at Chanyeol. “He were so taken by me good looks, and he wanted to take me first kiss and me maidenhead, so we fucked right against a rock and decided to be society’s outcasts for forevermore. Isn’t he a romantic? Aren’t I a lucky sod and a half?”

“Oooooh,” Jongdae swoons, “that is romantic. I wish I could have been there. Of course, it’s not as romantic as mine and Seok-Seokie’s first meeting was.” Baekhyun grimaces at the nickname, but Jongdae does not care, looking at Chanyeol to tell him the infamous tale. “I’d been attacked by crows and left for dead in the middle of nowhere, so I had to warg into the first animal I saw in passin’. It were an eagle, and once I’d warged I set about tryin’ to find someone who could come save me. Eventually I came across this camp in the Frostfang flatlands and I started to scream at this man. Took me a while to get him to follow me, what with me bein’ inside a bird and all, but once he got the gist of it he found me in no time and he took me in, all dramatic and that, and as soon as I was better we were fuckin’ from sundown to sunup.”

“They were very loud,” Baekhyun adds in, as if Chanyeol needed to know even more about Jongdae’s nightly activities.

“Oh, well,” he nods awkwardly, “that’s nice.”

Travelling continues in the morning. Around midday, they reach the top of the mountain, now able to look down on all the leagues they have yet to walk, as if Chanyeol’s morale is not crushed enough. At least the rest of the journey is mostly downhill. It is an easy slide until they reach the Skirling Pass at the bottom where Chanyeol has to actually put some effort into walking again, but by that time the sun is already low in the sky and they are capping the day off with more mutton soup – because the first time really had not been enough for them to satisfy their mutton cravings,
While they are huddled around a fire, Chanyeol witnesses warging for the first time. He initially panics when he sees Jongdae’s eyes rolling into the back of his head so drastically that only the whites are visible, figuring that something has gone deathly wrong and Jongdae needs a maester immediately or else he will never be right again. Not a moment later, an eagle screeches in the sky up above and steals the show, beating its wings to somersault and spiral through the mist.

“His mind is goin’ into the eagle,” Baekhyun provides when Chanyeol assumes he has realised how clueless he looks. “That’s what wargin’ is: when yer enter an animal. Not many people can do it nowadays so that’s probably why yer didn’t know about it.”

“Oh right… So that’s like some Children of the Forest stuff, then?”

Baekhyun chuckles. “I guess yer could say that. There’s magic up here, Chanyeol. Magic that you southerners started to neglect when yer gave up the rightful gods. The old gods watch over all of us.”

He sees Jongdae warg again the next day when they reach the mouth of the Pass, the Haunted Forest looming before them on the other side of the Milkwater. He almost thinks he recognises this place, but he does not voice this out as he is not completely certain; embarrassing himself in front of Jongin is something he desperately wants to avoid. He cannot give the wildling any ammunition.

Despite the harsh conditions, quaint hemlock bushes continue to thrive, merging in with the fir trees that succeed in breaking up the repetitive pines. Lichen marks almost every bare branch like lettuce leaves, even blooming out over the rocks and cliff faces they come across as they tread further south. Occasionally, they will see packs of wolves racing through the trees in the distance, too far away and moving too fast for them to hunt but just close enough for Chanyeol to appreciate.

When they are lucky, they find blueberry and cowberry bushes, and Baekhyun always makes a habit of eating them straight off the branch rather than collecting them and saving them for later. In the end, Chanyeol has to ban him from berry picking, but always finds himself smiling when he catches the Wildling stealing single ones from the pile in his palm.

They have just crossed a smaller river and are well into the forest when Jongdae goes under, the signal of his transition coming in the form of thumping wings.

“The Fist is around here, so we’ve got to be careful,” Kyungsoo explains, offering Chanyeol a kind smile out of nowhere that catches him completely off guard, leading him to stumble on returning the favour and grimacing painfully instead. Kyungsoo laughs it off though, finding his expressions funny, and does not even acknowledge Jongin’s looks of disgust. That’s not classed as flirting, is it?

“There should be at least twenty people up there, from what I remember,” Chanyeol pitches. “I remember there being fifteen men from the Shadow Tower, and some other scouting groups should have made it back by now.”

Those around him nod, thankful for the information, until it is refuted by a cackling Jongdae who blinks himself back to earth.

“There’s no one there,” he announces cheerily, rubbing his palms together. “I just flew around it twice and didn’t see a soul.”

Jongin hmphs in triumph, smirking at Chanyeol while crossing his arms.
The crow is dumbfounded, stupefied, taken aback. What does Jongdae mean there is no one up there? There should be people up there, they cannot have all finished their scouting missions already and gone off back to the Wall! It has not been long enough!

“What do you mean there’s no one up there?” he demands, stepping towards the king’s consort in alarm.

Jongdae looks surprised for a moment, hands coming out to ward him off in case he approaches any further. He must look crazed to warrant that kind of reaction. “I just looked, Chanyeol,” the warg shrugs. “There’s no one up there. So I mean: There’s no one up there.”

Chanyeol’s eyebrows sew together, denting lines in his forehead as his lips part in disbelief. “But there has to be! They have to be up there!”

“Hey,” Baekhyun interjects, placing a mooring hand on his elbow to try and get him to simmer down, “maybe yer brothers already packed up and went back to the Wall, Yeol. Yeah? It’s plausible.”

“But the scouting groups can’t all possibly be back yet,” he objects, staring down at Baekhyun with wide, befuddled eyes. He really does not understand what is going on and no one is providing the answers he is longing for. Where has everybody disappeared to?

“Do yer reckon there could be an ambush?” Kyungsoo asks seriously, suspiciously eyeing the environment. “If they’re all not at the Fist anymore, chances are they’re in the forest.”

The group instantaneously bristles, grabbing onto their weapons and doing whole turns on the spot to survey the surrounding trees. As far as they can see, there is no one around them, there are not even any tracks in the snow. Nevertheless, if the brothers are not on the Fist anymore, they must be around here somewhere.

“Listen,” Jongdae chuckles uncertainly, “I’m tellin’ yer, there were no one up there. Only crows – the actual bird kind.”

Baekhyun purses his lips, his patience running thin. “Chanyeol, we have been gone for nearly three weeks,” he says pointedly, but Chanyeol is not having it. There is no way that in that time the Night’s Watch completed all their rounds and went back to the Wall. It is physically impossible. They would have had to have flown to make it back so soon.

“Don’t tell me yer think they’d wait for you,” Jongin sneers, silencing the group immediately.

“Jongin,” Kyungsoo sighs, exasperated. “How many times have I told you to leave it?”

“I can’t fuckin’ leave it, Soo! He’s a crow! He’s already dividin’ the group in half, what more damage do yer want to let him do? Kill us all off one by one as well?”

Kyungsoo fumes, hands balled into fists as he glares up at Jongin with a look to kill. “We are not goin’ through this again, Jongin!” he snaps, whipping around and striding off through the trees to put some much needed space between them. The white fox follows, of course, and their argument sinks into the background as they move off to talk – shout – things out.

Meanwhile, Jongdae lets some new information loose. “There might be no one movin’ up there, but I swears they left all their stuff behind.”

“Stuff?” Chanyeol demands, rounding on him like a lion to a fresh kill. “What stuff?”
Jongdae glances at him warily. “Tents and that,” he says, eyes flitting between him and Baekhyun, as if asking for back-up. “Cookin’ pots and sleds. It’s all been left behind. Guess they didn’t need it anymore?”

Chanyeol tries to make sense of what is going on and ends up staring madly into Baekhyun’s eyes as he tries to concentrate. “They wouldn’t leave it all behind,” he murmurs to himself, his thundering heartbeat drowning out his other senses. “Those supplies came from the Wall and we’re running out of things as it is. It doesn’t add up. They need all that, they can’t afford to just leave it.”

“Chanyeol,” Baekhyun cuts in, suddenly more hostile. “I really don’t understand why yer so bothered about this. Who cares what happened to ‘em? Who cares if they leave their stuff behind? Who gives a shit if they’re runnin’ out of pots and the like at Castle Black? Yer not one of them anymore, are yer? Yer one of us. There is no we between you and the Watch. If they die or have died, it’s a good thing.”

Chanyeol cannot really string together a response for that, so he stalks off through the trees to try and clear his head while Jongdae wargs again. He cannot piece together his mind. It feels like he is clawing at smoke with his bare hands as he tries to get it in order. Baekhyun is right. Why is he so bothered? It’s not like he cares, is it? It is not like he would be upset if they all died because they all left him behind anyway, right? He cannot be feeling sorry for them, it is ridiculous to be.

As he wanders off alone, trying to rope in the dispersing pieces of his soul, he accidentally stumbles into earshot of Kyungsoo and Jongin’s argument. They are still barking at each other, though the volume is severely muted in an attempt to remain unheard. Chanyeol grimaces every time he sees Jongin reach out and Kyungsoo push away. He feels responsible. He is splitting the group in half.

“I’m just sick of hearin’ about it, Jongin. I’m really sick of it,” Kyungsoo complains, pressing his palm to his forehead and closing his eyes. “It’s all you’ve talked about for the past three days and it’s like yer obsessed. No one else is havin’ this problem. It’s only you!”

“Don’t come cryin’ to me when he presses a knife to yer throat, Soo,” Jongin growls in retaliation, hurt flashing across Kyungsoo’s face like the lash of a whip. “He has no right in bein’ here. I can’t believe Minseok trusts him, the fool.”

“Minseok is who we follow, Jongin.”

“Aye, but that doesn’t mean I have to agree with him. Have you seen how Baek acts around him? It’s like he’s constantly drunk off his own face! He were never like this with Hayder.”

“Maybe that’s because he likes him, Jongin!” Kyungsoo whisper-screams. “Maybe Baek has actually found someone he likes and instead of bein’ happy for him like a good friend should be, yer here tryin’ to throw him out! The boy might have been a crow in his past but might I remind yer that I was a southerner too.”

Jongin turns on him, backing him up against a tree. Chanyeol reaches for his sword, worried for Kyungsoo’s safety, but his curiosity gets the better of him when Jongin starts talking again.

“Yer know that’s not the same.” His voice scrapes along the ground, low and husky.

“Yeah, but it’s not completely different neither,” Kyungsoo refutes. “I spent the first seven years of my life with people no better than the crows at the Wall. I’d still be one of them if it weren’t for my shipwreck washin’ up at Hardhome. When yer family took me in, they didn’t stop to think that...”
this boy might kill us in his sleep. They didn’t think I were a spy and they didn’t treat me as the enemy. Yer parents took me in as their own, Jongin. They looked after me without holdin’ my past against me, so now I ask yer to do the same with Chanyeol. That’s all.”

Rebelliously, Kyungsoo slips out of Jongin’s hold and heads to rejoin the main group, signalling that it is time for Chanyeol to do the same. When he returns, he finds Jongdae arriving back to his human body, and once he is completely back he starts to draw pattern on the ground with a nearby twig, scraping the end through the snow in a large circular motions.

“There were pieces of horses,” he says, voice harder to hear as it is aimed at the ground. Chanyeol strains his ears, eyelids peeled all the way back. “Heads and arms, bits of their bodies, all laid out like this in a giant spiral.”

“What does that mean?” gasps the crow.

Baekhyun glances at him grimly. “White Walkers, most likely. They have no need for horses, do they?”

“Aye, that would make sense,” Jongdae admits, sighing as he stares down at his drawing with his hands on his hips. He looks like he regrets seeing what he has seen, wishing he could erase it from his memory. “Which means most of your brothers are probably dead, Chanyeol.”

Chanyeol swallows dryly, trying to ignore Baekhyun’s judgemental gaze. “Right, well.” He clears his throat awkwardly. “If anyone survived, they would have gone to Yifan’s Keep, so we should try and steer clear of that.”

“Alright,” Jongdae nods, kicking his design over with his boot to hide the haunting lines. Chanyeol wonders why the White Walkers leave patterns and symbols behind them, then deduces that they are probably warnings, foreshadowing the end that waits for them all. Even if they do go south, will they truly escape them? Or will the White Walkers never stop until they reign over Westeros and Essos combined? “Let’s get movin’ again, provided that Jongin and Soo have finished their fightin’.”

“We have,” Kyungsoo utters softly, face puffier than before.

Chanyeol cannot look Baekhyun in the eye as they get moving again. He does not know why he was so bothered about the fact that his brothers are probably dead, but maybe it is just because he is freaked at the thought it that could have been him. If he and Baekhyun had gone through with the deal, as he was keen to do, he would not be alive right now. He would have been back at the Fist, unwillingly clutched in Death’s hands surrounded by heartless strangers.

“Pull yerself together, Yeol,” Baekhyun grits. “I’ve told yer so many time about all this mixed signals bullshit. Make yer mind up before yer get rejected by both parties, eh?” It is a warning, a threat, and it has Chanyeol quaking in his boots. Perhaps he is not ready to let go of either life just yet, and that makes him angry at himself. Why do his emotions have to complicate everything?

Baekhyun stops talking to him after that. Baekhyun also stops looking at him, and Chanyeol spirals into a pit of despair as he berates himself over and over for being so selfish. He cannot explain why he was so worried over the potential death of his brothers, cannot decide whether to put it down to shock, grief, or disappointment. Maybe he was just surprised to find them gone so soon, or maybe he was upset because what Jongin said was right; maybe he is just hurt to have his previous suspicions confirmed: that no one really cared for him there. Maybe no one cares for him here too.

For the rest of the day, he meanders at the rear of the group alone, staring guiltily at the back of
Baekhyun’s head as the wildling converses with Jongdae about their plans in more detail. His feet feel heavy and the acid in his stomach is giving him cramps. His nose is running halfway down his face from the cold and the unshed tears seeking sanctuary in his eyes have frozen over, icicles down his cheeks. When he looks to his legs trudging through the snow, he does not recognise himself anymore. He does not belong in black or grey.

When they make camp in the woods by the bank of the river, the cold shoulder persists. Like an outcast, he sits on the end of a capsized tree trunk with only himself for company, watching as Baekhyun laughs with Jongdae and Kyungsoo about their funniest fighting moments. Jongin is sat with Dunston and Calf, sharpening their scavenged spears and swords with the word ‘crow’ leaving their tongues in every other sentence like a curse.

“I want to skewer one,” Calf says, voice surprisingly deep. “Put me spear right through his mouth and out the back of his skull.”

“Yer’d need a lot of push behind that,” Dunston remarks, scraping a stone along the edge of his blade to grate it to a fine point.

Calf snorts. “Good thing I’ve got a lot of push then, eh?”

“Do yer reckon I could spear one up-ways?” Jongin asks darkly, gaze deliberately finding Chanyeol’s as he hones the tip of his spear. “Shove it up his arse ‘til it comes out his mouth?”

The other two laugh, Calf then saying, “If yer ever get to that point, call me over. I want to watch.”

“Shouldn’t be too hard,” Jongin says. “Even if the crow does claim to have killed a White Walker.”

Furious, Chanyeol gets to his feet and retreats from the threats. He walks through the trees, aiming to hide himself, and is just about to sit down behind a thick elm when he hears Baekhyun call his name.

“Where are yer goin’?”

Chanyeol looks up, well aware that his bated tears are about to be set free, and he stills on his spot.

“What’s the matter with yer?” Baekhyun asks, sounding more irritated than concerned, and his tone sets Chanyeol’s tears off.

“I’m sorry.” His voice is muffled as he pouts, burying his face in his hands for a moment before staring at the person who told him he was worth something. “I’m sorry, okay? I have no idea what I’m doing. I don’t mean to be so confused all the time but I can’t help it.”

“What are yer even confused about, Chanyeol?” Baekhyun shakes his head in disappointment, gradually creeping closer with each step until he can look up into Chanyeol’s eyes and hold him prisoner. “Do yer not want to be here with me? With them? Do yer want to go back to yer brothers, is that it?”

“That’s not it.”

“Then what is it?”

“I just—I’m sorry,” he cries, pressing his fists into his eyes.

Baekhyun sighs, tired. “Yeol, just tell me what the matter is. Please? Talk it out with me, yeah? Talk it out.”
Chanyeol nods, preparing himself. “Yeah, okay.”

“Yeah?” Baekhyun smiles, stepping forwards to cup his face. “First of all, I’m sorry. Yer know what I’m like, Yeol. Remember what I said about all the mushy crap? Well, there’s a lot of it now, see, and I don’t fancy bein’ left with it all on my own knowin’ you don’t have just as much. I—Yeo, I—” Baekhyun’s lips tremble. “Can yer blame me for not wantin’ yer to leave? When yer stand there and look so upset about the fact that people who didn’t give two shits about yer might have died, it felt like I’d been stabbed in the heart. Here I am, alright? I give more than two shits about yer, so many more. I’ve got shits galore where you’re concerned.” His smile is like the sun breaking through the clouds on an overcast day. Heavenly.

“I’m not going to leave you,” Chanyeol whispers, lacing his hands around Baekhyun’s neck. “I was just—I guess what Jongin said was right. It was always just suspicions before – that they didn’t care about me, I mean. Today it was confirmed and I—”

“You panicked?” Baekhyun supplies, hitting the nail on the head.

“Y-Yeah,” Chanyeol winces, dropping his eyes and resting his forehead down on Baekhyun’s. “It’s not nice to have it shoved in your face that you’re not wanted.”

“You’re wanted here,”

“I’m not,” he mourns, struggling to keep himself together. “Jongin doesn’t want me here. He just threatened to kill me.”

Baekhyun stills, a beat of silence, and then, “What?”

“Not directly, but he told the others how he wanted to spear a crow and he looked at me, like he meant I was the crow. It’s not surprising, really. It’s not like he wants me around.”

“Yeah, well he’s gonna have to deal with it because yer not goin’ anywhere are yer?”

Chanyeol sniffles. “I don’t want to, no.”

“There we are then,” Baekhyun smiles, caressing his cheeks. “Hayder and me never really talked about this kind of stuff, so I’m still gettin’ used to it all.”


“I’m gonna try and try and try until I’m perfect,” Baekhyun grins.

“You’re already perfect.”

Baekhyun chortles, looking satisfied. “Damn right, I am. But there’s always room for improvement, eh? And Chanyeol, if Jongin ever bothers yer, ever says anythin’ nasty or even looks at you funny, yer come and tell me, alright? I want to know.”

“Baek, I don’t want to ruin your friendship—”

“So long as he is bein’ a cockhead, Yeol, he ain’t no friend of mine. Bloody tosser, he is.”

“Uh... okay then.” Chanyeol release a light and airy laughs, brushing his hands over Baekhyun’s cheek and revelling in their satin texture. “I preferred it much more when it was just me and you,” he whispers, watching Baekhyun’s eyelashes every time he blinks.

His caramel eyes gleam, his own hands coming to overlap Chanyeol’s, adorable in the way that his
fingers and palms are much too small to cover them properly. “It can be just you and me again, if yer want. We don’t have to stay with them, not forever. We just need to take Castle Black and then we’re free. A crow and a wildlin’, hmm? We’ll take the Seven Kingdoms by storm, I’m sure.”

“We will,” Chanyeol smiles, wrapping his fingers sideways around Baekhyun’s when the wildling hooks them through the spaces between. “You’ll burn them all like wildfire. Beautiful but deadly.”

Chuckling, Baekhyun goes a rosy colour of pink, the heat flushing his cheeks radiating into Chanyeol’s hands until a gratified shudder courses down his arms. “Aye. No Kneeler has a place in the new world. Let’s go get some supper, yeah?”

With a chaste peck, they follow the scent of cooking rabbit through the trees.

They travel downstream for another two days, making camp in the evening at the western reaches of the Wall.

“We should keep an eye out for the Shadow Tower,” Chanyeol tells Baekhyun as they tread over brambles collecting firewood. “I don’t know how many men they have, so they could have sentries and ranging groups. Two blasts on the horn means wildlings; we should keep an ear out.”

“Noted,” Baekhyun grunts as he bends over to grab a fallen branch. “I think I heard your Watch horn before, yer know. Back when I were younger. A right noisy thing it is.”

Chuckling, Chanyeol places his boot on the trunk of a pine tree to break one of the lower, thinner branches off. “One blast for rangers returning, two for wildlings, three for White Walkers. I read that somewhere, I think.”

“Best hope we don’t hear three blasts then, I s’pose. ‘Cause if we do, I’m not fuckin’ about with that again. I’ll be out of there as fast a lightnin’ Yeol. I’ll go hide in a hole and never come out again.”

“A hole? Not a cave?”

Baekhyun smirks at him, just as he manages to snap a bare branch from a tree, pine needles shedding from the higher levels like prickling snow. “Maybe. Depends which is closest,” Baekhyun tells him, dusting the barks from his fingers. “Looks like the snow’s melted around here. Autumn’s bein’ kind to us.”

“The summer was kinder,” Chanyeol sighs, lodging the wood over his shoulder.

Baekhyun hauls the slim trunk of a young larch tree in his arms, then turning and almost ramming the end of it into Chanyeol’s stomach. The crow has to leap out of the way, the wildling oblivious.

“That thing has two ends, you know,” Chanyeol points out, just managing to spare a finger to point in the direction of the tree. Apparently, Baekhyun has selective hearing.

“How long did the summer last?” the wildling wonders.

“About nine years from start to finish.”

“Ahh, that’s not so bad.”

“But you know what they always say: A long summer means an even longer winter.”

“Yeah, and I grew up surrounded in the cold with snowdrifts three times my height. I’m pretty sure
I can survive your petty southern winters,” Baekhyun chortles, juggling twenty large branches at once.

Chanyeol laughs, poking Baekhyun with his toes to get his attention. “What are we going to do when we’re in the south?” he wonders. "Where will we go?"

There is a hopeful glint in Baekhyun's eyes. “Who says we have to even stay in Westeros, little crow?”

And just like that, Chanyeol's horizon has expanded tenfold. Where before he thought he might just be lucky enough to get to see all the Seven Kingdoms, now his scope is stretching out beyond that to the places he has only ever seen on maps. Asshai, Yunkai, maybe even Meereen and Slaver’s Bay.

He smiles, absorbed in thought as he imagines Baekhyun framed with nothing but cloudless blue skies and shimmering teal seas. “You want to sail to Essos? See Braavos and Pentos?”

The wildling shrugs nonchalantly. “Well, I’ve been alive for eighteen years and only been lookin’ out at the world through a porthole. I’d like to see the rest of it. Startin’ with Seagard, so I can teach those rotten children a lesson about how great my little crow is. Can’t have them pickin’ on me favourite bone.”


Before noon, Baekhyun catches a total of five rabbits, and as they settle down in their camp for the night, Chanyeol allows the heat of the fire to sink through his clothes as he watches the meat sizzle and spit.

“Tomorrow,” Jongdae claps his hands, “we climb the Wall.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Baekhyun cheers excitedly, grabbing his wineskin and taking several long draws, everyone else following suit and hooting with enthusiasm.

“In the mornin’ I’ll go over the gear with you, Chanyeol,” Kyungsoo smiles, though it does not reach his eyes. “It’s not that complicated.”

“Oh, thanks.”

Jongin has not said anything since the death threat, which makes Chanyeol wonder whether Kyungsoo has finally gotten through to him. He knows he is putting strain on their relationship, but the only thing he could do to relieve it is to leave and that is off the table. He is not going anywhere. Not now, not ever, and definitely not voluntarily.

“Don’t have a fear of heights do yer, Chanyeol?” Jongdae teases as Kyungsoo starts plating the meat.

“I used to be a builder for the Watch so I had to walk the Wall quite often. Heights don’t really
bother me.”

“A builder, yer say?”

“Yeah, I would repair the Wall when it cracked and put down gravel when it got slippery.”

“Sounds interestin’. Would yer say the Wall is fit for climbin’?” Jongdae asks, rising a laugh out of some of the others.

“I should bloody hope so,” Kyungsoo chuckles, shaking his head as he hands Chanyeol his dinner: two rabbit legs with a pinch of something green on top. “We’re climbin’ in tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I would say so,” Chanyeol nods, thanking Kyungsoo afterwards. “So long as the ice picks go in far enough, there shouldn’t be a problem. There’s always the risk of the outer laying shedding, but that would only happen either if the weather’s warmer than normal or if you don’t get the pick in properly.”

Baekhyun nods, rubbing his chin where a fine layer of stubble is starting to show. “That’s good to know. It’s been a while since I scaled that mountain. Do yer remember, Soo? When we had that bet to see who could reach the summit the fastest? Nearly shat meself about five times when me pick fell out, bloody useful piece of kit that was.”

“How long was the pick?” Chanyeol curiously asks, grabbing Baekhyun’s undivided attention.

“It wasn’t very long. Only about half the length of my forearm. Learned from that, though, we use massive picks now. I like my picks big and long.”

Chanyeol nods, tearing the tender meat from the bone and eating rather messily. Baekhyun snorts at him and reaches over to wipe his mouth with his thumb, then suckling on it.

“Who won the bet?” he asks, eyes absorbed in Baekhyun’s hollowed cheeks and puckered, glistening lips.

“Me, you idiot,” Baekhyun grins smugly, smacking him with a playful vibe after popping his thumb free. “I don’t mess about, me. When I want somethin’, I get it. Yer should know that.”

“What did you win?”

Baekhyun licks his lips, grinning from ear to ear. “Nothin’ too fancy.”

“We were low on oil,” Kyungsoo cuts in. “We had hardly any left. I wanted it for cookin’ and Baekhyun wanted it for… other things. In the end we couldn’t decide who to give it to, so we climbed the mountain to settle it.”

Chanyeol stops chewing, his mushed up food sitting on his tongue. “For—You mean—” he looks across at Baekhyun who looks like the perfect criminal. “Baek, wouldn’t it have been better to use the oil to cook food and not for, you know, that?”

“He’d just popped his bone away,” Jongdae shrugs. “He was obsessed.”

“Hey,” the wildling pouts. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“In a rut, then,” Kyungsoo amends.

“Well, it’s not like yer can’t cook without oil. But, fuckin’? It hurts if yer don’t have somethin’ to ease the slide.”
“As yer can see, Baekhyun doesn’t really have his priorities in order,” Jongdae smiles.

After that bombshell, they settle down to sleep, laying on whatever mats they were fortunate enough to bring along. Baekhyun comes cuddling up to Chanyeol, humming with content once his face is resting right over his collar.

“These furs are much more comfier than that shit leather yer used to wear,” he remarks sleepily, wrapping his arms around Chanyeol’s middle. “Yer make for a lovely pillow.”

“Thank you,” Chanyeol chuckles, lying his head back against the mattress and looking up at the stars.

“Hmmm,” Baekhyun deflates, then shuffling around to look Chanyeol in the eye. “Goodnight kiss,” he narrates, leaning down to press their lips together. He hums again, almost purring, and then says, “Slip that tongue in there, little crow. It’s go big or go home with me.”

Chanyeol laughs at that, tongue consequently hidden behind a blinding smile.

“Pshh, naughty.”

Sleep takes them not long after, all tranquil until Jongdae is shaking them awake. Chanyeol has flashbacks to when he had first heard the White Walker walking towards them weeks ago, when he had woken from a peculiar dream to hear footsteps on the other side of the thicket. It makes him smile now, because his first instinct in a fit of fear had been to go to Baekhyun for help so that the wildling could protect him. Things are not so different now, except that it is Jongdae’s hushed words telling him to keep quiet this time.

“What?” Chanyeol hisses, Baekhyun moaning gently as he is disturbed. He rubs his eyes and stretches his arms above his head, detached in the clutches of sleep.

Jongdae does not say anything, just points through the moonlight to the north and draws Chanyeol’s attention to blurry shadows travelling east. It almost does not look real – the strange shapes floating between the trees, at first glance. It takes the crow a moment to figure out that they are in fact walking, so they must be some form of human, and as far as he can see there are no harrowing blue eyes. His first instinct is to be calm because thank the gods it is not a White Walker, but then he realises that it is something else, and it could be something worse.

“Who’s that?” Baekhyun asks lowly, pushing against Chanyeol’s chest to pick himself up. Once Baekhyun has succeeded, the both of them stand, soon joined by the other four members of their climbing team. Jongin is scratching his head and Kyungsoo’s neck feathers are ruffled, and they both look like they have not had a wink of sleep.

“I can’t see anythin’,” Kyungsoo squints, then being reminded by Jongin that his eyesight has never been very good. “Explain it to me then,” he huffs, not in the mood for any of Jongin’s cheek at such an early hour.

“Well,” Jongin takes a breath, “there are people walking through the trees, about twenty feet away. They’re going to the right and they look kind of…” Jongin cocks his head to the side, “kind of…”


Chanyeol almost chokes on his spit, but it is aborted at the last second by his brain when his heart decides to swoop down into his stomach instead. Through the trees, there is a picturesque single beam of moonlight breaking the shadows, and into it steps a lone figure, cloaked in the pitch. It looks to be a man, dressed in black with the tip of his sword dragging beside his footsteps. There is
something hauntingly gaunt about its face. When it turns in the light, the moon reflects off the bare bone exposed to the cold, and Chanyeol feels his stomach shrivel. It is a person. A rotting person.

They watch the rest of the men in silence, eyes tracing after individuals who happen to catch their attention. Chanyeol finds himself drawn into one who staggers with a twisted foot, toes facing in the opposite direction to its kneecap. There is an axe buried in its skull, the handle sticking out against the moonlight that passes over the long black braid tumbling down its front. For some reason unbeknownst to him, it looks familiar.

It takes another ten minutes for the woods to be completely clear, and when they are, Chanyeol cannot shake the anxiety tickling his insides. “Were they White Walkers?” he whispers, terrified, looking around at the other members of the group for answers. They had not looked particularly like the White Walker he has seen before, but they had definitely not been alive either.

“No,” Baekhyun shakes his head, “they’re wights. They’re killed by White Walkers, recruited for their army.”

“They were probably your friends from the Fist,” Jongdae says sympathetically. “That would explain it. It’s odd that they’d be movin’ this way, but yer can’t predict what they’re plannin’.”

Solemnly, Baekhyun turns to face him. “This is why we need to leave, Yeol. Go south of the Wall. We’re vulnerable here. Exposed. And if we stay we’ll be taken by the White Walkers one day. We’ll join the army of the dead, and when we do it’ll be near impossible for all the flower kings down south to take us down. We’re not doin’ it for their convenience, though. We’re doin’ it because we want to stay alive. We want to be free, not labelled as savages or murderers, rapists and plunderers. We’re people, and we wanted to be treated as such, but if we don’t leave, we won’t be conscious enough to even see what could have been; our eyes will be blue and our skin will be white, and we’ll be rottin’ on our feet with evil thoughts in our head.”

Shaken by the news, Chanyeol does not sleep the rest of the night. He sits and watches dawn come and pass, Baekhyun’s head in his lap as he slumps against the base of a tree, his wildling lover snoozing the rest of the night away. Chanyeol idly cards through the strands of fiery red, touch light so as to not wake him, and he rests his head back against the trunk as he sees the Wall through the trees, gleaming in the pink light of the sun. He will have to climb seven hundred feet today, and the thought that he might never make it to noon causes him feel queasy.

Kyungsoo is the first to wake, giving him a kind smile in greeting before he sets about trying to revive the fire and sorting out breakfast. Chanyeol grows curious as he watches his companion blowing on the embers, knelt down as if to pray. He thinks back to the conversation he heard between Kyungsoo and Jongin yesterday, regarding how he is from the south like him, and he finds himself wanting to know more, just not knowing how best to go about it.

"Could yer not sleep?" the gentle wildling wonders, catching Chanyeol off guard.

"Oh," he perks up, eyes fluttering down to Baekhyun to make sure he is still asleep, "no, not really." His eyes get stuck on Baekhyun's peaceful expression however, and there they stay as he strokes the hair back from his face. How did he get so lucky to capture the attention of a being so splendid?

Kyungsoo smiles, returning to his duty of getting the fire going. Chanyeol watches as the wood crackles and spits sparks, Kyungsoo dodging them easily as if he has spent his whole life making stubborn things burn.

"I'm sorry about Jongin, Chanyeol."
Within seconds, Chanyeol feels guilty. Kyungsoo should not have to be apologising for this, nor should he feel like he has to.

"It is nothin' yer've done personally. There's just bad history between his family and crows." The wildling smiles sadly, observing Chanyeol with a soft gaze. "There's bad history between all of us and crows but that's just the way it is, isn't it? No matter how regrettable it is."

"I'm not a traitor." Chanyeol hates that he has to justify himself, but he does so anyway. "I'm not going to stab you all in your sleep, and I'm not going to rat you out. I'm here to fight with you. I don't know what more I can do to prove that," he says grimly, eyes following Kyungsoo's movements as the wildling grabs a leather pouch and undoes the string tie at the top.

"Don't worry about it. Honestly. I'll keep him in line. It's him who has the problem, anyway."

Chanyeol keeps his neutral expression, not wanting to cause offense by agreeing with what Kyungsoo has said. Then the curiosity comes back, and he decides to take the risk. "I accidentally overheard your conversation yesterday." Kyungsoo beholds him with interest, hands moving without vision as he places a pewter pan – one of Chanyeol’s from Castle Black – over the fire. It is a wonder he does not burn himself. "You said you were from a shipwreck? From the south. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to eavesdrop but I couldn't really help it at the time."

Chuckling, Kyungsoo drops his eyes and starts placing small chunks of meat onto the pan, fat immediately sizzling and sending steam twirling into the crisp morning air. "It’s not a secret that I'm from the south. I grew up in Ramsgate with my family. It’s a small city on the east side of the North, near to White Harbour. You know it?" Chanyeol nods, having a vague idea of where Ramsgate is.

"We were fishermen by trade. Had a monopoly on carp because they only liked our cold, northern waters. One night we went out further than we intended and were hit by a storm. We were out way past land, and in the rain we couldn't see our maps or compasses. In the end, the winds were so rough that we were blown completely out of charted waters, and lightnin' set our ship alight. It capsized and I clung onto the main mast for me life. I thought I was goin' to drown, but the current took me to Hardhome beyond the Wall, and Jongin's family took me in, no questions asked. Everyone has been acceptin' of my past, so I find it ridiculous that they are not acceptin' of yours. Minseok trusts yer, Chanyeol, so I trust yer."

Chanyeol realises he is smiling when Kyungsoo finishes, and smiles wider because of it. “I wouldn’t look at you now and think you were once a southerner,” he says thoughtfully.

“And in a few months, people will look at you and never think yer were once a crow. It’s not who you are that’s important, it’s what yer do, and if yer prove yerself to be loyal and trustworthy, yer’ll be able to wash the black stains off in no time.”

Nodding to show his understanding, Chanyeol breaks eye contact and enjoys this moment on his own, gaze cast over his future in his lap.

“What were yer just talkin’ about?” Jongin asks mid-yawn, kneeling behind Kyungsoo and wrapping his arms around his waist. He completely ignores Chanyeol.

“Appearances,” Kyungsoo responds lightly, eyebrows raised. “And why we shouldn’t judge people based on them. Yer’ll know all about that, won’t yer? Eh?” The gentle wildling grins, looking back to meet eyes with his lover before giving him a kiss.

Baekhyun is soon roused by the smell of food, the scent of frying rabbit tickling his taste buds, and
he moves from where he is drooling over Chanyeol’s crotch to rest his head under Chanyeol’s chin instead, crawling onto his lap like a little kitten.

“Morning,” Chanyeol rasps, voice rough from dehydration. He does his best to accommodate the wildling, flattening his legs and enclosing him in his arms so that he does not fall away. Baekhyun is muscular though, so he is rather heavy.

“Mmmm,” is all Baekhyun has to say to that.

After Jongdae and the other two finally wake up, they eat breakfast under the sunrise. Blues and golds decorate the sky, an aurora so heavenly blessing their day as they eventually start moving towards the Wall. Jongdae wargs to check for sentries standing at the top, and he flies across to the other side just to double check that they are in indeed the right place. Chanyeol watches as the eagle climbs and swoops, soaring through the periwinkle sky and in front of the twinkling wall of ice that stretches up high to embrace the sun.

Down here, they are shrouded in the shadows. Tiny ice flakes drift down from the Wall in lazy succession, pinching Chanyeol’s face when they touch his skin. When he looks up through the aged trees he can hardly see the top of the Wall for the clouds misting shy of the verge.

Jongdae comes back into his body, eyes returning from the inside of his head – that still makes Chanyeol feel a bit sick – and gives the group a thumbs up, signalling that they can start getting their gear in order. Backpacks are dumped on the ground and thrown open; ice picks, ropes, and hooks all being retrieved in great numbers. When Jongin drops his bag, he tips it upside down until a giant cascade of small metal spikes come tumbling out, wired together in groups of ten.

“We’re just about in line with one of your castles,” Jongdae tells Chanyeol, approaching him with a giant roll of rope slung over his shoulder. In the darkness of the daylight, everything has turned a bluey-grey, even Jongdae’s reddish hair has turned to ash. “About midway between Castle Black and the… Shadow Tower, is it?”

Nodding, Chanyeol tries to work out in his mind where they are. “Are we at Hoarfrost Hill?”

Jongdae looks uncertain. “Minseok wanted us to be at Icemark but I can’t say where we are really. The castle looked pretty rundown, built with grey cobblestone. Doesn’t look like it’ll make good cover but at least it should be unassumin’. Doubt anyone even bothers with it anymore.”

“What does it matter which castle it is?” Baekhyun grins, busy tying a rope around his waist. “I’m just excited to see it.”

Chanyeol looks at him in confusion, Jongdae leaving to help Calf wrap the spikes around his shoes. “You’re excited?”

“Oh, yeah,” he grunts, finishing a knot and tugging it a few times to make sure it is secure. “Never seen a castle before, have I? Out here it’s all either tents or caves. We’re not big builders, see, not even of ice castles.” He snorts with laughter, sauntering closer. “I feel like doin’ a little roleplay in the castle, you know, Yeol,” he admits lowly, eyes burning. “Pretend I’m some southern king and sit around eatin’ grapes with some fancy cheese.”

Chanyeol’s imagination runs off without him, Baekhyun smirking when he hears him gulp.

“Yer can be my servant if yer want,” the wildling then decides. “Follow my orders, do whatever I say. I might just dominate yer if I’m in the mood. Might get yer to lick me toes as well. They’re in need of a good cleanin’.”
“Okay, Baekhyun, keep it in yer trousers,” Kyungsoo chirps in passing, then swinging around to walk backwards just so he can say, “We have things to do before yer get frisky with yer bone.”

Baekhyun sticks out his tongue like a child, Chanyeol chuckling at the interaction before grimacing. “You want me to lick your toes? I don’t think that’s going to happen, Baek.”

The wildling pouts, glancing at him as if he is an eyesore. “Worth a try,” he mutters sourly.

Chanyeol is then fitted out in his climbing gear, handed two ice picks with iron heads and wooden handles. The spikes on wires are wrapped around his feet so that he can dig them into the face of the Wall for leverage, and a rope is tied to encircle his waist, attaching him to the queue.

“We all ready?” Jongdae asks, stood at the head of a separate line with Dunston and Calf behind him. Chanyeol squints at him through the harsh shade, shielding his eyes from a polluting ray of sunlight with one hand and giving a thumbs up with the other.

“Here goes nothin’, eh, Yeol?” Baekhyun grins giddily, grabbing his hand and giving it a good squeeze. “Try not to piss yerself, yeah? Major turnoff.”

In one group of four and one group of three, they move to the base of the Wall, every step making it extend further and further towards the clouds. In its shadow, the temperature of the air feels like it has dropped below freezing, and Chanyeol shudders in the presence of the Wall for the first time since he was a boy. To be on the other side is scary enough, but to now know that he is no longer immune to its talents as he once was unsettles him even further. If he is quaking in his boots on the ground from the harsh chill, what is he going to be like when he is face to face with it? There will be no rest stops, no pauses for breath, no breaks; the Wall is a solid sheet of ice, albeit serrated, and they will have to climb the whole height of it in one go.

Suddenly, Chanyeol's knees feel weak. "How long is this going to take?” he wearily asks Baekhyun who looks back at him with a cunning smile.

"Well,” he shrugs, “if all goes to plan, maybe... six or seven hours? I honestly can’t say really, never climbed no wall before, let alone the Wall. Although that mountain did take me the best of half a day.”

"And this climbing equipment," Chanyeol takes the rope tying their waists together, giving it a wave, "it's safe, isn't it?"

Baekhyun shrugs again, cocking his head to the side, "Sure."

That seems like the best answer he is going to get, so Chanyeol just does his best to try and think positive.

Jongin leads their team, pitching his picks into the ice and starting the climb. Around thirty feet to the left, Jongdae is doing the same, leading Dunston and Calf. At the rear of the group, Chanyeol cannot see all the technicalities of their strategy. As Jongin rises higher towards the sun, he is knocking niches into the ice as foot holes and hammering in metal pegs with hooked ends with a mallet, threading the rope through. It looks complicated and tiring, and Chanyeol is glad that he does not have that responsibility weighing down on his shoulders along with everything else. All he has to do is keep himself attached to the Wall, yet even that feels like it is going to be near impossible.

His heart comes up in his throat when Baekhyun pierces the ice for the first time, getting one leg up and almost being given a black eye when a slab of the Wall sheds off towards his head.
Kyungsoo shouts to look out below, his pick having disturbed the surface. To Chanyeol, this does not bode well at all. If Jongin were to accidentally – or on purpose, knowing Jongin – knock off a wedge of ice, it would gain speed faster than a green boy would die in battle and it could knock him directly off the Wall. Nevertheless, there is no way to prevent such things from happening, so Chanyeol accepts that he will have to keep his wits about him ten times more than normal.

When it gets to be his turn, Chanyeol whispers a quick prayer to whatever god is listening before hacking his right-hand pick in the ice. He can see all the holes where the others have climbed up before him, making it difficult for him to find a sturdy section of the Wall within arm’s length. The same can be said for his feet too, and even though he is only one foot off the ground now, he still almost has a heart attack with the spikes on his boots slip without warning.

“Fuck me,” he whispers, about to rest his forehead against the ice until he scares himself with images of getting stuck to it.

“Chanyeol! You alright?” Baekhyun calls down, a good twelve feet above him.

Trouble is, because they are all looped together on the same piece of rope, they all have to keep moving at relatively the same speed. If Chanyeol were to stop completely while the others carried on, the rope would run short to stop them from climbing any further. He has no choice but to pursue the summit, even if he is on the border of calling it quits and running back to Minseok. He would rather battle a giant than do this.

“Keep goin’!” Baekhyun yells, the shattering sounds of impaling ice picks echoing down with a light spray of fresh water.

Readjusting the grip of his hands around the wooden handles, Chanyeol yanks his right pick from its place in the ice and stretches his arm up to stab again, hoisting himself higher one limb at a time. His nerves are on edge and his eyes are watering from panic, tears getting frozen onto his face until his skin is numb and sore. He can barely feel his toes. About fifty feet up, Chanyeol makes the mistake of looking down and immediately feels like fainting, closing his eyes for a moment and clinging onto his picks for dear life when he realises just how windy it has gotten up here. When he sniffs, he inhales his crystallized snot.

Ever so carefully, he takes his right foot out of its niche and bends his leg at the knee, squashing it as close to the Wall as possible so he remains streamlined. He kicks at the ice to replant it, and so he takes another step towards heaven. A small littering of ice sprinkles down on him, a piece the size of his palm smacking against his head and splitting in two before carrying on to the floor. When he looks down, Chanyeol finds it hysterical to realise that he is actually closer to the ground than he is to the top, and wonders whether falling off from this distance would actually kill him. Of course it would, but he is just trying to comfort himself by pretending there is still a way out.

Ice falling on him is a regular occurrence that everyone bar Jongin has to deal with. Chanyeol strikes the Wall with his picks and feet and sometimes it takes a good five goes before he gets a solid hold he trusts enough to use. Most of the time, he is using the ice pick more like a pick axe, wearing a giant gash into the ice until he has found a thicker inner layer.

“Chanyeol! Yer need to hurry up!” Baekhyun calls down from above, probably relaying a message from those higher still, and Chanyeol begrudgingly tries to up his pace in a safe and cautious manner. He has to forgo his incessant hacking and opt for three or less direct perforations, endangering himself every time he takes one of his four holds out of the only thing saving him from death. Every next step is like a gamble, Chanyeol dreading the outcome of every movement, and it is this prudent outlook that has him slipping only once every twenty hikes.
So focused on himself, Chanyeol almost forgets that he is climbing with other people. He is reminded when Baekhyun tells him to stop and he finally has a chance to get his bearings, just happening to look to the right where Jongdae and the others are. Visibility is poor with the frostiness of the air, but by the looks of things the two groups appear to be pretty much level with one another. At least that means they are on schedule.

“Why aren’t we moving?” Chanyeol bellows up to Baekhyun, fighting to be heard against the whistling wind that has made his ears ring. No doubt, the higher up they will get, the harder it will be to communicate. The skies are cold and vicious, no place for a man. Even when Chanyeol had walked the top of the Wall, he would do so in the trenches he was in charge of maintaining. They act as windbreakers against the constant howling gusts, protecting them from a frozen death while on the job.

“Jongin—the peg—!”

“What?!”

“Jongin can’t get the peg—properly!”

“Whatever,” Chanyeol groans, too tired to hear anymore. He stares at the ice in front of his face, grimacing as the raw air stings his eyes and floods them all over again. When he looks around him and sees how far they are from the bottom, he almost bursts into tears. They are not even a seventh of the way up and yet it feels like they have been going for hours. “Oh gods,” he mumbles, almost hanging his head against the Wall before scaring himself again.

They get moving a few minutes later, Baekhyun screaming something unintelligible down at him, the wind morphing his words into undiscernible white noise. Chanyeol does not know what is happening for a moment or two, but when he sees the rope starting to move again he guesses that Baekhyun was giving him the all-clear. Mourning for the most stable position he has had so far, Chanyeol forces himself to leave it behind.

Slamming his pick into the ice above his head, Chanyeol hauls himself up again, arm muscles screaming at him as they tear apart. His legs muscles are not necessarily happy with him either, cramping up from the awkward stance he has them stuck in for this gruelling expedition. Everyone else seems to be getting on with this fine; what do they have that he does not? Some convenient ability only possessed by wildlings?

He is contemplating what this ability could be, perhaps light bones or more muscle, when suddenly he is deafened by what sounds like a hundred thunderstorms congregating over his head. The noise knocks him off his guard, the whole wall vibrating in front of him, and he shrieks unreservedly when one of his feet slips from the ice. Luckily enough, his hold on the picks persists and he can drag himself back up, but then there is more screaming from further away.

His first instinct is to check on Baekhyun, and when he looks up through the thickening mist to see the wildling still there above him, only his distant feet and furs visible from such an angle, he calms significantly. Then the screaming starts up again. Whipping his head to the right, Chanyeol watches in horror as the Wall sheds a colossal amount of ice at once, right where Jongdae and his group were just climbing. It peels off in a solid sheet, like the layer of an onion, and screeches down to the ground while chaffing away a great deal of what lies in its path. The screaming stops, and Chanyeol blinks madly to try and see where Jongdae is through the fog. All he sees is white and grey. Nothing moves.

“Jongdae!” Baekhyun’s voice screams desperately. “JONGDAE!”
Either Jongdae does not hear or he is not there to respond. The silence leaves their questions unanswered.

“Fuck!” Baekhyun roars, the exclamation followed by a shower of ice falling over Chanyeol’s head. He gets hit on the eye, chin and ear this time, the edges so sharp that he is sure they cut his skin.

At the moment, Chanyeol does not even try to comprehend the possibility of Jongdae’s death. His own life is in the balance, and he is alright with being selfish enough to disregard the chance for now until his feet are on some sort of horizontal ground.

Clouds converge overhead, blocking out the sun until they are left in nothing but gloom, and Chanyeol flinches when more falling ice catches him unaware. Snow sticks to the Wall and turns it a frosty white, glowing blue under the cool tones of the sky. Around him, the air swirls and howls without restraint, taking his waist in its clutches and sucking him away from his lifeline. He roars when he stakes his pick again, climbing another couple of metres in only three steps. It takes his mind off how far below the ground is, so Chanyeol starts using his voice more often, shouting until it is hoarse and sore.

Fog seeps around them from an unknown source, blocking all communications from then on. Chanyeol strives to see through it yet has no such luck, only catching glimpses of Baekhyun’s boots every couple of minutes.

Chanyeol punctures the jagged surface of the Wall with a determination unrivalled, desperate for it to be over. And then he hears it again – another rumble, only louder this time. His eyes shoot up to where a huge plume of white smoke is rushing down to meet him, and he clings into the Wall with all his might, tucking himself in as best he can while a giant peppering of ice tumbles down over his head. Even the snowflakes feel like needles against his skin, the larger chunks of ice leaving blood where they slice his bare flesh.

There are more screams nearer by, and Chanyeol looks up only to have his eyes seized by the snow. Around him is only white in every direction, sounds distorted through the bubble he is stuck in until his mind tells him that it is Baekhyun who is screaming.

“BAEK!” he screams, then coughing up a lung. “B-BAEK!”

The rope tied between his and Baekhyun’s waists goes slack in front of him, dangling in mockery as it sends Chanyeol down a well of despair. Has Baekhyun fallen? Did he slip? Is he okay? Is he even alive?

“BAEK!”

“AHHHHHHHHHH!” someone suddenly wails, and a pair of wriggling legs burst through the smoke to greet him. “Baekhyun! Baekhyun I’ve lost—pick from your belt—rope is breaking fast I can’t—”

“Kyunsoo?!” Chanyeol shrieks, flailing to climb up higher as he watches his companion floundering onto the Wall, digging his toes into the ice and scraping it away, deepening the grooves even more.

“Chanyeol! Don’t move!”

Chanyeol hears the command through fuzzy ears, panicking. “What’s going on?!” he yells, not getting an answer. Keeping his eyes open proves to be tough with the barrage of wind, and then it suddenly starts pelting rain, as if it could not get any worse. The water sneaks its way into his
clothes, stealing away the only warmth he has retained during his climb, and it numbs his fingers at an even greater rate. The wooden handles of the ice picks become slippery, and their hold on the Wall grows questionable when Chanyeol gawks at the ice melting slightly around it.

The legs are still there, presumably Kyungsoo’s, thrashing around through what feels like a tornado and spritzing ice flakes all across Chanyeol’s face as he tries to lock on.

“I can’t! I can’t!”

“Kyungsoo—the pick!”

“I—reach it, Baek!”

Chanyeol decides he has had enough of loitering around like this, completely in the dark and clueless regarding what is going on up above, so he plucks his right hand pick from the ice and immediately hurls it back in a few feet higher. His leg goes next, unhooking itself and latching onto a higher space. When he looks up, Kyungsoo seems to have gotten one foot stabilised on the Wall, and that is when Chanyeol’s own foot slips.

The iron spikes squeal against the ice, his body falling down to the sound of more screams, including his own. Kyungsoo’s legs disappear completely, clouded over as he gets further and further away, picks burrowing trenches down the Wall’s face as they miraculously maintain their grip. With a jolt to his middle and a suffocating squeeze, Chanyeol pants hoarsely when he comes to a stop, the rope between him and Baekhyun now fully taut.

He cannot hear anything over the wind and the ringing in his ears, he does not even want to open his eyes, so he shuts himself off from the world, half dangling in mid-air, to try and regain his sanity. It is not far now, he tries to convince himself. Half an hour at most.

It feels like they have been at this for days, maybe even weeks or months, and Chanyeol is more than ready to pack it in for a good night’s rest. His body aches and his heart is terrified, all of his internal organs blitzed to mush. And, quite frankly, he has pissed himself, and it is the only warmth he has got right now.

“Just a bit more, Yeol,” Chanyeol whispers brokenly to himself, tears gluing his eyes shut. “Just a bit more.”

As he starts to climb again, the corset around his waist gets slacker, the rope having more give as he gains on Baekhyun. He does his best to move around the valleys and punctures in the ice, even sidling over to get a clean slate when he comes across where he assumes Kyungsoo had been scrambling for his life. The sight would make him worry if it were not for the fact that he has not seen a caterwauling body whizzing past him on the way down.

The fog, wind and rain all work in tandem to blight his vision, everything around him disappearing completely into a canvas of grey. Before him, his hands appear blue and frosted over, bleeding lightly in several places where the onslaught of ice has nicked his skin. The only thing that feels alive is his heart, thumping with a fool’s ambition.

“But—arghh—a bit—more,” Chanyeol growls, bearing his teeth. The malevolent storm turns his saliva to icicles dangling off the roof of his mouth before he even has the chance to swallow it, rain battering down against his will. It feels so much heavier now, like boulders launched from the heavens rather than tiny little drops of water; every touch drains a fragment of his strength, splintering it down the middle.
He cannot see how far he has come or how far he has yet to go. He cannot see whether Jongdae is alive or whether Baekhyun and Kyungsoo have made it. He cannot see the sun or the sky, can only breathe in knives and stare into pins and pray that it is just a little bit more.

He soldiers on, alone.

Just when it seems like the storm will never end, the rain thins into a refreshing drizzle. The winds die down to a tranquil breeze and the clouds disperse to reveal glorious rays of aureate sunshine, and it is at that point when he notices two feet above him. He blinks at them, bewildered, and wonders if they are real or not. He could be hallucinating for all he knows, so he thoughtlessly leaves his left pick in the ice and reaches up to grab an ankle.

“ARGHHHH WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT?!”

The foot wriggles from his hold, spikes catching his hands and slicing his palm and fingers open, but no pain could outweigh the amount of relief in his heart.

“I see Jongdae!” Jongin’s voice is faint in the distance, Kyungsoo chirping in after.

With the sun so bright on his face, Chanyeol struggles to see, yet he can hear Baekhyun’s grunts and shuffles as clear as day. An angel peers down at him, flames dancing in a halo around their head, and Chanyeol wonders if maybe he has died. Then the angel says “Don’t just fuckin’ hang there, Yeol” and the illusion is ruined. The sun disappears behind a grey cloud again and Chanyeol blinks away his stupor, realising that his eyes are trained on Baekhyun smirking at him from the top of the Wall.

“Yer a crow that never left the nest, aren’t yer?” he teases, grabbing the rope and giving Chanyeol a helping hand as he climbs the last couple of metres. Like a slug, he slides over the edge and flops onto the ice, rolling gracelessly onto his back and closing his eyes, ready to sleep for at least a decade. His heartbeat continues to race, legs limp and lifeless, and when another body lolls over his chest, he chokes from the pressure to his lungs.

“I’m not movin’,” Baekhyun grunts, refusing to debate his removal.

Chanyeol is too incapacitated to really care. He is alive and breathing, having climbed seven-hundred feet of ice through a storm all in one go. Desperately, he wants to succumb to unconsciousness, to dream away his fatigue and energise for the descent ahead, but then Kyungsoo comes along and announces that Jongin has just set up the abseiling equipment. The crow groans, not even having the strength to rest his arm over his eyes when the sun reappears, and ignores Baekhyun when he says they need to move.

In the end, they let him rest for about an hour when he mistakenly falls asleep anyway. When he wakes up, he feels better than ever, albeit sore, and clambers to his feet to take a look at the view.

"My gods," Baekhyun gasps, awestruck and rewardingly exhausted. He crawls off his knees to stand beside Chanyeol, also just awoken from a nap. "Look at that. Fuck me."

Before them lies the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, sweeping plains of lush grassland rushing towards the decorated horizon, trees gathered like tribes battling against the roaming mist. Although colours are subdued in the stale autumn air, sun concealed behind brooding clouds, it is still a palette of vibrancy in comparison to the monochrome stretches of beyond the Wall.

In the distance, the sky is a cobalt blue, the weather better the further south it is, while above floats an array of threatening storm clouds; not the best greeting, but a greeting nonetheless. At least they
have made it.

"Would it be unorthodox to ask yer to fuck me on top of the Wall?" Baekhyun laughs heartily, swaying his body around to face him while slinking his arms around his neck.

"Just a bit." Chanyeol's grin splits his face, the elation growing like a bubble in his chest. Again, Baekhyun makes him feel like he wants to explode.

The wildling’s lips are cool and scratchy, but his tongue is burning hot when it slides against his own. Chanyeol hums as if he has tasted heaven, wrapping his arms around Baekhyun's waist and reeling him in further until their bodies are pressed flush together.

"It’s been too long since I've had yer," Baekhyun slurs, eyes twinkling as he blesses Chanyeol with a beaming smile. "When we make camp," he whispers, leaning in close until his lips brush against Chanyeol's when he talks, "yer won't be able to get me off yer. It’s gonna be a bumpy ride for yer, Yeol," he promises, then stopping to sniff.

Frowning, Baekhyun looks him up and down. “Have you pissed yerself, Yeol?” he asks seriously, making Chanyeol wish the Wall would swallow him whole. “Gods,” the wildling chuckles breathlessly, “what yer like, eh? I tell yer not to piss yerself and yer go and do just that. Naughty boy.” Shaking his head, delighted, Baekhyun strokes affectionately through his hair. “Don’t fret about it, little crow. I like a man with a strong smell. Even if it is yer golden water.”

Chanyeol buries his face in his hands out of embarrassment as Baekhyun sashays away towards Jongin and his equipment, preparing himself for the drop.

The way down is a lot easier than the way up had been, Chanyeol is glad to discover. On Jongin's system, it is all plain sailing. All he has to do is kick himself away from the Wall whenever he gets too close. The rope in his hands rubs them raw until his skin is cracked and dry, but seeing as it is the only thing keeping him from dying he wouldn’t even mind if it sawed both his hands in half.

Looking down, he can see the cherry top of Baekhyun’s head beneath him, the wildling doing some bizarre stretches while he waits. Chanyeol chuckles, then smacks into the ice, having forgotten to keep his legs out before him.

“Well, if it ain’t a god comin’ down from heaven to meet the common folk!” Baekhyun bows dramatically to him even though he has not even reached the ground yet. “What be yer the god of, oh mighty one? Could yer be the god of cocks come to bless me?”

“Baekhyun, not now,” Kyungsoo sighs, continuing to lower Chanyeol carefully with the rope looped through his belt, feeding it through his hands inch by inch.

The crow burns scarlet, legs crumbling when he finally finds the grass, and Baekhyun laughs as he helps him to his feet. “Oh mighty one,” he whispers, ridding Chanyeol of his climbing gear with an overpowering gaze. “I have some confessions to make; please make me holy again.”

Chanyeol, already dying of thirst, struggles to form a response past the sand on his tongue.

“Get it?” Baekhyun asks, grin so wide it stretches from ear to ear. “Hole-y. As in—”

“I get it,” Chanyeol splutters, rubbing his sore throat and turning away. “What happened with Kyungsoo?” he then remembers, watching Baekhyun as he winds up the rope and shoves it in his backpack.

“He slipped,” he says casually. “Put a pick in the Wall and didn’t test its hold before he used it.”
With wide eyes, Chanyeol gasps. “Is he alright?”

“He’s fine,” Baekhyun shrugs, hoisting the pack over his shoulder. “That’s why we have the rope, see.” He flashes Chanyeol a smile. “Noticed you slipped a couple of times too.”

Laughing emptily, Chanyeol rubs his clammy neck. The turbulent emotions of the times he thought he was going to die come back to haunt him. “Yeah.”

In the distance, he can still hear the thunderstorm clashing above the treetops, yet here all is calm. The clouds have pulled back to reveal the welcome sight of blue sky, and there is actual grass beneath his feet, sloping down across the moors and littered with large rocks. A small voice in the back of his head tells him that he is home again, but he shoots it before it can say more. His home is wherever Baekhyun is; it is not a place.

"We'll stop in there for the night,” Kyungsoo says, pointing towards the rubble of a fortress Chanyeol has not yet noticed. His eyes scour over the great mass of grey cobbles stacked up against the ice of the Wall, a few structures and crumbled towers discernible amongst the chaos. “It should be alright.” Kyungsoo does not sound too sure of himself, Baekhyun sniggers.

“So long as it doesn’t fall in on us I think we’ll be fine,” the wildling chuckles away, turning to share his amusement with Chanyeol who grins in return. “Or maybe Mister Builder over here can fix it up. Make it nice and homey for us, eh? Make it comfy. Make sure the beds don’t break.” With a wink, the wildling spins away, skipping over to where Jongdae is currently scaling down the Wall on his own.

The sight makes Chanyeol hear a crash, eyes claimed by the pictures of the Wall shedding so ruthlessly, taking Dunston and Calf with it. He can hear their screams from the pluming snow, conjure what their limbs would have looked like as they clawed around for a hold on thin air. Shuddering, he brings himself back to the present and looks on at Baekhyun helping Jongdae to the ground, reminding himself that he and Baekhyun made it and that is all that matters.

"There isn't much woodland around here." Jongin narrows his eyes at their surroundings, placing a hand over his eyes to keep out of the glare from the sun. Around them is nothing but grass for miles, and although it is good for visibility, it is poor in terms of finding food. "It'll be hard to hunt in these open areas."

Kyungsoo approaches the white fox with a gentle smile, hooking his arm around his waist. “We’ll make do,” he assures softly, casting Jongin under a lovesick spell and pacifying his irritable tendencies. Chanyeol redirects his line of sight when he sees them going for each other’s mouths.

He focuses on Jongdae and Baekhyun striding towards them. The warg looks a little paler than usual, shaken, but he still approaches them with an encouraging smile and rubs his palms together, eager to get on with their journey.

"Moving onward then, eh?” he asks, a little jittery, eyes dancing around the group for reassurance and support. The nods he receives calm him, and soon they are setting off towards the remains of the castle nestled bedraggled against the base of the Wall.

“I was just sayin’ about huntin’,” Jongin perks up again, the pacemaker of their team. “Game’ll be hard to come by out here where there’s no trees.”

Baekhyun purses his lips, mirroring what everyone else does and looking around for a wood of some sort. “Yer right,” he huffs, “and I don’t really fancy starvin' meself tonight after all that. Are there any woods around here, Yeol?”
Four sets of expectant eyes immediately turn to him and his face burns. "Uh..." he stalls, jaw slack, having no idea what to say. "I'm not really sure. I mean, I haven't been around here before. I was based at Castle Black which is several leagues that way." He points by way of illustration, four heads turning in the direction of his hand, before the eyes are back, two pairs understanding, one pair disappointed, and the last pair irate. "Sorry...

"Yer have nothin' to apologise for," Baekhyun assures, sending a glare at Jongin to berate his filthy attitude. "We'll figure it out. We Free Folk are good at thinkin' on our feet." He grins. "And our knees."

Eventually, after fifteen minutes of walking, a fuzzy line of trees appear in the distance, Jongin and Kyungsoo volunteering to hunt for the group and veering off towards the south with hands entwined. Chanyeol admires the picture, wondering what kind of a man Jongin would be if he would just give him a chance. If he is willing, they could even be friends.

"Just have to get rid of Jongdae now," Baekhyun whispers sneakily once the hunting duo are out of earshot and Jongdae is far enough ahead, lunging up to the ashen bricks laid by nature in a state of dilapidation. "Then we can do whatever we want and be as loud as we want."

Soon, they are cautiously treading through the collapsed faces of the gate and entering a courtyard encased by crumbled walls and splintered buildings, wooden huts long since been abused by lightning and wind. The air is heavy here, filled with dust and the pungent smell of rotting timber, and as they look around Chanyeol wonders whether there actually is anywhere that they can find cover in.

With walls made up of stacked stones having been blown over by stormy gusts, and with the wooden structures gradually being eaten away by termites, this place – which Chanyeol has an inkling might just be Greyguard – seems to hold a higher chance of killing them than keeping them safe. Nevertheless, they are all too tired to really care.

After a good twenty minutes of independent exploring, Chanyeol hears Jongdae's call and follows the echo of his voice to the western maze of the castle, discovering what looks to be an old dining hall equipped with long tables and benches, much like Castle Black.

"This is the securest room I've found so far," the warg tells, turning to Chanyeol with a smile while scratching his head. "You found anythin' better?"

Shaking his head, Chanyeol replies just as Baekhyun finds the room. "Not really," he says. "Other than little cupboards and storerooms that we wouldn't all fit in."

"Same here. The rooms on the eastern side only seem to have two or three walls. Useless, really."

"We'll make camp here then," Jongdae nods. "Hopefully the other two will bring firewood. I'll focus on clearin' the ground and makin' it safe to sleep on, you two can busy yerselves with whatever yer fancy."

Baekhyun grins suggestively. "Ooooh, that sounds nice, doesn't it, Chanyeol?" he cheers, strutting up to Chanyeol’s side and hanging off his arm. “Whatever we fancy, eh?” With a yank, he gets Chanyeol’s ear right by his mouth. “Yer'd better show me those storerooms yer found."

Turns out, before leaving the Free Folk camp, Baekhyun had raided every single wineskin of cooking oil from at least a hundred of his neighbours, or so it seems. When he reveals to Chanyeol that the bag on his back is carrying almost nothing other than the substance, the crow is too shocked for words.
"It’s so we don’t run out," Baekhyun then protests while stripping off his clothes, goosebumps rising up his arms and legs when they come into contact with the ceaseless Greyguard chill. "Dry rumps are really painful, Yeol, and yer have one hell of a bone. It wouldn't be fair for you to enjoy yerself and me not. And once we take Castle Black, who knows how hard it'll be to find oil in the north? I can’t be abstinent for long, little crow. I get grumpy!"

"I'm quite sure there's a lot of oil in the Seven Kingdoms, Baek," Chanyeol weakly objects as he watches the wildling fold his clothes and place them in a neat pile on the floor, very clinical about the whole thing.

Baekhyun then looks up at him, as naked as the day he was born, and puts his hands on his hips. "How do yer know that? Yer've been at the Wall since yer were a boy, they could have had an oil shortage in the recent years and I can’t be puttin' up with that." He speaks with no joking manner, and Chanyeol does not know whether it is appropriate to laugh or not. "Anyways, I've been eatin' light these past few days specially for this, so I'm pretty empty inside and clean down there. And I wasn't even lookin' for a room just now, Yeol." He drops the sass. “Want to guess what I was doin' instead?” he wonders innocently, blinking with wide, beguiling eyes as he slithers closer.

"Um…” Chanyeol looks around the room for the answer. "I don’t know, maybe... pissing or something?"

Baekhyun shakes his head as he reaches out to cup Chanyeol's face, bringing it down closer to his own. "I was preparin' myself, silly.” He pauses, letting that statement fully sink in before he ambushes Chanyeol with another one. “Fucked me fingers right up me arse to the thought of you and yer big cock. But before we get to that part, I want yer to put yer tongue in me again, just like yer did for our first time. Take me back to the cave, little crow. I want to remember what it felt like."

Without a second thought, Chanyeol obliges. He guides Baekhyun down onto his hands and knees, licking his lips when the wildling swings his hips back and drops his head between his shoulder blades at the first ghostly touch of his fingers. Chanyeol kisses the rim gently, lovingly, before he starts working it with his tongue, breathing through his mouth to not only heighten Baekhyun’s senses, but to minimize his awareness of the taste on his tongue. They have not washed for a while and are both bound to stink like feral dogs, so occasionally Chanyeol takes a little break to leave teeth marks all over Baekhyun’s plump cheeks.

“I want to come just from this,” Baekhyun pants, chest already heaving as he forces his arse back against Chanyeol’s mouth. “Put it further in, yer holiness. Free me of my sins and all me wrongdoin’s, oh god. I’ve been a bad little lord.”

Chanyeol pulls back, staring down the effortless slope of Baekhyun’s spine to lock their eyes together. “What are you talking about?”

The wildling looks back at him in surprise, not having anticipated Chanyeol to stop. “What do yer mean?”

“Why are you talking about sins and wrongdoings?” Chanyeol pulls a face, spit dribbling over his chin by accident. It handily oozes off the edge of his jaw and over the reddened marks on Baekhyun’s behind.

“Because yer the god of cocks come to bless me,” Baekhyun states matter-of-factly. “And so I have invited yer into my nice, homey castle to break bread over my fire and bed me as much as yer like, even though I don’t happen to have a bed or bread. But they’re only minor details.”
Chanyeol’s confusion only grows. “So we’re... performing a play?”

Baekhyun sighs indignantly. “Yes. It’s a nice little play that only the two of us can enjoy, alright? You are the god of cocks and I’m some little lord who’s repentin’ for a fuck load of sins. Now shove yer tongue back up me arse before I cut it off, your holiness.”

“You can’t boss me about,” Chanyeol scowls, then sucking a mark into over the back of the wildling’s right hip. “You’re the one who’s in trouble.”

“There we go,” Baekhyun deflates against the floor, only his arse in the air. “Embrace the character, little crow. Embrace the scene.”

Chanyeol slaps the side of his thigh. “What did I say about telling me what to do?” Baekhyun’s response is to wiggle himself in his face, giggling audaciously as he goes.

They sew their seeds like the petals of snowdrops on the stone floors as they love the daylight away. They do not stop until they are lifeless, lying limp with their bones digging into the ground at uncomfortable angles while their muscles burn beneath the pearly stickiness. Chanyeol is the first to start redressing, and a good five hours after they first left Jongdae, they return to the disused dining hall to find the others already asleep and their dinner blackening over the fire.

The next several days are very much the same. As they work their way further east, they teeter off towards the treeline of a large wood dotted across the land known as the Gift. Snow falls only lightly, the majority of the days cloudy and cold, yet when the sun does glow golden against the greens and browns of the forest Chanyeol feels warm both inside and out.

All light beyond the Wall had been cool and unflattering, yet here, where the sun’s rays burn the ground until it is radiant, Baekhyun looks more like an (unconventional) angel than he ever has. His hair comes alive, flickering and flashing like the embers and sparks of an unruly fire, his eyes transformed into glowing coals while his skin goes peachy, almost pink in contrast to the ghostly white it was before.

“Anyone would think yer fancy me with how much yer starin’, Yeol,” the wildling teases on the fifth time he catches Chanyeol in the act, but Chanyeol does not even stop. “I know I’m handsome already, I don’t need yer to tell me.” He reaches over to punch him lightly. “Yer eyes say it enough already, yer lovesick prick.”

Laughing, Chanyeol turns to face the sun, squinting through the ivory haze pouring in through the branches. With the crisp air, it feels like spring, yet this is really just the calm before the storm. When autumn passes and the seasons change, the North will be plunged into an ice age that will last for years. The poor will die from the cold and famine will spread like wildfire, and nothing will grow in the impossible conditions. The best place to be during the winter is in Dorne, the southernmost kingdom, where temperatures remain relatively high all year round and snow is rarely ever sighted. For the wildlings, winter will not be a problem, but it is moving around the Seven Kingdoms freely that will be, if they hope to see the rest of the world.

Baekhyun reaches across to hold his hand, his cool fingers lacing in the spaces between Chanyeol’s own. Bound together like that, Chanyeol compares them to their paths, their fates; how the both of them were seemingly walking on different roads through history and somehow had the fortune of crossing at the most unexpected moment. Is their destiny the same now? Will they end up in the same place? Chanyeol does not know, but he sure hopes so. He squeezes Baekhyun’s hand, strangely delicate for a cutthroat wildling like Baekhyun, and decides that he will never, ever voluntarily let go.
The sky reddens with the sunset. Being nowhere near one of the castles along the wall, the wildlings choose to make camp in the woods. The magnanimous presence of the sun leaves them lounging in its light, the fire adding to the heat already provided by the smouldering orb in the distance which sinks further and further into the west. Chanyeol plays with Baekhyun’s fingers as Kyungsoo roasts dinner over the flames, admiring the intricate creases of his palms and the slender nature of his nails.

“I like to be clean, yer know,” Baekhyun murmurs as Chanyeol revels in the lack of dirt. “I have a special brush for cleanin’ me nails, and I trim them every month.”

Savage, Chanyeol muses before kissing the mole on Baekhyun’s thumb.

When Chanyeol thinks back to the tumultuous time he had scaling the Wall, he is physically shaken with how close to death he was. If Baekhyun didn’t save Kyungsoo, all three of them would have gone down together; a five hundred foot drop straight to a certain and sudden end. So Chanyeol tells Baekhyun how amazing he is when they whisper into each other’s ears late at night, thanking him for saving his life over and over. Although Baekhyun starts off as indifferent and pursues to be somewhere in the middle of mocking and shy, he ends up with a flattered smile on his face and drags Chanyeol in for a plethora of different kisses.

Chanyeol feels alive for the first time in his life, breathing after having accomplished something great. He has killed a White Walker, climbed the Wall, and soon he will help the Free Folk take Castle Black. He has had more adventure in the space of one month than he has had in his entire life.

He wakes to the tweeting birds the next morning, blearily opening his eyes to the sight of Baekhyun crouched before him, arrow drawn tight back against his bow ready to fire at something to his right. In the still moment, the crow admires the coarse lines of Baekhyun’s body, his posture and his concentration. He looks to be hardly breathing, so focused on the end goal that Chanyeol envies him a little. He receives a greeting smile from the wildling who successfully kills a rather fat rabbit in the next couple of seconds, whispering to Chanyeol that breakfast is now taken care of.

They walk again that day, and the next, treading the endless trail towards the Night’s Watch headquarters. By the second nightfall, they have just reached the Nightfort. The castle is similar to Greyguard, meaning it is in ruins, but it is much, much larger. The towers are crumbling, rubble from its defences scattered over the sloped ground between the fir trees in disorganised bundles.

They split up to explore once again, trying to find the safest room that will mute their chatter and house their cooking fires; a place that they can sleep knowing that they will not be uncovered by whoever should pass. The Nightfort is closer to Castle Black than Greyguard, only two more abandoned castles lying between them, so the risk of a brother patrolling the Wall up top is greater here.

On his search, Chanyeol finds an old library and borrows a couple of books in the Common Tongue he can almost fluently read, before he finds himself in the godswood. It lies in a small courtyard towards the northern side of the castle, hidden within gothic towers and shadowy walls. A single weirwood tree stands primly in an otherwise overgrown garden. Chanyeol sits silently on the bench provided and stares at the ghoulish face carved into the bone-like trunk, the red sap making it seem like the eyes are bleeding. Legend says that the Children of the Forest carved the faces on all of the weirwood trees throughout Westeros, and Chanyeol had not believed any of it possible until now. If the White Walkers have come back, who knows what else has.

Or maybe, the White Walkers never left at all.
“What yer doin’ out here?” Baekhyun appears through an archway, stepping over a thicket of thistles before carefully choosing his steps around the holly bushes. “Jongin’s found the cellar, says it’s safe enough. We’ll be campin’ out in there for the night.”

“Sounds good.” Chanyeol moves up the bench to make room for him, scooting along to the end and hooking his fingers around the front edge. “I was just having a look,” he says in gesture to the heart tree. “I haven’t seen one before, unless you count the pictures in books.”

Baekhyun crosses his legs and rests his chin on his fist, pondering the sight before him. “The old gods see out of those faces, yer know,” he says, pointing to the heart tree and gesturing to the features carved into its bark. “They watch over us. How come yer’ve never seen one before?”

“There aren’t any Godswoods south of the North. They were all destroyed a long time ago so I was raised to worship the Seven. No matter how hard I prayed to them, they never listened to me.”

“That’s because they’re not the real gods, Yeol,” Baekhyun chuckles, reaching over to curiously take the books out of his hands. “What are these?”

Chanyeol looks down and watches as Baekhyun’s lithe fingers trace the markings on the first double page and smiles.

“I found a library so I thought I’d take some. Haven’t practised my reading in a while.”

“Hmm,” Baekhyun nods, interested, flicking past a couple of pages until he comes to an illustration that he can somewhat understand. It is of a man riding a fire-breathing dragon, his ruby-encrusted sword pointing towards the red asteroid in the sky. The caption reads ‘Targaryen’, Chanyeol thinks, though he is not sure if he is pronouncing it right.

“Yeah, I can’t read to save my life. Do yer need to be able to read down south?”

Mulling over the information, Chanyeol decides: “Not really. There are a lot of people who can’t read. It’s just the rich houses who can afford to learn.”

“Houses?”

It seems so strange to Chanyeol that Baekhyun knows completely nothing of Westeros even though he lives in it, and as he sits there and explains all about King’s Landing and the great houses of Lannister and Baratheon, the Faith of the Seven and all the different kingdoms, he commits Baekhyun’s expressions of intrigue and amazement to memory. Hopefully, one day he will look at him like that.

“What are the best places to visit in the south then? Where’d yer go to have some fun?” Baekhyun grins excitedly.

“We’ll have to figure that out together,” Chanyeol laughs. “I’ve only ever known Seagard and Castle Black. I’ve always wanted to go to the Arbor, though.”

Baekhyun’s eyes widen with familiarity. “Yes!” he cries. “We’re goin’ there, and we’ll steal all the wine ‘til we have enough to bathe in, eh? I want to swim in it.” With a lick of his lips, Baekhyun comes swooping forwards to claim his mouth. The kiss is sweet with promise and alive with dreams, yet when Baekhyun pulls back he is more serious than he has been in a while. “Don’t ever betray me, little crow,” he warns, voice dark and deadly. “It won’t bode well for yer, if yer do. Might drown you in the wine if you ever try.”

Chanyeol is not as scared of him as he was before, and instead of cowering in a pit of anxiety he
finds himself smiling. “I won’t,” he says earnestly. “I swear it on the old gods and the new.”

“They’ve heard yer, yer know.” Baekhyun fights back a grin as he jerks his head in the direction of the weirwood tree. “There’ll be no takin’ that back now.”

Chanyeol boldly takes hold of Baekhyun’s face, positioning it to his liking so that their lips are brushing together ever so slightly. “Why would I even want to?” he asks the wildling sincerely, and proceeds to seal the deal with a kiss.

From here, the meeting point near Castle Black is only a day and a half away. Their day of reckoning is further into the future, however, and that reassures Chanyeol somewhat the end is not necessarily nigh.

Now an expert in walking, the remaining distance is not too over-facing. Thick layers of muscle have grown and wrapped around his legs like vines, snaking up his torso and down to his wrists. Baekhyun has made it unambiguously apparent that he enjoys the view, and Chanyeol does not really mind it either. He feels like a beast.

They head into the thicker trees, further south into the heart of the Gift until they have reached the border, an abandoned stone tower visible through the trees by the name of Queenscrown.

“Looks like we’re the first people here,” Jongdae perceives, turning gradually on the spot to survey the whole area, sucking on his teeth. With an expectant look, he asks the group: “Shall we set up camp?”

It takes a long time before all the wildlings show up, the camp gradually spreading over a wider amount of ground the with the more people who arrive. What starts off as one tent made out of a mat hanging between two trees becomes a colony, a handcrafted village amidst nature with stone lines marking clan borders and huge mountain lion pelts strapped up as roofs.

Approximately seventy other wildlings have joined them, arriving in small groups who trickle in when the sun lies in different positions in the sky, and as more and more newcomers reach the final destination, the word about Chanyeol being an old crow spreads like wildfire. It does not take long to find the fire’s source, however, when Chanyeol sees Jongin talking indiscreetly about him to a group of five new arrivals.

Evil stares is how it starts, people assessing him with narrowed eyes and shrewd sneers that bare their rotting teeth. Chanyeol does his best to ignore it all, focusing his attention on Baekhyun instead. The wildling busies himself with carving an infinite number of fresh arrows, all for shooting the cawing crows. When glares turn into not so subtle bitching – for want of a better word – Chanyeol finds it much harder to tune them all out.

At the start, he accidentally allows himself to be consumed by their words which claim he will betray them and run off to his scum crow friends while they sleep. He wonders why people keep bringing up his past when it is apparent he is trying to distance himself from it, and he is angered
by the fact that no one is giving him a real chance to change. The sense of belonging, which had
already been frail, is now almost completely dashed. But then he asks himself why he cares, why it
matters what they think. It takes a while, but he slowly comes to accept that his life is not
determined by the crippling expectations of his peers.

“Ignore them, Yeol,” Baekhyun grunts under his breath as they walk back to their side of camp
from the stream, freshly washed pots and pans gripped in Chanyeol’s fists.

“I am,” he replies solemnly, keeping his eyes down.

“Filthy crow,” someone hisses.

“I’ll cut yer throat meself!” whispers another.

“Just wait ‘til the sun goes down,” a woman threatens, and Baekhyun turns on her like a starved
dog to a slab of meat.

“You shut the fuck up, lady,” he warns, arrow poised at the spot between her eyes. “I have had it
with the lot of yer!” he yells, beady eyes skirting to all the members of the crowd that has gathered
around them. “When are yer goin’ to shut up and focus on what’s important? We’re takin’ Castle
Black soon and instead of practisin’ yer fightin’ skills, yer sittin’ around threatenin’ to murder
someone on the same side! Minseok would be ashamed of how pathetic yer’ve become. We’re
Free Folk, anyone can join us.”

“Not a crow!” someone calls from the back, and Baekhyun turns in their direction to release his
arrow. The sharp point spears the bark of the tree directly beside the man’s head, an almost lethal
shot.

“There’s no place in the future for people like you,” Baekhyun glowers at him, slotting another
arrow into place in less than a second. “Focus on yer own and leave us to ourselves. Come on,
Yeol.”

In complete silence, they walk back to their section of the camp. Dropping the pans by the fire for
Kyungsoo who smiles in thanks, oblivious to the confrontation.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Chanyeol says quietly as he watches Baekhyun strip of his quiver. “If
you save me all the time they’re never going to respect me.”

Baekhyun glares at him before kneeling down and crawling under their awning to put his bow
away safely. “I couldn’t give two shits about that, Yeol,” he spits, speaking at a volume which
induces Chanyeol to move closer so he can hear. “They’ll respect neither of us if we let it all pass
by like we don’t care, like their death threats don’t mean shit.”

“So you’re doing this for yourself, not for me?” Chanyeol involuntarily finds himself pouting,
lowering to his knees and shuffling into their sleeping space beside Baekhyun who is furiously
pulling his boots off.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

Baekhyun pauses to look at him, gaze steady. “Yeol—”

“Does it damage your pride to be with someone who’s picked on a lot? Are you ashamed?”
“What the _fuck_, Yeol? Yer think I’m ashamed of yer? What kind of insecurities are these?”

The words feel like a stab to the chest. “I wouldn’t feel insecure if you weren’t so easily provoked all the time. You hear the word ‘crow’ from someone’s mouth and you go batshit crazy, like someone’s cursed your ancestors! It is like you’re overcompensating for something!”

Baekhyun narrows his eyes darkly. “Well, _excuse me_ for wantin’ to stick up for yer. I don’t want yer to be trodden in the mud by those low lives out there. If yer’d rather they carry on, I’ll stop, and yer can look like an idiot on yer own.”

“Baek… just be reasonable here, okay?” he pleads. “We don’t need to give them cause to get worse. If we react to them that way every time they say something, they get a thrill out of it and they do it again. It’s best just to ignore it.”

“He’s right,” Jongdae pipes in, having just appeared by the campfire. “Yer addin’ wood to the fire, Baek. Best just leave it alone.”

For the first time, Baekhyun starts sulking. “What is this? Pick-on-Baekhyun day? I didn’t get the raven about that one.”

Chanyeol comforts him with a heartfelt hug and a kiss to his hair, starting to rock him back and forth like a child to get him to calm down.

Just like nearly every other time, Baekhyun’s warnings do not exactly stand their ground. The wildlings do not stop taunting Chanyeol and it even progresses to the point where they shout “Crow!” every time they see him. Baekhyun gets frustrated whenever Chanyeol makes him hold back, so he releases his tension by killing things in the woods. One night, he even scores a badger, and the two of them tuck themselves away in a private clearing to keep it all for themselves. It is as close to a romantic candlelit dinner that they can get, even if they are interrupted multiple times by those with a keen sense of smell who track them down and ask for a piece.

“Be nice to Chanyeol and I’ll consider sharin’ with yer in the future,” is what Baekhyun always says, and Chanyeol finds himself amused rather than offended.

They do not just move their cooking station though. They move the bedroom as well, taking their awning and mattresses to a perfectly secluded area by the stream. In the absence of prying eyes, they get through several bottles of cooking oil before snoozing off to the sight of the stars rippling in the reflection of the water.

Despite their new abode, they have to travel back to the main camp for supplies every day, and although the slander continues, Chanyeol vows to himself that he will prove them all wrong when it really counts. Still, he does not exactly know when that will be, and as Baekhyun cuts his hair by the stream with a newly honed knife, he asks the wildling what Minseok’s signal is and when it will come.

Taking a deep breath, the wildling smiles and pauses for a moment, idly massaging Chanyeol’s scalp. Intrigued, Chanyeol angles his body so he can turn around to look at the longing expression on Baekhyun’s face, and receives the words: “When the sky burns and the wall is aglow – that’s his signal. It will come whenever he is ready, but it should be soon.”

“Soon.” Chanyeol nods, smiling and accepting a soft peck on the lips before Baekhyun directs his head into position again.

“Yer gonna look so hot after I’ve done this haircut,” the wildling promises, and Chanyeol laughs so
boisterously that Baekhyun ends up catching one of his fingers with the tip of the blade. “Fuck you, Chanyeol!” he cries, sucking on the swelling bead of blood. “I’m shavin’ yer bald now.”

The next ten days are spent preparing for battle, Baekhyun now sitting on a mountain of arrows as tall as a tree. Chanyeol, on the other hand, spends hours and hours a day practising and perfecting his swordplay, learning tips and tricks from another wildling named Sehun who arrived shortly after himself and Baekhyun parted from the main camp.

He is a respected member of the Free Folk, the equivalent of a commander in a southern army, and is the first person to come up to him without shouting an insult in his face. Not only does it make a nice change, but Sehun also makes for good company, his broad intellect allowing all conversations to consistently pique Chanyeol’s interest.

Together, the both of them clash swords until dusk each day, their blades clanging noisily through the woods until Baekhyun struts between them and drags Chanyeol away with the excuse of “You’ve had his blade all day, now I get his bone.”

Mostly they talk about fighting techniques and Minseok’s strategy. Sometimes they are even brave enough to speak of plans for the future. When they walk through camp together, conversing healthily like old friends, the glares Chanyeol receives are spawned from confusion rather than hatred. He can see the wonder in the wildlings’ eyes as they ask themselves, why is Sehun talking to a crow? Why does Sehun trust him?

With the wildling’s help, perceptions are starting to change.

“I can definitely tell you fight like a crow,” Sehun pants after disarming him for the fourth time. “You use only your arm and not your whole body. Stupid.”

Chanyeol rests his hands on his knees, trying to regain his breath. “That works when everyone else is only fighting with one arm too. If we’re going up against crows, that’ll be how they fight.”

“Aye,” Sehun nods, returning him his sword hilt-first. “But then you will be equal. You need to be better.”

Sighing, Chanyeol stands up straight and looks around the forest – his way of ending the conversation. They are talking about killing the people he lived with for eleven years of his life. Now that the prospect has become a reality and said reality is so close that Chanyeol can feel it in his very bones, he finds it terribly difficult to come to terms with.

“Only half of you is in this,” Sehun deduces, gesturing to him with a lazy arm before he lumbers to a fallen tree and perches himself on one of the thicker upper branches. “I think the other half of you feels bad for your brethren.”

Chanyeol hangs his head, lugging his aching limbs over to sit beside who he is courageous enough to call his friend. “I do not feel bad for all of them,” he murmurs, rubbing his forehead and sheathing his sword as he thinks of Yixing and Luhan. They will be at Castle Black, dressed in the colours of his enemy. Yixing has only ever been nice to him, how can he stab him in the back? “And your people hate me,” he then adds, just in case it was not obvious enough already.

“My people hate everyone from south of the Wall. We call them Kneelers; they submit to their lords and laws like dogs.”

“I’m aware of that. But how do I make them not hate me?”

Sehun shrugs, jumping off the branch and doing a few arm stretches while he walks away. “An
opportunity will present itself, I am sure. Every day there are thousands of possibilities.”

Chanyeol gazes on through the trees to where the main camp is thriving and wonders why Sehun has to speak so ambiguously.

“Now, let’s fight again. And this time, we will use your whole body. Come on.”

Frowning, he gets up again to let himself be beaten. Yet Sehun is not the cocky type, so at least Chanyeol knows that the wildling is not just doing it to show off; he genuinely wants to help.

Every night he will return to his and Baekhyun’s camp with a new bruise to show off, telling the story behind it to the grinning wildling over their fire. Watching Baekhyun’s smile grow from nothing into something so beautiful is ingrained onto Chanyeol’s memory now, and he is more than okay with it.

“I have somethin’ of yours,” the wildling whispers one night when they are lying down in bed, facing each other. Baekhyun’s skin looks a bluey-grey in the darkness, his eyes as black as a raven, yet his lips remain a tantalising pink. Chanyeol wonders whether he bites them deliberately to draw blood to the surface. “Found it in yer old clothes. Yer know, those black rags yer used to walk around in?” he teases, rising a laugh out of him. “Figured it meant somethin’ to yer considerin’ yer had nothin’ else, other than the rags of course, so I picked it up. Only just remembered about it.”

And then Baekhyun reveals the small wooden sculpture of a fish from his pocket, cradling it ever so carefully in his hand between them before passing it on. “I’m surprised it survived the Wall climb, to be honest,” he chuckles, eyelashes fluttering as his eyes skit between Chanyeol’s hand and his expression. “Yer would’ve thought that with all the bloody weather we had to put up with it would’ve fallen out somehow. Blown away on the wind. Guess not, eh?”

How could Chanyeol have forgotten about this?

Chanyeol does not let go of it for the next few days. It is kept safely in his pocket, his hand subconsciously checking every few moments to make sure it is still there. In a time where the days are unpredictable, it brings him comfort. It reminds him of his adoptive mother and her love for him, no matter how absent she may have been. It reminds him that he had been cared for, he had been important, and it reminds him that he is lucky to have had a woman like Nora around at the time he had been born.

Be happy, my boy.

With all his might, he is trying.

“What is that thing?” Sehun points at it, blatant and direct. The wildling is always straightforward, and Chanyeol actually admires him for it. Everyone down south – Kneelers – are backhanded. Every sentence has a different meaning and a compliment is never really a compliment, but a test. It is refreshing to be around people who say things as they are. Although it honestly can be brutal, it is better than being lied to. “You have been looking at it for so long, I am starting to think you are going to lose your mind.”

Chanyeol turns the fish over in his palm again, reading the inscription and feeling the corners of his mouth twitch. “My mother gave it to me,” he says gently. “Just before I left.” He offers it to Sehun, figuring that he should quench the man’s curiosity before he starts getting frustrated. “I didn’t realise until recently that there was something written on the back. I couldn’t even read until about a year ago. When I was younger I just thought it was the carver’s sign or something, I didn’t think it was a message for me.”
Sehun nods, admiring the detail with deep concentration. “And what does it say?”

“Be happy.”

“Ahh,” he nods, throwing it up in the air and catching it again. “Baekhyun makes you happy,” the wildling grins, knowing. “I can tell that Baekhyun is also very happy. He used to not be happy, you know. He would strut around the camp and flirt with me to piss off Hayder. Sometimes he would even sit on my lap.” He chuckles. “I never touched him though. I do not touch another man’s lay no matter how willing he is. Now he is your lay, a lay who makes you happy, yes? So you should do what your mother told you to do and fight for that happiness. And if your happiness is Baekhyun Byunson, fight for him and his cause. Fight for your freedom.”

A smile creeps onto Chanyeol’s face when Sehun lightly tosses his fish back to him, unwavering until it is disrupted by a flicker of movement through the pines. His jaw goes slack as he homes in on a deer grazing away at a patch of grass. Even with their position, being a good half a mile away from the main camp, it is unexpected to see such grand wildlife so nearby. Alas, supper.

“Sehun,” he whispers, tensing his body so that he moves less than a statue. The wildling looks at him in the midst of cracking his knuckles before he spits on the ground, two of Sehun’s many unfavourable mannerisms. He grunts to show Chanyeol he has heard him, so the crow talks further. “There’s a deer over there.”

At the mention of food, Sehun stills. His eyes shoot after Chanyeol’s to find the creature still gnawing away, blissfully aware of their presence. Judging by Sehun’s generally loud nature, Chanyeol is surprised that the deer is there at all, meaning he is absolutely flabbergasted when another one, a lithe doe, comes tootling over too.

“Oh, fuck,” Sehun cries in a muted voice, turning to Chanyeol with wide and hungry eyes. “We need to kill them,” he declares. “I want them for dinner.”

Chanyeol nods, completely on board. “How?”

Sehun rubs his chin, scowling for a moment before he whirs around. “We get spears. I’ll be right back.”

Chanyeol keeps his eyes on their food while Sehun races back to the main camp, collecting the equipment they need. The deer only move a couple of paces, engrossed in the dwindling autumn grass. It is a calm picture, one of tranquillity, and just as Chanyeol starts to feel a wash of peace come over him, Sehun is racing back into the frame with two spears in hand.

“I take the big stag, you take the doe. We shoot at the same time. The deer will probably run off but they should die if we hit them right. Here.” He thrusts a long mammoth rib bone into Chanyeol’s hand, carved to a sharp point on one end and cut specifically before the natural curve of the rib cage. There are brown blood stains blotching its surface, proof that it works. “Are you good at throwing things?”

“Sometim—”

“Great! Let’s go!”

Sehun runs off, prancing through the woods like a deranged fox to ensure that his footsteps remain light and unheard. Chanyeol can only follow, feeling rather lost. He has never even held a spear before, let alone thrown one. Nevertheless, there is a first time for everything. Briefly, he frets over whether Sehun would hate him if he let the doe get away, but decides that it is silly to worry over
such matters. Their friendship is not determined on his ability to hunt.

He is reminded of the last time he scored a deer. Baekhyun had made it look so easy, essentially pouncing on the thing like he had been a mountain lion himself. As far as Chanyeol is aware, he even sustained no injuries. On the one hand, Chanyeol feels like he has a lot to live up to, but on the other, he is starting to accept that it is okay to be different. Where some people excel at hunting, he will excel at swordplay, and that is just the way it is.

Still, this is dinner they are talking about. Killing the deer is sort of a necessity.

Concealing himself behind a thick trunk, trying to be inconspicuous, Chanyeol examines where it would be best for him to strike from. The doe is about ten feet in front of him, astoundingly still none the wiser of her impending death, her whole side facing him. He will be unable to strike the chest from this angle, so maybe he should aim for a leg so as to prevent her from running away. Seeing as Sehun is not here to confer with, Chanyeol chooses to trust his instincts.

He can still see the wildling though, hidden several trees away. South of the Wall where the snow has recently melted, their grey furs become redundant, but if one is stealthy and observant enough, it need not be a hindrance.

Sehun signals the impending strike by raising his left hand in the air. When he throws it forwards, they both let the spears loose. Chanyeol hits the doe square in the right thigh, while the stag is taken by the shoulder. Both make an urgent departure, dashing off through the trees, so it is up to them to follow the trails of blood until they collapse from their wounds.

The evening sun is breaking through the trees by the time they are lugging the carcasses by their hooves back to camp. They make the decision to trade away some of their meat for variation purposes, Sehun saying that he saw Marge’s sons with a group of chickens strung up between two trees and he wants one. Together, they section the meat in Sehun’s area of the camp, garnering the interest of the locals who stop by to have a peep at their kill, and then they go off to see who has the things they want.

Sehun makes the trade, a chicken dangling from his belt, and Chanyeol manages to barter two doe legs for a badger. The cooperation from the wildling in possession of the badger does take him back a little, but he is too thankful to question it. He has just offered the front legs to a woman with some drying fish from the river when her partner turns around and gives him a glance from head to toe. Sehun has walked ahead to where he saw the tail of a fox, thinking of getting it for his expecting woman, so Chanyeol is on his best behaviour. Angering a wildling will not end well if he is on his own.

He makes a deal for seven carp with the woman’s promise that they will keep until tomorrow, and is tucking them all safely into a handy sack when he feels a hefty hand clamp down on his shoulder.

“Sehun likes you,” the woman’s partner, a bald headed man with scary scars over his scalp, says. His voice is deep and accented, words kept at the bare minimum. A group of five or so gather in behind him, all giving Chanyeol the same stern look with almost identical appearances. They are all huge, seven – maybe eight – feet tall and covered in strange markings, some even depicting what look like scenes of violence.

Chanyeol swallows, nodding as a way of response. If anything, he does not want to provoke them at all. It looks like just one alone could snap him in half like a twig.

Instead of being split into two, he is being patted, the hand dropping as the man tips his head back
and forth slowly. “We like you too.” Then the whole group of them are nodding, beefy arms crossed like they have become his protectors and are showing outsiders their deadliest weapons – themselves.

“Oh… Thank you.” Despite their kind words of acceptance, it still almost sounds like they are threatening him. Though Chanyeol has no interest in turning them away. They like him because Sehun likes him, and that is good enough for now.

“Ooooh! What as me man been up to?” Baekhyun parades into the group, affectionately dangling himself off Chanyeol’s arm. “My, my, we have been busy. Gonna cook me a nice big meal, are yer, Yeol? Gonna fill me up ‘til I’m burstin’?”

Chanyeol smiles, distracted by Baekhyun’s suggestive words, when the bald man decides to thickly interject, “We like him now,” to Baekhyun, as if it is imperative that he let everybody know.

The wildling looks over, sultry act dropped, and actually seems surprised. “Gods, Chanyeol, have yer been seducin’ the Thenns?” He lets rip a scoff of astonishment. “Well, thank you Skur, that’s very kind of yer to say,” Baekhyun smiles politely to the main bald man, tilting his head to the side to further sweeten him up.

“We go tell others to like him too,” Skur then announces, and the whole group of them go stomping off through the camp. Chanyeol watches for a little while, turns away when he sees them begin to grab regular wildlings by their collars and colourfully threaten them.

“What’s a Thenn?” he then asks, turning back to Baekhyun as the wildling picks up his hand.

Baekhyun says, “They’re one of the clans. They don’t speak much of the Common Tongue which is why they sound a little strange, but they’re the best warriors and can craft bronze. Minseok only just persuaded them to join the army, and it’s a good thing they like yer.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because everyone else is scared shitless of ‘em. Except for me, ’course,” he chuckles, dragging him away from the Thenn woman currently gutting her fish.

Chanyeol hums, frowning. “They said they liked me because Sehun liked me. What does that mean?”

“Everyone looks up to Sehun, hadn’t yer noticed? Even the Thenns have respect for him.”

In truth, Chanyeol had not realised. He spends all his time with Sehun alone and the rest of it with Baekhyun in their separate camp, unknowing of the group dynamics and Sehun’s alleged power. He feels better for it, though, more assured. There are people looking out for him, people who accept him and have given him the recognition he has so desperately longed for since the day he first saw the King-Beyond-the-Wall. He feels light with happiness, and simpers in the last dregs of the sun.

They retreat to their private camp under a lilac sky with the accompaniment of birdsong, holding hands as they weave through the ferns and over the moss. A rabbit is already roasting splendidly over the fire when they return, vengefully spitting into the flames before they section it off and split it over two plates. Together, they fall into a comfortable conversation as they tend to their stomachs, calmly pondering the future by finishing off each other’s sentences and stealing the words out of the other’s mouth.
“It’s quite warm today,” Chanyeol remarks offhandedly, looking up to where a family of birds play around on the tree branches, tweeting to each other.

“Mmm,” Baekhyun sighs in agreement, lounging back against their bed beneath the awning and crossing his arms behind his head. “There’ll probably be a storm of some kind soon.”

Beside them, the stream trickles pleasantly, helping to wash out the roars of laughter coming from a little way off through the trees, stemming from the main camp. Chanyeol places their dinner plates out of the way and wipes his hands on his furs, leaning back on his palms with his legs stretched out in front of him, just thinking about what is to come.

“I reckon you’ve got enough arrows to kill every man in Castle Black three times over.” He smiles fondly, eyeing Baekhyun’s backpack that has now been repurposed from oil storage to a supersized quiver.

“That was the plan,” Baekhyun replies sleepily. “Just need more arms now so I can shoot from multiple angles at a time. Bows are great for long distance fighting but in short ranges they’re a bit of an inconvenience, so I’m gonna be shootin’ all the peckin’ crows from the roof as best I can.”

Chanyeol nods, then twisting his torso around and propping himself up on his elbow. “Please be careful,” he begs softly, Baekhyun’s eyes opening to behold him. “We have to make it out of this fight together.”

Baekhyun’s lips curl into a mellow smile, smitten. “You worry too much,” he murmurs, rolling his head a little to the side to better look at him. Seamlessly, he takes Chanyeol’s hand. “I’ll be careful. Don’t worry about me.”

“It’s just,” Chanyeol closes his eyes for a moment, appearing to be in pain, “if anything were to happen to you I… I don’t know what I’d do.”

“Then it’s a good thing nothin’s gonna happen, isn’t it?” Baekhyun whispers, bringing Chanyeol’s knuckles to his mouth to kiss them. “The gods are watchin’ over us, Yeol. They’re on our side, have been since the start. We’re the ones who’ll win.”

Melting into his words of confidence, Chanyeol swiftly leans down to press their lips together. Baekhyun puckers up to meet him, soft and compliant when the crow eventually moves to lie between his legs. They slot together like a lock and key, snugly carved just for one another.

In the warm autumn air, Chanyeol takes his time uncovering every last inch of Baekhyun’s skin, kissing goosebumps and old, faded scars as he goes, admiring the evidence of victory laid to rest on the wildling’s body. The bruises on his midriff are fading into blotches of yellow and green now, the sole remnants of the angry purple scarring. His stomach sucks in when Chanyeol kisses his navel, moving his mouth hotly up and over his torso to his neck to make bruises of his own, the wildling keening beneath him.

Baekhyun clings to him in a way that he has not done before. His legs wrap around Chanyeol’s hips and his arms wind around his neck, holding him as close as possible without a single mocking sentence leaving his lips. He is calm and quiet, exposing himself and all that ‘mushy crap’ to Chanyeol for him to cherish. Trust blossoms between them like a spring flower, buds transforming into magnificent petals when Chanyeol makes them a part of each other.

It feels different this time. Less like fucking and more like lovemaking; like they are not just quenching frustration or tension, but more like they want to make each other feel good instead. Really, Chanyeol just wants Baekhyun to feel how powerful his love is, and how tough it is...
growing. Yet the dewy afterglow is ruined when Chanyeol sees smoke billowing in the sky. Lilac turns to orange in the blink of an eye, and suddenly there are horns and shouts sounding through the trees.

By the time they make it back to the main camp, more than half of the wildlings have moved out. Fires are still smoking away under food that will not be eaten. Tents lay strewn across the ground where people have torn them down in their heroic sprints to the battlefield. Chanyeol wonders how many of them will come back to reclaim their drying washing strung up between the trees, how many will return to pack their bags and move onto the future that they have been preparing for their entire lives.

This is it, all their efforts culminating to end life as they know it.

Chanyeol grips his sword out of fear, grabbing the hilt, ready to unsheathe it at a moment’s notice. He does not trust these woods, does not trust the wildlings who are charging off towards the north with spears made of animal bone and brutal mallets crafted from stones. A crow could pop out from behind a tree and slit his throat, or the Free Folk could turn and make all their death threats come true. The only person he trusts right now other than himself is Baekhyun, the wildling making quick work of gathering all his necessary resources.

“Baekhyun! Chanyeol!” Jongdae calls, running towards them in the opposite direction to the fight. “Have yer seen the signal? We’re takin’ Castle Black now!”

“We saw it,” Chanyeol says, glancing back at Baekhyun just to double check that he is alright.

“Kyungsoo and Jongin already left have they?” the wildling asks, swinging his backpack and hooking his arms through the straps, hundreds of arrows stored carefully inside.

Jongdae nods, surveying the area as he answers. “Yeah. Listen, keep each other safe, alright? I’ll join you in a bit.”

He starts jogging away from them, clapping Chanyeol’s shoulder on the way past. The crow pivots around in confusion. “Where are you going?”

“To hide in Queenscrown! Yer goin’ to need eyes in the sky!” Jongdae grins smugly, running backwards for a short while before sprinting off towards the old tower with buoyant steps.

“Come on, Yeol,” Baekhyun grabs his attention, testing out his bow, “we’re already late. I didn’t carve all these arrows only to get there and find the battle over.”

When Baekhyun starts walking, Chanyeol reaches for his hand to pull him back, crushing him in a hug that he hopes will protect him through the dark hours to come. Already, twilight has passed and the sky is fading to indigo, an angry blaze staining it red on the other side of the Wall, the Haunted Forest on fire.
“We’re going to be alright,” Chanyeol whispers, mouth directly beside Baekhyun’s ear once he bows his head enough, “you and me.”

Baekhyun clutches him tighter. “I’ll drink to that. When it’s all over of course,” he decides. “I’ll even find yer some fruit juice, eh? Seein’ as wine is for bathin’ in.”

“Yeah,” Chanyeol breathes shakily, burying his face into the fur of Baekhyun’s shoulder. “Please stay safe, Baek. Please.”

The wildling chuckles, rubbing his hands up and down Chanyeol’s broad back. “Come on, yer pansy. Almost sounds like yer fancy me.”

The joke eases Chanyeol’s nerves, and he pulls back to reveal his shy smile to the boy he is past feeling a fancy for. “We’d better get going if you hope to use up all those arrows,” he says gently, pointing to where he can see a great bundle of feathers sticking out the open top of the bag on Baekhyun’s back. “Not that I think there’s even enough crows for that.”

“Then we’ll have plenty for afterwards,” Baekhyun shrugs, readjusting his straps. “Give us a kiss then, you. I would say give us yer children but we don’t have time for that, if yer catch me drift.” The wildling poses naughtily, popping out his hip as his eyes flicker down to Chanyeol’s crotch a good few times before the crow delivers him the kiss he wants.

Then they are on their way, racing towards the fire with an inferno just as hot in their souls. Their feet lurch over the rocky ground in the tracks of the wildlings gone before, stones grinding against one another with the weight of their steps. Up ahead at the base of the Wall, towering above them from the higher ground, is the symbol of their freedom. Once Castle Black falls, the whole of Westeros shall be theirs whether the southern kings like it or not; the world will be ripe for the taking.

Nerves home in as they start bolting up the entry road, muddy puddles splatting around their ankles and up to their shins. Balls of fire arc through the air and hiss at their feet. Wildlings swarm around the palisade like a colony of rats, bowstrings twanging from the battlements above the gate as crows try to fend them off. Flames thwart the darkness from metal grates and torches, brothers blight their easy way in, and Chanyeol leaps over fiery shafts aimed directly at his charge.

Baekhyun stays behind, a bunch of arrows in his bow hand as he shoots in quick succession, taking out three crows without even breaking a sweat. Chanyeol goes on, joining the mass of roaring wildlings at the foot of the gate as they hurl the grappling hooks over the top. Rocks fall from above, a large one landing and obliterating the man beside him, skull caving in. Blood splats across Chanyeol’s face and his eyes turn up, wary of another before an arrow whizzes past and strikes the crow with a scream.

The men cry and rage around him, scaling the wooden gate against the flickering light. Chanyeol’s heart rages in his chest, beating like punches against his ribcage as he watches men of the Night’s Watch being flung from the ramparts by the fists of wildlings. They are butchered before his eyes, hacked to pieces until they are unrecognisable. Another two men come down, an arm smacking Chanyeol in the face. He reveals his sword in one deft move, turning to brace himself before the gate as it slowly creaks open, a wave of noise blowing into him from the other side.

Men of the Night’s Watch hold their weapons to the smoking skies, bellowing against the two blasts of the horn. “Brothers! With me!” a commander yells, footsteps pelting against the drizzling rain as he initiates the charge. Watching them rush towards him has Chanyeol frozen on his spot. These are the people he used to live with. He broke bread and shared ale with them on winter days and swore his oath in their presence on a midsummer’s eve. And now he is here to kill them. End
their lives so they can think no more, bludgeon their bodies until their names cannot be placed to their faces. He envies the others who can run so brazenly ahead of him, clashing with his old brothers in the centre of the courtyard with shrieks of steel against sheer will without a worry in the world.

His eyes find Kyungsoo slitting the throat of the cook, Martin Moors, a lethal knife in each hand as he dances through the square slicing people to slithers. Jongin has his spear, tackling a harmless steward to the ground before he stabs him in the centre of his forehead. An eagle cries from up above, plummeting into the chaos with its claws outstretched as it descends onto First Builder, Clifford Banks, to mutilate his eyes, gauge them from their sockets and squeeze them until they pop. Everyone is in the thick of it, everyone but him, and as he watches people being skewered on metal and steel like food over a campfire, he starts to doubt whether he has the stomach for this.

“If yer don’t move,” a familiar voice suddenly shouts, “I’m gonna shoot this fuckin’ arrow up yer arse!”

Chanyeol whirls around to see Baekhyun knelt on one knee behind a wagon before the gate, hands a blur as he sends ten arrows a minute through the air to meet their intended targets. His body moves in perfect co-ordination, so sure and confident in its aim as he fatally wounds crow after crow. He is so effortless, so surreal. Chanyeol actually stops to wonder how he is even a being of this earth.

“Stand there and they’re gonna pick yer off like a nasty scab, Yeol!” Baekhyun glares at him with pure hatred in his eyes. “Do you want to die?”

The crow grips his sword, looking on through his damp hair. “No!”

“They are the only thing standin’ between us and freedom! Fight, you idiot!” The wildling gets up on his feet, a shot then whirring past Chanyeol’s head to kill a man coming for them. “Fight like a fuckin’ wildlin’ and let the crows be damned! Behind you!”

Chanyeol spins around so fast that he almost pisses himself out of shock. There, storming towards him like a slobbering hound, is the brother from the rookery. He is the reason why Nora does not know he is alive. The pig had practically thrown him from the room when he had asked to send a letter back home to Seagard, so now Chanyeol is going to kick him down to hell.

With the rage instilled in him from his childhood grudge, Chanyeol raises his sword and thrashes it down, closing his eyes when he feels resistance behind his swing. While the row of the battlefield fades into a muffled clamour in his ears, Chanyeol focuses on his shuddering breath to calm himself down. Opening his eyes tells him that his sword has cut a clean line from the crow’s shoulder through his chest, blood guzzling down along his blade until the swirls in the metal shine a rosewood pink. His eyes are fused onto the dying expression of a man who had been very much alive only a few moments ago, watching as crimson trickles from the corners of his mouth and even out of his left nostril. Gaze vacant, battle cry aborted, the man slowly surrenders to the floor.

Chanyeol jumps back in shock, impervious now to the carnage transpiring in all directions around him. His voice stumbles over words and phrases are caught in the back of his throat. His mind is cluttered with repeating images of how the man had looked while he was dying, so sombre with eyes swimming in remorse. His heart throbs so painfully that he even has to grab his chest, just to feel like he is doing something to ease it somehow. When he turns around to tell Baekhyun that he has done it – he has finally killed his first man – he finds the wildling long gone, and raises his eyes to see him leaping over the roofs with a finesse unrivalled.

He needs to man up. If Baekhyun can do this, so can he. This is his chance to prove himself to
everyone who has ever doubted him, crow and wildling both. He will show Jongin and the men from the other clans, he will show his old brothers who labelled him useless without warrant, and more importantly, he will show himself. He deserves to be here and he deserves his freedom, and he will fight whatever stands in his way.

Fire sparks up within him, the icy gusts and the breath of the Wall deflecting off his skin as the fury he lets rip stokes the flames; and with steadfast steps, he thaws irrevocably into the heat.

To his right, an axe. He dodges the sharp edge by bounding to the right, countering with a sure stroke to the wielding arm. A cry follows, a man mourning for his lost limb, before Chanyeol silences him completely.

Amidst the bloodbath, an orchestra of clanging metal, breathless shouts and stomach-turning squelches vibrantly plays; the bass of a giant's roar and the tenor of an eagle's screech leaves a persistent buzz in his ears, one that refuses to pass even though there are people screaming in his face just a few mere metres away.

"Traitor!" they cry, Chanyeol ignorant to it. He bloodies them up one by one, leaving a trail of dead bodies behind him. Their spiteful words have no hold over him anymore. He is on fire, and while he is immune, they are all getting burned.

An arrow barely misses his eye. It clips his ear as he turns his head, eyes homing in on the archer behind it. He finds Vince, stood on the walkway with a cocky amount of calm, smirking down on him like he had deliberately intended to miss. Baring his teeth like a dog, Chanyeol bolts after his retreating footsteps, bloodthirsty.

With an animalistic growl, he vaults up onto the walkway and launches himself in the direction of his old friend. His fist clenches in anticipation around the hilt of his bleeding sword, the reflections of the fire dancing in the blade as it relishes in the butchery. Footfalls are loud against the sodden wooden planks, his vulnerability peaking as the ears of his opponents pick up on the sound. There is nothing he can do to help it though, and Vince is already mindful of his oncoming.

At the approaching corner, he sees the door to the council chamber swing back. Blood drips down his neck and under his clothes, yet the pain of the arrowhead wound itself is pushed to the back of his mind. There is no time to spend grovelling over future disfigurations when he might not even have a future if he lets his concentration slip.

There is a single candle framed by the doorway, Chanyeol hastening towards it to find Vince and break his bow in two. With a burst, he flies in over the threshold and the door slams shut behind him. Four bodies creep out of the shadows with swords in their hands, a yellow smile illuminated in the darkness, flame extinguished and fuming.

"Well, look who it is, eh? It's little Rivers. Never thought we'd be seein' your mug 'round 'ere again," Bags sneers, chancing a domineering step forwards. "Wha's this? Grey 'n' not black?" He raises his sword to trace Chanyeol's furs, testing his patience. The steel strokes over the strands with almost a hissing sound, and it grates on Chanyeol’s nerves. "My, my," Bags cocks his head to the side, "we 'ave been busy."

Chanyeol hitches up his sword to defend himself. He is not going to lose to Bags. He is not going to lose to anyone. Falling to his knees tonight is simply not an option. He is a Kneeler no more, but a member of the Free Folk. He is his own master and makes his own fate, his is under the immortal protection of the old gods.

"Gonna fight us, are yer, Rivers? Like t'see you try." Bags’ eyes glint in the light from outside, his
face aimed towards the window; rain pummels against the thin glass in the frames, rattling on the wooden panes. It does its best to mute the sounds of Death calling, yet falls short. Chanyeol can hear the yells and screams, despite Nature’s best efforts. "Bet yer can’t even kill one of us. Bet yer gonna die tonight, Rivers. Yer not seein’ the sun in the mornin’, traitor."

"Turncloak." Vince.

Peter. "Deserter."

Lofty keeps to himself, wordless.

Chanyeol scans the dark room quickly, heavily relying on his peripheral vision. There is a thick table with a map strewn across it, several chairs around the perimeter. Tapestries on the walls show the Seven Kingdoms in the finest of detail, yet Chanyeol is about to spoil them with red.

Vince pounces forwards with an arming sword, their blades crashing in an X formation when Chanyeol retaliates. Chanyeol grabs his sword handle with two hands and leans his head back at the same time as forcing his weapon down, the acute sword edge and his new muscle rapidly winning the war. Vince’s weapon clunks to the ground and he stumbles back, cradling his right hand to his chest and wailing extravagantly. In a pool of blood on the floor floats his thumb and the four ends of his fingers.

The others belatedly address that this is not going to be as easy as they had originally thought, so they descend on him like crows to a fresh carcass. Chanyeol backtracks against the door, locked, and spins around once he clocks that he has gotten himself cornered. Bags and Peter have longswords, the former spinning his in his palm to show off his talents and skill, trying to intimidate him into cowardice. Chanyeol glowers at that, broadening his shoulders and squaring his chest, and then he strikes forwards.

He chops through the air, Valyrian steel singing. A slash to his thigh throws him off balance, but he uses the momentum the sudden stumble brings to carve Peter’s stomach open from hip to hip. The splashing sound resembles the noise created when a net full of fish is released onto a ship deck, and Chanyeol flies away before he can catch the sight or smell of any entrails.

"Lofty!" Bags cries, now fighting Chanyeol alone. “Shoot ‘im! Lofty, shoot ‘im!”

No such arrow comes. Lofty’s trembling hands are clasped around a bow, his figure squashed into the corner of the room in fright. From the sounds of things, he is murmuring obsessively to himself, words unintelligible but probably attempts at convincing himself that what Bags is saying is the right thing to do. It is easy to follow an order, not easy to deal with the repercussions. A man is not innocent just because he is being told what to do and Chanyeol intends to make him realise that.

“Nock, you idiot! Nock ‘n’ loose!” Bags rages, jumping back from Chanyeol’s advances.

The crow pushes forwards, evading all blows and drives as he staggers Bags back against a tapestry. He can taste justice on his tongue, sweet with just the optimum amount of tang. And then all he can taste is pain. Bags’ victory smile makes him nauseous.

Without thinking, Chanyeol swivels around to meet eyes with Lofty, betrayal distorting his face. The arrow has embedded itself into the top of his shoulder, agony leeching onto his skin. He is about to storm towards the coward, chop him to pieces, when arms trap his elbows to his torso and drag him backwards.
“Fuck you, Rivers,” Bags spits in his ear as he tightens his hold, cutting off Chanyeol’s movement completely. He is nothing above helpless as he stands there, practically immobile, and has to stare into the face of an untimely death. Grunting, he writhes to break free, his spine arched backwards from the height difference. Lofty approaches with another arrow nocked in his bow, hands aquiver as he aims it for Chanyeol’s face with determination and a foolish ambition.

“Do it!” Bags hisses, Chanyeol relentlessly wrestling against him. This is not how he is going to die. He stares down the metal arrowhead as a lump builds in his throat, his heartbeat getting louder and louder in his ears as if to beat out all the years he could have lived before it all ends. Then he senses an opportunity. The risk is high and the doubts are many, but it is the last shred of hope he has if he wants to get out of his intact. So when Lofty lets his arrow loose, Chanyeol jerks his head to the side and prays harder than he has ever prayed before.

A sharp lashing of pain erupts along the side of his skull and he cries out, the throbbing so intense that he physically crumples to the floor. His hand reaches for his hair and is immediately drenched in warmth, the blood making his grip slip when he retakes his sword and looks back to where Bags is slumped against the wall, an arrow rooted firmly in his erupted eye.

In his bid to get to his feet, Chanyeol’s foot gives out from under him. The sole of his boot slides over the guts from Peter’s stomach, and he finds himself retching not long after. The smell is putrid and dizzying, enough to choke a man to death, but Chanyeol uses his common sense and breathes through his mouth instead. Although the stench sits heavy on his tongue and he can faintly taste it every time he swallows, the blood flavour also present from his injuries and exhaustion helps to lessen the blow. In a situation where he has to choose the better of two evils, Chanyeol makes do.

“I’m sorry, Chanyeol!” Lofty cries in distress. “Bags made me do it!”

The crow glares up at him, throwing himself over a chair to help himself stand. His body feels weak and tingly, limbs trying to sleep to get the rest they need to heal, but Chanyeol has not got the time for that. “You didn’t have to do anything,” he grumbles to his old friend, backing the coward into the corner. “You always have a choice.”

“I— I didn’t, Chanyeol!”

“You did,” says Chanyeol, as he stabs his sword through his stomach. He stands there, finding a great deal of pain leaving him as he watches the man die. This coward would have killed him. He would never have seen Baekhyun again. Never have seen the future. It is only right that he dies, repenting, paying, apologising.

The only person left to kill now is Vince, and Chanyeol finds him sprawled across the floor, unconscious and pale beside his severed fingers. Grimly, he finishes the job, slowly dipping the tip of steel into the centre of his throat while holding the man down by the chest with his boot when his body starts to convulse.

Weary and overcome with dizziness, Chanyeol stumbles through the room until he falls to his knees. His head is banging, though the queasiness dulls the pain somewhat. When he puts his hand to his skull properly, he can feel that an entire strip of hair is missing from the right side of his scalp; and when he ventures deeper, his prickling fingertips locate a gash – not necessarily great in depth, but large in surface area – all bloodied and scabbing. In the haze, he investigates his opposite ear too, the drowsiness quelling the alarm he would have had if he were sane upon finding that the top half of it is not there anymore.

Still, through the murky daze he has drowned himself in, he can hear the battle raging on outside. The blurry outlines of fires frisk about the air, tasting the frost, and every so often the black
silhouette of a man will hurry by, generally with another person in tow.

He does not know how long he sits there, senseless. His body feels funny and his mind cannot string together any thoughts, let alone sentences, but eventually the confusion subsides and he is getting to his feet again. Baekhyun is out there somewhere, fighting for their freedom, and he has a responsibility to do the same.

With sword in hand, Chanyeol flops towards the floor again, the door swinging out of his vision when he loses his balance and faceplants the wooden floorboards instead. He gets it on the second attempt, albeit barely.

Being released back into the fight is like being thrown into a blizzard: he is flung this way and that with no control over his own body, hardly making any sense of anything he sees. His mind searches out those in black like a starved child would scavenge for food, and when he comes across them, he swings and slices away until he is the only one standing. This mindset almost leads him to killing two crows recuperating under the walkway, but then he recognises the leather coif and finds himself stalling.

“Ch-Chanyeol?” Yixing gasps, completely befuddled. “Is that you?”

It feels odd to see him again after so long. So much has changed that Chanyeol reckons Yixing would not even be able to imagine the wild things he has experienced. His face takes him back to a time where he had been lonely and unsure of himself, when he had no one and no certainty, and he hates it. Chanyeol hates how powerless it makes him feel, and he loathes the wave of insecurity that drowns him in a lack of confidence and low self-esteem. It had only been his peers who had made him feel that way, like he was not even worth the clothes on his back, and he had not deserved it one bit. No one deserves to feel that way, not even the worst of the worst. But none of that had been Yixing’s fault.

He stares at Yixing with a trembling Luhan beside him and makes the split-second decision to make an allowance. It might be traitorous, yet Chanyeol has learned that the Free Folk do not follow a strict set of rules. They have no laws and no rightful born king, only follow who they deem strong and fit for guiding – not ordering – them in the right direction. So Chanyeol believes he has the right as a loyal member of their community to write a few more unspoken rules of his own, starting with this one.

“Follow me.”

His plan is only to get them to the gate and see them off. Once they are out of Castle Black, they are on their own, but Mole’s Town is near enough and should offer some cover. He can do no more and should not be expected to.

“Why are you dressed like that?” Yixing wonders, the two of them creeping after Chanyeol under the shadows of the upper level. They are slightly hunched over, a paranoid stance, and manage to blend in with the shadows in their midnight cloaks. Luhan looks even worse than when Chanyeol last saw him. He has lost almost half his body weight and has a gaunt look about him, eyes sunken into violet wells of despair and sleepless nights. Freeing them of their oath will help him to cure himself. After all, freedom is the best medicine.

“You’re dressed like a… like a wildling.” Yixing sounds more curious than alarmed, and Chanyeol would smile if it were not for their grim situation. He keeps his keen eyes around him as he escorts them discreetly to the gate, having to pause several times to fight off other crows he faintly recognises until the way is clear again.
“Chanyeol, where are we going?” Yixing asks innocently. It finally makes the crow laugh, because Yixing is following him anyway, even if it could be into a trap. Bless him, he thinks, he does not belong in a place like this.

“I’m getting you out of here,” he declares over his shoulder.

Luhan immediately makes Yixing stop in his tracks. “Getting out of here? But we can’t desert!”

Chanyeol finally reaches the gate and waves them over with a jerk of the head. “There’ll be no Night’s Watch after this.” His words are rather foreboding, and the promise behind them prompts them to leave. It is in their best interest, though. Chanyeol is doing them a favour. “Now go!” he barks over the ruckus, pushing them out of Caste Black.

A forceful shot behind him makes him turn his head to see a man tipping forwards, an arrow embedded into the back of his skull. His eyes turn to the skies to see Baekhyun stood over the walkway above the gate, sending arrows almost vertically down onto anyone who tries to come out and meet Chanyeol on the entrance road. The crow starts when something flies over his head – Jongdae’s eagle with a sizeable rock in its claws.

Without wasting another second, Chanyeol runs to rejoin the fight, pushing past the weakness in his leg brought on by the cut on his thigh. In the battleground of orange and blue lights and shadows, Chanyeol works with all he has to save his new family from failure. When he sees a wildling in an unfair fight, he jumps in to even the numbers, and when he sees a younger, thinner wildling starting to struggle, he gives them a helping hand. In his haste, he misses the looks of gratitude and respect, and instead flies on to catch another crow in his vice.

One proves to be difficult in particular. He cannot put a name to his face but the familiarity is there, and Chanyeol has an inkling that this person was never too kind to him in his first days at Castle Black. Their fight starts over by the barracks, out of the main courtyard and by the entrance to the vaults and wormwalks beneath the castle. Chanyeol has him confined against the foundations of Hardin’s Tower a moment later, the rocks framing his outline as he lurches to avoid Chanyeol’s endless stabs.

“Traitor!”

The name itself does not phase Chanyeol anymore, but the fact that this man recognises him does. He stills for less than a second, yet the brother takes that opportunity to kick him back by the stomach. Unable to catch his balance before he smacks into the ground, Chanyeol lands on the grit with his body completely exposed, the brother then stepping over his hips and getting ready to stab him in the stomach. His heart skips a beat and his breath gets lodged in his throat, quailing with anticipation.

A huge mace crafted of bone thwacks the brother around the head, blood and teeth spraying from his mouth as his neck twists backwards to series of spine-chilling cracks. He goes crumpling to the floor, a hand offering itself to Chanyeol in his place which belongs to the wildling Sehun.

Heaving, he reaches for it, latching his fingers securely around Sehun’s and hauling himself to his feet.

“You okay?” the wildling asks, voice gruff and husky. There is dried blood over his nose and mouth from a painful looking split on his cheekbone, and by the looks of things he has already had to patch himself up several times on his arms and legs.

Chanyeol checks himself over. His hands trace his chest just to double check that the crow did not
actually stab him – even if it had only been by a little – before he provides an answering nod. “Yeah,” he says, readjusting his hold on his sword.

“Crows die easy,” the wildling smirks, pivoting easily and lugging his bone mace through the air, cracking it down on a brother charging towards them alone. It breaches his skull and leaves it spewing on either side of the weapon, almost torn in two down to his neck.

They part ways afterwards. Chanyeol rushes off back into the main courtyard while Sehun stays behind, slaying those who come out of the armoury with refilled ammunition, roaring like a bear. Chanyeol finds himself coming across more familiar faces than he would have liked, his days spent people-watching coming back to bite him in the behind. He had been a very jealous man back then, skulking in corners and moping about the walkways, wishing he could be with the so-called ‘popular’ brothers who loitered in the courtyard like gang of gnats. Somehow, he had told himself that it did not matter, he was content with being alone, and it is the biggest lie he has ever told himself.

Baekhyun has now retired from the air. Chanyeol sees him, only because he is looking, stationed in the corner of the elevated walkway by the gate, shooting anyone who comes towards him before dealing with those down below. Seeing his wildling lover in his element, skill unparalleled, encourages Chanyeol to do better.

He cuts down fellow builders, notable commanders and a couple of stewards too weak for the fight. One eludes him though, rushing off into the comforting arms of cowardice as Chanyeol chases him through the castle. His life ends at the door to the rookery, soul giving out with an unmanly squeak before it thuds to the ashen floorboards.

Maester Kluse is behind, huddled in a corner in his grey robes with his chain of validation hanging heavy around his neck. He is an old man, eyes tired and hair departed with age, yet he is skilled in the ways of medicine. When all this ends, there will be plenty of wounds needing to be tended to. Best leave that to a specialist, Chanyeol decides, so he shuts the door on the maester to keep him hidden.

He stamps on through the dark, winding corridors of Castle Black before he emerges into open air again. An arrow stabs the wall beside his head and a warring couple come tumbling past, the wildling slain and hurled over the walkway onto the courtyard below. Chanyeol knifes the brother in the back of the head as he watches his prey fall.

With rain and smoke clouding his vision, it takes Chanyeol several glances to realise that the person he is seeing being cornered against an anvil is Kyungsoo. Three crows descend on him like he is fresh meat, and although the wildling works hard to fight back, it is simply not enough. Jongdae’s eagle screams overhead, catching Chanyeol’s attention and leading him to pan across the courtyard to where he sees Jongin rushing towards his partner like a battering ram, trampling down everybody in his path. He lunges at the tallest crow, tackling them to the floor and punching them square in the face; but there are still two other brothers focused on Kyungsoo. Chanyeol decides to even the score.

He leaps over the walkway railing and falls to the floor, twisting his ankle when he lands on the slain wildling already there. It hurts to put weight on it from thereon in but Chanyeol is too concerned with Kyungsoo’s fate to really notice. Building his speed like a soaring bird, he crashes into the two wildlings attacking Kyungsoo and takes them both to the ground. Nevertheless, his advantage does not last for long.

The brother, whom he identifies as the main blacksmith, throws him away like he is nothing but an empty sack. A fist takes him by the scruff of his neck and Chanyeol can only stare in horror as
another hand, gloved in dark leather, comes pounding at his face over and over again. With every hit, the ringing in his ears increases tenfold and his sight loses its accuracy. The ten fists he sees become a black blur and the growls behind it grow to be muffled in his ears. It feels like someone has dropped a boulder on his face.

*It hurts*, is all Chanyeol can think, though he refuses to let himself be taken under. Although his limbs feel boneless and his heart is on the brink of giving out, he somehow manages to make it out alive. An arrow seizes the brother by the head, followed by a spear, and Chanyeol is free to recover for a short moment of time.

“Get up, yer lazy shit.” Is that Jongin? “Fight’s not over yet.” That might be Jongin.

Chanyeol can only groan and roll onto his back, his light head swimming in great raging waves that crash against his bleeding face. He coughs out spit and blood, thankfully no teeth, before he is dragging himself back to his feet again, flopped over the anvil to fund his attempt at obtaining balance. His body feels like it weighs the same as a mammoth, his limbs all at least ten feet long, and he feels like he is on the verge of life and death. One more hit could send him down. Even falling over his own feet could be the end.

Just a bit more.

Then the ground is shaking, driving quivers up through his ankles and to his already suffering knees. His eyes shoot to the tunnel that goes through the base of the Wall to find a group of brothers rushing out for their lives, screaming and wailing that something is lifting the gate. Chanyeol has to stitch his fingers to the ridges of the iron just to keep himself upright, legs turned to formless slush. Great roars can be heard from the other side of the Wall, and the ice itself seems to tremble with fear. The giants are barging their way through the outer gate, and once that happens, their victory will be undoubtable.

There are slim pickings in the courtyard now. Most crows lay dead at Chanyeol’s feet, the ones unfortunate enough to still be alive currently being rounded up into corners. Yet there are crows still up on the Wall doing all they can to keep the Free Folk army away from the gate. If he were to go up there and kill himself some crows, it would unquestionably ease the passage.

Brazenly, he starts hurrying across the courtyard towards the chain lift, thoughts racing as he tries to figure out how he can get the mechanism working when there is no one to push the wheel around for him. He has to cut down a few brothers in his path, ones who take him by surprise, and he leaves them draining out onto the muddy gravel already littered with dead bodies turning stone blue against the bronzed flames. It is carnage, but also justice. Or maybe just revenge disguised as justice. No matter what it is, Chanyeol finds it rewarding. Look how strong he is; look how strong he can be when treated right.

Leaping onto the platform, Chanyeol vaults towards the chain lift. Then there is a man in his path, and not just any man.

His body comes first, blocking his access to the top of the Wall. A sword follows, pointed directly between his eyes. And then a face comes into focus.

“*Lord Commander?*” Chanyeol gasps, completely awestruck. His face is the last face Chanyeol thought he would see in this battle. The last he saw of the Lord Commander had been when he and Harold left him to execute Baekhyun on his own, and that was weeks, if not months ago. The two of them were walking the trail, the round trip that would have lead them directly back to the Fist. So how is he here? The White Walkers attacked the Fist. He should be dead, yet he hardly has a mark on him.
His voice aids the Lord Commander in recalling his name, and soon he is joining the chorus of brothers who have all already shouted the word “Traitor!”

“Yer wearin’ the wrong colour furs, boy,” he sneers menacingly, keeping his sword up and ready.

It is almost comical how the Lord Commander thinks those words could affect him. He has heard them a million times before. What Chanyeol thinks is more important is the Lord Commander’s presence.

“How are you here?” Chanyeol winces as he speaks the question, sword at his side so that he can preserve energy in his arm. He will need it for when he cuts the bastard down. “You should have been killed on the Fist!”

“I am not that easy to kill,” he insists, eyes flickering down to Chanyeol’s blade warily. It shows that the Lord Commander does not trust him, cannot predict his next move, and it fuels Chanyeol’s ego like there’s no tomorrow.

He squints, rain starting to hammer against his eyes with droplets dripping from his eyelashes and blurring his vision. “You don’t stand a chance in all the seven hells against a White Walker!” Chanyeol shouts, taking a measured step back so he can defiantly raise his sword. The Lord Commander has paled, and Chanyeol recognises the nerves draining the colour in his face. Something tells him that the fear he sees is not just brought on by the traumatic memories of seeing an undead creature walking the earth. Then something tells him that the fear might not be fear at all, but guilt.

“Unless you deserted them,” Chanyeol says, voice hard and tone disappointed. He had been stupid enough to think better of this man, despite everything. His idol from his past life is not so clean-cut after all.

“How dare you—” He has the audacity to look upset which disgusts Chanyeol even more. How can this man live with himself?

“You abandoned your men!” he yells, feeling the pain in his body edge away as it prepares for another fight.

“I did no such thing!”

“You left them to die!”

The Lord Commander bellows, swinging his sword down towards Chanyeol in a deathly blow. Chanyeol just manages to jump out of the way, the attack chipping the wood decking where his feet had just been to remind him not to underestimate this man’s skills in battle. He has been in the Watch for almost twenty years, he is sure to have picked up a trick or two.

Chanyeol grits his teeth and meets the Lord Commander’s weapon in the air, the ringing of steel being drowned out by the monumental roar sweeping in from the other side of the Wall. It distracts him, his mind fixated on the giants’ attempts to breach the ice, and Lord Commander Kim uses his blunder to knock his sword from his hand.

Startled, Chanyeol looks back just in time to see an elbow coming for his nose, and he ends up being thrown back down the stairs into the courtyard to hit the rocks. His shoulders splash into a bloody puddle, the Lord Commander stomping down the steps one by one to greet him with the burning sky at his back.

Yet Chanyeol has no time for words, instead splitting his fingernails as he claws at the gravel to get to his feet again. So far the battle has been a repetitive streak of being pushed down and somehow finding his way back up again, and if he is to be knocked down many more times he is unsure whether he will make it. The wound on his thigh is debilitating his whole leg, his right eye has started to swell and is ravaging his vision. His head feels on the brink of bursting, the gash running down the side of it enough to convince him that his hair has caught on fire. It burns with the power of a thousand suns, and not all the pails of water in Westeros could put it out. He finds Baekhyun by chance, now in face-to-face combat, and wonders why he is not immune to the flames yet.

The old gods are looking over him today, though, as in Chanyeol’s desperate retreating crawl he happens across a fallen brother of the Night’s Watch, a great longsword pooled in the rippling red beside him. He seizes it and waves it back. A second too late and the Lord Commander would have stabbed him through the chest. His momentum sweeps the sword straight from the commander’s hands and Chanyeol scrambles away as fast as he can. He swiftly considers whether the chain lift is still a viable option, but his thoughts get cut off when he sees a knife somersaulting past his head. The Lord Commander is chasing after him again, throwing blades, so Chanyeol runs back onto the walkways and tries to put as much distance between them as possible.

His footsteps are muted by the doused wood, washed out completely by his own heartbeat. Fire rages in the sky as the wind blows it in sporadic circles, the very tips of its talons rippling into the paths of unsuspecting fighters, setting whatever it can alight. If he could get the Lord Commander into a fire pit, victory would be easy. Nevertheless, victory is never that simple.

Chanyeol yelps as he springs over an arrow aimed for his feet, the archer anonymous and somewhere off on the other side of the courtyard. He fails to land on solid ground, however, and twists his ankle again when he makes the mistake of planting his foot on the face of a fallen wildling. Even over the howling wind and his thunderous pulse, even over the deafening growls of Minseok’s giants, Chanyeol hears the crunching of the nose he stamps on, his weight winging out to crack the rest of the woman’s skull.

He goes down head first, putting his hands out to break his fall and instead sabotaging his wrists. Just one more time, he assures himself. He only has to get up one more time. Though he knows it is not entirely true. When he is finally upright, he turns only to have his neck seized and body thrown back against the wall behind him. Something sharp digs into his throat and it doesn’t even take him a second to figure out what it is. The Lord Commander has a knife to his throat, burrowing it ever deeper into his skin until the tip disappears completely.

“On behalf of the Watch,” Chanyeol’s old commander barks, rain and blood streaming down his face in trails of pink and red. “I, Kim Junmyeon and nine-hundred-and-ninety-eighth Lord Commander, condemn you to die.”

Something hot falls alongside the rain, something red that trickles down Chanyeol’s neck and under his clothes. It is only a small stream, scarcely there and quaint in nature, yet it is enough to convince Chanyeol that this might just be the end. He searches for Baekhyun and panics when he cannot find him anywhere, so instead he looks to the fire and tries to remember all their burning touches, all their blazing smiles and the sizzling embers in his eyes. He relays the times where he singed Baekhyun’s skin and melted in his embrace, relishes the time when Baekhyun’s heat had been enough to suffocate him into the next life. They flared brightly, but maybe there has never been enough fuel to keep them going for eternity. Eventually the fire had to give out, and it is happenstance that that day is today.

Chanyeol’s vision quivers erratically. Not because of fear or nausea, not even because of heartbreak – but because the ground is moving. It feels like there is some great demon beneath the
earth trying to beat his way out, or like there are giants stamping—

Giants.

Everything goes quiet in Chanyeol’s mind, everything but his breathing. It is hard and laboured, breathless, as he looks over to the entrance of the tunnel. Air is sucked brutally from his lungs when he sees a giant bursting through, monstrous wedges of ice flinging out around him from where he has carved his way through the Wall. He stands in the courtyard, ten feet tall, and captures the attention of every man in sight. Including the Lord Commander.

This is Chanyeol’s chance – his only chance. And when he clenches his hands into fists he realises that he has somehow managed to retain his hold on his sword – a hold that he swiftly makes use of.

The noise the Lord Commander makes next could be enough to haunt Chanyeol forever if it did not feel like they are finally even. He chokes on something, maybe blood or spittle, the rain or the air – Chanyeol does not know. There is heat rushing over his hand, red heat, and Chanyeol watches the same run down the Lord Commander’s chin. It is funny how Chanyeol thinks he sees betrayal in those eyes, as if maybe the knife at his throat had only been a warning and not a true sentence, implying that Lord Commander might have given him another chance. But it is too late for that now.

In his mind, Chanyeol can only replay the words the Lord Commander spoke to him. I do not need advice from the likes of a green boy from the south who knows nothing of winter. He remembers the way his commander has joked about him with Harold, made him feel isolated and worthless. In some twisted way, he is grateful. He was the tipping point, the extra weight on his side of the scale that made him hit rock bottom. Without the harsh words or the tainting of his image, Chanyeol would never have switched sides. He would never have befriended Baekhyun and never been given the opportunity to build his life for the better. However, that is all Kim Junmyeon had been good for. The Lord Commander has fulfilled his purpose.

“There is no place in the future for people like you,” Chanyeol says lowly, unsure if the Lord Commander can even hear him anymore. Not that it matters to him particularly. So long as he knows himself that he has said it, it can all be laid to rest, thrown into a tomb and buried for the rest of his life.

It takes a while, but once he is sure the person he used to look up to is mostly gone, he slowly peels his fingers from the hilt of his sword. Lord Commander Kim staggers back on his feet before he trips backwards, slumping against the walkway railing with his chin bowed into his chest.

His movement opens Chanyeol’s eyes on the rest of the scene. Minseok has ridden into the courtyard on the back of a mammoth, swamping the brothers still trying to fight. A horde of wildlings follows like a grey sea, their weapons aimed at the sky. The battle is mostly over, yet it is the first battle of many. Chanyeol intends to enjoy their victory while it lasts, however small it may seem to an outsider. After all, they have won their freedom. What is more important than that?

As dawn breaks over the top of the Wall with them finally on the right side of it, Chanyeol limps forwards. He rests his hands down on the wooden railing and looks out as the last of the crows are silenced. Some fall like ants from the ledge seven-hundred feet in the air, obliterated when they land, and others are crushed by the stampede of reinforcements. It only takes minutes, maybe less, until there is no one in a black cloak left standing.

It turns eerily quiet. Chanyeol can hear the breathing of the wind and the remnants of the rain tinkling off the anvils, can hear each and every groan an injured wildling makes as they are helped from the ground. Sehun is with Minseok, dragging the bodies of the dead into a huge pile for
burning. Jongin is helping Kyungsoo to his feet by the gate, checking him over with caring
touches, and Chanyeol finds Jongdae’s eagle swooping through the air as if surveying the damage.
Nonetheless, Chanyeol struggles to find the face he yearns for.

His injuries are starting to catch up with him, it seems, as his legs start to weaken and his eyes
begin to feel bruised. He idly wonders what he would look like if he were to come across a mirror.
Would his face be purple and swollen? Is he now completely bald on one side of his head? How
much of his ear is missing? Even though a mirror could not answer this, he wants to know if his
injuries are fatal. To be killed now by bleeding beneath his skin would be atrocious. He did lock
the maester in the rookery however, so not all is lost. Plus, he still needs to get that arrow out of his
shoulder.

Then there is someone slipping their hand into his, disturbing his injured wrist. As soon as
Chanyeol sees Baekhyun stood there, ruefully smiling up at him with hardly a scratch on his face,
Chanyeol thoroughly lets himself go. The tears come straight from his heart, relief and pain all
mixed up into one forgiving antidote, and he buries his face into the shoulder of his wildling lover,
blessed to be alive.

Chanyeol sits by the window in the pale, unflattering light, grazed hands wrapped tightly around a
pewter mug filled with steaming mulled wine. Outside, Minseok and a few other notable wildling
faces are guiding the throngs of Free Folk people through the courtyard. They carry their lives on
their backs, have their children’s hands sewn to their own, and all look wearily hopeful. The Gift is
land owned by the Watch, now owned by them, so the Warden of the North in his seat at
Winterfell should not be able to touch a hair on their heads when they start to rebuild their homes
on the right side of the Wall. For now, they should all be safe, though the time will come when
they have to move further south. The White Walkers will only see the Wall as a minor setback, not
impenetrable cell bars.

To the soothing whistle of the wind, Chanyeol looks up to see Jongdae stumbling through the door
to a roar of laughter, his friends all clapping him on the back and fistig his hair. They make him
impersonate his eagle, and Chanyeol smiles at the sound, chuckling to himself where he sits alone
turning his fish token over and over in his palm.

Most of them survived the night. The Thenns are all intact, huddled in a corner eating some
suspicious looking meat – Chanyeol could have sworn he saw them hacking through the pile of
dead crows with their bronze axes – and Jongin and Kyungsoo are quietly holding each other by
the doorway. Baekhyun is off fetching them some food, and Chanyeol thinks back to the doe ribs
he had left roasting over the fire back at their camp. Later on, they will have to go back and fetch
them, he supposes. It could be their victory feast.

His injuries have been treated by Maester Kluse. The venerable man was not very happy to see his
face alive in bloodstained clothes of the wrong colour, but had sorted him anyway through fright.
Milk of the Poppy, a painkiller potion, has numbed him to most of his ailments, though there is still
a faint burning on the side of his head and his left ear is tingling. The arrow in his shoulder had
only nicked him in the end, Lofty’s shot too weak to sufficiently break through his layers of fur, while the slit on his leg had turned out to be only be very slim and shallow. In his own opinion, he has been fairly fortunate.

Maester Kluse had wrapped him up from head to toe in bandages after rubbing ointment after ointment onto his stinging wounds. His wrists, ankles, neck, thigh and head are all bundled in white, and the maester told him that he might never regrow his hair on the right side of his head. Even his knees have been swaddled in cloth to support them, practically destroyed by all the falling and getting up again. There does not seem to be any lasting damage, however, save for the cosmetic side of things. Yes, he may be down half an ear, but at least he has not gone deaf.

A chilly snow has started to fall, turning invisible when it gets close enough to the raging flames of the nearby fire, the bodies of wildlings honourably being burned first. Chanyeol peeks out through the window, struggling to move more than a few inches due to how heavy he feels, and sees that Sehun is reuniting with his pregnant partner. To Chanyeol’s amusement, the wildling whips the fox tail he traded his meat for yesterday from his pocket, and he wraps it around her neck before bending her over in a passionate kiss. Chanyeol licks his own lips, pining for Baekhyun’s return; he will be in the kitchen by now, where a group of wildlings are testing out the facilities, unsure of what all the contraptions are and setting fire to the wrong things.

When his eyes come back into the room, leaving the foggy glass of the window, Chanyeol finds Jongin staring directly at him with a sharp intensity. The white fox, clothes stained with splashes of browning red, comes wandering towards him with a limp, one of his hands tucked suspiciously behind his back. Kyungsoo follows, a couple of his neck feathers missing and a few others crooked. His calm appearance tells Chanyeol that Jongin is not going to be fighting him any time soon. In fact, the wildling does the complete opposite, and takes Chanyeol by surprise when he reveals his Valyrian steel sword and places it carefully on the table.

“Found this by the lift,” he says quietly, struggling to meet Chanyeol’s eyes so watching the table instead. He looks jaded, thoroughly battered. One of his eyes is closed up by purple swelling and there are black stitches running down his lip to his chin. There are bruises all over him, albeit there are plentiful bruises on everyone. “Recognised it as yours and thought I should return it before someone takes it for themselves.”

Chanyeol’s eyes drop to his weapon to see it in almost perfect condition. His fingertips freeze when he runs them over the blade, newly cleaned, while his other hand takes it by the hilt. The metal still retains the faintest tinge of pink, but other than that it looks like it has not skewered an enemy in its life. There is virtuous trust and respect in this gesture, and Chanyeol now understands that by putting the sword back in his hands, Jongin is holding up his own in surrender.

“Thank you for what yer did out there,” he carries on, sneaking his arm around Kyungsoo’s waist to pull him closer, referring to Chanyeol’s intervention when Kyungsoo was being surrounded. “I don’t think I could’ve saved him without yer help. So thank you. And I’m sorry. For all I did. I realise now that I was wrong. We can trust yer, ‘n’ from now on, I will.”

Tears water Kyungsoo’s eyes as he looks up at Jongin with a great deal of pride, and Chanyeol smiles faintly at the interaction. Jongin looks repentant and remorseful, honest and sincere, and Chanyeol finds his heart to be warmed. Finally, their feud is at an end.

“Thank you,” the crow replies earnestly, finding that the words are almost not enough to cover the monumental gratitude he feels. Harmony encases the room and Chanyeol’s soul feels at peace. Everything is now the way it is supposed to be.

The two leave just as Baekhyun reappears with a couple of steaming bowls, looking rather miffed
and discontent. “Yer weren’t kiddin’ when yer said yer were livin’ off cabbage here. I thought yer might have been bein’ dramatic but no. Fuckin’ hell.”

Chanyeol gladly relieves him of one of the bowls and puts his face in the line of steam, feeling it thaw out his sinuses and cause his nose to run. He sniffs, praying that he is not inhaling his own blood, before he brings the bowl to his lips and dares a sip. The liquid scorches him, the burn overpowering the strong cabbage and potato flavouring. Perfect. The last thing he wants to do is to be able to actually taste it. It’s foul.

Baekhyun slides in beside him on the seat, gently stirring his soup with a spoon. “Thought I might try and be civilised,” he teases, gesturing to the cutlery, “now I’m a southerner and all.”

“Aye,” Chanyeol laughs a little, “but not a Kneeler.”

The wildling smiles shyly. “Not a Kneeler,” he nods in agreement, making a toast by raising his bowl to the rafters where the birds are nesting. They sit in a comfortable silence, mouths busy with slurping up new energy, and Chanyeol only speaks again once he has drained his bowl dry.

“Suppose we’ll have to fight again soon. The king in King’s Landing will hear of this and he won’t be very happy.”

Baekhyun waves him off carelessly, snorting as he tips his head back to consume every last drop. “I’m sure they won’t care,” he shrugs, as if a Lannister army is nothing. “Look at how many of us there are, Yeol. A hundred thousand, at least. Yes, some of that is made up of children, but we’re made of better stuff than all your green boys down here. Bet that’s more than all the southern lord’s armies combined, eh?” He raises his eyebrows complacently. “Looks like yer head’s stayin’ on yer shoulders, Yeol. No need to worry about any future fights or you bein’ executed. The Thenns are in love with yer. Yer practically safe for life.” He jerks his head in the direction of the Thenns, and when Chanyeol looks over at them they all smile and wave. It is perturbing to see such scary men do something so normal, so his returning smile is unwittingly a little wobbly.

“What are we gonna do then? What’s the first thing on our list?” Chanyeol wonders, resting the good side of his head on his good fist so he can look across at Baekhyun properly. In his mind, the first thing he wants to do is sleep for at least a week, and never walk anywhere ever again. He does not care about losing all his strength and muscle through laziness, he just wants to stay in bed forever, entwined in the satin sheets with a certain naked wildling.

“What did I say before?” Baekhyun chirps as he wipes his mouth on his sleeve. “We’re goin’ to Seagard to teach those rotten children a lesson, aren’t we? Gonna beat ’em up, give them the northern treatment.”

Chanyeol smiles, thinking of Nora with fondness and casting his eyes down to his fish. This will be his chance to thank her, to say she did the best with what she had and that he is forever indebted. Although there is the worry that she could disagree with his actions – deserting the Watch and being entangled with a male wildling – he does not think it will affect him. He has found his happiness and he is living in it. No one, other than Baekhyun, can bring him down now.

“And then,” Baekhyun bites his lip as he grins, shinning closer along the bench to get up in Chanyeol’s face, “after we turn them black and blue, a bit like how you look right now, we’re goin’ to travel all the kingdoms.”

Chanyeol likes that idea, and he likes the idea of doing so with Baekhyun even more. The wildling’s breath is fanning across his swollen face and his lips look tantalising. By some miracle, he finds he can describe Baekhyun in one word: Irresistible. His vibrant hair is the only vivid thing
in the room, eye-catching and loud, a smouldering spectacle; while his gleaming smile draws in as a close second. There are hot coals in his eyes and his pale skin is incandescent, and every single one of his touches leaves Chanyeol flushed with red.

“And while we travel,” the wildling brushes his lips over Chanyeol’s, birthing sparks, “yer gonna fuck me all over Westeros. How about that?” he barely whispers, eyes boring into Chanyeol’s with fervour.

Overcome by the flames, Chanyeol liquefies into Baekhyun’s hold. He takes the wildling by the lips and cradles his face to keep him close, relishing in the warmth soaking in from his tongue. Right here, in Baekhyun’s embrace, is the only place he ever wants to be. If they are ever parted, just like their footsteps in the snow, they will be led straight back to one another, never lost for long; and if in doubt, Chanyeol can always just follow the sun, for it is a person, not a star.

Usually, when people get too close to the fire they get burned. Their skin turns to ash and their hair frazzles into blackened wires. Their lives are reduced to nothing more than a pile of cindered dust and crumbling bones. Everyone else around them has been ignited somehow, proportionately incinerated until they are the only two left standing.

Chanyeol is immune to it.

Because Chanyeol was never burned by the fire that is Baekhyun Byunson.

He was kissed.
My twitter (˘ ³˘)❤️

End Notes
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