All I Wanna Do! Wanna One High School

by LilicaDearest

Summary

At the Mireu High School for the Arts, our love story begins…

With a boy who loves to dance but yearns to move an audience with his voice.
A boy who gives up a bright future to chase his dreams in a foreign country.
A boy who lost his confidence, but never lost his dream.
A boy who hides his loneliness behind the mask of a smile.
A boy who plays pretend to conceal the truth of his dark past.
And a boy whose only wish is to break free from the chains of his untainted persona.

If Wanna One was formed through a school for idols and entertainers… what do you think their story would be like? Six hopeful dreamers. Three love stories. One idol group.

“All I Wanna Do! Hello, we are Wanna One!”
Hi Wannable~ (and even if you're not, hello!) This is my very first work of fiction, and I'm excited to share it with you guys as I love Wanna One very much. I hope you guys enjoy reading this story as much as I enjoy writing it! Word of warning: this fanfic is going to be very long, so I hope you're prepared for A LOT of Panwink, Jinhwi and Ongnie! xD

P.S. This story was originally published on Asianfanfics on September 13, 2017. As such, I will be releasing the first few chapters on here once daily! Thanks again for clicking, and have fun reading~
Foreword

ARC 1. PANWINK

“Why is it so hard to say those three words? Because I’m worried that I’ll never hear them back. It’s like an author dying and leaving a story unfinished before it has the chance turn into a masterpiece.”

“No matter how cheerful the song, I will only feel any emptying sort of sadness if I have to perform it onstage without you. But oh, if we both make it, I want a kiss by the way.”

ARC 2. JINHWI

“If love was a person I don’t think I’d like him. He’s like that toxic friend you welcome at first and then can never be rid of… But I think love walked through the door of my home a long time ago. On that day we first met, it entered into my life and locked the door behind it.”

“I’ll debut no matter what. I’ll become an idol even if it kills me. But if I have to do it without you, I guess I’ll just have to wait for my chance to do it in the next life.”

ARC 3. ONGNIEL

“If you never liked me back just say it-- I don’t want your honey-sweet kisses if they’re poisoned with lies. But if your lips speak the truth, no matter how harsh, its release will be the sweetest thing I’ll ever have tasted.”

“This school is a joke. But even if I joined some survival program and got famous in some other life, I’d rather stay here if that means I’d never met you.”

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PARK JIHOON has always been a hardworking student. Apart from school, he works two jobs just to help his mother pay for his school’s tuition—which is no small matter at Mireu High. And though he’s never had the courage to say it, his dream has always been of becoming not just a dancer, but a singer and idol. But just when he thinks all hope is lost, a mysterious freshman turns up by chance at his dance practice after hours, and he soon comes to realize his dream is much closer to fruition than he might think.

LAI KUANLIN left everything he knew back home in Taiwan to pursue his dream of becoming a rapper—his family, his friends, his bright future as a basketball superstar. But Kuanlin has always chased after his dreams no matter what; so alone, against his parents’ wishes, with no formal training and yet entirely unafraid, he auditions for Mireu High, the most famous school for aspiring idols and entertainers in Korea, where he rediscovers his love for rap, finds a new dream to debut as soon as possible… and meets the boy who will change his life forever.

BAE JINYOUNG has always been known as the “pretty boy”. And yet, no matter how many girls try to approach him, he has always had eyes for one person only: his best friend of three years,
Jihoon. But as Jihoon’s dancing gets better and Jinyoung’s skills remain mediocre, he feels the distance between them widening. But when he meets an enthusiastic and awfully persistent freshman, he soon begins find the confidence he once lost, and starts to realize he has more to offer the world than his good looks.

**LEE DAEHWI** wasn’t always the happiest kid at school. Behind his cheerful façade hides a boy who was once the target of jokes and mockery because of his small frame and effeminate demeanor. Since then, he has worked hard to become a better Daehwi, and has excelled as a student at Mireu High for it. But the fact that he’s lonely doesn’t change… That is, until a chance encounter with one of the prettiest faces in school, and with one of the only people who ever truly understood what his loneliness felt like.

**ONG SEONGWOO** thought he wanted to become an actor. People always said he had the face for it, and the variety skills to match. But deep inside, Seongwoo has always wanted stand to onstage as an idol… and yet that dream isn’t so easy for someone with a dark past, and a certain reputation at Mireu as a troublemaker. But when he is placed under the supervision of Kang Daniel, model student and Council President at Mireu… will Seongwoo realize he still has a fighting chance?

**KANG DANIEL** is everybody’s idea of a perfect idol. He’s handsome, smart, charismatic and extremely talented. But apart from his best friend Jisung, nobody knows the real Daniel, and he’s afraid that if people find out, they’ll eventually turn against him. But one day he meets a person so vastly different and so entirely annoying… and yet, he can’t seem to shake the feeling that this person is the only one who has ever accepted him for who really he is, and not for the perfect guy he’s always tried to be.

When six fateful roads intertwine… where will the future lead them as they chase their idol dreams? Read on to find out!
It was already nine o’clock in the evening and Jihoon hadn’t even eaten a single meal all day. He spent his remaining allowance on a new pair of laces for his shoes, as he’d completely worn out the old ones-- they were crummy, caked with dirt, and the plastic whatchamacallits at the edges (the aglets, he recently learned they were called) had disappeared completely. His shoes were well-loved, perhaps too much, but he couldn’t bring himself to throw them out because they were the gift his mother had given him as congratulations for passing the auditions into Mireu High last year. So instead, he cleaned up by deciding to buy new laces, neon ones of course (in a mismatched green and pink, because why the hell not?) and that had definitely cost him extra.

Now he was out of money for the week, and hungry. Starving, in fact. He could definitely mooch off of his best friend Jinyoung tomorrow, but Jinyoung for some reason slept really early at night (he needed his "beauty sleep" apparently, which Jihoon thought was hilarious), and he would hate to be woken up from it. Jihoon wondered if he could make it to the nearest chicken restaurant before he passed out from an empty stomach. He usually practiced his dance late into the night, but he had promotion exams tomorrow and desperately wanted to make it into Class A.

That was the only way he’d ever be put into consideration to become an idol, which was what he always dreamt of. Dancing was his passion, and popping was his expertise... but he also longed to sing and rap his heart out onstage. Jihoon had already let go of so many dreams in the past. He dreamt of traveling the world once, of singing ballads, of writing a comic that was as great as his favorite Shugo Chara series. If dreams were made of stardust, he’d have already formed a star big enough to explode into a supernova.

Jihoon didn’t want to let go of any more dreams. If he did well tomorrow, if he danced good enough, maybe his teachers would recommend to have him formally moved into the Idol Track. Could there be a chance?

His stomach grumbled in response.

Jihoon sighed. "Yeah right," he said. "If I die of starvation today, I wouldn't even be around to take the test tomorrow." He rubbed his stomach as if to rub away the hunger, but he knew it was a futile exercise. Darn it, he shouldn't have bought those laces...

...but man were they pretty. If only they were edible too. He stole a glance at the clock, which read 9:05 PM. Maybe Jinyoung was still awake? If only they were roommates, so he could be free to secretly steal his stash of food... but unfortunately, he was stuck with Park Woojin for the rest of the year, and that guy inhaled his food like a vacuum. Still, no harm in trying to text Jinyoung to see if he had some instant ramen left somewhere. Jihoon fished out his phone from his pocket, but it didn't seem to be there.

"Ugh, where'd I put it?" Jihoon asked himself. He walked around the dance room, but it was empty save for his bag and the CD player he used to play the songs he danced to, as his phone battery had run out ages ago. "It's probably in my bag," he decided, making towards it. But just as he was about to grab his phone, a voice inside his head said: "Just one more song, Jihoon-ah".

He sighed. His inner voice was really trying to kill him. They both knew he was tired... but he
guessed they both knew he was desperate. Desperate to chase after the dream he had so long
hidden inside himself, thinking he wasn't good enough. But he wanted it. He enjoyed performing,
he enjoyed dancing, singing, rapping, all of it. He enjoyed making his mom proud. He wanted to
see her proud as he stood onstage an idol as well.

"All right," he said. "I'll dance to the song just one more time." He walked towards the CD Player,
pressed the play button, and immediately EXO's 'Monster' started playing. Jihoon smiled. He loved
this song. Taking a deep breath to compose himself and recall the choreography he had danced to
over a hundred times, even in his head...

He started moving. He felt the beat, heard the lyrics, felt the emotion, and emptied them all out
onto the dance floor with his movements. It was as if the rhythm of the song had held him prisoner,
and he was no longer simply trying to memorize steps, but moving as if in a euphoric trance and
feeling every movement, every sway, every pop. And soon enough he felt the words, too.

"There's curiosity in your eyes," he started singing. "You've already fallen for me." He smiled as he
danced; this was his favorite part. "Don't be afraid, love is the way, shawty I got it. You can call me
monster." And as the choreography intensified, so did his movements and so did his voice.

"I'm creeping in your heart babe, I'll flip you over, break you down and swallow you up." As the
choreography dictated, he faced sideways to dance. "I'll steal you and indulge in you." From the
corner of his vision, he caught someone watching him.

"I'm gonna--" Wait...someone watching him?

"OH SHI--" he exclaimed, frightened as a boy materialized near the door. Jihoon quickly moved
his hands up to cover his mouth, amazed at himself for almost spouting profanity in front of a
stranger. A stranger whose eyes were watching him with such an intensity that he couldn't help but stare
back. The boy smiled all of a sudden, the smile crinkling his eyes.

"Sorry," the boy said. "I didn't mean to startle you. But you were dancing so well, I didn't want you
to stop."

Who is this? Jihoon thought. And why is he so damn good-looking for a guy? Jinyoung would be
quaking in his shoes right now, with this boy threatening his visual crown. Where the hell have I
been?

"Uhh..." Jihoon said. Apparently 'uhh' was the only non-word he could muster. "Uhh...I was... I
just. Uhm."

The boy laughed, and it was a sound that awoke butterflies in Jihoon's stomach. If people meant it
when they said voices could sound like honey, this was probably what they were talking about
when they said it. As the boy walked slowly towards him, Jihoon couldn't help but notice how tall
he was, how lean, how fair, how nice his cologne smelled.

Wait what? Okay, he thought. This boy is standing way too close now. I should probably complain.

"You should've told me you were watching," he said. "That was really embarrassing." He moved
away from the boy towards the CD player, turning off the background music.

"Why so?" The boy asked, still not removing his eyes from Jihoon's face. If someone could melt
from being stared at, Jihoon would probably be a puddle on the floor by now. "I really like the way
you dance. And I like that song too. I really didn't want you to stop."
Jihoon blushed at the compliment, but he wasn't sure why.

"Your face is red," The boy observed.

"Uh-huh," Jihoon agreed, not knowing why he was incapable of forming complete sentences up to that point. "It's from how much I've been dancing. That happens sometimes."

"Do you always stay this late to practice?" the boy asked.

"No, but I have exams tomorrow. They're extremely important."

"Why?" The boy propped himself on one shoulder against the wall at the entrance of the room, leveling his eyes to Jihoon. Jihoon could only do so much not to stare and get lost in them.

"Because tomorrow is a promotion exam. I have a chance to move up from Class B to A and I need to if I want to reach my dream of--" Jihoon startled, stopping himself right on time. "Wait. Why am I even telling you this? I don't even know you."

The boy laughed again, and Jihoon felt his legs go weak for some reason. *I should probably stay away from this kid,* he thought. *He seems dangerous.*

"Dream of what? Becoming an idol?" the boy asked, raising one perfectly shaped eyebrow. Jihoon raised one of his own in response.

"How could you possibly know that?" he asked.

"Because I can feel it. I think we're soulmates."

In other situations, this would probably the part where Jihoon would do a spit-take. In this instance, he simply blushed from head to toe. "S-soulmates? I don't even know you."

"Relax," the boy smiled, relishing in Jihoon's reaction. "I was kidding."

"Wait a minute. Why are you talking down to me by the way? I've never seen you because you're probably a freshman, so I'm probably older than you."

"I'm kidding, hyung," the boy finally said, adding formalities.

"Ugh." Jihoon took that opportunity to give the boy a once-over. From up close, he had really nice skin, pretty double eyelids... and as his gaze moved down, he had nice hands too.

Okay. Jihoon thought to himself. *All that dancing has made me dizzy and I'm starting to lose my mind.* Jihoon wondered why he was so fixated on this guy's looks when he had always been into girls. He decided it was probably because he looked like a girl (he remembered a really pretty celebrity named Sulli and they could seriously have been twins).

"You look like you're trying to undress me," the boy said.

"E-excuse me?" Jihoon asked, not believing his ears.

"Ah," the boy said. "Sorry, I'm from Taipei, so I'm really bad at using Korean expressions. I meant the way you were staring."

"I wasn't staring," Jihoon said, way too defensively for his own liking. "I was just... examining you."
"Sounds like an excuse for staring."

"Go away."

"No."

"What do you mean no... Wait. You're from Taipei? Ah, I knew you were a foreigner."

"Is it because of my exotic good looks?"

"Yes, exactly."

"Really?" the boy said, winking. It was a failed wink, unfortunately. If only this boy knew how much of a winking expert Jihoon was.

"No, not really," Jihoon replied. "It's because of your broken Korean, you dummy."

The boy laughed again, and Jihoon wondered how someone's face could change so much as they smiled. How long had he been standing there? But if he had really been watching, then...

"I heard you singing too," the boy said, confirming Jihoon's suspicions. "Your voice is beautiful."

Jihoon didn't know how to react to that. Was this boy making fun of him, or what?

"Are you making fun of me or what?" Jihoon said, accidentally saying his thoughts out loud.

"Why would you think that? I meant it, your singing voice is good. And it's quite deep too. You're probably also good at rapping."

"I'm not," Jihoon countered. "Compared to everyone else at Mireu High... the only thing I'm good at is dance, and I'm not even good enough to be in Class A. Singing and rapping is out of bounds for me."

"It didn't sound like it."

"You're probably not a singer."

"Maybe not, but I listen to a lot of songs. And the ones I tend to enjoy the most are the ones where I can hear the emotions of the song through the melody. The one where I can hear the singer pour out his feelings into every lyric. And I have to say I enjoyed your song a lot. Whatever you dream is, it isn't too late for that."

Jihoon looked away, utterly embarrassed. This boy may not have great Korean pronunciation, but he sure did have a way with words. Great, he had been trying to hide the fact that he liked to sing so others couldn't make fun of him, and yet he managed to do it so passionately in front of a complete stranger. But Jihoon had heard his classmates sing... they were much better, and had much stabler voices. Either this guy was lying, or he had really low standards. He probably couldn't sing. Was he a rapper? But how could he rap, when his Korean wasn't even that good? Why did Jihoon even want to find out anyway?

"Those lyrics you were singing..." the boy started. "I really like them."

Jihoon snorted. Yeah, right. The first time he heard the lyrics to Monster, he thought they were too kinky for his own liking.

"The lyrics kinda speak to me, you know," the boy continued. "Especially Kai-sunbaenim's part."
"Which one?" Jihoon asked. "There's a curiosity in your eyes?"

"The one after that."

"You've already fallen for me?"

At this, the boy smiled, his eyes piercing straight into Jihoon's heart. "Exactly. I've already fallen for you."

For a moment Jihoon didn't know what to say. "You're kidding, right?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Don't you believe in love at first sight?"

"I'm not gay, you know. And no I do not."

"Me neither. I was obviously kidding."

"Good, because this conversation was getting weird." Jihoon said, even though hearing those words made him feel a little uncomfortable. This boy confused Jihoon more than anything else that entire day, and they had known each other for a grand total of fifteen minutes, max.

At that exact moment, Jihoon's stomach grumbled.

"Have you not eaten?" The boy asked. "I think your stomach is trying to tell you something."

"Yeah I hate it when it tries to communicate with me, too."

"Wanna go with me somewhere?" The boy asked, out of nowhere.

Jihoon looked up at him. It strained his neck, because he was really tall. "You're not an ax murderer, are you? If so, could you wait until tomorrow to chop my head off, I still have promotion exams to take."

The boy laughed, and Jihoon felt his insides churning like butter again. He couldn't help but smile too. The boy looked at him for a long while. "Well, the only thing I'd like to chop is some pork 'cause I'm hungry. I don't have an ax, but I do have some food. You want it?"

Jihoon felt the moment all of his rationality flew out the window because of his empty stomach. "Really?"

"Sure."

"Thanks, I was famished." Jihoon smiled at the boy, realizing that all this time he hadn't even thought to ask for a name.

"Kuanlin," the boy said.

"What?"

"Kuanlin. Lai Kuanlin."

"Uhm... is that your name?"

"Yeah. Why would I say it, if not? Unless it's your name?"

"No," Jihoon said. "My name's not Kuanlin. I'm Jihoon."
Kuanlin held out a hand, smiling from ear to ear. "Nice to meet you, Jihoon-hyung."

Jihoon hesitated, not sure where a friendship with this stranger would lead him. At the moment though, he didn't care much. He was hungry, and this guy was apparently a walking convenience store. How a convenience store could make him feel so embarrassed, he had no idea.

Jihoon took Kuanlin's hand, shaking it once. "Yeah. Nice to meet you too, Lai Kuanlin."

~PANWINK 1 END~

Chapter End Notes

So I've decided to add these little notes at the bottom of each chapter, because there are some things readers might want to know / get confused about regarding the story, so I'll just address them here! First of all, some of you might be wondering: why did I name their school Mireu High? Well, Mireu is actually a mythical and immensely powerful Korean water dragon. Some stories say that they start off as Imugi (the lesser dragons) that aspire to become full-fledged dragons and have to go through a series of ordeals to get there (sounds like what trainees have to undergo, does it not?). The school's crest and logo are actually that of a water dragon as well, and coincidentally (or not), the school's cafe and restaurant where Jihoon works part time at is called the Imugi Cafe.

Second, you might be wondering about the school's... rather complicated promotional system. I have no idea how these things work in real life, so this system is mostly a figment of my imagination (and inspired by Produce 101, of course!) but the main premise is that during the entrance exams, students must first choose a track (there is a Singer, Rapper, Dancer, Actor, Host/Comedian and Idol track) and after acceptance, he goes through a placement exam (through a performance of his current skills) where he is sorted into either Class A, B, C, D or F, and only then is he officially enrolled into the school. Over the school year, students go through both normal subjects and track-specific subjects and take written/oral/performance exams, but once every couple of months they take a special type of exam as well (called "promotion exams") where students, except for those in already in Class A, have a chance to be promoted into a higher class level if they do particularly well, and may also be incidentally demoted (unless you're in F) if they do particularly horribly. Furthermore, if they do exceptionally well, professors may opt to recommend them to be moved to, or take up an additional track (kinda like shifting and double majoring in real life). In Mireu though, it's mostly that those in the Singer, Rapper, and Dancer tracks may be recommended to be moved to Idol (so you can imagine it's quite hard for Ong, who is in the Actor Track... or is it? lol). So what do you do during a promotion exam? Basically, it's a performance where there are no real rules, except for the allotted timeframe. So you can do covers/adaptations, or compose/choreograph your own songs, write your own scripts, even showcase skills outside of your Track (if you wanna get recommended). You can even do it in groups (mostly for those in Actor and Host/Comedian Tracks, but it's pretty rare elsewhere since it's hard to shine that way).

Is there a way to get kicked out of the school? Absolutely. If you're still in F at the end of your sophomore year, still in D at the end of your junior year, and still in C at the end of your senior year, you're done for. Or if you do something illegal, yeah that works too lol but basically, the only ones who graduate are in Classes A and B. So
where does the formation of Wanna One fit into all this? Haha well, stay tuned to find out!

Whew. That was a lot information. But I hope that made things clearer for you guys! See you in Chapter 2~
Jinyoung was in an extremely bad mood. And by bad he meant the I-want-to-strangle-the-next-person-who-crosses-my-line-of-sight kind of bad. And for someone as peaceloving as he was, this was no small feat.

First of all, he hardly managed even a wink of sleep last night because his roommate Jaehwan had stayed up 'till late for singing practice, right next to his bed ("because the acoustics are nice here" he said. "I'll just sing you to sleep" he said). And if he hadn't already managed to wake up the entire dormitory, he sure as heck managed to piss off at least one person (clue: Jinyoung).

As soon as Jinyoung rolled out of bed at 6 A.M. the next morning, dazed and sleep-deprived, he rubbed the tiredness out of his eyes, tousled his hair into less of a bird-nest looking state, and then immediately demanded a reason as to why Jaehwan absolutely had to sing and play his bloody guitar at the top of his lungs in the wee hours of the morning and night.

"Okay, okay," Jaehwan began. "Good morning to you too. First of all, I did practice in the the afternoons. I did so the entire day, in fact. But I just wouldn't be able to sleep well knowing I didn't practice anymore than that."


Jinyoung stood up to walk towards the full-length mirror propped onto the wall on the right side of his bed. He gave his reflection a once-over, and decided that he was in desperate need of a bath and some eye cream.

"I wasn't even singing that loudly," Jaehwan said. "I made sure to pick mellow songs too, you know. I almost sang you a lullaby and cradled you to sleep myself."

"I appreciate the effort hyung, but yeah...no," Jinyoung said, tapping Jaehwan lightly on the shoulder. "I'd like to sleep in perfect silence next time."

"You don't need the beauty sleep, though." Jaehwan said, trying to lighten up the mood by teasing him. "Don't worry, if you don't receive your daily love letter from a loyal fangirl today, I'll write you one myself."

Jinyoung cringed at the thought of Jaehwan being his fangirl. No, he chided himself. Keep the disturbing mental image out of your head.

"No thanks," he said. "Besides, hyung, it's not beauty sleep. It's JUST SLEEP."

"Well, it's JUST ANOTHER EXAM that I had to prepare for right, which is why I bothered-- no, blessed you with the sound of my sweet singing last night? Wrong. It's a promotion exam, Jinyoung. It's really important, for you and me both."

For a moment there Jinyoung seemed to forget his bearings. And then it all came crashing down to him. The second reason why he was in an extremely bad mood: he completely forgot that promotion exams were tomorrow.

He stared at the wall next to Jaehwan for a solid ten seconds in disbelief. "Seems like someone
forgot all about it," Jaehwan said. "But aren't you in Class F? You need the promotion even more than I do. You're already a sophomore too, and most students are out of Class F by their freshman year. You're lucky all the girls love you and would probably go on a hunger strike of some sort if you got kicked out of this school."

"Wow hyung, thanks for reminding me of how utterly pathetic I am. Not that you could've also reminded me of the fact that we had exams today."

"Sorry," Jaehwan said regretfully. "I meant to make you feel better, but I don't understand why you're so demotivated these days. Some of the boys are starting to call you names behind your back too, and it makes me want to suckerpunch them."

Jinyoung sat back down on his bed, burying his face into both of his hands in agitation. What am I going to do now? I don't have a song prepared, and even if I do I'll end up just staring at the floor while I perform it. As much as he hated to admit it, Jaehwan-hyung was right. It was his fault that he looked dead while performing onstage, his fault that all his grades were dropping, his fault that his male classmates had begun calling him "deep dark" because he couldn't even manage to look at the audience as he performed. He had his stage-fright to blame, and everyone was saying that at the rate he was going, it was impossible for him to debut. He remembered their dance instructor telling him to just quit and become a model, as if the only the thing he was good for was his looks.

Jinyoung couldn't even provide a counter-argument. And those girls following him around... they were attracted to his dainty features, his small face, and nothing else. It was like being attracted to a statue, or to a pretty, yet empty shell.

Ever since Jihoon moved up from Class C to B, he started feeling as if a rift was opening between them, and if he so much as tried to jump across to the other side, he would fall straight into the endless abyss. The more Jihoon improved in his dance, the more Jinyoung felt as if his best friend of three years would just one day pack up and leave him. They promised they would debut together one day, no matter what, but as Jinyoung found himself unable to improve because he feared performing in front of people, he began to feel as if the hope of that dream coming true was slowly slipping like sand between his fingers. And so he began losing motivation to improve.

And yet, whenever he practiced with Jihoon, he managed to do his best. He performed naturally. Jihoon was encouraging, and kind, and allowed him to make mistakes and try again. If Jihoon were the only one watching, he could become the idol everyone thought that he was incapable of being.

But he guessed that was only natural that Jihoon brought out the best in him. After all, he had been secretly in love with his best friend since middle school.

As if on cue, a knock on the door came once. Jinyoung's heart soared, expecting Jihoon.

"Finally," Jinyoung exclaimed. "After not texting me since your dance practice last night. Where have you been, hyung?"

But the door unlocked, and instead of Jihoon, a small, bright-eyed boy peeked through. Jinyoung blinked twice, as if he was hallucinating.

"Hello," the boy greeted, in what was probably the cutest voice on a guy he had ever heard. "I heard you two were in here?"

"Oh hey Daehwi, there you are!" Jaehwan exclaimed, standing up from where he was seated on the dining table to walk towards Daehwi and give him a tight hug. "You're early. I haven't even taken a bath."
Daehwi's small nose scrunched up. "Yeah. I noticed." As Jaehwan released him, Daehwi's eyes locked with Jinyoung's. Jinyoung couldn't do anything but stare at him in confusion.

What was Lee Daehwi, one of the top ranked and most famous students of Class A doing here? As he stared, Daehwi looked away blushing, as if embarrassed. And all of a sudden Jinyoung was hyper-aware of the fact that he was wearing nothing but his sleeveless undershirt and his striped boxers.

Oh great going Jinyoung. What a way to make a first impression.

"Uhm," Jinyoung started, clearing his throat. He turned to Jaehwan, who was already looking through the cupboards for his breakfast cereal. "Hyung, what's he doing here?"

"Oh, did I forget to tell you?" Jaehwan said. "I found you a tutor. Don't worry, he already knows of you. He's seen you perform."

"Oh, I see."

And then the statement began to register. "Wait. You found me a WHAT?" Jinyoung couldn't even bring himself to be embarrassed at the fact that Daehwi had seen him in one of his "deep dark" moments already.

Jaehwan finally found the cereal he was looking for, and set it down on the table smiling. "Did I forget to mention it? Anyway, I as your ever-loving roommate and ever-thoughtful big brother, was worried you might botch the promotion exam, which might be right since you actually forgot we had them. And since I didn't want you demoted instead, which is impossible because you're already in F, I took the liberties to find you someone who could help you make it work in the shortest time possible. And so I introduce to you, musical genius and aegyo prince Daehwi."

At the compliment, Daehwi bristled, playfully hitting Jaehwan's shoulder. "Stop that hyung. I'm not that cute."

Jinyoung's eyes narrowed. If this guy's natural aegyo isn't actually overflowing, I must be out of my mind. He approached the table to retrieve a glass and fill it up with water, just in case he was actually losing it.

"I...I don't think I need a tutor." Jinyoung said. "I can make something up on my own."

"And if not?" Jaehwan said. "What then?"

"I'll make it work somehow." Jinyoung brought the glass to his lips, aware of how Daehwi's eyes never left him.

"But why refuse help when you need it? Besides, don't think it was easy on me to lend Daehwi to you. I don't lend my crush to just anyone."

Jinyoung almost choked on his own saliva.

"Excuse me?"

"What?" Jaehwan said, shrugging. "What's so weird about a guy having a crush on another guy?"

"N-nothing," Jinyoung said too hastily. Of course nothing was wrong with that, since he'd been crushing on the same guy by himself for the longest time. And Daehwi was... kind of cute if he was being honest. But that wasn't the point. Where was Jihoon anyway?
"Stop saying those things already, hyung," Daehwi said embarrassed. "It's probably making him uncomfortable."

"Fine. But don't refuse help this time, Jinyoung-ah," Jaehwan said. "I'm sure you and Daehwi can get along. Daehwi, you be nice to my roommate alright?" At this, Jaehwan pushed Daehwi towards Jinyoung, apparently overestimating the amount of force he needed to push someone so small, because Daehwi toppled right over and landed straight into Jinyoung's arms as he made a move to catch him.

"Woah there," Jinyoung said. "Be careful Jaehwan-hyung, this one's really light."

"S-sorry," Daehwi stammered, pushing embarrassedly at Jinyoung's chest to place some distance between them. As he did this, Jinyoung's head began registering how much of his skin touched Daehwi's because of his exposed arms, and how small Daehwi's waist actually was when he caught him. *Seriously,* he thought. *Is it possible for a guy to be this dainty? His skin feels like a girl's too. Those people who've said I was the delicate one have obviously never held a Lee Daehwi in their arms before.*

*Wait, what am I thinking of now?* Jinyoung stopped himself before his thoughts took him to weird places. He was probably missing Jihoon too much already.

"So do we have a deal?" Jaehwan said. "If you agree to let this guy help you, I agree to never sing while you're trying to sleep ever again."

Jinyoung was unsure how he felt about that. It would be nice to finally have some peace and quiet, but still... it embarrassed him to have to take lessons from a guy who was younger than him, and yet was so much more talented. Just the thought of Daehwi possibly having seen one of his horrible performance exams wanted to make him hide under the bed for an entire day. Still, Daehwi knew how bad he was at performing, and yet didn't seem to judge him for it. He felt a bit grateful.

"It's alright if you're not comfortable with it," Daehwi said, probably sensing his hesitation. "I'm sorry if I disturbed you."

"It's fine," Jinyoung said, not sure why he was even saying it. Did he not want to disappoint this kid? "I'll take the help. But only if a certain someone allows me to kick him out of the room in case he breaks our no-singing agreement."

"Deal!" Jaehwan said, doing a thumbs up motion with his left hand, and then eating a spoonful of cereal with his right. "I'll just go to Daehwi and Kuanlin's room if I ever get evicted. Right Daehwi-ya?" Jaehwan wiggled his eyebrows at Daehwi playfully.

Jinyoung rolled his eyes. He pulled Daehwi away from Jaehwan towards him, accidentally pulling Daehwi into his chest because of how light he was. "Hey. You're probably scaring him, hyung. Go and flirt with Minhyun-hyung instead or something."

"Ah," Jaehwan said sadly. "I'm afraid Minhyun-ie and I are in a bit of a lover's quarrel because of how I ruined his cleaning tools when I tried to borrow them."

Jinyoung promptly ignored him, turning his focus to Daehwi instead. "Are you hungry?" he asked.

Daehwi blushed, and then proceeded to shake his head vigorously. "No, I'm fine. I just had breakfast with Linlin."

"Right. I thought you might've wanted some of Jaehwan-hyung's cereal. You're seriously thin."
"Speak for yourself." Daehwi said, pouting at him. Jinyoung was surprised at how cute he found it. Maybe that aegyo prince nickname wasn't a joke, after all.


Jinyoung realized he still had one arm wrapped around Daehwi's shoulder, so he immediately withdrew it. He ruffled his hair in embarrassment. "Sorry about that."

"That's fine."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I got used to skinship since Kuanlin arrived. He's surprisingly a bit clingy too."

"I've been meaning to ask this, but who's Kuanlin again?" Jinyoung asked. "Is that the guy who transferred last week? I thought you didn't have a roommate because of Class A privileges."

"I didn't, but Kuanlin didn't have a roommate since no one else transferred, but he's in Class D and can't have a room to himself. So I volunteered since it was getting quite lonely. Besides, he's still learning Korean since he's Taiwanese, so I speak with him in English to help him learn."

"Taiwanese, huh?" Jaehwan said. "Wasn't the boy Jihoon was with last night Taiwanese? So that's his name."

At this Jinyoung almost lost his footing. "What?"

"Yeah, I heard from Woojin last night some really good-looking foreigner he had never seen before came to drop Jihoon off at their room. He said he treated Jihoon out to dinner or something."

"Wow." Was the only thing Jinyoung could say. The third reason why he was in an extremely bad mood: Jihoon ate out with a some guy he had never heard of before and couldn't even be bothered to text him about it. "Why didn't Jihoon tell me about this? I thought I was his best friend."

Jaehwan raised his eyebrow at Jinyoung in suspicion. Daehwi looked at him with an unreadable expression. "Someone sounds jealous."

"I'm not jealous."

"Yeah, but--"

"I'M NOT JEALOUS."

"Woah there, Romeo," Jaehwan said surprised. "Relax, it was a joke. Besides, Jihoon's phone battery probably ran out after dance practice since he plays his songs from there. I heard he had to borrow a CD player afterwards. And he's probably still asleep and hasn't been able to recharge it. He was so tired too, so don't get too mad at him okay?"

Jinyoung breathed in deeply. He's right, I'm overreacting. Still, it surprisingly hurt to find out Jihoon was with a guy that wasn't him or Woojin, whom he couldn't really be jealous of because those two Parks fought way too often. This Kuanlin guy though, was a mystery. And apparently a really good-looking mystery too. But he couldn't afford to get distracted now. Not with promotion exams looming over his shoulder. If he failed again, he might as well say goodbye to Jihoon forever.
"So now you know how it feels to have your first and only love taken from you, huh?" Jaehwan teased. "So don't steal Daehwi away from me."

"Too late." Jinyoung replied.

"What?" Jaehwan and Daehwi said in unison.

"Wanna come with me somewhere, Daehwi?" Jinyoung said.

Daehwi simply stared at him. "What for? We're not gonna take revenge by making Jihoon jealous, are we?"

Jinyoung raised an eyebrow at him. "Why? Is that what you wanted?" he said, not sure why he was teasing him.

"N-no."

"Knew it. I wasn't thinking of that. I just meant we should go ahead and practice now. I only have..." He looked at his watch. "Six hours till promotion exams. Let's just go ahead and spend it practicing together. I need something to keep me distracted too, so the timing is right."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Daehwi asked, genuine concern in his voice.

"Yeah," Jinyoung replied, grabbing Daehwi's hand and making towards the door. "I'm fine. I have to be right?" he smiled at Daehwi. "Jihoon-hyung will just have some explaining to do later when he wakes up."

And so hand in hand they walked out the door, leaving Jaehwan behind them.

"Aaaaand another pair of lovebirds leaves me to my solitude," Jaehwan sighed, feeding himself another spoonful of cereal. "Ah well, guess I better get back to my singing practice."

~JINHWI 1 END~

Chapter End Notes

Hey there wonderful readers! Hope you enjoyed my very first Jinhwi chapter. They're not my ultimate ship (Panwink is, and some of you who lurk on our Panwink thread on OH already know that lol) but I still enjoyed writing their love story. So what is there to talk about today? I realize writing from an alternate universe school setting is hard, because there are lots of things you have to invent, but if you missed it, the breakdown of the school system is in the Notes for Chapter 1, JIHOON. I guess now, it's time to reveal what tracks the Wanna One members are in am I right? Here goes:

Idol Track - Daehwi (Freshman Class A), Daniel (Senior Class A), Woojin (Junior Class A)

Dancer Track - Jihoon (Junior Class B)

Rapper Track - Kuanlin (Freshman Class D)

Singer Track - Jinyoung (Sophomore Class F), Jaehwan (Senior Class B)
Actor Track - Seongwoo (Senior Class A)

If you're wondering about their ages in the story, it's the same as in real life. I know, I know, Dan, Jaehwan and especially Ong are way too old to still be high school students, but these guys have gone through a lot in their lives, which is why they're still in school and have yet to graduate. You'll find out soon-- But Minhyun, Jisung and Sungwoon are all graduates and are alumni of Mireu (and Minhyun sometimes works as an assistant professor!) Also, the current setting is the middle of the First Semester, so no, if Jinyoung fails his promotion exam, he won't get kicked out yet. Don't you worry (but pray he doesn't fail lol he has Daehwi to help).

Okay, that's all for now. Stay tuned for Ongnie in a while!
Ong Seongwoo was not the type of person to dislike a lot of things. Sure, he cowered at the sight of a bee, or a cockroach, or even just a mosquito. And sure, once or twice he had his own prank backfire on him because random passersby accidentally gave him a surprise attack as he snuck up on other people (and he absolutely despised failing at this sort of thing, which he considered his own expertise). And sure, he was deathly afraid of ghosts, and hated having to do chores alone at night because of it. But apart from such things, he liked mostly everything. And most everyone liked him, too... except for his teachers. But despite the fact that he had, on multiple occasions, been branded "public enemy number one" by the faculty at Mireu High for being a troublemaker and repeat offender, he didn't hate being their student either. The teachers even sincerely wished for him to graduate, which he appreciated, even though it was less likely because they wanted him to succeed in life, and more because they wanted him to haul his ass out of the school already, as he had long since overstayed his welcome. But that didn't stop him from annoying the heck out of them during detention, sometimes on purpose.

Oh, once he did manage to graduate, he would definitely miss his teachers. But the one person and the one place Seongwoo hated the most in the world?

The vice principal. And the vice principal's office. In front of which he just so happened to be sitting, because of his quadrillionth attempt at stirring up trouble. He had been to the office so many times before, he had practically memorized the map of Korea that was framed and on display just outside the office, across from where he was seated. He was horrible at geography, but he could tell you where every province was in relation to everywhere else. He even knew how many tiles were on the floor (360 at last count), how many leaves were on the plants (27 on Kimchi and 35.5 on Cheese, because one was half-eaten for some reason), even how many stray white hairs were on the vice principal's balding head (way too many hairs for a guy his age), because he made a habit of counting them as the vice principal droned on with his unnecessary spiel on how tired he was of seeing Ong's face. An extra hair probably sprouted out of stress just by talking to him. But who would even get tired of seeing such a handsome face so often, anyway? The vice principal should feel grateful Seongwoo even bothered with a visit since he was always in very high demand with the ladies.

Man, how he wished to be with them instead of in this hellhole waiting for judgment day to arrive, yet again. He drummed his fingers against his knees impatiently. What was taking the old guy so long anyway? Seongwoo stood up, walking across the waiting room to the door of the main office, pressing his ear against the small space between the door and its frame, straining to listen in.

"...your mother and father in Taiwan..." he heard the vice principal saying. "...at their request, as they have donated so kindly to our school..."

Ong pressed his ear closer. The snippets of the conversation he was hearing made little sense. A donation? But this was just a student he was talking to wasn't it?

"...though you're in Class D..." "...not required to share room with student Lee Daehwi anymore..." "...your parents asked for only the best for you..." "...your family's generosity..."

What was this? Was the vice principal offering a Class D student the privileges reserved for A ranked students only? Seongwoo distinctly remembered the sort of hardship he had to go through
just to get a room of his own and escape the torture of sharing a space with his noisy Idol track roommate (it involved a bribe, a couple of bottles of soju, some drunken confessions, and a short-lived romance with his Theatre Arts professor. Well, sort of. Ong was only acting his part, but he guessed his acting was extremely believable to naive girls). And yet whoever this kid was, he was being given some sort of free pass... who was he anyway?

He heard the students voice next, and Seongwoo was surprised at how deep it was.

"...no need for special privilege..." "...already gave up my scholarship..." "...not the best, but I'll prove myself soon..."

Hmm. Seongwoo could hear this clearer since the student's chair was nearer to the door, but his accent was thick so he wasn't sure he was hearing it right. Well, at least one person had common sense in this place.

Wait, two people. Seongwoo wasn't too shabby himself, either.

But just as Seongwoo began pressing his ear to listen in further, the door swung open. Seongwoo straightened himself, and immediately began employing his acting chops to salvage the situation.

"Wow that surprised me," he said, feigning the surprise with his expression. "So you're done? That was quick."

"What do you think you're doing?" The vice principal demanded. "So you've resorted to eavesdropping now, have you?"

Seongwoo feigned as much scorn and indifference as he could muster. "I was practicing my ear-folding technique." From the corner of his vision, he noted the student behind the vice-principal. He glanced upwards at him to give him a proper look.

Okay, first of all this guy was as lean as a bean pole and as tall as a basketball player. Wait, he'd seen that face somewhere before. Was it on television? Was he actually a basketball player somewhere?

And hey, he was almost as good-looking as Seongwoo himself. Almost. "You know how to do it?" he addressed the boy, smiling. The boy looked confused. Seongwoo demonstrated his ear-folding technique, first with his left ear and then his right.

The boy suppressed a chuckle. "Cool! How'd you do that?" Seongwoo smiled knowingly, then unfolded them both at the same time. "I can do it while dabbing, too."

The boy's look turned to something akin to admiration. "Really?"

Seongwoo nodded. "Actually, I was practicing a new technique. It's ear-folding with my ear pressed to the door, which is why I was doing that just then. I was trying to see if I could unfold it while doing that, since I was bored out of my mind and needed a new gimmick for my promotion exam performance." It was a lame, unbelievable excuse if he ever heard one, but it was the best he could do.

"That is a lame, unbelievable excuse if I've ever heard one," the vice principal said, seeing right through him.

"Why are you being so suspicious?" Seongwoo countered. "Were you talking about something suspicious? Besides, I bet you can hear nothing through this crack. Try it yourself."
The vice principal shot him a look of disgust. "If you even dare--"

"Seongwoo pretended not to hear him. "I'm actually trying to showcase some variety skills here and there," he told the boy. "I'm actually pretty interested in pursuing a double track of Actor and Host/Comedian." At least this wasn't too much of a lie. But if he were being honest with himself, there was another track he really wanted to pursue. But he would never admit it out loud.

"Impressive." The boy said, looking at him with adoration. "That's good for you, hyung."

"Don't think for one second I believe you," The vice principal continued. "If you get caught doing the same thing twice, I will not be so kind. I have a duty to uphold here as vice principal, and inappropriate behavior will not go ignored."

Liar, Seongwoo thought to himself. You speak of abiding by the rules, yet you try and bribe a student with privileges because you're trying to impress his wealthy parents for them to donate even more money to the school. Or your pocket.

"Let's just let it go, vice principal," the student said, trying to sound polite. "I think someone else is waiting for you outside there, too." He gestured to the door at the entrance of the waiting room, where yet another boy had entered, as silent as a fox. At this, the vice-principal shot Seongwoo a long look, and then finally sighed in defeat.

"Let's settle this matter a different time," he said. "You may go, Mr. Lai Kuanlin. Thank you for your time. And tell your parents I send them my greetings."

Kuanlin smiled, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. There was a certain graveness in them that mimicked Seongwoo's own. I kinda like this kid, he decided. Kuanlin bowed to the vice principal and them to him before excusing himself, but not before Seongwoo managed to give him a look that said. Thanks man, you saved my hide. After Kuanlin left smiling, the vice-principal gestured the other boy waiting at the entrance. "Come in, Daniel." He then turned to Seongwoo, both his tone and expression changing from gentleness to displeasure. "You too. And don't even try to do anything stupid this time."

After being seated inside the office, Seongwoo took the liberty of examining the student who had come with him. Now this was a face he had seen multiple times before, but never even talked to. It was a face you wouldn't recognize only if you were living under a rock. Or if you were a Lai Kuanlin. The boy in front of him sat at the chair with a certain aura of grace about him, as if he belonged seated only on a chair that luxurious. His rich, chestnut brown hair was slicked back and parted at the side, and his eyes looked as sharp as he had ever seen them. Now this was a guy Seongwoo would gladly concede to in terms of looks. He was beautiful, and Seongwoo hated himself for thinking it.

Student Council President Kang Daniel. Was that even his real name? Either way, he was arguably the most famous Idol Track student at Mireu, ranked first in the whole school. A student whose eyes were now trained on him. Seongwoo averted his gaze quickly. He wondered how long he had been staring.

"Both of you must've been wondering why I called you both to my office at the same time."

Seongwoo raised his hand and said "I'm not!" at the same time Daniel nodded and said "Yes, sir." They both looked at each other, and then turned away.

"Well, you're obviously here because you made trouble again, Ong Seongwoo," the vice principal said. "What was it this time again? Getting caught cutting classes for the third consecutive day?
Picking a fight with another student? Or was it arguing with a teacher?"

Seongwoo scoffed. "I only argued with that teacher because he had no idea what he was talking about. If I didn't correct him he would've taught the wrong thing to everyone." This wasn't a lie. Seongwoo was in Class A since he was a freshman, because he had been learning how to act since he was a little kid. He had gone through countless classes and workshops, and the new teacher seemed to know even less than he did.

"If you really dislike all your classes so much, why are you still here then?" the vice principal said. "I have no idea what to do with you anymore."

Seongwoo narrowed his eyes at the vice principal. "You and I both know the answer to that."

*It's because I'm your sister's son. It's because the only reason I haven't been kicked out is you keep giving me chances just to please my mother. It's because she'll stop support for this school if I don't graduate. It's because I'm only in the Actor track since she wants me to become an actor, even though it isn't what I want for myself.*

The vice principal sighed as if Seongwoo was sucking the very life out of him. "This is my last resort, Ong Seongwoo. For the rest of the Semester, or the entire year if you continue to give me trouble, I will place you under the supervision of Kang Daniel here."

"What?" Seongwoo and Daniel said in unison.

The vice principal continued. "He will report to me if you step even a toe out of line, and he will make sure you don't break anymore rules."

"Vice principal, I don't think this is a very good idea." Daniel started.

"What makes you think I'll listen to this guy?" Seongwoo demanded.

"Excuse me?" Daniel said, offended.

"Sorry, pretty boy, but I don't listen to just anyone, not even to the Student Council."

"I leave him in your capable hands, then." The vice principal said. "That is really all I have to say. I've long since given up on you, Seongwoo. If you won't listen to me then at least listen to the Council President."

Seongwoo knew the game the Vice Principal was playing. If Seongwoo dared to displease the Council President, he had a loyal army of fangirls to back him up and make Seongwoo their next target. Seongwoo was pretty popular too, but nothing could ever come close to Daniel's fanbase, and these were the sort of girls who would start a religion just to worship his abs. And he knew just how dangerous fangirls could become if you angered them.

"How exactly will I supervise him, sir?" Daniel asked. "We aren't in the same track, and we don't take the same classes."

"And don't think I'll ever agree to this," Seongwoo added.

"Then how about a deal?" The vice principal said, turning to Seongwoo. "If you behave and do well during your promotional exams, I will recommend to have you moved to the Idol Track myself."

This shut up Seongwoo effectively. *Move him to the Idol Track?* He had been wanting to do that
forever. But why now, in this kind of situation?

"Don't think I don't know these things, kid," The vice principal said. "All of the free electives you've taken are for that track. I will have them all credited, even the ones before your... leave of absence. And it would work out for me since you'll then have to take the same classes as Daniel's."

_Leave of absence._ He really had to bring up the fact that Seongwoo had been involved in a major controversy before and had to take years off because of it. It was the reason he was still in high school at twenty-two years old.

"There must be a catch to all this crap you've been pulling," Seongwoo said. "Spill it."

The vice-principal smiled victoriously. "Room privileges will be removed. I will have you share a room with Kang Daniel for a year."

"WHAT?" Seongwoo and Daniel said in unison. Seongwoo hated the idea of having a roommate, and he knew Daniel had always been in Class A, and never had any roommates to begin with.

"Sir, I fail to see why I have to do this. I did nothing wrong," Daniel said. "Why do I have to..."

"Because it is your duty as Student Council President. And it would add to your reputation to be... mentoring such a high-profile student like Seongwoo."

This made Seongwoo laugh. "So you force Class A students to share a room, when you offer our special rights to a Class D student unfairly?"

"So you were eavesdropping." The vice principal said.

"So you don't deny that you did something so unsavory."

"Do we have a deal, Ong Seongwoo?"

Seongwoo gave him a look of pure hatred, before throwing his hands up in the air. "I give up," he said finally. If he had to share a room with Daniel so be it. He just had to make sure he'd annoy him enough that he'd request the vice principal to stop the supervision. Let's see how well the vice principal can handle a mob of angry fangirls if he displeases Kang Daniel. Let's just see.

"I'll do it," he said, turning to Daniel. "You should agree too, Council President. Not that this is gonna last for very long, anyway."

***

It had been five days since Seongwoo and Daniel started rooming together. And in the span of five days, Seongwoo had already accidentally entered the bathroom while Daniel was naked in the shower, accidentally entered the bedroom while Daniel was undressed and changing into his uniform, and accidentally entered the kitchen while Daniel was cooking in nothing but an apron and boxer shorts. By day five, he was already extremely embarrassed.

"Are you doing this on purpose?" He finally demanded one day.

"Doing what on purpose?" Daniel said, buttoning up his polo shirt at an excruciatingly slow pace.

"Don't play dumb with me. I mean this whole stripping thing. In case you were wondering, I don't need to see your abs five times in one day. They're really nice, I know. But I have abs of my own, thank you very much."
“Stop being so annoying,” Daniel said. “This is my room too. I don’t have anywhere else to change into. Besides, we’re both guys. It’s no big deal.” At this, Daniel averted his gaze. Seongwoo noted how his ears were turning red.

Seongwoo raised an eyebrow at him suspiciously. “Then why are you so embarrassed if it’s no big deal?”

“Nobody’s embarrassed.” Daniel said, finally managing to button his shirt the whole way through. “Now if you’ll excuse me I have class to attend.” Daniel stood up from the edge of the bed, retrieving his school jacket and necktie from where it was perched on the chair. “You better be home before curfew, or else.”

“Class A students don’t have curfews.”

“Well, Class A Ong Seongwoos do.”

The only thing Seongwoo liked about Daniel was that he pronounced his last name right. His abs were also nice, sort of. And the innocent face he had while sleeping. But that was about it. Not that Seongwoo watched him while he slept because that would be almost as creepy as Edward from Twilight.

Daniel wore his jacket and tie, and straightened them out perfectly before turning to leave. But before he could do so, Seongwoo stood up to grab him by the arm. Daniel turned back in surprise, their faces level with each other. Seongwoo could see the blush creeping up Daniel’s cheeks, and it was the only sort of victory he could enjoy by being his roommate.

“What are you doing?” Daniel demanded. “Let go of me.”

Seongwoo raised his hand, and began pulling out a dust bunny that had gotten stuck in Daniel’s hair. “There was dust in your hair.” He said softly, savoring the look of confusion and embarrassment on Daniel’s face.

“You’re— you’re being really annoying.” Daniel stammered.

“What’s new? And I need to practice for promotion exams tomorrow, so don’t think I’m going to be here in time for your curfew.”

“You really want to be an idol?” Daniel asked. “I thought that the vice-principal was just making that up as an excuse.”

“Why else would I agree to this if I didn’t want it?” Seongwoo said. “You think I have a secret crush on you or something? Not everyone falls for you within five days, Daniel. Give me six days at least.”

Daniel blushed again, but this time he tugged his arm away with so much force that Seongwoo was forced to let go. “I never said anything. Stop bothering me already. But curfews are final.”

Seongwoo smirked at him playfully. “You miss me waaay too much.”

“Shut up.” Daniel said, a look of horror on his face.

“You’re really fun to tease you know. Your reactions are gold. I would never expect it of someone as uptight and well-behaved as you, so this is kinda fun. But I still don’t wanna keep seeing you without a shirt on.”
"Speak for yourself." Daniel said. "I'm going." He turned to leave.

Seongwoo called after him. "Hey Daniel."

"What is it now?" As he turned, Seongwoo reached him in one stride, cornering him against the wall with one arm. "I don't normally tell people this, but you should remember: All men are wolves. It's eat or be eaten in this world. So if you don't want me to keep on forcing you out of your comfort zone, you had better not get in my way either. I only admitted to you that I wanted to enter the Idol Track because I want to make it clear why I agreed to this. I would never tell anyone otherwise."

He put one finger to Daniel's lips. He felt them trembling at his touch. "So you better keep quiet about it."

Daniel looked at him with an unreadable expression. "Or else what?"

Seongwoo decided it was best to use his acting skills right about... now. He looked at Daniel in the eyes. "Or else I'm going to kiss you if it makes you shut up."

Daniel's eyes widened in surprise. Seongwoo really liked his expression. He released Daniel slowly, placing both hands inside his pants' pockets. "I'll leave first. See you later Kang Daniel. And don't miss me too much. I'll try to make it here before your curfew."

~ONGNIEL 1 END~

Chapter End Notes

Is it just me, or are my chapters getting longer and longer? Sorry about that guys :( Anyway, I really enjoyed writing this one, because Ongniel is the sort of ship that I tend to get confused writing about. Like, who really "wears the pants" in this relationship anyway? For me at least, it's clearer in Panwink and Jinhwi that Kuanlin and Jinyoung are more dominant in its usual sense, but for Ongniel it could go both ways. I have read a couple of Ongniel fanfics myself for fun, and most of them have "top Daniel" and "bottom Ong" haha. In this fic though, it's the other way around. I always did see Ong as the more assertive type. And besides, it's "Romeong and Daliet", not "Danmeo and Ongliet" lol just kidding xD Anyway, some things I still have to think about: what was the controversy that happened to Ong in the past? Why is he such a troublemaker? Is he going to get along with Daniel? These are the themes I kinda wanna explore in the Ongniel story. It's gonna be more mature than Panwink and Jinhwi for sure (but just to clarify: this fanfic is not going to have any smut in it. It's either just dramatic and romantic Ongniel or fluffy and comedic Ongniel from here on out, sorry xD But I'll do my best to make it heart-fluttering! By the way, has any one noticed that this high school is like a college? Shifting, double majors, electives, dormitories... Oh well, it's fiction anyway. I hope you enjoy reading as much as I enjoyed writing it!

But that's it for this chapter. Have a great day~
Kuanlin didn’t know much about Park Woojin, apart from the fact that he was Jihoon’s roommate, and was a Junior in Class A from the Idol Track.

But one thing he did know was that Park Woojin was an amazing dancer. Probably one of the best he had ever seen, even though Jihoon’s cover of EXO’s ‘Monster’ was still his favourite. He stared in amazement as Woojin took over the practice room floor where they had been for the past two hours, dancing to BTS’s ‘Blood Sweat and Tears’, each movement sharp, precise, and absolutely captivating to watch.

“He’s amazing.” Kuanlin said, turning to Jihoon beside him. He was watching Woojin too, but he kind of looked a bit annoyed for some reason.

“Yeah,” Jihoon said. “Too much for his own good. Ugh, at this rate I won’t be able to catch up.”

“Don’t worry, hyung, you’re still my favourite,” Kuanlin teased, which made Jihoon blush and look away. Kuanlin had no idea why he reacted that way, but he thought it was kind of cute, anyway. Everything about Jihoon was kind of cute. If he was being honest, Kuanlin had decided the moment Jihoon almost cursed at him yesterday that teasing him would probably become his newest favorite hobby. Jihoon’s reactions were kind of priceless.

“You’re really cute, hyung.” Kuanlin thought out loud. “I prefer that expression over the scowl you have on whenever Woojin-hyung dances.”

“What’s this about a scowl?” Woojin said. Apparently the song had finished, and Kuanlin had missed it. Darn, he liked how the choreography ended too, so he was a little bummed about that. It was Jihoon’s fault for being too distracting.

“Is it my turn to dance yet?” Jihoon asked. “I knew I shouldn’t have told you we were here. You’ve cut into my practice time way too much.”

“What are you on about?” Woojin asked in return, retrieving a towel from his backpack and wiping his sweat away with it. “You’ve practiced your piece twelve times already. I only practiced mine for eleven.”

“Yeah and if you weren’t here, my count would be at twenty-four.”

“Stop acting like you didn’t practice over a hundred times yesterday.” Woojin said. “Aren’t you getting a little tired of it? Eleven times more hardly matters, it isn’t like the song is going to magically speed up in beat or change in lyrics.”

Jihoon simply glared at him. “Well stop acting like you need the practice. You’re in A, and there’s no chance you’ll get demoted to B.”

Woojin smirked in satisfaction. “Sounds like a compliment to me.”

Jihoon buried his face in the palm of his left hand. “Darn it. I slipped.”

As they bickered, Kuanlin watched them with a certain curiosity. He wondered how this sort
of dynamic formed between them, because he had never seen anything like it before. They seemed like the type to randomly break into a three-hour-long shouting match over whether or not the chicken came before the egg.

But then again, they were roommates, so they probably secretly got along. As Kuanlin observed them silently, he felt a small pang of envy. He didn’t have anyone like that. All of his friends were back in Taiwan, and even then he had been too focused on basketball and his studies to maintain his friendships with a lot of people.

At that moment, Jihoon’s phone started ringing, interrupting Kuanlin’s thoughts. Jihoon fished it out of his pocket.

“It’s Jinyoung,” he said. Kuanlin had no idea whether the look on his face was of excitement or panic. It could well have been both. Jihoon pressed the answer button hurriedly, bringing the phone to his ear. “Hey Jinyoung! I’m sorry I wasn’t able to—” he stopped, and the expression on his face changed visibly to worry. It worried Kuanlin as well. What was wrong?

“I’m really sorry,” Jihoon continued. “I was too tired, and I forgot to recharge. I really meant to tell you. I even sent you a text as soon as I woke up, but I couldn’t come to meet you anymore because Kuanlin and I had to….” his voice faltered. “Hello? Jinyoung? Are you still there? Hey!”

“Trouble in paradise?” Woojin asked, as Jihoon slowly brought the phone down from his ear to his lap, staring at the screen in disbelief.

“I don’t believe this. He hung up on me!”

So this was what Jihoon looked like when he was angry. He thought it was kinda scary… but cute. How was that even possible?

Kuanlin had no idea how to comfort Jihoon at a time like this, but he still wanted to wipe the look of distress off of his face anyway. So he did the only thing he could think of to make Jihoon feel marginally better. He fished into his sweatshirt pocket, and from it offered to Jihoon the Lotte Chocolate Pie he had been saving. “Want some?”

Jihoon looked up at him in confusion, then at the snack in longing. After a while he decided against it. “No thanks, I’m not hung—“

Jihoon’s stomach grumbled.

Kuanlin suppressed the urge to laugh. Woojin laughed out loud, pointing at Jihoon’s belly mockingly.

“Well, well, it seems stomachs speak louder than words.”

Jihoon cast a murderous glare in Woojin’s direction. Kuanlin sighed, then took Jihoon’s hand, aware of how Jihoon bristled in surprise at the contact. He placed the snack onto Jihoon’s palm.

“You can have it, hyung,” he said, patting Jihoon’s head affectionately. “You must be really tired from practice. I’m sorry I can’t do much else for you.”

There it was again, that blush. Somehow, being able to entice that sort of reaction out of Jihoon was really satisfying. He watched as Jihoon debated in his head whether or not to take the snack and eat it, or throw it at Woojin’s face. Jihoon took the snack after a long moment. “Thanks. At least one of you is being civil about this.”
“So why is Jinyoung mad at you again?” Woojin asked, ignoring Jihoon’s underhanded comment.

“No idea, to be honest,” Jihoon said, ripping the plastic of the chocolate pie, and biting into half of it in one go. “It’s not like I didn’t have a reason why I couldn’t contact him.”

As he talked, Kuanlin wondered what sort of relationship Jihoon had with Jinyoung. He’d heard they were best friends, so did that mean he was even closer to Jihoon than Woojin was? But then again, it was probably none of his business. He cast a sideways glance in Jihoon’s direction, spotting the pie crumbs at the edges of his lips. Without a second thought, he reached out and wiped them off.

Jihoon immediately moved away in surprise. “What are you doing?”

“You had some food on there,” he said. He watched as Jihoon’s cheeks started turning into a bright pink color unlike anything he had ever seen. “Are you okay, hyung? You’re looking kind of red.”

Kuanlin reached for him again, this time to touch his forehead with the back of his hand. He leaned in closer to get a better look at Jihoon’s complexion. “Are you getting sick?”

Jihoon stared at him for a few seconds, and then seeming to realize something, immediately swatted Kuanlin’s hand away.

“No, I just… I’ll just go and find Jinyoung for a sec.” Without another word, Jihoon stood up and headed towards the door to leave. Once he had gone, Kuanlin was left with an empty sort of feeling, as if he had just lost a game he didn’t know he was playing. Did he overdo it? Kuanlin liked to tease Jihoon to get a reaction out of him, but just then he was actually genuinely worried.

“I knew something was going on between the two of you.” Woojin said out of nowhere, startling Kuanlin. He had somehow forgotten Woojin was still in the room, and he felt his face heat up at the thought that he had done something so embarrassing in front of him.

“If I were you,” Woojin began. “Don’t you ever become anything like your Jihoon-hyung.”

“Why? What’s wrong with Jihoon-hyung? I think he’s actually quite nice.”

“He’s too easily distracted by things that should be unimportant for him at this stage in life.”

“Like?”

“Like boys, for example.”

“Boys.”

“Yes. Especially the mysterious, brooding, and pretty-looking ones. You know who I’m talking about.”

Kuanlin ran through the mental list in his head of who might be described as mysterious, brooding, and pretty-looking (though he had no idea what ‘brooding’ meant. His Korean just wasn’t advanced enough).

“You mean boys like Jinyoung-hyung,” he finally concluded.

Woojin simply stared at him for a long moment before sighing in what seemed like resignation. “Okay, yes, let’s just say it’s Jinyoung.”

As Kuanlin nodded in agreement, Woojin began patting Kuanlin’s shoulder slowly.
“Your naïveté is kind of refreshing. Makes it easier for me to get away with accidentally saying something I shouldn’t.”

Kuanlin had no idea what naïveté meant either, but he would definitely store it into one of his mental folders for him to Google translate from Korean later on. It was probably a compliment anyway. And it made sense. Jinyoung and Jihoon had known each other for a long time, so it would be no surprise if Jihoon got distracted by him from time to time. Or maybe just by his head, because it was disturbingly almost just the size of his fist.

“You’re not the same, are you?” Woojin asked, his eyes narrowing in suspicion. “You don’t get distracted by guys either?”

The only thing distracting Kuanlin nowadays was his upcoming promotion exam performance, which he had decided to take after all, despite it not being required of a transferee. But that was less something to be distracted about than the very thing he shouldn’t be distracted from. But apart from Jihoon, he didn’t think much about boys really. He guessed nothing was particularly wrong. He shook his head. “Dunno. I think I’m pretty much still into girls.”

But he had never really been into anyone, period. He teased girls before, but it was just to get a reaction from them out of curiosity. He guessed he was still at that stage in his life where he was trying to understand how girls really worked, and convince himself they weren’t actually aliens from a different planet because they kinda spoke in a weird language that was even harder to decipher than Korean. He really liked teasing them though, because their exaggerated reactions were kind of hilarious.

“So you’ve had a girlfriend before.” Woojin asked, startling Kuanlin a second time. Why was he suddenly on the hot seat?


“Shh,” Woojin said abruptly, cupping his ear with his left hand and bringing his right index finger to Kuanlin’s mouth as if to gesture for him to keep quiet. “Did… did you hear that Kuanlin-ah?”

Kuanlin did not, in fact, hear that. “Hear what?” he asked, confused.

Woojin leaned in closer to the source of the sound, wherever the heck it was. “I think… that’s the sound of a million girls collectively sighing in relief at the fact that they still have the chance to capture your heart.” He looked at Kuanlin with a smug look on his face.

Kuanlin wasn’t sure whether to pretend he found it funny, or just inwardly pity his Woojin-hyung for thinking that his remark was even remotely deserving of a reaction. “There, there, hyung,” he said, patting Woojin gently on the back, deciding to comfort him instead. “I’m so sorry you’ve got no jams.”

Woojin feigned a look of annoyance. “I swear you’re starting to sound and look like Jihoon more and more each day.”

“Thanks,” Kuanlin said. “I think Jihoon-hyung is really handsome.”

Woojin simply nodded his head absently. A few moments later a look of horror dawned on his face. “Wait. You think he’s handsome? What is this? Do you like him? Are you secretly dating? Or perhaps you’re in love with him and he’s in love with you but neither of you know it? Are you trying to recruit me as your wingman so you can use me as a messenger to send mushy love letters...
back and forth to each other? And then expect to me to watch you giggle stupidly at them while I wait for your response? Because let me just clarify that I absolutely refuse.”

Kuanlin could only stare at Woojin with his mouth agape. “Hyung,” he said. “I don’t know what you’re getting so worked up about, I literally just breathed. I never said anything about a love letter. Besides, I’m not shallow enough to like someone just because they’re handsome.”

“Ya sure about that?”

“See, I don’t even like you all that much just yet.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Woojin demanded.

“It means you’re really handsome, but I need to get to know you better first before I decide if you’re truly likeable.”

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN I’M NOT TRULY LIKE—wait. You think I’m handsome?”

Kuanlin grinned at him, gums on full display. He randomly sent Woojin a finger heart for maximum effect.

“Wow,” Woojin said. “I’m amazed. Your judgment of visuals is superb. Your parents raised you well.”

Kuanlin was sure Woojin meant this as a harmless remark, but it still tugged at something painful within the deeper recesses of his heart. Still, he feigned laughter to hide how it affected him.

“So you’ve never thought about kissing Jihoon?” Woojin asked.

“No, I’ve—“ Kuanlin stopped. Had he thought of it before? Maybe, but only because Jihoon was standing way too close to him once and he was simply observing how nice and plump his lips were. He never thought of kissing them. Definitely not. “Definitely not.”

It sounded like a half-truth and Kuanlin didn’t like that—it wasn’t like him at all to feel conscious over someone. He actually prided himself on being chill about almost everything in general.

“Good,” Woojin responded. “Because otherwise this is about to turn into some of the gayest fanfiction I’ve ever read in my life. Not that I, uhm… have ever read any before.”

Kuanlin laughed. “That’s alright, hyung. We all have our own little hobbies. Mine is basketball, yours is… to do research on Jihoon-hyung’s weird behaviour by reading, uhh… interesting stuff. Besides, there’s nothing wrong with reading about gays even if you aren’t one of them.”

“You’re right,” Woojin nodded. “Yeah, there’s nothing to be guilty of.”

“So you do read them.” It was more a statement of fact than a question.

“Just shut up about it already before I tell Jihoon you read smut in your spare time.”

Kuanlin blinked, a blank expression on his face. “What’s that?” he asked. “Sounds kinda nice.”

“Oh god,” Woojin exclaimed. “Someone should just get you the hell away from me before I permanently corrupt your untainted soul.”

Kuanlin, as per usual, had no idea what Woojin was talking about. Woojin didn’t particularly care to explain either. Kuanlin decided to change the topic before he got curious enough to Google the
term, which was probably a bad idea.

“You think he likes Jinyoung-hyung that much?” Kuanlin asked instead. “He seemed really worried when Jinyoung-hyung called a while ago.”

“Sure, Kuanlin,” Woojin simply conceded. “Sure, it’s Jinyoung he likes and not you.”

Kuanlin sighed. Woojin sounded like he was meant to be saying something sarcastic, as if there was a chance Jihoon liked him instead of Jinyoung. But that wouldn’t make much sense because they met only yesterday. He and Jinyoung, on the other hand, knew each other like the back of their own hands. Kuanlin might have been young, but he was old-fashioned in some ways. For example, he still believed that one’s true feelings for someone emerged only after you got to know them. And as far as he was concerned, he hadn’t even begun to tear a crack through Jihoon’s surface.

For all he knew, the Jihoon he had gotten close to was nothing but a passing mirage, a trick of the eye, an illusion he had conjured up for himself because he was in desperate need of someone’s company. It was way too early to tell.

Besides, he wasn’t into boys at all. Right? He just liked teasing people, and Jihoon was just especially fun to mess with for some reason. He looked up at Woojin, trying to imagine what it would be like to date him.

Kuanlin crinkled his nose in disgust. “Ugh, no.”

“Did you say something?” Woojin asked.

Kuanlin shook his head. “Nothing, hyung. I was just thinking you looked cool onstage a while ago.”

Woojin grinned at him. “Okay, I take it back. You definitely do NOT sound anything like Jihoon.”

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“Don’t you think Woojin-hyung might’ve danced too passionately during practice?” Kuanlin asked Jihoon as they geared up for dance practice later that day. He had changed into a sleeveless black top and sweatpants, and since it was way too hot for a cap, he had to remove it and send his messy hair flying. He caught Jihoon staring at him from the corner of his vision, and he began wondering if he looked really funny in his getup. Or was it that he looked nice?

“Do you like this outfit that much, hyung? You haven’t taken your eyes off of me even once.” he teased. Jihoon blushed pink at his remark. “No, you look funny. It was nicer with a hat.”

“And yet, you’re still looking.”

“What’s all this about Woojin anyway?” Jihoon inquired, obviously eager to change the subject. He began doing some stretching to warm himself up for practice.

“I dunno,” Kuanlin said. “I just… I think he might’ve moved around too much that he ended up dropping all of his charisma on the floor and leaving it just floating around. The Woojin-hyung I talked to a while ago was kind of a dork.”

Jihoon laughed, and Kuanlin was surprised at how nice it felt for Jihoon to laugh at something he said. “Yeah, I’m glad we agree that Woojin is a hundred times cooler onstage than off of it. I hate to admit it though, but he was born to be a performer. He’s just a natural. And wait till you hear
him rap... It makes me kind of want to punch him because he’s just that good.”

“I was kind of envious,” Kuanlin admitted. “I think he’s come to a point where no one could call him out for his skill. He isn’t really lacking in any particular area.”

Jihoon pouted, which made something jump violently from within Kuanlin’s chest. *Something was weird,* he thought. *It’s just an expression, so why am I being like this?*

“You know, it kinda pisses me off when you compliment him like that.” Jihoon said. “Compliment me too, sometimes.”

*A. So that’s why.*

“Are you being jealous, hyung?” he asked, smiling. “It’s adorable.”

Jihoon’s expression turned from smugness to embarrassment almost immediately. “N-not that kind of compliment. I mean the genuine ones.”

Kuanlin was nothing if not genuine with that remark, but he decided not to correct him. “So are we going to practice or not?”

“Right,” Jihoon said, seeming to collect himself. He slapped both of his hands across both cheeks. “Focus, Jihoon-ah.”

“Hyung, who are you talking to?”

“Nothing, just this guy who isn’t thinking straight. Anyway, let’s get to it. Have you thought of which song you’d like to prepare? I’m assuming it’s a cover, unless you’re a genius like Daehwi who can compose entire songs in a matter of hours.”

Kuanlin was definitely nothing like Daehwi. If he was being honest, rooming with Daehwi was hard on him. Everytime Daehwi practiced his dance and his vocals in their room, it felt to Kuanlin like a constant reminder of just how inferior he was in comparison. Granted, he was in the Rapper and not the Idol track, but still… it would be cool if he could learn how to dance too.

“I kinda want to learn how to dance like you, hyung,” Kuanlin said. He wasn’t sure why he was baring that information, even though it was embarrassing to admit out loud. He guessed Jihoon was just really comfortable to talk to. “The one you showed me earlier. You said you really liked it, and I do too.”

Jihoon scratched the back of his neck. “That dance I like…? Oh.”

Kuanlin watched as Jihoon demonstrated his dance. It was mesmerizing to watch even if he was just jerking around various parts of his body—it made him look kind of like a robot, which was cool. “It’s called popping,” Jihoon said. “You want to learn it?”

Kuanlin nodded. Jihoon smiled, excitement in his features. “Okay first, this is how you do it.”

For about ten minutes, Jihoon demonstrated the basic moves he first learnt for popping, asking Kuanlin to repeat after him. Arm movements would come first, as the footwork could get kind of tricky. Kuanlin listened intently, trying to emulate the seamless movements of Jihoon’s body. It didn’t really work out too well.

“Your arms are too stiff, Kuanlin-ah,” Jihoon said. He rested both hands gently on both of Kuanlin’s shoulders, looking directly into his eyes. “And you slouch way too much. I know it’s
because you’re tall, but you should be conscious of that while dancing. Even when it’s not popping.”

Kuanlin sighed. “You’re right. Maybe I’m just not cut out for this.” He ruffled his hair absently, feeling kind of sheepish. “Sorry about that.” He looked at Jihoon, and was surprised to see an expression he had never quite seen before. It looked like the midpoint between shock and awe.

“Don’t do that again.” Jihoon said. *Now that was unexpected.*

“Do what?” He asked. “Running my hands through my hair? Sorry, that’s a habit.”

“Well, unlearn it. I don’t… I don’t like it.” Jihoon said, looking away. What’s his problem all of a sudden? Kuanlin thought. Jihoon still hadn’t removed his hands from Kuanlin’s shoulders, and it made Kuanlin kind of aware of how large their gap in height was. Suddenly, a look of recognition flashed in Jihoon’s eyes, and he immediately withdrew his hands, hiding them behind his back. “A-anyway, you did well for a first time learner. It’s definitely harder than you’d think.”

“I’m sorry for wasting your time.” Kuanlin said. “Our promotion exams are in three hours, and yet I ended up having you teach me something completely different.”

Jihoon sat back down on the practice room floor. “No worries. They say you learn more by teaching. Works out for both of us. You’re the one who needs to think of your rap. I still have no idea why you want to push through with your exam though. You literally found out yesterday.”

Kuanlin sat himself down as well, right next to Jihoon. His right hand accidentally brushed Jihoon’s as he rested it on the floor, but upon their contact, Jihoon immediately pulled his away. Kuanlin didn’t really like that much.

“I decided I needed to somehow prove to myself that I have something to offer.” Kuanlin said. “I’m in Class D, and who knows, I might end up being moved to F… but if I sit this out I feel like I’ll miss out on an opportunity to improve. There’s a lot to learn from our professors’ feedback.”

“Wow,” Jihoon said. “Your mindset is really impressive for someone as young as you are.”

“Thanks. To be honest I’m really scared… but I don’t want other people to know that. I didn’t come all the way here just to fail. I have to… I have to prove my parents wrong.”

Kuanlin felt Jihoon’s eyes land on him. He wasn’t sure why he was baring his feelings to Jihoon, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, but it provided him some relief as he had been keeping all his emotions to himself for the longest time. And Jihoon was a great listener.

“I actually came here…” he began. “Against my parents’ wishes. My dad wants me to follow in his footsteps, succeed him as he retires, and my mom just thinks my decision to become a rapper is a rash one. She’d rather I pursued basketball, as I’ve been playing that since I was little, and lots of amazing schools have already offered me scholarships. She thinks I was being selfish in deciding to leave Taipei. But I’ve already left, and I’ve never looked back since. I don’t regret it at all.”

“I understand,” he heard Jihoon say. "I’m not sure if I’m being too invasive in asking, but there are rumors going around that your parents are donating to the school and you’re getting special privileges for it. Sorry, I hadn’t met you when I first heard the rumors, but… I don’t want you unaware of the things being said behind your back. They might be lies.”

Kuanlin looked at Jihoon, patting his head affectionately. He relished in the shy reaction he got out
of it. “Thanks, hyung. For telling me. But it’s true. I was sent to the principal a couple of days ago. He was telling me about that too.”

“But if your parents are so against it, why are they donating to the school?”

Kuanlin sighed. “Who knows? Maybe they’re doing it out of spite. Kind of like telling me I’m not going to survive this place without their help.”

“Or maybe they just want the best for you, despite you going against their wishes. Maybe they genuinely want to help you succeed, no matter what path you choose to follow.”

Kuanlin smiled, and this time it reached his eyes. He wondered what it was about Jihoon that made him feel so nice. He guessed he just hadn’t met someone who treated him so kindly, who comforted him when he most needed it, who made him feel a little less alone in the world. Before he knew it, his left hand was reaching out, not stopping until they found Jihoon’s. Jihoon tried to pull them away out of surprise, but Kuanlin held fast, quickly interlacing their fingers.

“What… what are you doing?” Jihoon asked, looking at their hands.

“I’m not sure. I just wanted to do it. It feels nice, though. Your hands are kind of small compared to mine, but they’re really warm.” His eyes found Jihoon’s. “Thanks for comforting me, hyung. It means a lot.”

“It’s… it’s nothing, Kuanlin-ah. You probably miss your parents.”

“I do.” Kuanlin heard the sadness in his own voice. “But if… if by chance I make it big as a rapper, I want to be able to repay them. For everything that they’ve done for me.”

“You’ll make it,” Jihoon reassured him. Kuanlin felt Jihoon’s hand holding his more tightly. He might’ve been doing it absently, but Jihoon’s thumb was also lightly stroking the side of his hand, and Kuanlin felt the heat from where it touched him. It felt nice. “I’m sure you’ll make it.”

“Yeah.”

A moment of silence passed between them, but to Kuanlin it felt like a million eternities.

“We should probably talk about happier things now,” Jihoon said, trying to break the silence. He probably found it awkward, but at least he didn’t care that they were still holding hands. “Are there things that you like, Kuanlin?”

Kuanlin thought about it for a long moment. “I like a lot of things.”

“For example?”

“Rapping.”

“Wow. I never knew that.” Jihoon said, his eyes rolling. “Anything else?”

“Popping. I really want to learn.”

“I’ll teach you more soon, don’t worry.” Hearing that made Kuanlin smile.

“I also really like food. Korean food is the best, especially beef and chicken, but I like pizza too. Wait, that's not Korean... Ah, but hotpot is my all-time favourite.”

“Ugh, stop making me hungry,” Jihoon said. “Or else my stomach might try to talk to me again. It
doesn’t say very nice things. We still need to practice, though… I want to do well this time, so I can debut as an idol as soon as possible. I’m still in the Dancer track so I can’t… but if I do well, there might be a chance for me.”

“The same goes for me,” Kuanlin said. “I want to debut, and do well on shows too. But I have a long way to go.”

“Right,” Jihoon agreed. “The future can wait. What’s most important is how well you can do right now, and I’m sure you’ll do fine, Kuanlin-ah. We still need to find out what to do for your performance.”

“Actually, I’ve been listening to Mino-sunbaenim’s Fear from Show Me the Money recently, and I really like it, but I don’t think—” Kuanlin stopped midsentence. Slowly but surely, an idea started forming in his head.

“Kuanlin-ah, what’s wrong?” Jihoon started. “You were saying something about Mino-sunbaenim’s Fear.”

“Hey, Jihoon-hyung.” Kuanlin said.

“Hmm?”

“If I cover Fear, but change some of the lyrics, even just the first verse… do you think the professors will like it? Could that work?”

Jihoon smiled at him, and Kuanlin thought a smile like that could easily light up the whole room. “Of course. If you’d like, you can write the lyrics down if you’ve got an idea, then we can work on the flow of your rap together.”

“Really?” Kuanlin said happily. He knew it, Jihoon was the best person on the planet.

“Sure, as long as – “ Before he could finish, Kuanlin tugged at the hand he was holding, pulling Jihoon forward. Kuanlin extended his other arm, wrapping Jihoon in a hug. “You’re the best, hyung.”

“K-kuanlin-ah,” he heard Jihoon say. “Uhm… this is…”

Kuanlin released him. “Sorry. I didn’t realize you might not like hugs.”

Jihoon looked at the floor, and Kuanlin wasn’t sure why he couldn’t bear to look up at him. Maybe he had overdone it with a hug?

“I really like you though,” Kuanlin said, not meaning to say it out loud.


“I don’t mean it like that. Just as a friend, you know? I really do like you a lot.”

Jihoon looked away, something unreadable in his expression. Why did he keep looking away like that? It was starting to bug Kuanlin already.

“I… I give up,” Jihoon said. “You’re too much. We should just start with your rap. A couple of hours might be enough if we work hard.”

“Yeah,” Kuanlin agreed.
Jihoon smiled, this time being the one to pat Kuanlin’s head. Kuanlin really liked that, too. Everything Jihoon did, he really, really liked. He wasn’t sure why, but that didn’t really matter. Kuanlin just wanted to know more about him, maybe someday repay him for all the help he’d been receiving.

That way, he might even find out what that slight pain in his chest meant whenever he looked at Jihoon.

A new dream started forming in Kuanlin’s heart, washing over him and piercing through his being, sending through him a jolt of excitement. And hope. A hope that he, until then, had all but lost for his future. What would it take for him--unskilled and inexperienced as he was-- to become not just a rapper, but an idol?

_I want to debut, Jihoon-hyung. He thought. But I want to do it with you._

“Let’s get started shall we?” Jihoon said, interrupting his thoughts. “And musical genius Lee Daehwi better prepare himself, because rapping genius Lai Kuanlin is coming for his title.”

~PANWINK 2 END~

Chapter End Notes

Crap. This chapter turned out extreeeeemely long, it's more than twice the length of Jihoon's O.o I guess I expected this though, because after all, Kuanlin is my ULTIMATE bias, I just couldn't resist it, I'm sorry ;-; I was never really vocal about stanning anyone before him, but now I'm active on forums, I force all my friends to watch PD101 (peacefully) and just recently... I started writing fanfiction. I'm kind of amazed at how attached I've grown to Kuanlin, and Wanna One in the process.

But the point of this note is different. I guess if you might be wondering who exactly is pining for whom in this complicated Panwink relationship, the angle I'm actually trying to go for is a Kuanlin who is entirely clueless about love, but is cool about initiating skinship and teasing Jihoon because he doesn't know how much it affects him, and a Jihoon who is completely in denial about his feelings, but is being obvious to everyone else anyway (except for Kuanlin, of course, who sadly just has no idea and continues messing with his hyung without knowing it might cause a heart attack lol). So you know, Panwink being dumb about each other's feelings might get frustrating, not that I didn't warn you xD I hope this chapter didn't bore you though... I tried to insert a playful Woojin in there for good measure!

By the way, if you notice any grammar/spelling mistakes, please excuse me, because English is not actually my native language! I will try to edit them as soon as they've been spotted though! I hope you enjoy reading~
If there was one thing Lee Daehwi regretted, it was that he had fallen in love with Bae Jinyoung.

For one thing, it was no secret that Jinyoung was in love with his best friend, no matter how hard he tried to hide it or how insistent he was at denying any sort of accusation with regards to his feelings. Jaehwan may have tried to play it off as a joke, but to Daehwi, it was apparent that Jinyoung's roommate had his own share of suspicions. Jaehwan was simply trying to avoid getting Jinyoung mad enough for him to think of smacking him upside the head, or smashing his guitar against the bedroom wall, especially considering how distraught Jinyoung was that he had even forgotten the state of disarray he was in as he rushed out the door.

"Jinyoung," Daehwi said as they walked across the corridors of the boys' dormitory. He looked frantically left and right, praying to all the gods that no one would see them walking by, hand in hand, Jinyoung still in his sleeveless shirt and boxers, and Daehwi blushing from head to toe at the sight of it.

He wondered if he should tell Jinyoung that he should consider sizing up his wardrobe, because his shirt was a tad too tight and his boxers a tad too scandalous.

"Jinyoung," Daehwi called again, louder this time. "JINYOUNG."

At the sound of his voice, Jinyoung stopped in his tracks, causing Daehwi to bump into his left bicep accidentally. Jinyoung turned to look at him, and Daehwi hated himself for being perpetually distracted by his god-tier visuals. His brain went into autopilot trying to find a suitable gameplan for how to survive the day being so close in proximity to the guy he had crushed on secretly for a month.

"Did you say something?" Jinyoung asked. "Sorry, I was deep in thought just then."

"Yeah, I know," Daehwi replied. "Not that you were being obvious." That's it Daehwi-ya, he thought to himself. Play it cool and act as if you aren't fazed by... wow he smells kinda nice.

Jinyoung simply nodded, then slowly looked Daehwi up and down. "Did you need something, then?"

"Oh right. Daehwi chastised himself inwardly for forgetting what he had to say in the first place. He seriously needed to get his wayward thoughts back in control.

"Are you sure it's alright to walk out of the room looking like that?"

Jinyoung blinked at him. "Looking like what?"

"Looking like a freakin' snack, you idiot."

"Looking like you just rolled out of bed. Even though you probably just did because it's seven in the morning, but that's not really the point."

It took a while for Jinyoung to register what he meant. He simply stared at Daehwi for a while as Daehwi tried his best to hold Jinyoung's piercing gaze. It was enough that he had somehow landed
himself in Jinyoung's arms twice that morning in the span of about fifteen minutes. If Jinyoung looked at him for a moment longer, there was a very real danger that he might just spontaneously combust on the spot.

"Oh crap," Jinyoung exclaimed, realizing that he was still dressed in clothes both unsuitable for practice and for female viewership, unless he was deliberately trying to make them pass out from shock. "Yeah no, this is not good. This is actually really embarrassing." Jinyoung ruffled his hair in an infuriatingly attractive manner. "Let's just go back to the room for a sec. I was actually planning on taking a bath, but scratch that. I can't make you wait that long."

"Are you sure?" Daehwi asked, striding to match Jinyoung's pace as he walked in a rush back to their bedroom. "I'm fine with waiting, to be honest."

"Why? Do I smell that bad?"

Daehwi kept his lips sealed. Yeah right, he thought to himself. You smell like roses and vanilla and all of my dreams come true. Which is very bad indeed.

"That bad, huh?" Jinyoung said when Daehwi didn't respond. "Guess you'd have to endure it for a bit longer then. I don't think a bath is a nice idea, now that I think about it. I'll end up all sweaty after practice anyway."

Daehwi tried to swat away thoughts of what a sweaty Jinyoung might look like. "Aren't you in the Singer track? I don't think you'd need to move around that much during practice."

"I'm not sure if you know this, but if you've seen me perform I bet you already do. I'm actually still in F class, and if I don't manage to get promoted this time, it's pretty much game over for me as I only have a semester left to redeem myself and that isn't nearly enough." Daehwi could hear the desperation in Jinyoung's voice, and it made him all the more determined to be of help.

So did you want to incorporate a dance into the performance?" he asked.

"Yeah," Jinyoung nodded. After a while he seemed to catch himself and added, "But it's not like I'm trying to get into the Idol Track or anything. I'm not that foolish."

All too easily, Daehwi could tell that Jinyoung wasn't telling the truth in it's entirety. He could hear the strain in Jinyoung's voice, the slight pause he made after saying he didn't think about getting into the Idol track, the defensive manner in which he said it even though Daehwi hadn't thought to mention anything with regards to his track preference. A part of him hated himself for being able to sense these things, because it felt like he was unintentionally breaching upon someone else's private thoughts.

But he guessed there was no helping it. After all, no secret was safe from a person whose entire existence was built upon them.

A few moments later, they arrived back at the room. Jinyoung knocked on the door thrice. "Jaehwan-hyung, it's me again. Let me in please."

Jaehwan answered the door, surprised at their return. "What's this? Returning Daehwi to me already? I had no idea practice could be ten seconds long, because that was way too quick."

Jinyoung rolled his eyes. "I'm just here to change into some clothes that won't get me stared at."

Daehwi laughed nervously. "I'm pretty sure you're going to get stared at anyway, no matter what sort of clothes you're wearing," he said.
At this Jinyoung elbowed him playfully, flashing him a blinding smile. "Not you too." he turned to Jaehwan. "And no, I'm not returning Daehwi. He's mine for the day."

Daehwi's head reeled at the contact, his thoughts whirling around Jinyoung's words.

*He's mine.*

Daehwi smiled to himself, watching Jinyoung's back as he rummaged through his closet for a loose shirt and a pair of joggers. He was completely oblivious to Jaehwan's apprehensive gaze, moving from him to Jinyoung and back again.

*You're right,* Daehwi thought. *I was all yours from the moment I first heard you sing.*

Daehwi suppressed a sigh, wondering how deep of a hole he had gotten himself into. He looked away from Jinyoung, feeling more than little guilty. He had gone past the point of being honest with his feelings if it meant that there was a way for him to be closer to Jinyoung like this. After all, he had lived most of his life as if it was a masquerade, throughout which he danced behind a mask of content and happiness, despite the crushing weight of his loneliness.

A loneliness that he, for once, found mirrored in Jinyoung's haunting song on that day he first fell in love a month ago.

But if Jinyoung found out... he might never have the chance to stay beside him again, to help him, to make him smile, to get to know him inside and out. He'd have to end their friendship before it even had a chance to start.

No secret was safe indeed.

A few moments later, Jinyoung had changed into a red Supreme shirt and a pair of gray joggers. "I'm ready," he said. "Sorry for the wait."

Daehwi shook his head. "It's fine. But we should probably go before all the practice rooms get taken. You know how it is during promotion exams."

"Speaking of promotion exams," Jaehwan said, walking to his bed and from it retrieving a small stack of papers. "These are the music sheets I borrowed from you last time. I forgot to give them back. The arrangement is great, by the way. Your musical genius just doesn't disappoint."

Daehwi's cheeks flushed with color at the compliment. "Thanks, hyung. Coming from a singer, that's reassuring."

Jaehwan nodded at him. "Well, good luck then," he turned to Jinyoung. "And you... you had better take good care of Daehwi, or else I'll sing to you every night until you can hear my voice even in your dreams."

"You mean my nightmares?" Jinyoung said. "And don't worry. I'll take better care of him than you ever will, that's for sure."

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Daehwi was right about there not being any more rooms that were vacant, or even just peaceful enough for them to practice in. All of them were occupied by students from different tracks, and the music drifting through the air was an unbearable cacophony of songs that could be heard through the practice room doors that busy students couldn't even be bothered to properly close.
"I'm starting to think we should've just kicked Jaehwan-hyung out of the room and practiced there instead," Jinyoung said. "Unless a miracle falls from the skies, I'm done for if I can't even find a place to practice."

As if on cue, Daehwi's phone vibrated, alerting him to new mail. He retrieved it from his pants' pocket. The screen read: new message from Yoon Taejoon. Daehwi rubbed at his eyes for a moment, not believing his eyes. What was Taejoon doing, sending him mail? He had just rejected the guy's confession a week ago, and he was the last person Daehwi would ever expect to receive any sort of mail from. Not after Daehwi had slapped him across the face for forcefully pulling at his arm, backing him against the wall as he suffocated from the contact, and threatening to expose the secrets he had so willingly shared in thinking that Taejoon was worthy of his trust.

And especially not because he had done it at the hallway where everyone could see them. He swiped at the screen nervously to access the message.

Hey Daehwi. You going to practice today? If so, our group just finished practice and I was wondering if you needed a place. It's Room 216-A at the Right Wing.

P.S. Sorry if this message startles you. I'm not upset anymore and just wanted to make up for my behavior last week. I hope you find it in your heart to forgive me.

Daehwi stared at the message for a long time, reading it over and over again just to make sure he wasn't hallucinating out of desperation. Until then, Daehwi had no intention of patching things up with Taejoon, because of how shaken up he'd been at the incident. But a part of him thought Taejoon was simply brave enough to confess, and Taejoon had been one of his very first friends at Mireu. Losing him as a friend had hurt in a way.

But Daehwi had no idea if the real Taejoon was the one who befriended him and made a mark on his heart, or the one who threatened him and left a bruise on his arm. He wasn't sure that it could have been both. He could still remember how painful it felt to have Taejoon's hands tightening around him, how he couldn't even think straight because of the fear.

But to Daehwi, that didn't matter much at a time like this. It was true that he needed a place to practice, and that was more for Jinyoung's sake than anyone else's. Besides, it wasn't at if he'd be forced to interact with Taejoon during practice, as Taejoon was leaving anyway. Only his pride would compel him to reject the offer, and that was something Daehwi could willingly set aside.

"Jinyoung," he said. "We should head upstairs to Room 216-A. A ...friend of mine told me they'd vacate it for the both of us."

Jinyoung nodded, and as both of them walked up the stairs, Daehwi wondered if he had made the right decision.

Taejoon greeted them at the entrance to 216-A.

"Daehwi-ya," he said. "I didn't think you'd come here."

Daehwi sighed, still unable to properly meet his gaze. "Yeah, but I really needed a practice room. They run out real quick at this time of year." He shifted uncomfortably, knowing that Jinyoung could already sense the tension and the awkwardness between them. He had probably even heard of what had occured, because news traveled fast at a school where everyone thrived on gossip. It was a blessing somehow that Taejoon was a master at acting like nothing had between them.

"I'm not sure if I should say this," Taejoon said. "But I'm really fine now. I knew there was
someone else that you liked anyway. Makes sense that it's Bae Jinyoung."

Daehwi almost wanted to kick off one of his shoes and chuck it at Taejoon's head.

"I'm sorry, but I think you're mistaken," Jinyoung said. "We met this morning. There really isn't anything between us."

Daehwi knew Jinyoung meant well, but hearing those words hurt. If buds were torn out at the roots before they could bloom into flowers, this was likely the sort of gutting pain they felt as it happened.

*Play it cool, he told himself. Pretend it meant nothing.*

"He's right," Daehwi said. "He's not even my type."

At this, Taejoon smiled. Daehwi had no idea what it meant.

"Well then," Taejoon said, addressing Jinyoung. "I guess that makes two of us who have been brutally rejected."

"Yeah well," Jinyoung began. "Unlike you, I'm into girls, so don't even try to drag me into this with you."

There it was again. Daehwi heard it as clear as day, the lie that passed so effortlessly between Jinyoung's lips. Before the situation could get any more ridiculous, Daehwi tugged at Jinyoung's shirtsleeve. "We'd better get to practice. See you around, Taejoon. And don't go around terrorizing little children."

He retreated into the room with Jinyoung in tow, breathing a sigh of relief as he had successfully overcome the situation without his cover being blown. The fact that Taejoon didn't try to expose his secrets to Jinyoung meant that he could probably be trusted. For now.

But there were more pressing matters at hand.

"Did you already have a song in mind?" he asked Jinyoung, moving towards the speakers and plugging his phone into it, then setting down the music sheets for his performance on the empty chair next to it.

"I don't, actually," Jinyoung said. "Like I said, I enter completely unarmed into this battlefield."

"But you want a song that you can dance to?"

"Preferably, if only to make it more memorable. But I'm already regretting the idea, seeing as we've only got a few hours to go and I'm starting from scratch. I'm not exactly the fastest learner either." He sat down on the practice room floor, and Daehwi sat next to him, hyper-aware of their proximity.

"I think you should go with whatever your heart tells you," he said. "Sounds stupid, I know, but I think the best performances are made from the songs you sing because you want to, and not because you're trying to impress a bunch of professors. Well, that's what I like to do, at least. It's worked for me so far."

Jinyoung looked at him for a long moment and Daehwi tried his best to collect himself before he melted into a puddle.
"Can I ask you a question?" Jinyoung asked.

"S-sure."

"Which song are you performing?"

Daehwi blinked. That was not the question he was expecting to get asked.

"It's a song called Playing With Fire, by Blackpink-sunbaenim. Have you heard of it?"

"Yeah," Jinyoung said, smiling. "I really like the song. I've sung it before, too. Why'd you choose it?"

Daehwi couldn't say the exact reason why out loud, but he knew that more than anything, it was because the lyrics of the song spoke to him. In a way, it felt as if the song had been written just for him.

"It's a song I really like," he began. "Not just in terms of its melody, or because it matches my voice well, but because it has a message that speaks to my soul. It's about knowing how dangerous love is, because love is a fire that can either keep you warm, or burn you and leave you permanently scarred. But despite knowing how much you're risking in choosing that love... you choose it anyway. You kindle the flames, you feed it, you welcome it and let it consume you. Because the love that is most beautiful is the one that hurts the most."

For a long while there was nothing but silence, and Daehwi wondered if Jinyoung had heard him or he had been talking to himself the entire time.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to ramble on like that."

"It's fine," Jinyoung said. "I just... I didn't know there was someone like that in your life too."

Daehwi was sure he didn't want to know the answer, but he asked the question anyway.

Kindling the flames, one burning spark at a time. "Is there someone like that for you too?"

Jinyoung nodded. "Yeah. Someone I'd really like to stop loving already. But I just can't bring myself to do it because I'm pathetic. I just let myself be consumed by thoughts of him, let myself fall in love more and more with every little thing that he does."

Daehwi looked away. It hurt to hear Jinyoung talk about his best friend like that. But in a twisted sort of way, it provided Daehwi some comfort, knowing that he and Jinyoung were going through the same things, the same unending loneliness, loving a person who was completely out of their reach. It was as if Jinyoung understood him more than anyone else.

"So you really are in love with your best friend."

Jinyoung looked at him, panic etched across his face. "Wait, what?"

"Well, you said it was a 'him'. If you were in love with a guy, it would be logical to conclude that it's Park Jihoon."

It took a while for Jinyoung to realize that he had inadvertently confessed that he was gay.

'Oh god. I... I didn't..." Jinyoung buried his face in the palm of his hands. "What was I thinking..."

"Do you want to perform this song together?" Daehwi asked, before he could even stop to think of
the implications. Jinyoung just gaped at him in awe.

"You... you want to perform it with me? Why all of a sudden? And that thing about Jihoon, I just--"

"I'll keep your secret," Daehwi said.

Jinyoung blinked. "Really?"

"Yeah. In exchange, perform the song with me."

"Why would you want to do it with me?"

"I've seen you perform. To be honest, I've always thought my arrangement of the song was lacking something, and I realize it could be remedied if I added a second layer to it. Your vocal color is really pretty, and I think it would do the job quite nicely. And besides, it would be easier for you to learn a song I've already made, rather than starting from scratch. Works in both of our favours."

"Wow," Jinyoung said, looking at a loss for words. "I've only ever performed horribly in front of other people, and you're complimenting me like this?" Jinyoung laughed, and the sound of it set Daehwi's heart aflame for the hundredth time over.

Daehwi had a lot of secrets. About his past, about his present, about the future he dreamt for himself. But one of Daehwi's best kept secrets was this: a month ago, Daehwi had stumbled upon Jinyoung performing alone in one of the practice rooms after hours. The door was slightly ajar, so his voice could be heard, and it was illegal to go past curfew unless you were in class A. If truth be told, he was planning on telling Jinyoung off. Instead, he had listened in secret to Jinyoung singing, watched him as he performed.

_I can't stop this trembling, on and on and on_

_I wanna throw my all into your world_

_Look at me, look at me now, you are burning me up like this_

_I can't turn it off, our love that's like playing with fire_

And then, all at once, he had fallen head over heels in love.

At the time he thought he was simply in love with Jinyoung's voice. But over the course of the month, he had seen Jinyoung around the school, seen how happy he was around his best friend. He had learnt that there was more in common between them than having the same taste in music. He realized this was a person he truly wanted to know more about. And sometimes, out of sheer luck or happy coincidence, he managed to find Jinyoung in the same practice after hours as he headed back to the dormitory.

And each time he had listened, allowing himself to drown in Jinyoung's voice, the sort that he couldn't seem to find when performing in front of other people. He hated himself for it, found himself creepy at times. But he never told anyone about how Jinyoung broke school rules.

Because it meant he might never hear that voice again. And now, he wanted to help Jinyoung find it, even if it meant having to perform a duet with him, which was practically unheard of for promotion exams where students hated to share the spotlight.

"Will you do it?" Daehwi asked. "If not... well, there must be some other way to help you."
"I'll do it." Jinyoung said. Daehwi was surprised at how immediately he responded. He stood up, retrieving Daehwi's music sheets. "It's this one right?"

Daehwi smiled at him, happiness welling up inside of him at the thought of getting to perform with Jinyoung. "Yeah, it is!"

"You seem happy," Jinyoung said. "You like me that much?"

"I like your voice," Daehwi said, trying to sound neutral. "But I guess you're not so bad yourself."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Jinyoung said. "So how do we start?"

Daehwi showed him the music sheets, explaining the arrangement. He wanted to make the song a bit slower, and a bit more sultry. He walked over to his phone and played the revised instrumentals he had composed for the song, singing it in parts and allowing Jinyoung to follow suit. Each time Jinyoung's voice cracked, or he didn't quite hit the right note, Daehwi allowed him to try again until he managed to do it correctly. To his surprise, Jinyoung was in fact a quick learner. They went on like this for a couple of hours, Daehwi teaching Jinyoung the new arrangement he had made for the song, Jinyoung trying his best to sing, allowing his voice to blend in with Daehwi's.

They were already halfway through with a couple of hours still to go until the exams.

"This might just actually work," Jinyoung said. "You're a great teacher, Daehwi." he patted Daehwi's head affectionately, making Daehwi blush in embarrassment.

"I didn't do much. Your voice is really nice. I wonder why you can't sing like that in front of other people."

"I have horrible stage fright," Jinyoung admitted. "But I guess... if there were two of us singing that might make me a little less nervous. Your voice is amazing." Jinyoung looked at him, and Daehwi smiled back. Jinyoung's expression changed slightly as he did.

"I've been meaning to tell you this," Jinyoung said. "But you know, you're actually really cute."

Daehwi almost lost his balance, even if he was just sitting. He pinched himself, surprising Jinyoung.

"What was that for?"

"I wasn't sure if I was dreaming when you said I was cute."

Jinyoung laughed, patting his head again. "I'm sorry if it makes you uncomfortable, since you already know that... I'm gay, and stuff. But I just wanted you to know that whoever the guy is that you like... he's stupid for not noticing you."

Daehwi almost laughed out loud at the irony. "Yeah, and the guy you like is blind for not noticing you when you're pretty much perfect."

"Ah, I thought I wasn't your type," Jinyoung teased. "Are you taking it back?"

Daehwi looked at him for a long while. How long could moments like this possibly last? He never wanted it to end. Before he knew what he was doing, he leaned towards Jinyoung, placing a kiss gently upon his left cheek.

He expected Jinyoung to recoil. He expected him to wipe at his cheek in disgust. He expected him
to demand an explanation.

But he never expected to make Bae Jinyoung blush and render him speechless.

"Hey... what was that for? You startled me." Jinyoung said after an eternity.

"It's a thank-you kiss."

"For what...?"

"For helping me out with this performance."

Jinyoung sighed. "That's my line, silly. And thanks for the kiss, it felt kind of nice."

Daehwi laughed nervously, not sure what to make of Jinyoung's non-resistance. This was dangerous. At this rate, he might start hoping he had a chance.

"Don't worry, I'm not gonna tell Jihoon I kissed you. Or anyone, really. The girls would kill me if they find out, and I don't have an explanation."

Jinyoung smiled at him. "Speaking of explanations, I should probably call Jihoon, huh? I still need to know why he didn't tell me about last night."

Daehwi's heart dropped to his stomach. "Yeah sure, you do that."

He listened as Jinyoung dialled Jihoon's number.

"Jihoon? Hey! Where were you last night? I heard Woojin saw you out with some guy. You didn't even tell me." Daehwi watched as Jinyoung listened, his expression turning from excitement, to disappointment, to anger. The conversation didn't seem to be headed anywhere good.

"Kuanlin. You're with Kuanlin again? What's up with you being with some guy I've never heard of? How come you're choosing to practice with him and not me when you only just met him last night? And yet again, you don't care to tell me a thing. This is ridiculous." Without another word, Jinyoung hung up, and almost slammed his phone against the floor.

Daehwi had never seen him so distraught. "Are you alright?" he asked. Jinyoung didn't reply.

"Hey," he said, poking at Jinyoung's arm. Jinyoung brought both his knees together, hugging them and burying his face in the space between his arms. Daehwi sighed. He liked Kuanlin a lot as a roommate, and it hurt to see him capable of hurting the person he liked the most. Daehwi wondered what he could do to help Jinyoung cheer up.

Not knowing whether or not he would regret it, Daehwi reached out, cupping Jinyoung's cheeks in both of his hands, gently raising Jinyoung's head to look at him. When Jinyoung did, he saw tears welling at the corner of his eyes. Almost immediately, Daehwi began singing.

"Cheer up baby, cheer up baby, cheer up a little more," he started bopping his head with the lyrics as a small smile formed at the corners of Jinyoung's lips. "A girl can't give her heart too easily, that's how you'll get to like me more."

At this Jinyoung laughed, slowly bringing both his hands up to cover Daehwi's. Daehwi always wondered why love was described in terms of burning. The searing warmth of Jinyoung's touch now gave him the answer.

"Thanks," Jinyoung told him, not removing his hands. "Sorry for being so emotional."
'It's alright. I understand what you're feeling. I don't really... like that Jihoon is spending a lot of time with Kuanlin either."

Because I know how much it hurts you.

Jinyoung, however, interpreted this differently. "Wait... Daehwi..."

"Hmm?"

"That person you said that you liked... it's Kuanlin, isn't it?"

Daehwi froze. He looked into Jinyoung's eyes. In them he found genuine concern. But more than that, he found relief; relief that Jinyoung had found someone who understood his loneliness so well. It was a relief Daehwi had found shelter in for a really long time. He couldn't bring himself to say a word.

"I'm sorry," Jinyoung said. "I didn't mean to pry. But I'll keep your secret."

It's better this way, Daehwi thought. If he thinks I like someone else, I won't get found out. I can stay beside him for longer.

"Thanks," was all Daehwi could say. "I appreciate that."

Before Jinyoung could say anything, the door burst wide open. Daehwi and Jinyoung, who were still holding onto each other, jerked away in surprise and embarrassment. Daehwi looked to see who it was. It was Taejoon, with a panicked expression on his face.

"What's the matter?" Daehwi asked him. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Not a ghost," Taejoon said. "It's Ong Seongwoo."

"What?" Daehwi and Jinyoung said in unison. Seongwoo was a student from the Actor track, a friend that Daehwi had met during his Theatre Arts elective. A friend that Daehwi found really hard to keep out of trouble.

"It looks like he picked a fight with the Student Council President."

"WHAT?" Daehwi and Jinyoung said in unison.

"They're in the hallway. You'd better hurry out of there, before things get ugly."

Daehwi and Jinyoung looked at each other. And then in a matter of seconds, they were out the door.

Neither of them noticed how, after they closed the door behind them, Taejoon smiled victoriously to himself, picking up the music sheets Daehwi had forgotten as he scrambled to alleviate the chaos, folding them up and placing them carefully inside of his pocket.

"Looks like I've found myself a nice song for promotions."

~JINHWI 2 END~

Chapter End Notes
Hello there lovely reader! I am so sorry for stirring up trouble in this chapter, but I just thought things would get boring if there wasn't much drama in it xD Anyway, I hope you guys like fluff and romance, because that's pretty much all that there will be for the couples in this story! I don't really have much to say in terms of Jinhwi, because I'm sure you guys can tell that at this point, I'm still going for an angle in which both of them are heartbroken and in a weird sort of way, find solace in each other. I especially feel bad for Daehwi, because he isn't particularly clueless about anything, and is just keeping things to himself so Jinyoung won't get hurt. By the way, I'd like to clarify that Daehwi wasn't a stalker, he literally just stumbles upon Jinyoung in the practice room because apparently someone doesn't know how to properly close a door xD

And I don't know if you guys picked up on this, but the songs that Wanna One will perform for the promotion exams are actually songs that the real life members recommended for the app 'The Musician', or songs that they performed during Produce 101 (if you noticed you are a true Wannable lol) For the complete list, in case you were curious, here it is!

Daniel - Get Ugly (Jason Derulo)
Jihoon - Monster (EXO)
Daehwi, Jinyoung - Playing With Fire (Blackpink)
Jaehwan - Skyfall (Adele)
Woojin - Blood, Sweat & Tears (BTS)
Kuanlin - Fear (Mino)
Ong - not a song since he is in the Actor track, but he's reenacting a scene from Goblin xD

The rest (Jisung, Minhyun, Sungwoon) are alumni so they will not have promotion exams. But that's all for this chapter! See you guys in the next one~
It had been months since Daniel had last managed to enter into the Imugi practice room unscathed.

On a normal day, he’d find that a bunch of girls would have already planted themselves at the café within which the practice room was located, under the guise of loyal customers who order nothing but an Iced Americano they never even touch. Daniel wondered when his definition of ‘normal’ had gotten so skewed.

It wasn’t that Daniel didn’t appreciate the fact that he had fans; for someone who spent half of his life completely ignored by his peers, bullied for his looks, and told he would amount to nothing… to finally have people appreciate him and acknowledge his skill was a blessing. And he had lots of fans who were extremely sweet, sending him words of encouragement as they passed by him in the halls, and supporting him as they watched him perform.

But an irritating handful of them were different. They followed him practically everywhere he went, sometimes even blocking the halls by huddling together and whispering, as if Daniel couldn’t hear the sorts of things they were saying, most of which made him want to escape to the nearest restroom and hide there for the rest of the day. Some of them even knew his entire schedule to the dot (he didn’t bother to get into the nitty-gritty details of how they found out, because he was already scared out of his wits), and of course, ambushed him as he entered the café and headed straight for the practice room just to get the hell away from them. A couple of times, a bunch of girls had even gotten temporarily suspended for trying to sneak into the boys’ dormitory and into his room, which, if the girls ever found out just how messy it was, would probably make them regret their decision to enter any way.

He had a roommate now, which he had hoped would prevent anyone from trying to break into it this time. But the thing was… his roommate was just as prone to catching female attention as he was. Ong Seongwoo was handsome, outspoken and worse: he actually flirted back with the ladies. In short, he was the sort of guy Daniel promised to himself he would never, ever interact with.

But he hated himself for being curious about Seongwoo anyway. He wondered if the guy had sasaeng fans too—maybe, in a distorted sort of way, he actually understood Daniel’s struggled more than anyone.

A second after thinking it, Daniel immediately regretted it. What was he doing, letting Seongwoo get the best of him, anyway? He turned his attention to the café he was in, where he was resting and cooling down with some Yo-Hi water after hours of strenuous practice. The place was void of activity and empty of patrons, likely because everyone was too busy preparing for their own promotion exams to bother with a cup of coffee, or to bother him for that matter. Nobody dared to use the singular practice room adjacent to the counter either, as everyone knew that was his territory. Even though promotion exams made Daniel nervous even as he tried his best to hide it, he was grateful for the peace it afforded him, no matter how fleeting.

The lone barista who owned and ran the café, had resorted to alternating between staring at the ceiling lights and rubbing the exact same spot on the counter with a damp washcloth, in a feeble attempt to act as if he was doing something productive instead of completely bored out of his mind. Daniel cast him a long look as he watched him do absolutely nothing of meaning.
“Jisung-hyung,” he called out. “I’m pretty sure whatever you’re trying to rub out of there is either gone or is impossible to remove. You’ve been at it for hours with that.”

Jisung stopped what he was doing momentarily. “Got anything better for me to do then? I hate promotion exams. Cuts into my sales by half.”

Daniel stood up from his seat, walking towards the counter and sitting on the barstool across from Jisung. “Want to watch me practice instead?”

Jisung shot him an apprehensive look. “For what? For me to envy you over the fact that you’ve had those glorious abs since you were fifteen, and I’m almost thirty and still look like a rotting potato? No thank you. I still need to dig out my self-esteem from the ground you buried it in last time I saw you perform.”

Daniel laughed, the sound of it echoing across the empty café. “Sorry hyung, I won’t ask again.”

He knew Jisung was just joking around with him, but the implicit meaning behind his words didn’t escape him. Yoon Jisung was once a student at Mireu High, graduating from the Idol track seven years ago. He flunked auditions at Mireu's agency, and auditioned for a lesser-known agency called MMO, training there for five years before giving up his dream to open and run the Imugi café. Daniel wondered to himself, if in an alternate universe, he had trained at that agency with Jisung… would he also have been unable to make his debut?

“Why are you so insistent on pulling up your shirt in every performance and displaying your abs for the world to see anyway?” Jisung asked him, intercepting his train of thought. “Don’t you get tired of it?”

“Not really,” Daniel shrugged. “The audience doesn’t get tired of seeing them either.”

But he knew a certain someone who did, remembering how Ong complained about his preference for staying half-naked and then threatening to kiss him just a few minutes later.

He shuddered at the memory. He knew that Seongwoo was notorious for dating around too casually, and rumor had it that his longest relationship lasted a record-breaking two weeks and a half before he called it quits. But what he hadn’t known was the fact that Seongwoo flirted with pretty much everything he came into contact with. The guy could probably make a pebble blush if he wanted to.

Wait. Here I am again thinking about him out of the blue. Why is he bothering me even in my thoughts?

“You alright there?” Jisung asked him. “You were staring at my flower vase as if you wanted to chuck it out the window and smash it into a million pieces. What did my plastic hydrangea ever do to you, anyway?”

Daniel sighed. Now he was starting to look like a complete idiot in front of his best friend.

“Sorry. I probably looked like a complete idiot.”

“Well I wouldn’t put it past you. Speaking of idiocies, how did your maths exam go last week?”

“Ugh. Remember that burning smell in the kitchen of my room? Yeah, that was me sending that math exam up in flames.”

The truth was, Daniel absolutely sucked at all of the general subjects that had nothing to do with
his track—maths, sciences, history— which for some reason the school still required. The only thing he had ever been good at was performing, so he was grateful they didn’t count towards rankings, because he would never have been top-ranked that way. He remembered how much sleep he lost asking Jisung to tutor him for those exams, and yet the only score he could manage was a pathetic 57 out of 100. It was as if his brain was a computer and decided to send and delete all of what he learned from the recycle bin right before the test began. Now he could hardly even remember what a derivative was.

“Is that why you look like you want to murder my plant? Let it be, it’s only a child. I literally bought it three days ago.”

“I have nothing against your fake greenery,” Daniel explained. “But remember that person I told you I was forced to share a room with?”

“Yeah, Hong Seongwoo, right?”

“It’s Ong Seongwoo.”

Jisung’s eyes narrowed at him. “That’s what I said.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I give up. Anyway, he’s been really annoying these days. He always nags me to clean my room, he said my ramen tasted like failure and depression, when it isn’t even possible to taste those things, and just this morning he complained about me not bothering to put on a shirt, as if I’m doing it just to spite him because I know how much he hates it.”

“Are you doing it to spite him?”

“I’m not.”

Jisung cast him an accusatory look.

“I am. But just a little.”

Jisung shook his head in resignation. “Yeah, I knew it, you’re still the same immature Daniel from years ago who would adopt a cat from the streets because you thought the peach-shaped pattern on its back was cute.”

“OH GOD.” Daniel exclaimed, startling Jisung, who promptly dropped his washcloth out of surprise.

“I FORGOT TO FEED MY CAT.”

“THEN WHY ARE YOU YELLING AT ME, IT’S NOT MY FAULT.” Jisung yelled back.

“I’M SORRY, BUT MY POOR CAT.”

“Daniel had intended to feed Peach this morning, until Seongwoo had gone ahead and left him unable to think properly after he had backed him against the wall. The contact had left him dizzy, and he could even still smell the scent of Seongwoo’s perfume wafting through the air.

But Daniel never forgot to feed his cat. Ever.

“So what are you going to do now that—“ But Jisung couldn’t even finish his sentence, as Daniel promptly scrambled off his seat and out the door.
Daniel stroked the fur of his tabby cat, as it ate from its bowl contentedly. “I’m so, so, sorry Peach. I promise I won’t ever forget to feed you again.” The cat mewed contentedly, and Daniel felt as if the weight of world was lifted from his shoulders. Thank god he isn’t angry at me.

Daniel would never let anyone but Jisung know (and now Seongwoo, he guessed), but he loved cats to death. He had two back at home in Busan, Rooney and Peter, and he remembered literally crying over the thought of parting with them before he entered into the school. He had no idea what everyone would think if they knew that a grown-ass man like him could bawl over kittens.

“If only everyone else could see you like this,” Jisung said. His best friend had followed him to his room, and was still breathing heavily from having to keep up with Daniel’s panicked sprinting. “Your clumsy, forgettable, disorganized self is just so different from that cool, I’m-better-than-everyone image you show to the public.”

“Yes well, I have a reputation as Council President to uphold. And besides, if people knew about what I was truly like… being messy, being a horrible cook, being afraid of ghosts and harmless insects, being an absolute cry-baby at even the trashiest of romantic movies…”

And once being broken beyond repair. Once being lonely to the point of wishing for all of it to end.

Daniel felt himself blush to Peach’s color. “What? No.”

“So he’s a bad kisser? Did he try to stick his tongue down your throat too soon?”

“NO. I meant that we didn’t kiss. Why would you even think I’d let a guy kiss me?”

“Just because you’ve only ever kissed girls, doesn’t mean you can’t kiss guys in the future. Especially if he’s the type of guy you’re really interested in.”

Daniel had to admit he was interested in Ong Seongwoo. But only because he wanted to know what sort of person could be so casual at everything. To him, a person like Seongwoo—who welcomed trouble into his life like an old friend—was nothing if not an enigma, both terrifying and awe-inspiring.

But that didn’t mean he was interested in Seongwoo in that way, because that would have been ridiculous. However, he couldn’t deny that he was envious of how readily Seongwoo displayed his recklessness and machismo, when Daniel fought hard day in and day out to keep himself under control. Especially now that he was Council President, and it was not just his reputation at stake
but the entire school’s if he so much as stepped even a toe out of line.

“You look like you’re trying to justify to yourself why you aren’t attracted to Seongwoo when that’s exactly what you are,” Jisung said. “Stop it with the inner debates and be honest with yourself already. Even if it isn’t in a romantic way, I don’t think you dislike him as much as you say you do.”

“Yeah, this conversation is getting out of hand,” Daniel picked up Peach gently from his lap and stood up, settling the cat atop the sofa. Seongwoo would kill him for leaving furballs on his favourite resting place. “I’ll just go back to practice now. You can return to the café if you’d like. I’m sorry for scaring you like that.”

Jisung looked at him then, with an unmistakable look of worry and sadness etched across his face. “But why can’t you just be a little more honest with yourself? It hurts me too, seeing you have to hide and grapple with a public image that is nothing like you.”

Daniel sighed. He knew where this conversation was going, and it wasn’t a place he particularly wanted to go to. “Because I’m a coward,” he said. “I’ve always been.”

“Then maybe this Ong Seongwoo of yours is just the person you need to bring you out of your shell.”

Daniel had to admit he had considered that too. Maybe he was interested in Seongwoo because he wanted to be just like him.

But he would never admit that out loud. Over his gorgeous dead body.

“See you later, hyung,” Daniel said, slinging his gym bag across his shoulder and heading towards the door. If you’re not returning to the café, stay here if you’d like. And if Peach poops on the floor, feel free to pick it up for me.”


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There were a lot of things that Daniel had never expected would happen as he made his way back from the dormitory to the Imugi café.

First of all, he didn’t expect to see Ha Sungwoon at the lobby of the dormitory, who had been Jisung’s boyfriend since high school. And because Sungwoon didn’t particularly like Daniel for being Jisung’s best friend (he was the jealous type), Daniel had to go the long way round to the back exit in order not to get his ass whooped.

Second of all, he didn’t expect to see a host of vans from various TV stations parked along the outdoor walkway between the dormitory and the campus. Cameramen were milling about, setting up their equipment and talking in excited voices. They were setting up a stage, and he had no idea what they were doing at the school, but Daniel had a feeling something big was about to happen.

And third of all, he did not expect for his walk along the corridor of the Right Wing to the Imugi café to get cut short by Ong Seongwoo, who had emerged from the corner of his vision, reached him in one stride, and with another step forward had Daniel backed against the wall, pinning him with both of his hands on either side of Daniel’s head.

This was the second time he’d done it in the span of five hours, and Daniel was not amused.
He was in fact, quite infuriated, and ever so slightly confused at how nervous it made him. This, of course, only served to fuel the flames of his raging fury.

Daniel folded his arms together, as if to regain some semblance of the personal space Seongwoo had so confidently infiltrated.

“What do you want?” he demanded, trying to keep his voice cool. “And if you didn’t already know, I’m starting to dislike this wall-backing fetish of yours. If this is the sort of play you’re into, I’m really not interested.”

Seongwoo simply smirked at him. “As much as I’d love to engage in a meaningful conversation with you regarding my hidden desires and all of the exciting things I’d like us to try together, I apologize because there’s something more important that I have to tell you.”

Daniel raised a brow at him. “And you can’t tell me without backing me into a corner, because…?”

“How are your acting skills?” Seongwoo asked all of a sudden, startling Daniel.

“If this is some sort of impromptu practice for your promotion exam, I swear I’m—“

“Chillax, pretty boy,” Seongwoo interrupted. “This has nothing to do with promotions. Now I’d appreciate it if you answered the question.”

Daniel sighed. “My acting skills are superb, thank you very much.”

“Great,” Seongwoo said. “Because I’d like to ask for a favour.”

Daniel hated being bossed around and dominated, because it was usually the other way around.

Daniel suddenly became aware of his surroundings, noting how the people walking around during practice break were stopping to stare and point at them. Panic rose to his throat. No. If trouble stirs because of a misunderstanding like this, I’m done for. Soon enough their phones will be out of their pockets to film this. Whatever the heck this even is.

“Hey, let go already. People are starting to notice,” Daniel said, resting a hand against Seongwoo’s outstretched arm, attempting to push him away. Seongwoo didn’t budge; the guy could practically announce that he was made of stone, and Daniel wouldn’t have batted an eyelash. His muscles were rock hard. In any other situation Daniel would have been appreciative, but this wasn’t the time to think of such things. “We’re going to get into serious trouble if you keep this up.”

“That’s the point.” Seongwoo said.

Daniel could hardly believe his ears. “Is it a hobby of yours to pay frequent trips to the vice principal’s office? Because it sounds like you’re trying to pick a fight with me.”

“I’m not. But I’m trying to get you to pretend we’re fighting.”


“Wow, that was great just then,” Seongwoo smiled, and it was the sort of smile Daniel had never yet seen him wear. It was a smile that reached his eyes, filled with enthusiasm and mischief.

It was a smile that made Daniel’s heart skip a beat, and it made him want to wipe the smile off of Seongwoo’s face himself, so he wouldn’t have to see that annoying dimple again.
“What’s with that intense stare?” Seongwoo asked, tilting his head slightly. “Fallen in love with me already?”

In an instant Daniel was released from his stupor. This guy... this annoying, aggravating, maddening guy.

What was he thinking just then, getting distracted by meaningless things? Daniel wanted to pull his hairs out. He wanted to grab Seongwoo by the collar and drag him to the vice principal’s office himself.

But the part of him that wanted to know exactly what Seongwoo was up to, to find out how the mind of a person like this ticked… that part of him won out.

“What sort of trick are you trying to pull this time?”

“You’ll find out soon, but not right now. Just pretend as if I’ve wronged you.”

“Why should I involve myself in this stupidity? You know how much I dislike getting into trouble.”

“Do it just once, okay? I promise to explain everything to that balding vice principal and you’ll be in the clear afterwards. Trust me on this, it’s important. If you don’t help me now… a friend of mine might get into even more serious trouble.”

Daniel looked at Seongwoo then, and he could see the anxiousness and worry on his face. It was an expression he had never known Seongwoo was capable of making.

Somewhere inside of Daniel, a piece of his shell broke slowly away.

“What happened to your friend?”

“No time to explain. Help me just this once, and I won’t bother you anymore. Well, at least not as much as before.”

Daniel sucked in a breath. He had no idea what he was getting himself into. But then again, every time he interacted with Ong Seongwoo, it felt like opening a box of chocolates and not knowing what exactly you were getting.

This could end in something really sweet… or something equally as bitter.

“Do I even need to pretend I’m angry at you?”

“Huh?”

With all his might, Daniel shoved at Seongwoo’s shoulders with the palms of both hands, catching Seongwoo off guard, causing him to release Daniel from the wall and to momentarily lose his footing. Seongwoo looked at him with both surprise and amazement, and the expression on his face was extremely satisfying to witness.

“You know,” he said in a deep voice, as if in warning, still conscious of their growing audience. “I’ve had enough of you causing disruptions like this. If you want to pick a fight, go ahead. I should never have agreed to mentor you in the first place.”

Seongwoo heaved a long sigh. His eyes met Daniel’s as if to say, don’t try to beat me at my own game.
“What happened to the guy who said he wouldn’t stop until I’d been disciplined?” Seongwoo reached for his him, grabbing him by the collar with both hands. Daniel felt Seongwoo’s restraint, as if he was trying his best not to accidentally hurt him. “You’re a liar if I’ve even seen one. I already told you to stop getting in my way.”

Daniel grasped at the hands Seongwoo had on his collar with both of his own, looking Seongwoo in the eye. From up close, Seongwoo was really beautiful, and his eyes were a color Daniel had never known could be so pretty. He struggled to remember what he wanted to say.

“Get your hands off of me, Ong Seongwoo. Don’t pick a fight with me before you regret it.”

Daniel saw Seongwoo’s eyes flit for a moment to the side. He had probably sensed the presence of the students he wanted to show their pretend argument to in the first place.

“What makes you think you have the right to just demand things of me? I’ve gotten sick of all your nonsense.”

Daniel tugged at Seongwoo’s hands forcefully, removing them from their grip. He pushed Seongwoo away before adjusting his tie, trying to muster his angriest, most menacing expression. “I don’t have time for this. You’re crazy for trying anything stupid with me, you know.”

“Don’t think you’re above everyone else just because you’re the Council President.”

“And don’t think I’ll let you do this again just because you’re in Class A. I’m not sure of what you even did to deserve making it there.”

He didn't mean it, but Daniel hated to say it anyway.

“You bastard.” Seongwoo glared at him.

“That’s my line.”

As soon as Daniel saw the door to farthest practice room flying open, Seongwoo lunged at him, looking ready to strike. Daniel turned away, shielding himself from any impact with both of his arms. In a flash, he saw Class A’s Yoon Taejoon entering into the practice room as if nothing was happening.

“Seongwoo-hyung, stop it!” he heard a familiar voice shouting. All of a sudden, Lee Daehwi and another student were on either side of Seongwoo, holding him back. “What’s wrong with you? Why are you trying to pick a fight with the President?”

Seongwoo shrugged Daehwi’s hand off. “It’s all this guy’s fault.” He cast a murderous glance at Daniel.

Daniel hated to admit it, but Seongwoo’s acting abilities were excellent. He almost forgot that they weren’t actually fighting.

The other student spoke up. “Seongwoo-hyung, maybe you just need some time to cool down for a bit. Let’s go somewhere else for now.”

“You get going too, Daniel-hyung,” Daehwi said. “I’m so sorry about our friend.”

Daniel tried his best to sound indifferent. “It’s not your fault. I’ll just head to the café now. And make sure this guy behaves.”
“Good idea,” Daehwi suddenly said, perking up. “Maybe we should head to the café too, Seongwoo-hyung. A nice latte might put you in a better mood.”

“Daehwi-ya, it might not be a good idea for them to stay in the same place.” The other student countered.

“Nonsense,” Daehwi replied. “These two should act like grown-ups and sort out their differences in a civil manner. It’s better for them to talk it out.”

Without another word, Daehwi pulled them along in the direction of the Imugi café with his friend in tow, and as soon as they were out of earshot and the crowds around them had dispersed, Daniel heard Seongwoo whisper,

“Good going, pretty boy. You’re a better actor than I gave you credit for.”

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“Wait. So you mean to tell me the entire thing was scripted?” Daehwi asked, as the other student (whose name, he found, was Bae Jinyoung, who was apparently the pretty boy with a small face he kept hearing about) stared at both of them in wide-eyed amazement. They had returned to the Imugi café and were standing in the middle of the practice room discussing their earlier skirmish.

“Not scripted,” Seongwoo explained. “More like spontaneous. I admit, our chemistry was pretty amazing though.” He winked at Daniel, who turned away immediately in utter embarrassment.

_God. Not in front of these children._ Daniel tried to divert the conversation elsewhere.

“What exactly did we have to do that for anyway?” he asked. “If you were just trying to do it for the sake of making me do stupid things, well congratulations.”

Seongwoo laughed, and Daniel was surprised at the sound of it.

He kinda liked that laugh.

_Ugh no, stop it Daniel_, he thought immediately.

“You see,” Seongwoo started. “A while ago, I was in the men’s restroom when I happened to overhear a conversation I probably shouldn’t have.”

“Why did no one notice you were in one of the cubicles?” Daniel asked. “If they were being secretive, they shouldn’t have been stupid enough not to notice your feet from under the door.”

“Haven’t you ever tried standing on the toilet and crouching at the same time so people will think no one’s in there?” Seongwoo asked. “If not, you’re missing out on the fun in life.”

“They could’ve tried to check if the cubicle door was locked.”

“Well then, you’re right. They’re pretty stupid.”

Jinyoung sighed in exasperation. “Back to the main point of this entire thing. What did you overhear anyway?”

“Yoon Taejoon and Go Hyunwoo were talking about starting a fight with Daehwi and Jinyoung in the practice room. Apparently, you two got lured to the room without working CCTV cameras, so it would be hard to tell who started the fight. Since Jinyoung is in F, things would not bode well for him if authorities found out.”
Daehwi’s eyes widened in panic.

“So instead, I decided to pick a pretend fight with Daniel to stir up a commotion and get you guys out of that room the moment Hyunwoo and Taejoon left the restroom and began wandering about along the corridors. They were probably waiting for practice break when everyone was out and about before starting a fight.”

“How exactly were they going to do that?” Daniel asked.

“I didn’t hear everything, but they were talking about Hyunwoo picking a fight with Jinyoung, using Jihoon’s name to aggravate him.” At the sound of Jihoon’s name, Jinyoung’s expression turned from curiosity to anger, his fists curling on his lap. “They were going to accuse him with lies, say that Jinyoung was gay and was trying to exact revenge on his best friend who had completely ignored his feelings, by using Daehwi to make Jihoon jealous.”

Daniel observed the grave expressions on Daehwi and Jinyoung’s faces.

“Hyunwoo sounded like he just wanted to beat you up though,” Seongwoo told Jinyoung. “I think he particularly dislikes you.”

Jinyoung sighed. “He probably still thinks I stole his girlfriend, even if that girl stalked me for ages.”

Daniel felt for Jinyoung. He himself had struggled with guys accusing him of taking their girlfriends away from them, or ruining their chances of getting together with the girls they liked. Jinyoung’s experience hit quite close to home.

“But if it’s true he tried to drag Jihoon into this, I’m never going to forgive him,” Jinyoung said. “And he’s right. If he even so much as tried to badmouth my best friend, I would probably have punched his teeth out on the spot.”

Daniel turned to Daehwi then, who had a pained expression on his face.

“I knew Taejoon wasn’t up to anything good,” Daehwi said simply, trying to hide the hurt in his voice.

“Speaking of Taejoon,” Daniel said. “I saw him entering into the practice room you left. He seemed like he was looking for something in there.”

Daehwi and Jinyoung exchanged nervous glances.

“Did you by any chance leave anything important lying around?”

At this, Daehwi gasped. “No… My music sheets! I must’ve forgotten them when Taejoon tricked us into leaving by telling us about your fight. I left without thinking.”

Seongwoo looked annoyed by this revelation. “Are you telling me my plan was used against me? What did he want with your music sheets anyway?”

Daniel assessed the situation carefully. If it were him, there was only one thing he would expect to gain from someone else’s music.

“If you’re telling me the truth,” Daniel said. “Well, whoever thought of stirring up a controversy on the day of promotions is as lame as his pathetic excuse for a bright idea. But I’m pretty sure Taejoon plans on performing Daehwi’s song in Daehwi’s arrangement. and since promotion exams
are conducted beginning with Class A and in alphabetical order… he’ll get to perform first, even if
you guys decided to team up. In that way, he’ll try to make Daehwi and Jinyoung out to be
copycats who plagiarized his arrangement, or at least get them to back out of performing the song
altogether, which would automatically result in a substandard performance they never practiced
for.”

“So you’re quick-witted and a good actor,” Seongwoo observed. “That’s kinda hot.”

Daniel tried to ignore the teasing compliment. “Why couldn’t you have just stopped Hyunwoo and
Taejoon yourself anyway? Or just told Daehwi and Jinyoung for that matter? That would have
been so much easier.”

“Are you kidding me? Hyunwoo and I hate each other’s guts. If I had tried to stop him directly,
we’d be throwing punches at each other in no time. I’ve got a bit of an anger management issue
when it comes to guys I don’t like, you see. And as for telling these two... I had no idea which
room they were in, and I wasn’t about to go bursting into every room at random. Besides, I needed
to keep my eyes on Taejoon and Hyunwoo, so I decided on the spot that its best just to pretend I
was picking a fight with you in the vicinity, since I can hold myself back way better that way. I
would never do anything to intentionally hurt you.”

Daniel wondered why those words made him feel embarrassed. Nobody had said anything like that
to him before.

“Why are you being so nice to me all of a sudden?”

“Ah,” Seongwoo said. He walked over to Daniel’s side and reached out with one hand, ruffling
Daniel’s hair. “I’m sorry for making your heart flutter.”

“Are you joking? It isn’t heart fluttering, it’s confusing.”

“Then what’s with that blush? Seriously. your complexion makes it really obvious.” Daniel felt
Seongwoo’s hand move from his hair to his cheek. The warmth of his touch confused Daniel even
more. “You look like a tomato.”

Daniel swatted Seongwoo’s hand away. Again, he tried his best to ignore Seongwoo and pretend he
wasn’t feeling the least bit fazed by his display of affection.

“Where do you usually practice?” Daniel asked Daehwi, who was already looking suspicously
between him and Seongwoo, as if suspecting that there was something weird going on between
them.

Daniel coughed. “Uhm…If there’s any footage of you practicing your song in a room with
cameras, we might be able to stop things from getting worse.”

Daehwi shook his head. “I usually practice songs in my room, especially if I write them myself. I
only use practice rooms for dancing.”

“So are we done for?” Jinyoung said, visibly agitated.

But even as they said this, gears started clicking together in Daniel’s head, a plan forming.

“Why don’t we just allow him to perform the song?” Daniel suggested.

“WHAT, WHY?” Daehwi and Jinyoung exclaimed.
“Taejoon is known for being a fast learner, so he can practice your song with three hours remaining and do just fine. But Daehwi’s songs always have a different layer to them and are quite complicated to sing in the first place. And at this school, music speaks the truth more clearly than any other type of evidence we might be able to provide that Daehwi and Jinyoung didn’t steal his music, but the other way around. Instead of throwing around accusations, we should let the performance speak for itself. All we need to do is make sure Daehwi and Jinyoung’s performance is so much better than Taejoon’s, that no one will even begin to question them.”

Seongwoo smiled at him, ruffling his hair yet again. “So you’re quick-witted, a great actor, and can think up stuff like this? You know, I’m starting to think you’re my type.”

Daniel tried to calm the beating of his traitorous heart, as Daehwi cast Seongwoo a mock glare. “Ugh, hyung. Go ask to marry him somewhere else. This isn’t the time for that.”

“If you guys like, we can use the remaining time to practice together, give each other feedback,” Daniel offered. “So you guys can have a sneak-peek of my Get Ugly performance too.”

Daehwi nodded his head vigorously, and Jinyoung’s relief was palpable in his expression.


Daniel had no idea how to respond to that.

“I had no idea you listened to Jason Derulo,” Seongwoo told him. “I really like that song, you know.”

With no preamble, Seongwoo began singing in English. “Tell them pretty faced girls tryna grabs each other, and them undercover freaks who ain’t nun but trouble, baby I’mma tell you some only ‘cause I love ya, people all around the world, sexy…”

Seongwoo stopped then. “Wow, my voice has gotten a bit rusty.”

Daniel had no idea what Seongwoo was talking about. It was the first time he had heard him sing, and Daniel was surprised at how nice his voice was. He had to try to keep his jaw from dropping, because of how amazed he was at Seongwoo’s vocals.

Daehwi and Jinyoung were clapping.

“That was great, Seongwoo-hyung,” Jinyoung said.

“Your English grammar needs some work though,” Daehwi added.


“You know…” Daniel began. “Your voice is really…”

“Smooth and sexy?” Seongwoo suggested.

Yeah, pretty much. Smooth and sexy.

“Really nice for someone not in Idol or Singer Track.”

“I’m pretty sure you thought smooth and sexy in your head just now.”

“Shut up, Hong Seongwoo.”
Before Seongwoo could retort, the principal’s voice rang out across the café through their Public Announcement system.

“All students, please head to the outdoor walkway immediately, for an announcement regarding this year’s promotion exams. I repeat, all students please head out to the outdoor walkway immediately, for an announcement regarding this year’s promotion exams.”

“Any idea what all this is about?” Seongwoo asked Daniel.

“I honestly have no clue.”

Once they were at the outdoor walkway, Daniel noticed that the vans and cameramen were still there, and they had already set up a small stage and lighting. Mireu High School’s banner was on full display as the stage’s backdrop, it’s water dragon crest looking majestic as ever. As soon as the students saw him, Seongwoo, Daehwi and Jinyoung, they parted like the Red Sea around them, whispering and speaking in hushed but excited tones. Daniel realized they must have been a rather peculiar group: the Council President, the musical genius, the visual king, and the school’s most outspoken Actor track student. All four of them made way to the front, Daniel trying his best not to make eye-contact with the girls, so they wouldn’t have to end up fighting over which one of them he actually looked at. Seongwoo seemed to sense his uneasiness, and moved closer behind him protectively. Daniel was thankful for the comfort it gave him.

A few moments later, the principal stepped onstage, and all the cameras simultaneously turned to face him.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the principal started, speaking through the microphone, "The Mireu High School for the Arts has been known for decades as the premium school for aspiring singers, dancers, rappers, hosts, entertainers, and idols. And for decades, this school has been producing some of the most successful and well-known names in the industry, including our newest and very own artist under Pledis and the Mireu Artist Agency, NU’EST W, who just recently concluded their world tour.”

Shouts rang through the audience in excitement, increasing further in pitch and fever as the members of NU’EST W themselves—JR, Baekho, Ren, and Aron—stepped onto the stage.

“And this year, Mireu High School once again wishes to introduce a new boy group to the world, by reintroducing a second season to the School Idol Project: Produce 101.”

Daniel could hardly believe his ears. The School Idol Project had its first run a couple of years ago, when it produced the girl-group IOI. After that, there were no talks of redoing the Project a second time.

This was it. This was the opportunity he had been waiting for.

“Every semester, our school holds special promotion exams for each student to assess their current level of skill,” the principal continued. "This year, promotion exams will serve as auditions for every male student who wishes to make it into the Idol Project.”

“Every male student?” Jinyoung asked. “What if we aren’t in the Idol Track?”

The principal’s voice rang out again in response. “This Project will be open to students from all classes, and all tracks, and special auditions will be held for alumni who wish to participate as well. The only criterion for making it into this project is showing enough skill as an idol to be chosen as one of only 101 contestants.”
The audience was now in an uproar, the cameras panning every which way to capture reactions.

“Once chosen, students may opt to form groups of up to 11 members, or work as solo acts, and will undergo a series of performance rounds. Each act will have an opportunity to work closely with the members of NU’EST W, who will serve as the coaches and trainers for this project. After each round, half the acts will get eliminated through a voting system, with half the votes coming from selected panelists and industry experts, and half of them coming from the public. By the end of the project, the act that remains victorious will debut as a new idol group by the start of next year.”

Daniel took this all in, his heart racing, thoughts running into his mind one after the other.

He had to do well this time around. He had to make it into the Idol Project.

The screams and cheers from the audience was a reflection of the excitement he was feeling at the announcement.

More than anything else, Daniel wanted to stand onstage and debut. He looked to Daehwi, Jinyoung and Seongwoo, who were looking just as elated as he was.

The principal’s voice echoed through the school. “So good luck with exams, everyone. It’s time to show us what Mireu’s students are truly made of.”

Daniel, Seongwoo, Jinyoung and Daehwi exchanged excited glances at each other.

“Well boys,” Daniel exclaimed. “I guess it’s time to get back to practice.”

~ONGNIEL 2 END~

Chapter End Notes

This is the longest chapter I’ve ever written and I seriously regret nothing. Daniel was so hard to write, and honestly, I think it’s because he’s a mixture of everyone: he’s as lonely as Daehwi, as fluffy as Jinyoung, as messy as Jihoon, as clueless as Kuanlin, and as badass as Ong, while at the same time being uniquely himself. But I love him, so I hope you do too! And I’ve built up so much hype for the promotion exams, so I thought now was the perfect chance to introduce “Produce 101” into the story. I’m not sure if you can technically call it a survival program, because the boys aren’t competing as individuals (well, they can… but you know that’s not how I intend to write it xD) but the idea is pretty much just there, except I wanted it to be not just purely based on public votes, because then there would be no competition lol and I’m sorry if the NU’EST here doesn’t have Minhyun in it (and never will, really, because Wanna One is supposed to be a permanent group). One of the struggles I have as a Wannable is not knowing whether I want them to be together forever, or go back to their respective agencies… but since the boys in this story don’t have agencies and will debut under the school’s agency anyway, they don’t really have obligations elsewhere.

By the way, in case you were confused as to why I had to introduce original characters Taejoon and Hyunwoo… I needed villains, and would hate to use one of the trainees for it as all of them are so sweet T.T And another thing I would like to clarify: the boys sexual preferences. Daehwi, Jinyoung, Sungwoon and Jisung are gay (not openly though), Ong is bisexual, Daniel and Jihoon are supposedly straight (or so they think,
they’ve only been into girls before), Kuanlin just has no idea, and Woojin, Minhyun and Jaehwan are straight (I have decided that Minhwan remains a bromance in this story, and Jaehwan’s crush on Daehwi is just because he thinks Daehwi looks like a girl).

But that’s all for now! See you next time in Jihoon’s chapter~
Kuanlin really reminded Jihoon of his favourite character from *Shugo Chara*.

Amu Hinamori was the main protagonist of the series, and the more he observed Kuanlin as he practiced (and Jihoon had been observing him a lot, much to his horror as he realized this later on) he found that Kuanlin and Amu shared a certain similarity he could no longer unsee.

First of all, their outer appearance stood in stark contrast to their inner personalities. Amu projected a cool image to outsiders, despite being quite timid in reality. Jihoon could easily imagine Kuanlin as the main character of a *Shonen Jump* comic whom everyone secretly admired, but couldn’t even bothered to look at the same person twice... And yet nothing could have been further from the truth. Kuanlin had a childlike innocence about him one wouldn’t expect from someone who looked so mature. He had a fierce drive to learn and a natural curiosity about certain things, which, by extension, meant that Jihoon should probably remember to keep him at least ten meters away from Woojin, who could undoubtedly corrode Kuanlin’s purity if left unchecked for too long.

Second of all, Amu had an endearing tendency to become an airhead, and Kuanlin was no different. Jihoon smiled to himself as he recalled their impromptu popping lesson, and how Kuanlin momentarily forgot the steps he had been previously taught each time he learnt a new one. He also, for some reason, seemed to be on a mission to start his own language, because of the way he mispronounced Korean words at random, despite being able to string entire sentences together. Jihoon had even heard him speaking in a curious combination of Korean, Cantonese, and English as he practiced. That being said, Jihoon did appreciate multilingualism, because he for one only knew how to say “I’m Park Jihoon, I’m nineteen, you fight me?” in English, which Woojin had taught him was the right way to ward off annoying tourists. But then again, Woojin could not be trusted with anything.

Third, and perhaps, most annoyingly of all, Jihoon thought that Amu and Kuanlin were both extremely beautiful. The first time Jihoon had laid eyes on Kuanlin, he had wondered if it was even legal for a human being to look that good, as Kuanlin looked like he stepped straight out of the pages of *Vogue Korea*, Photoshop edit intact. He could easily have been a model, as he had amazing proportions, a nice facial structure, large eyes, rosy red lips, and other such things Jihoon should never have noticed, but did anyway. Despite having to persevere against the unceasing visual attack, however, Jihoon had once thought that being best friends with arguably the “prettiest boy” in school had rendered him immune to unearthly good looks. And yet, no matter how many times he tried to get used to seeing Kuanlin’s face, the persistent feeling of nervousness refused to subside, the butterflies in his stomach refused to fold their wings, and the beating of his heart refused to decelerate. The prolonged exposure to Lai Kuanlin was driving him nuts, and Jihoon had no idea how to remedy himself because he frankly had no idea what was happening.

The thing was, Jihoon had secretly crushed on Amu Hinamori for seven years.

… Which in no way meant that the same thing was happening with Kuanlin. Right? Jihoon had never been into guys. He even had a couple of ex-girlfriends, and the thought of dating, much less finding a guy attractive had never occurred to him before. So was it possible, that he really... Really...

“Whyyy goddamnit!” Jihoon exclaimed, ruffling his own hair in frustration, confounded by the
strange turn of events he had found himself in.

“Hyung?” Kuanlin called out to him, pausing his practice upon hearing Jihoon’s sudden expletives. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Jihoon responded, trying to calm himself down. “There’s just… something that’s been bothering me lately.”

Kuanlin walked over to Jihoon then, squatting down in front of him so that they were at eye-level. “What is it? Maybe I can help.”

Jihoon looked at him for a long moment. There it was again, that uncontrollable buzzing. The pain in his chest whenever his eyes met Kuanlin’s. The urge to reach out and touch him.

Before his mind could process what he was about to do, Jihoon reached out and touched him, placing one hand against Kuanlin’s left cheek. If Kuanlin was startled or even remotely flustered by the gesture, there was no telling. Kuanlin simply brought his left hand to cover Jihoon’s, pressing his cheek into Jihoon’s hand slightly, eyes locked on him. “Hyung?”

“Hey, Kuanlin-ah,” Jihoon began. “If I told you that my heart had a Humpty Lock… could there be a chance that you had the Dumpty Key to open it?”

Kuanlin blinked in utter confusion. “Humpty dumpty…? Hyung, are you craving eggs? I’m a horrible cook, but maybe we can head to the café if you wanted some.”

Jihoon sighed. What was he doing, bringing vague Heart Unlock logic into the conversation for the sake of hiding away his feelings?

“What I meant was… have you ever, uhm… felt like you were losing your mind whenever you were with a certain person?”

Kuanlin stared at him, and the brown in his eyes seemed to shift in color. “Not really.”

Jihoon sighed. Of course, Kuanlin wasn’t feeling the same way that he was. He wasn’t even the least bit fazed by Jihoon’s uncharacteristic display of affection. To him, the gesture meant nothing.

Jihoon made a move to withdraw his hand, but Kuanlin held fast to it. “Not just yet, hyung. This feels really nice.”

The pain in Jihoon’s chest worsened. His heart beat at a dangerous pace, and Jihoon was terrified of the possibility that Kuanlin could hear the sound of it as it hummed to life at his touch. “You… you really like skinship, don’t you?”

“Only if I do it with you.”

Jihoon tried his best not to sound too happy at the sound of that. “You don’t do skinship with Daehwi?”

“I do, but it doesn’t feel half as nice. He’s way too skinny. Whenever I hug him, it feels like I’m about to get stabbed by his shoulder blades or his elbows at any minute. I like you better.”

Jihoon tried not to think of the intimate sorts of hugging positions that would make it possible for one to get stabbed by shoulder blades or elbows. Kuanlin brought his other hand to Jihoon’s cheek then, and Jihoon could feel the world blurring at the edges around him.
“Why… why is that?”
Kuanlin smiled. “You’re a lot squishier.”

He began pressing Jihoon’s cheeks together, who was immediately released from his reverie.

“Squishier.”

“Yeah. You remind me of a Shiba Inu,” Kuanlin said, an excited look on his face. “The fat ones.”


“It’s really cute. I get the urge to feed you sometimes.”

Jihoon was instantly reminded of the Lotte Chocolate Pie Kuanlin gave him earlier that morning.

“How could you. I’m not a pig.”

“Yeah, you’re a Shiba. You know those dogs that—“

“I KNOW WHAT A SHIBA INU IS.” Jihoon yelled, startling Kuanlin, who released him and backed slightly away in surprise. Jihoon took a deep breath, attempting to regain his composure. What was he thinking, getting all giddy at Kuanlin’s affectionate words? Kuanlin was just throwing them around for the sake of getting a rise out of him, and there he was, like an idiot, letting himself get swept up and double-crossed by his own readiness to believe in them.

“Never mind,” Jihoon said, backtracking. “I was getting distracted. Just get back to your practice. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt it.”

Kuanlin’s eyes looked at him with worry. “Are you alright, hyung? I didn’t mean to make you angry.”

Jihoon shook his head. “I’m not angry.” That sort of thing is impossible, when it comes to you.

Kuanlin smiled at him, and Jihoon was convinced that he did, indeed, have the Dumpty Key hidden somewhere. “No worries, hyung. I think I’m quite prepared now. I actually wanted you to hear it.”

Jihoon nodded. But just as Kuanlin was settling himself down to begin his rap, the principal’s voice blared through the loudspeakers. “All students, please head to the outdoor walkway immediately, for an announcement regarding this year’s promotion exams. I repeat, all students please head out to the outdoor walkway immediately, for an announcement regarding this year’s promotion exams.”

Jihoon and Kuanlin exchanged nervous looks at each other.

“What was that all about?” Kuanlin asked him. Jihoon shrugged, equally as nonplussed by the announcement. Promotion exams were starting in a matter of hours, and they had to make an announcement at this time? And why go through the trouble of gathering all students to the outdoor walkway?

“I have no idea what all this is about,” Jihoon said. “So I guess we’d better go out there and find out.”

***
The outdoor walkway was jam-packed with students. Mireu was a relatively small school, owing to how difficult it was to enter into the school in the first place; but the scenery around him, where thousands of students dressed in the black, white, and yellow colors of the school uniform were whispering about and talking amongst themselves, drove home a point that Jihoon was just one small fish amongst multitudes in the sea. He felt a bit nauseated by the sheer number of them, and Jihoon wondered if there had ever been another time during which the entire student body had been gathered in a single enclosed space. He didn’t really think so.

Jihoon looked around, examining the faces in view, trying to find his best friend. It didn’t take him much time to do so, as Jihoon had worked on improving his Jinyoung-radar throughout the years. He could probably spot Jinyoung from a mile away, no matter how small his head was.

From the corner of his vision he spotted his best friend within a few yards from where they were standing, walking towards the stage with a group of boys he had no idea Jinyoung associated with. And was that Kang Daniel walking behind him? Jihoon squinted at the other boy walking behind the Student Council President, looking like his bodyguard against the sudden onslaught of excited girls who had crowded near them. Jihoon could have sworn that it was Ong Seongwoo, who was famous across the school for his devilish good looks, his outstanding skills as an actor, and just recently, his status as Kang Daniel’s reluctant mentee. Jihoon heard that they didn’t get along too well, but from afar it didn’t seem that way at all. They kinda looked good together, if Jihoon was being honest.

There was another, much smaller guy walking next to Jinyoung, who was unmistakably Lee Daehwi. For a brief moment, Jihoon felt a pang of guilt and jealousy at the sight, as if Jinyoung had replaced him because of his inability to be a good friend. Their relationship was not in a nice place at the moment, and Jihoon wanted to hurry up and apologize, as the rift between them was something he could never get used to. Not being on good terms with Jinyoung opened a chasm within his heart, one filled with loneliness and regret, and one that needed yet another Dumpty Key to seal shut.

At that moment, Kuanlin’s hand found his. Jihoon attempted to turn back, but Kuanlin was standing just a few inches behind him. Kuanlin leaned in to whisper in his ear, and Jihoon could feel the warmth of Kuanlin’s breath on his neck.

“Hyung,” Kuanlin started. “I think I see Daehwi in the distance over there. We should probably head to where they are.”

But just as Kuanlin was about to pull him in Jinyoung’s direction, the principal stepped onstage towards the raised platform, all the cameras, lights, and students’ attention on him.

“Ladies and gentlemen, The Mireu High School for the Arts has been known for decades as the premium school for aspiring singers, dancers, rappers, hosts, entertainers, and idols. And for decades, this school has been producing some of the most successful and well-known names in the industry, including our newest and very own artist under Pledis and the Mireu Artist Agency, NU’EST W, who just recently concluded their world tour.”

Jihon could hardly believe his eyes when the members of NU’EST W themselves stepped onto the stage, as they had been hidden from sight by curtains and the assembly of six-foot-tall bodyguards who had arrived at the venue. Screams for each member rang throughout the crowd, and Jihoon realized that this would have to be around the time during which girls magically transformed into dolphins, as their frenzied screeching was almost unbearable.

“And this year, Mireu High School once again wishes to introduce a new boy group to the world, by reintroducing a second season to the School Idol Project: Produce 101.”
Jihoon needed a moment to process what he was hearing. This time, he could hear the excited voices from the boys around him, each one clamouring to hear more about the Idol Project, and each one a mirror of the excitement and anticipation he was feeling throughout his bones.

“Every semester, our school holds special promotion exams for each student to assess their current level of skill,” the principal continued. "This year, promotion exams will serve as auditions for every male student who wishes to make it into the Idol Project. This Project will be open to students from all classes, and all tracks, and special auditions will be held for alumni who wish to participate as well. The only criterion for making it into this project is showing enough skill as an idol to be chosen as one of only 101 contestants.”

“Oh god,” Jihoon exclaimed. “This is amazing.”

He turned to Kuanlin, who had a gummy smile plastered on his face, looking like the very definition of sheer delight and ecstasy. “Hyung, it’s open to all classes and tracks! Does that mean I can make it, too?”

Jihoon smiled at him, his grip subconsciously tightening around the hand he was holding. Kuanlin held him tighter in response, turning to Jihoon and flashing him a blinding, billion-won smile.

“Once chosen, students may opt to form groups of up to 11 members, or work as solo acts, and will undergo a series of performance rounds. Each act will have an opportunity to work closely with the members of NU’EST W, who will serve as the coaches and trainers for this project. After each round, half the acts will get eliminated through a voting system, with half the votes coming from selected panelists and industry experts, and half of them coming from the public. By the end of the project, the act that remains victorious will debut as a new idol group by the start of next year.”

Jihoon could hardly believe what he was hearing, as the thrilling news poured in one after the other.

A chance to work with NU’EST W, who had been his role models since their electrifying debut. A chance to showcase his skills to a massive audience. A chance to debut and find success. A chance to make his parents proud, and repay them for all that they had done for him.

All of these chances were being offered to him, and Jihoon wanted nothing more than to take them and hold on for dear life.

“So good luck with exams, everyone,” the principal’s voice rang out. “It’s time to show us what Mireu’s students are truly made of.”

The announcement ended then, but the crowds refused to disperse. Girls were still waving at the NU’EST W members, their inner dolphins making a comeback as the members indulged them with finger hearts and flying kisses. The boys remained, talking in excited voices, discussing their promotion performances, and placing bets on who would make it into the Idol Project.

Jihoon scanned the place a second time for Jinyoung, but he was nowhere to be found.

“Are you alright, hyung?” Kuanlin asked him, and Jihoon found himself bewildered at how easily Kuanlin caught on to his shifts in mood. Was Kuanlin watching him that observantly? Jihoon made himself blush at the thought.

“I was looking for Jinyoung,” Jihoon admitted. “He was with Daehwi a while ago, and I… I just wanted to talk. I need to make up for being so irresponsible, even if I have no idea why he’s so
mad at me. This sort of thing has happened before, and yet he’s never reacted the way he did this morning. I’m starting to wonder if he’s getting sick of me.”

Kuanlin listened to him with genuine concern.

“I don’t think that’s it,” Kuanlin said, his voice a soothing comfort to Jihoon’s ears. “I’ve never met Jinyoung-hyung, but I’m sure he isn’t the type to end year-long friendships over trivial things. He’s probably just stressed with promotion exams, and happened to take his frustration out on you.”

Jihoon had never thought of it that way, but Kuanlin was probably right. Jinyoung had always struggled with performing in front of an audience, and now that the exams had reached a scale of importance this massive… the pressure might have become too overwhelming. Guilt flooded Jihoon for not thinking of it sooner.

‘I need to find him,” he said.

“You’re in luck, then,” Kuanlin said. “I happened to see where they were headed. This way.”

Without another word, Kuanlin tugged at Jihoon’s hand, leading him across the ocean of students to where Jinyoung had headed.

***

When Jihoon and Kuanlin walked into the Imugi café right into Jinyoung’s line of sight, it took one murderous glare from Jinyoung at their intertwined fingers to realize he had listened through the announcement and walked across the school with Kuanlin’s hand in his the entire time.

Jihoon immediately withdrew his hand out of sheer embarrassment, wondering at what fraction of the entire student population had seen them holding hands so tightly like a pair of shameless lover boys. Jihoon turned to Jinyoung apologetically, who looked like he couldn’t decide which one of them he should interrogate first.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Jinyoung asked, trying to hide the disdain in his voice.

“What do you mean what’s the meaning of this?” Seongwoo said, smirking at Jihoon and Kuanlin in turns. “These two obviously wanted to go for a coffee date, and we’ve simply interrupted their—OUCH!” Seongwoo clutched at his side and turned to Daehwi, who had elbowed him with all the force he could muster. "The hell was that for?!"

“Stop it, hyung. This isn’t the time to be joking around.” Daehwi pouted at Seongwoo.

“Sorry about this guy,” Daniel spoke up, and Jihoon realized it was the first time the Student Council President had ever addressed him. He wasn’t even sure if he had ever been blessed enough to breathe the same air as him for extended periods of time. “You guys can go ahead and order. Jisung-hyung’s in the kitchen.”

Jihoon needed no explanation for Jisung, as the guy had been his employer for eleven months. Jihoon began working as a waiter at the Imugi café a few semesters back, and Jihoon had never thought to quit because of how generously Jisung had paid him. In many ways, he kind of reminded Jihoon of his own mother.

“It’s alright,” Jihoon responded, still aware of Jinyoung’s piercing gaze. “I work here part time, so I’ll just do it myself. In the meantime, Kuanlin you—“
But Kuanlin had left his side, and had already walked over to where Jinyoung was. Jihoon could almost hear the gates of hell creaking slowly open with the way Jinyoung was eyeing him, his gaze laced with suspicion and resentment. Seriously, what was wrong with Jinyoung? He and Kuanlin had never even met.

“So you’re Jihoon-hyung’s best friend,” Kuanlin said, smiling. “Hi, I’m Lai Kuanlin. I’m a new friend of his. We met last night.” Kuanlin bowed politely at him in greeting.

Jinyoung’s eyes narrowed. Jihoon wondered how long Jinyoung could sustain his anger, as his best friend was horrible at staying mad at people for too long. This disagreement of theirs was a new record.

“Yeah, I heard,” Jinyoung responded. “But not from Jihoon.”

And so it begins.

“Look, I’m really sorry about not telling you,” Jihoon began. “It’s my fault for forgetting, and my fault for being an insensitive douchebag. I didn’t even know how stressed out you must’ve been because of the exams.”

Jinyoung turned away. “I wasn’t. Daehwi was here for me the entire time, unlike someone who couldn’t even be bothered with a text message.”

Jihoon looked to Daehwi then, who blushed unmistakably at Jinyoung’s mention of him. Jihoon saw his own reactions to Kuanlin mirrored in Daehwi’s, and he made a mental note in his head to consult Daehwi later on regarding what those reactions might’ve meant.

“Thanks,” Jihoon told him. “I’m sorry for laying the burden of my best friend on you.”

“N-no problem,” Daehwi replied, waving his hands in front of him as if to say that it really was nothing. “Jinyoung isn’t particularly hard to work with. We’re doing promotions together, and he’s learned my song quite fast.”

Jihoon smiled. “And I thought I was the only one Jinyoung could perform a halfway-decent song for.”

“Hey!” Jinyoung demanded. “Don’t slander me while I’m in the vicinity.”

Jihoon walked towards him, enveloping him in a hug. “So are we good now? Please don’t be mad at me anymore. I’m not sure what I’d do without your relentless nagging.”

Jihoon could feel Jinyoung tensing up at his touch, and Jihoon wondered what it was for. The rift between them felt only partway closed. He heard Jinyoung sigh, as if in defeat.

“Fine,” Jinyoung said finally. “But only because Daehwi keeps on telling me to forgive you already.”

Jihoon raised a brow at him. “What’s with all this talk of Daehwi all of a sudden? I feel like I’ve been replaced.”

“Says the guy who replaced me with Kuanlin last night.”

Jihoon blinked. Was that jealousy in his voice? For a moment, Jihoon almost let himself think that Jinyoung had feelings for him outside of being friends, but Jihoon quashed the thought even as it entered into his head. No, Jihoon, he thought. Just because you’re starting to feel strange things
for a guy doesn’t mean you should project those feelings onto someone else.

“I should’ve come equipped with some 3D-glasses and popcorn,” Seongwoo said, interrupting Jihoon’s train of thought. “This exchange has gotten really interesting.”

“What are the 3D-glasses for?” Daniel asked. “This is real life. We’re already in 3D.”

“Stop killing my vibe with your rationality, already,” Seongwoo simply said. “Speaking of rational activity though, weren’t we supposed to practice?”

“Ah, I still need to practice, too,” Kuanlin said. “It might be better if I could get feedback from all of you.”

“What even are you?” Jinyoung asked him.

“Oh, uhm… a human being? Was that a trick question…”

“NO. I meant your track.”

“Ah,” Kuanlin said. “I’m a rapper. Not a very good one though. I’m still in Class D.”

“Is that so? Well I’m in F. Not saying I’m any worse than you though. We’ll see.”

Jihoon sighed in relief at the sight of Kuanlin and Jinyoung having a civil conversation. He chalked it up to Jinyoung’s inability to stay mad at people, and Kuanlin’s entirely lovable personality. He was grateful that he didn’t have to deal with another version of him and Woojin, whose day could never be complete if he didn't attempt to start a fight with Jihoon even once.

“Right!” Daehwi said. “Daniel-hyung, are we allowed to use the practice room in here?”

Daniel seemed lost in contemplation for a while before he finally nodded. “Sure, but if you guys are ordering drinks, leave them outside. I’m not cleaning up after any of you.”

Seongwoo chuckled. “Well that’s because you can’t even clean up after your—“

Daniel pulled Seongwoo in a choke hold with his right arm, covering Seongwoo’s mouth with his left hand. “And don’t listen to anything this guy says.”

At that moment, Jisung emerged from the kitchen. He took one look at the spectacle in front of him before saying, “Well, if the ladies knew just how many visuals are standing in my café right now, they’d all regret not bothering to pay me a visit. I should probably just snap a picture of each of you and sell them at the Mireu black market for a hundred thousand won each to make up for lost profit.”

“Don’t even think about it.” Daniel warned.

Seongwoo removed Daniel’s hand from his mouth. “Mine would sell for way more than that.”

“Girls would really pay that much for a picture of Jihoon?” Jinyoung asked, trying to tease him.

“There’s a Mireu black market?” Kuanlin asked out of genuine curiosity.

“Does the principal even know about this?” Daehwi demanded.

“YOU GUYS,” Jihoon yelled, surprising each of them. This was getting ridiculous. “Let’s just get to practice.”
Jihoon watched as Daniel practiced his Get Ugly performance. The six of them had been in the practice room for hours, practicing in pairs and in turns, but Daniel didn’t look the least bit exhausted two hours in. He didn’t even give himself breaks in between, as he helped Jinyoung and Daehwi prepare for their performance, and tried to fend off Seongwoo’s advances (who, for some reason, had taken a liking to Daniel, and now wanted him to play the part of his love interest for his skit practice. Jihoon honestly couldn’t tell if he was joking).

He could hardly believe Daniel’s performance was a self-choreographed routine, and Daniel’s deep voice surprisingly matched the song well. He couldn’t help but envy how Daniel could sing, dance and rap so effortlessly in front of everyone, but he guessed that there was a reason a guy like him was ranked first in the school. It was as if performing to him was second nature. They were only practicing, but his facial expressions were amazing as he performed, and his body movements were fluid and precise. He had yet to make a single mistake at that point.

He could even b-boy. Dang. Jihoon really wanted to learn how to do that.

“That was amazing, hyung!” Kuanlin clapped in amazement after Daniel concluded his performance. “I want to learn how to do that too.”

“I’ll teach you one of these days,” Daniel said. He retrieved a towel from inside of his gym bag and began wiping his sweat away from all over his body. It didn’t escape Jihoon how Seongwoo’s eyes never left Daniel.

“I could probably do that too,” Seongwoo said. “Nobody asked, but I’m actually a pretty good dancer.”

“You’re right,” Daniel agreed. “Nobody asked.”

Seongwoo actively ignored his comment. “Wanna see?”

Seongwoo stood up, reaching for Daniel’s phone which had been connected to the Bluetooth speaker. He scrolled through Daniel’s playlist, looking for a suitable song. He pressed on the phone as he found it, and Bruno Mars’s ‘That’s What I Like’ began playing.

Jihoon had no idea what he was expecting Seongwoo to look like while dancing. It was definitely nowhere near as cool as he looked in reality.

Seongwoo moved his body in time with the beat, every movement telling a story. There was a certain fluidity to his movements that were reminiscent of Daniel’s, but at the same time he saw a certain arrogance, as if Seongwoo was saying he was not to be underestimated. He sang as well as he danced, and Jihoon was surprised at how he managed it despite his dance requiring a lot of energy. When the song changed from the pre-chorus to the chorus, Seongwoo’s movements changed as well, became slower, more deliberate, as if to capture the romantic feel of the song.

This guy’s mouth might’ve been too loud for his own good, but he certainly was no fraud when it came to his dancing. Jihoon looked to Daniel, who was staring at Seongwoo as he moved, his eyes wide and lips slightly apart, as if he couldn’t believe what he was witnessing. Jihoon could almost swear that Daniel’s cheeks had gotten tinged a certain shade of pink.

The song ended with Seongwoo on one knee. Kuanlin clapped and cheered as soon as it ended.

“Hyung, that was so cool! I’m a fan of yours now!”
What was up with this guy? They perform for a couple of seconds, and he’s suddenly become their adoring fanboy?

_What’s up with you then, Jihoon? His inner Jihoon chastised. Why are you so bothered by him expressing admiration towards other people?_

Seongwoo winked at Kuanlin then, and Jihoon had no words for the sort of uncomfortable feeling that gave him. “Knew you’d like it,” Seongwoo said, getting up from his final dancing position to high-five Kuanlin. “Now what does the pretty boy here think of my little number?”

“Pretty good,” Daniel admitted. “You’ve still got to work on your stability though. You sounded like you were out of breath the entire time.”

“That’s a start,” Seongwoo said, reclaiming his place on the floor beside Daniel. “It isn’t as if I’ve practiced much for this sort of thing. But if you’d like to help me practice my acting, that would be much appreciated.”

“I kind of want to see that,” Daehwi said. “I heard you were doing a scene from Goblin. Maybe you should re-enact it with Daniel-hyung.”

“Excuse me?” Daniel said.

“I’m doing a kissing scene, though,” Seongwoo said. “Not sure Daniel here could handle that.”

Daniel looked like he was about to punch Seongwoo. “Don’t even think about kissing me.”

“Too late. I already think about it every night before I go to sleep and every morning when I wake up.”

Daehwi and Jinyoung laughed at this, and Jihoon had to admit their exchange was a bit hilarious. It sort of reminded him of himself and Woojin, except Seongwoo and Daniel’s dynamics came with a sort of tension he couldn’t quite put a finger on.

“You’re alright with kissing girls onstage?” Jinyoung asked.

“It’s just acting,” Seongwoo shrugged. “No big deal.”

Daniel turned away then, something unreadable in his expression. “You’d better incorporate a song and dance in there too, if you want to make it to the Idol Project.”

“I’ll cross the bridge when I get there,” Seongwoo said. “I’m more of a spontaneous performer anyway.”

“I had no idea you wanted to become an idol,” Jihoon said. “I always kind of thought acting was in your blood. You’re really good at it.”

“I’ve just never spoken about it before, not even to Daehwi or Jinyoung. But I guess this guy’s already laid out all my cards on the table, so there you have it. Besides, it isn’t as if I’m the only here not in Idol track who wants to make it in.” He turned to Jinyoung. “Don’t think I didn’t notice how happy you looked when the principal announced that the project was open to all tracks. You looked like you could kiss Daehwi any second with the way you were exchanging glances with him.”

“I did not,” Jinyoung retorted. “I mean… I didn’t think of kissing anyone.”
Jihoon noted his best friend’s embarrassment. It was unlike any expression he’d seen before, and Jihoon had seen almost everything. So what? Did Jinyoung really have the hots for Daehwi, then?

“Do you guys want to see our performance?” Daehwi cut in, eager to change subject. “Jinyoung’s pretty good.”

“I want to see it,” Kuanlin said, raising his hand. “I’m Jinyoung-hyung’s fan too.”

“Me? What did I ever do?” Jinyoung asked.

“Not sure yet, but your face is nice.”

Jinyoung sighed, then looked to Daehwi hesitantly. He met Jihoon’s eyes for a brief moment, as if looking for affirmation. Jihoon nodded as if to say, there’s nothing to be afraid of.

Jinyoung sucked in a breath, and then began singing the first verse of Playing With Fire. Jihoon had been hearing bits and pieces of the performance as Jinyoung and Daehwi practiced together, but he found himself still entirely surprised by Jinyoung’s voice. Daehwi took over the second half, and they sang the pre-chorus together. Their voices blended really well together, and Jihoon couldn’t help but envy Daehwi for managing to bring out a side to Jinyoung’s performance skill that even he had not managed to entice awake.

Near the end of the chorus, Jinyoung’s voice cracked accidentally as he sought to reach the note.

“Whoops,” Jinyoung said, interrupting their own performance. “That part needs a bit more work.”

“It’s alright,” Daehwi said, patting Jinyoung on the back. “We’ll make it work.”

“And you’re the guy who’s supposedly in F?” Daniel said. “That was actually pretty good… The arrangement is unlike anything I’ve ever heard before. You might actually just have a chance at exposing Taejoon.”

“Taejoon?” Jihoon asked. “What’s up with him?”

“Long story,” Seongwoo said. “Just let the performances speak for themselves if you want to find out.”

Jihoon nodded. He knew that everyone, Taejoon included, had signed up to perform at the Kirin Performance Hall, which was one out of ten that had been prepared for exams, as he had seen the notice for performance arrangements posted at the bulletin boards a couple of days ago. Besides, most students from their hall at the dormitory opted for Kirin, as that was the hall closest to them in proximity. This meant that they would get to see each other perform, and despite humming with nervous energy, Jihoon couldn’t help but look forward to watching everyone as well.

“What about you, Kuanlin-ah?” Seongwoo asked. “Care to show us what you’ve prepared?”

Kuanlin looked at Seongwoo, smiling a little sadly. “I wanted to, but everyone’s performance is so amazing that I don’t think I could even begin to compare.”

Jihoon looked at him, immediately sensing his restraint. Kuanlin was good at hiding the fact that he was struggling, but Jihoon knew that deep inside he had been fighting to regain his confidence after moving to Korea.

“It’s alright if you can’t do it,” Jihoon told him. “But it would also be nice if we could provide you some feedback.”
Kuanlin looked at him, then reached out to stroke his cheek gently. Jihoon couldn’t bring himself to move away, despite knowing how intently the others were staring at them. “I’m sorry, hyung,” Kuanlin said. “I can’t bring myself to do it just yet. I think I’ll just… surprise you guys later on during exams.”

Jihoon nodded. “Alright.” Kuanlin withdrew his hand, and Jihoon felt an unusual sort of emptiness at the absence of his touch. He was crazy for getting used to skinship way too soon.

“It would be nice though,” Kuanlin said. “If I could debut with all of you.”

Jihoon was startled by Kuanlin’s declaration, and the others seemed to share his sentiments. Jihoon himself had never thought about it; did he want to debut as a solo artist, or in a group? He and Jinyoung had promised to debut together, but he had become unsure of Jinyoung’s desire to debut, and he himself had been way too focused on making it into the Idol Project that he had forgotten to consider what would inevitably come next if he succeeded.

He had to choose whether to enter into a group, or go through the entire ordeal without one.

“I’ve never thought about that,” Seongwoo said, mimicking Jihoon’s thoughts. “Did any of you?”

Everyone save for Kuanlin shook their heads simultaneously.

“I always thought I’d never have to make the decision for myself,” Daniel replied. “But now, I guess I do.”

“But I agree with Kuanlin-ah,” Daehwi declared. “I… I’ve never thought about making it alone. And after watching you guys perform… It would be nice if we could all do it together.”

“What about you, Jinyoung-ah?” Seongwoo asked.

Jinyoung met Jihoon’s gaze for a split-second before looking away. “I only ever wanted to debut with Jihoon-hyung. But if he wants to debut with everyone, then…”

“So does he want to debut with everyone else?” Seongwoo asked, directing his attention to Jihoon.

The only certainty Jihoon had in his life until that point was that he wanted to debut. No matter what. Whom he debuted with hardly mattered, as he had promised himself he would do his best to outshine everyone onstage anyway.

But things were different now. And like a river, rushing to flow into the waters of the vast ocean and reunite with its source, Jihoon found himself slowly, but ever so surely, allowing himself to be taken by the currents of his ambitious heart.

Into a new dream.

He looked at Jinyoung, who smiled at him, nodding as if to say, words aren’t necessary. I hear you.

He looked at Daehwi, and Daniel, and Seongwoo, who returned his gaze with their own, filled with expectation, and excitement and the tiniest glimmers of hope.

He looked at Kuanlin, whose smile he really liked seeing, whose hand he really liked holding, and whose dream now overlapped with his own.

Like a river rushing, he let himself be taken by his feelings for this guy who had, in no time at all,
manage to unlock his stubborn heart. And he didn’t even need a Dumpty Key to do it.

Sure, Kuanlin-ah, I’ll take your hand. I’ll let you take me wherever it is you wish to go.

“I want to debut,” Jihoon said, finally. “I want to debut with everyone.”

As if in response, the loudspeakers blared.

“Promotion exams and auditions for the Idol Project begin in less than an hour. Please prepare and head to the assigned venues at least ten minutes prior.”

“Well, there’s our answer,” Seongwoo said. “We’d better get ourselves ready. And you guys had better make it in, or else.”

“Of course we’ll make it,” Daniel said confidently. “We’ve worked our asses off for this. Well, except you.”

“Don’t be too surprised if I blow your mind with my stellar acting,” Seongwoo said. “And don’t be too jealous of that girl I’ll be stage-kissing. I’ll reserve my first real kiss in two years just for you.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “How thoughtful.”

“So we’ll debut as a six-member group, then?” Daehwi said excitedly. “I can hardly wait.”

“I can hear Woojin crying in the distance,” Jihoon said. “That guy will probably want in if he makes it and hears of this.”

“Jaehwan-hyung might have a few things to say about this as well,” Jinyoung added. “Although I have no idea if that guy can dance.”

“He can do it without looking like a fool, at least,” Jihoon said. “Trust me, I’ve seen it. There are worse things in this world.”

“Jisung-hyung might just want to join us as well,” Daniel said. “I mean, he says he’s given up on being an idol but that’s because he didn’t know chances like this could ever show up in his lifetime. But if he drags Sungwoon-hyung in with him… I may have to rethink this debut-with-everyone strategy for a bit.”

“Well, that’s ten members,” Kuanlin said. “There’s room for just one more.”

Jihoon sighed. Everyone was getting way too excited, with talks of forming a group before their exams had even started.

“Guys,” he reminded. “Let’s just get through exams first before we even begin to think of such things.”

Everyone nodded, and Jihoon couldn’t help but think that their chemistry as a group wasn’t so bad after all.

“Promise me you’ll all make it,” he said.

The response he received rang with clarity across the practice room, and Jihoon saved that response in his heart.

“We promise.”
Forgive me if there isn't as much Panwink in here as you'd like... this has turned into a Panwink/Jinhwi/Ongniel chapter, as all of them are in it xD And if I were being honest, I had meant for this chapter to include the actual performances already, but this chapter would've been way too long if I had extended it any further, so I'm sorry for being such a blabbermouth and having to make you guys wait just one more chapter until it happens T.T The next few chapters, with the exception of Daniel's (which will be set post-exam for the most part) will actually be occurring in the same timeline (during practice, and the exams themselves), and I'd just like to clarify that in case things get confusing later on xD I'd also like to apologize if this fanfic is moving way too slow... seven chapters in, and most of the story has occurred in the span of a single morning and afternoon ;-; I had no idea things would turn out this way really.

But I hope you guys still like this story nonetheless! It's incredibly detailed and complicated, I know... but that's because I want this story to be around for a really long time to come. And oh, if you were wondering why Minhyun hasn't made an appearance... he will, next chapter! So please stay tuned for that. Sungwoon will be around for a bit as well. Lots of Minhwan hilarity and bromance, as well as 2Sung realness incoming! Hope you enjoy, and see you in Chapter 8!
Jinyoung could vividly recall the last time he had witnessed the very moment Jihoon’s expression changed as he fell in love. The way his eyes misted over reminded him of the early morning dew, and the way his lips parted, trembling slightly, reminded him of how a rose fluttered slowly into bloom. Back then, Jinyoung hadn’t harboured special feelings of any sort for his best friend, so he didn’t think much of it when Jihoon decided to ask a girl out for the first time.

He and Jihoon were in middle school then, one year apart, no classes shared between them, and yet entirely inseparable for the most part. The only times during which Jihoon could be seen without Jinyoung in close proximity was as he worked his afternoon shifts at his auntie’s chicken restaurant, trying to figure out how to properly fry chicken strips without getting the fabric of his shirt burnt to a crisp, as the oil from the fryer smouldered and flew at him at seemingly impossible trajectories. Jinyoung, meanwhile, would be away at the studio where he worked as a model part-time, the same place where he first encountered Ong Seongwoo. Seongwoo, much to his chagrin, was not only devastatingly handsome but also entirely gifted at all of the things Jinyoung considerably lacked, which meant that he had an irksome tendency to unwittingly hack away at Jinyoung’s already crumbling sense of self-confidence.

The girl in question, Han Ahreum, worked at the same studio. Despite the abundance of attractive male company, however, she never displayed even the slightest traces of interest in any of them. She didn’t even bother to flirt with Seongwoo, who otherwise never failed to secure a phone number, a scheduled date, and at the very least an acknowledgment of his presence by the host of female models who requested specifically to work with him. Ahreum, at the time, was also the most beautiful person he and Jihoon agreed they had ever seen walk the face of the earth, and they used to fight over which one she’d pick between them despite knowing they would never stand a chance. Jinyoung was a mediocre student, Jihoon had yet to shed his baby fat, and Ahreum seemed the type of girl to look your way only if you possessed a certain degree of both talent and good-looks. Both of them agreed that they had passable amounts of one and an alarming shortage of the other.

But that didn’t stop Jihoon from asking her out on a date, anyway, as she was about to graduate and enter into a completely different school that Jihoon knew neither the name nor the address of. And besides, he only had the smallest scraps of dignity left to lose in case of rejection, as he had profoundly messed up the musical number his class prepared for the school festival, which had cost them first place and vanquished them to seventh. The reason? Han Ahreum was seated front row and center at the play, and the moment Jihoon’s eyes locked with hers, he had proceeded to throw all of his practice knowledge out the window in exchange for the entirely useless, yet gratifying knowledge that for once… Ahreum had seen him. The euphoria lasted only until she broke her gaze, as Jihoon had already missed an entire beat of the choreography at that point and was in the middle of conducting an accidental repeat performance of the song’s first verse.

On the day of Jihoon’s date with Ahreum (which Jinyoung never thought would happen in a million years), he remembered how Jihoon gelled his hair back to expose his forehead, put on copious amounts of eyeliner, practically emptied an entire tube of lip balm, and spritzed on enough perfume to suffocate the next unfortunate stranger he could manage to stay trapped in an enclosed space with.
And Jinyoung remembered how, when Ahreum answered the door to her apartment, wearing an off-shoulder red dress, smelling distinctly of vanilla, and welcoming Jihoon in with a million-watt smile, Jihoon had looked at her as if he was seeing for the very first time.

In awe and in wonder, in bliss and delirium… his eyes misted over, reminding Jinyoung of the early morning dew, and his lips parted, trembling slightly, the way roses fluttered slowly into bloom.

Jinyoung had no idea when he would get to see that very expression next, and Jinyoung had hoped once that it would be as Jihoon looked at him, to finally return his unanswered feelings and restore his broken heart.

But he certainly wasn’t expecting it to be as Jihoon looked at Lai Kuanlin the way he did now, who, until only a couple of hours ago had been a faceless name and a meaningless identity. Things would be much different, Jinyoung thought, if Kuanlin was the sort of person he could dislike with no effort. That way, Jinyoung would have an excuse to warn Jihoon away, to say look at me, instead. I can make you happier than he ever will. But Jinyoung had no such luxury, as he couldn’t find fault with Kuanlin’s innocence, his eagerness to debut, and his readiness to make friends even with people as wretched as he was.

The only thing Jinyoung could do as he watched his best friend fall in love with someone else was attempt to hide away his feelings even as they threatened to bubble out of him towards the surface. He kept his mouth carefully shut, as if at any moment he could snap and declare his love for Jihoon in front of everyone.

At that moment, the principal’s voice blared through the loudspeakers, interrupting Jinyoung’s depressing train of thought. “Promotion exams and auditions for the Idol Project begin in less than an hour. Please prepare and head to the assigned venues at least ten minutes prior.”

“Well, there’s our answer,” Seongwoo said. “We’d better get ourselves ready. And you guys had better make it in, or else.”

Jinyoung had no idea if he was capable of making it anywhere. His only motivator was the prospect of debuting with Jihoon, but that had since been shattered by the realization that his skill level was nowhere near where Jihoon’s had gotten. All of a sudden, he felt a set of hands against his own, the warmth of skin coursing through him as it made contact with his trembling fingers. He looked at Daehwi, who was regarding him with a worried expression and had reached for his hand in an attempt to ease his distress. In an instant, Jinyoung felt a small piece of his burden being lifted from his shoulders, and Jinyoung wondered to himself why Daehwi’s presence had an immediate calming effect on him. In reassurance, he slid his fingers against Daehwi’s, gently interlocking them together.

“Of course we’ll make it,” Daniel said then. “We’ve worked our asses off for this. Well, except you.”

Jinyoung turned to Seongwoo, who seemed to have adopted a new and exciting hobby of pissing the Student Council President off at every single chance he could grasp onto.

“Don’t be too surprised if I blow your mind with my stellar acting,” Seongwoo said, confirming Jinyoung’s belief. “And don’t be too jealous of that girl I’ll be stage-kissing. I’ll reserve my first real kiss in two years just for you.”

“How thoughtful.” Daniel rolled his eyes in an attempt to conceal the effect Seongwoo’s words had on him. Jinyoung wondered how he had gotten so good at reading those sorts of things. He could
see from a distance the unbearable tension that existed between Seongwoo and Daniel, how at least one of them was bound to snap at any given moment. He could see how Kuanlin regarded his best friend, and looked at Jihoon the way only he himself had, as far as he could remember.

The only person he couldn’t manage to get a read on was Daehwi, which felt ironic as Daehwi seemed to understand him the most for some mysterious reason. And even though he had recently found out that Daehwi also had feelings for Kuanlin, he couldn’t quite shake away the feeling that Daehwi was hiding something else, something more unspeakable and damning behind the mask of his cheerful persona.

“So we’ll debut as a six-member group, then?” Daehwi said, the excitement apparent in his voice. “I can hardly wait.”

Jinyoung wasn’t sure what he thought of the idea yet. He had no complaints about debuting with Jihoon, who had promised him they’d make it together, with Seongwoo and Daniel whose talents would prove to be assets to any idol group, and with Daehwi, whose comforting presence he had grown quite fond of. But Kuanlin was a different story, especially if debuting with him meant having to endure through the saccharine looks he and Jihoon exchanged so frequently.

“I can hear Woojin crying in the distance,” Jihoon said. “That guy will probably want in if he makes it and hears of this.”

“Jaehwan-hyung might have a few things to say about this as well,” Jinyoung replied, remembering his insufferable roommate. “Although I have no idea if that guy can dance.”

“He can do it without looking like a fool, at least,” Jihoon said. “Trust me, I’ve seen it. There are worse things in this world.”

Jinyoung stifled a laugh. He found it so easy to smile at Jihoon’s remarks, no matter how sarcastic. He wondered how long it would take for him to finally give up on his best friend. He had no idea how he’d do it, but that would certainly be the easy way out.

He watched as Kuanlin took Jihoon’s hand in his own and laid it on his lap, and Jinyoung had to turn away in order not to unravel at their display of intimacy. Daehwi entered into his line of sight, and Jinyoung noticed how hard he was trying to keep his expression neutral.

He decided that he didn’t the like the idea of Daehwi being in love with Kuanlin, either. Hurting him for stealing Jihoon away was one thing, but hurting Daehwi even unintentionally was another. What was so great about the guy, anyway? His personality wasn’t particularly distasteful, but neither was he any better a person than Jinyoung thought himself to be.

*Neither a friend nor a foe. Neither a comrade nor an adversary.*

Jinyoung wondered at random if Jihoon or Daehwi had ever considered the number of times they’d have to suffer through a stiff neck by having to crane it upwards to look at him. Kuanlin's height was a little frightening, which, coupled with his thin frame, made it look as if he was about to be blown away by the slightest gust of wind at any minute.

“Jisung-hyung might just want to join us as well,” Daniel added. “I mean, he says he’s given up on being an idol but that’s because he didn’t know chances like this could ever show up in his lifetime. But if he drags Sungwoon-hyung in with him… I may have to rethink this debut-with-everyone strategy for a bit.”

“Well, that’s ten members,” Kuanlin said. “There’s room for just one more.”
They were about to reach the eleven member threshold, and yet none of them had even gone through the auditions themselves. “Guys, let’s just get through exams first before we even begin to think of such things,” Jihoon reminded, reflecting Jinyoung’s concerns. “But promise me you’ll all make it.”

Jinyoung had made promises to Jihoon before.

*I promise that I’ll never leave you. I promise that we’ll always be together. I promise to find my way back to you, no matter how many paths I stumble through and get lost upon.*

This time, the promise was different.

*I promise to make it with you. But I also promise to learn to let you go. Somehow. If that means I can make it easier for the both of us.*

“We promise.”

With a sigh, Jinyoung stood up from the practice room floor. “I’ll just head to my room now. I need to get changed into performance clothes.”

“Do you by any chance need a stylist to consult?” Jihoon asked, grinning at him askew. “Because I volunteer my services.”

Jinyoung shook his head vigorously. The last thing he needed at this point was yet another excuse for his professors to bump his grade another step down because of Jihoon’s perpetual lapses in judgment when it came to making even the simplest of fashion choices.

“I’ll pass,” Jinyoung said. “But I volunteer... no, I require you to consult me about your outfit before you step anywhere near the stage. If I see any more clashing prints or neon laces, I swear you’ll never hear the end of it.”

“We’d better head out as well,” Seongwoo said, pulling at Daniel’s hand to stand him up as well. “I’ve reached quota on viewing Daniel’s chocolate abs for the day, but I guess it can’t be helped this time.”

“Just change in the bathroom, why don’t you,” Daniel said. “And don’t act as if I’ve never seen you half-naked either.”

Seongwoo brought a finger to Daniel’s lip. “Please. Not in front of the kids.”

“I should probably start preparing, myself,” Kuanlin said. He looked to Jinyoung then, smiling at him like a puppy. Jinyoung held an offhand debate in his head as to whether he should pet Kuanlin or ignore him. He decided on a smile back.

It’s a truce, for now. But only because I can’t afford to get distracted. But if you so much as make Jihoon upset, don’t think I’ll ever forgive you.

“Wanna get changed together, Daehwi?” Kuanlin offered, catching Jinyoung off-guard. Images of Kuanlin and Daehwi seeing each other’s bare skin flashed through his mind like a movie sequence, and Jinyoung intuitively tugged Daehwi’s hand with enough force to pull Daehwi against him. Jinyoung wrapped an arm around Daehwi’s shoulder protectively, unsure of what he was doing half the time.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Jinyoung said. “I’m bringing Daehwi with me.”
“What for, hyung?” Kuanlin asked.

“Jinyoung?” Daehwi looked tentatively at his right shoulder, where Jinyoung’s hand was resting.

Jinyoung was well-aware of how Daehwi might’ve wanted to be alone with Kuanlin then, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. He looked to Jihoon then, who was regarding him with an unreadable expression that could’ve been anywhere between suspicion and bewilderment. Jinyoung returned his gaze with one of his own apologetically.

*I’m sorry, hyung. But let me be selfish just this once.*

“I’ll dress him myself,” Jinyoung said, noting how Daehwi’s head snapped in his direction as he said it. “We’re performing together, so we need to coordinate.”

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“Done yet?” Jinyoung asked, knocking on the door of the bathroom where Daehwi was changing into clothes he had picked out himself. “You’ve been in there for the longest time, Daehwi-ya. We might not make it to our own performance at this rate.”

“Just one more minute!” Daehwi called out. “I’m not done with makeup. And I… I really don’t think I’m wearing this right.”

“Come out of there for a sec,” Jinyoung replied. “Let me help you out.”

“I don’t want to… I’m really embarrassed. Are you sure this sort of outfit looks alright?”

“Just let me look at you, Daehwi-ya.” Jinyoung said, heaving a sigh. “Please?”

A few moments of silence echoed across the room before Jinyoung heard the door knob click and saw the door itself swing open. Daehwi stepped out of the bathroom then, and Jinyoung could barely keep his jaw from dropping at sight of him.

Daehwi was wearing a white silk shirt that was in Jinyoung’s size, so it wore loosely around him and exposed his collarbone. Jinyoung had also forgotten to consider how low the neckline of his shirt went, and he wanted to slap himself for feeling suddenly grateful for the oversight. The pants Jinyoung picked out hugged Daehwi’s waist and accentuated the delicate curves of his figure, and the choker Jinyoung had asked him to wear as an accent piece didn’t do his ability to reason out with himself any favors. The way Daehwi applied his own makeup also added a certain glow to his features, made his eyes look larger, his lips redder, and his skin more flawless than was humanly possible.

Daehwi looked positively ravishing, and Jinyoung had no idea whether to applaud himself for putting together such an attractive outfit, or ask Daehwi to politely step back inside the bathroom and remove everything because the sight of him was slowly eating away at Jinyoung’s sanity.

He remained speechless for a solid ten seconds, just drinking in the sight of Daehwi before him. Apart from Jihoon and Han Ahreum, he had never seen anyone else look so beautiful.

“J-Jinyoung?” Daehwi began, still waiting for any sort of reaction. “Why aren’t you saying anything?”

Jinyoung tore his gaze away from Daehwi’s body to look him in the eye. “This outfit, uhm…”

He struggled to find the right words to say. Daehwi pouted, folding his arms across himself. “I
knew it, I look really weird in this. I’ll just change into something else.”

Daehwi moved to re-enter the bathroom and change, and Jinyoung would’ve gladly let him if his treasonous body didn’t move of its own accord to grab at Daehwi’s arm and stop him. Daehwi looked to him, confusion settling in his features.

“Sorry,” Jinyoung began. “I was just… speechless for a moment there. You look amazing, Daehwi-ya. Extremely beautiful.”

Daehwi’s cheeks blushed pink. “Stop it, hyung. That’s not true.”

Jinyoung found himself surprised by how much he disliked being addressed by Daehwi as ‘hyung’.

“What’s with the formalities all of a sudden?” Jinyoung said. “Just speak with me the way you normally do. I think I prefer that.”

“Sorry, I just kind of revert to that sort of speech when I get embarrassed.” Daehwi turned away, still unable to look Jinyoung in the eye.

Jinyoung placed a hand beneath Daehwi’s chin, coaxing him to look upwards. “Why are you embarrassed all of a sudden? You won’t even look at me. That kinda hurts, you know. Do I look weird? We’re wearing the same clothes, though.”

Daehwi shook his head. “You… you look really handsome in that. But I don’t think I expected any less, considering how good you look on a daily basis.”

“Aren’t those the sorts of words you should be saying to Kuanlin?”

As soon as the words left his mouth, Jinyoung regretted saying them. Daehwi looked away from him yet again. “I don’t think I can handle saying those sorts of things to him.”

He was only trying to tease Daehwi, but Jinyoung felt an unexpected pang of pain shooting through him at Daehwi’s response.

“Don’t say them then,” Jinyoung said, more to himself than to Daehwi. “Just keep the thoughts to yourself.”

“Is that what you plan on doing with your feelings for Jihoon-hyung?”

Jinyoung wished he could skirt the answer to such a question forever. “I’m trying my best to give up on him already.”

Jinyoung watched as Daehwi’s expression changed, brightening even as he expected it to darken. “Why?”

“I don’t want to lay the burden of my feelings on Jihoon any time soon… or ever, for that matter. I just want us to continue on being friends, even if that means having to pretend I never loved him. The risk of losing him is too great if I suddenly confess to him out of the blue. Besides, it’s clear as daylight that he and Kuanlin like each other and I—“

Jinyoung stopped himself, panicking inwardly as he remembered how Daehwi had feelings for his roommate. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to say those things. Forget it.”

Daehwi simply shook his head. He fished a hundred won coin from the depths of Jinyoung’s
“I found this a while ago as I was changing,” Daehwi said, taking hold of Jinyoung’s hand and placing the coin within his palm. “So here, a penny for your thoughts.”

It took a while for Jinyoung to realize Daehwi had spoken in English. “Excuse me?”

“I lived in LA for a while,” Daehwi explained. “And that’s an expression I used to hear a lot as a child. It means that I just want the chance to hear what’s on your mind. Whatever you’re thinking, feel free to spill them, as I’ll be listening.”

Jinyoung smiled at the thought of the endearing practice. He looked at the small coin resting atop his outstretched hand, and then at Daehwi. He felt a tremendous force of gratitude surge through him then, wondering what he had done well enough in his past life to deserve meeting someone as ready to listen to him and share in his concerns as Lee Daehwi.

“We don’t normally give actual coins away, as it isn’t meant to be taken literally, but that was in your pocket so I might as well give it back.”

Jinyoung looked back at his study table, finding an empty mason jar resting atop a small stack of craft guides. It was originally meant for display, but he took the jar anyway, uncapped the lid, and dropped the coin into it before placing it back on the desk.

“Thanks,” he said. “I don’t really have much to say anymore, but thank you. I really appreciate the thought.”

“Are you really going to give up on Jihoon-hyung, then?”

Jinyoung closed his eyes momentarily, allowing himself to be transported back into the place where his entire life was turned on its head in a single, defining moment.

He remembered how Jihoon came to him with tears in his eyes after Han Ahreum broke up with him. He remembered how Jihoon rushed straight into his arms, folding into his warmth, seeking his comfort. He remembered how he wrapped his arms around his best friend then, how he buried his face into the crook of Jihoon’s neck, breathing in his scent. He remembered selfishly and shamelessly wishing that the moment, no matter how heartbreaking, would last forever.

With Jihoon in his arms. No longer a friend, but never a foe. He was something different, and something more.

And Jinyoung took that memory of his, hid it away within the deepest fissures of his heart, and willed himself to walk away from it slowly.

“I know I have to tell him,” Jinyoung said. “One of these days. No matter how painful, the memory of loving him is something I’ll always cherish. It’ll take a while to heal the wound he’s opened in my heart, but I’ll find a way to mend it somehow. I have to. For now… I just want to protect our friendship. Because more than being unable to tell him how I truly feel, losing him would hurt the most.”

Daehwi looked at him then, a certain sorrow in his eyes. Jinyoung wondered what they were for. Without a moment’s notice, Daehwi had closed the distance between them, wrapping both his arms around Jinyoung’s neck, and wrapping him in a hug.

Jinyoung felt his heart skip a beat.
“Daehwi?”

“I’m sorry, Jinyoung,” Daehwi said. “This is as much as I can do to comfort you.”

Jinyoung smiled, allowing himself to embrace Daehwi around the waist, still marvelling at how small it was for a guy, or even just a human being in general.

“Thanks, Daehwi-ya. You have no idea how much you’ve helped me already.”

Daehwi released him, looking into his eyes. Jinyoung saw himself reflected in them.

“There’s another thing I have yet to help you with,” Daehwi said.

Jinyoung nodded in perfect understanding. “Right. We’d better head to Kirin Hall now. We don’t want to be late.”

***

The Kirin Performance Hall was packed. Usually, only students were allowed to enter into the hall and watch promotion exams, but things were different today. Strangers not in uniform had occupied seats at the balcony and the upper box, and Jinyoung realized that they must’ve been relatives of students slated to perform at Kirin that afternoon, as some of them were talking excitedly with Mireu students he already recognized. Jinyoung scanned the place for familiar faces, but he doubted his family had come to see him perform, as he had yet to gain their approval in wishing to become a singer. He tried to push away the disappointment gnawing at him as he settled himself down on one of the seats closer to the stage.

“Jinyoung-ah!” a familiar voice called out to him. He turned in the direction of the source, and saw Jihoon waving at him from the other end of the row, motioning for him and Daehwi to sit with them. Jihoon was wearing an all-black ensemble, from his jacket down to his shoes. Jinyoung blinked twice, wondering if he was hallucinating at the sight of Jihoon not dressed in clothes that made him look like a farmer, a grandpa, a church choir-boy, or god forbid, an appalling combination of all three. Jinyoung thanked the skies for whatever miracle had to fall from heaven for Jihoon to realize the error of his ways.

“What do you think, hyung?” Kuanlin asked him, as he and Daehwi reached Kuanlin and Jihoon’s side. “I helped Jihoon-hyung pick these clothes out. I think the outfit suits him.”

Daehwi nodded approvingly, patting Kuanlin on the back. “This is great. You look amazing, Jihoon-hyung.”

Jinyoung gave Jihoon another quick once-over. Why couldn’t he dress like this more on a regular basis? But then again, if he did such thing, Jinyoung might have been left with no more room to breathe, when everyday was a constant struggle not to let unwanted feelings overwhelm him.

“I guess you’re in good hands after all, Jihoon-hyung. Well, at least in terms of your styling.”

“Looks pretty good,” he remarked. “I admit you’re unrecognizable in this get-up. Makes me believe that there is hope yet in this world for those of us who have been misled into thinking that print-on-print is still a thing.”

“Hey,” Jihoon exclaimed, offended. “It’s a fashion statement.”

“Not if it makes other people want to wash their eyes with acid. I bet only people like Kuanlin can pull it off.”
Kuanlin grinned at Jinyoung. “Is it because I’m handsome?”

“It’s because you know the right prints to mix together. Or at least, I’m assuming you do.”

Kuanlin shrugged. “I’m not sure. I usually just throw on whatever catches my eye first. I did the same for Jihoon-hyung.”

“Well then, I guess some of us just have a penchant for winning the wardrobe lottery.” He cocked his head at Jihoon. “If this guy had the same methods, then he’s been on a losing streak since we were in middle school.”

Jihoon cast Jinyoung a mock glare, although Jinyoung didn’t miss the playfulness in his tone, and the relief that Jinyoung was back to his old, tongue-in-cheek self. “Thanks for throwing me under the bus whenever I need it. Much appreciated.”

Jinyoung smiled at him. Yeah, I miss this too. “What else are friends for?”

“I actually really like Jihoon-hyung’s sense of style,” Kuanlin declared. “I think it’s cute.”

“You think everything about him is cute,” Daehwi said, elbowing Kuanlin playfully. Jinyoung thought that either Daehwi was an expert at hiding his feelings, or had lost them over the course of a day, because Jinyoung couldn’t sense even the slightest hint of bitterness in Daehwi’s tone as he said this.

Or maybe Jinyoung just lacked the skill to get a read on Daehwi’s intentions, among other things he seemed to be lacking in Daehwi’s presence, including his ability to tear his gaze away, or his ability to find his voice instead of just stand there speechless like an idiot.

“Jinyoung?” Daehwi said. “Are you alright? You’ve been looking at me weirdly.”

Jinyoung turned away from him, embarrassed at the thought that he had practically gaped at Daehwi as he spoke, as if he was seeing light for the very first time.

“Stop looking so smitten already,” another voice said then, interrupting Jinyoung’s thought process. “You like his outfit that much?”

Jinyoung turned around in surprise to see both Seongwoo and Daniel standing there, Seongwoo in a black leather jacket and shirt combo that reminded him of their days as catalogue models, and Daniel in a denim jacket and white undershirt, a feather-shaped necklace hanging loose around his neck. Both of them reminded Jinyoung of Greek gods for some reason.

Seongwoo snickered at him. “What’s the point of dressing him then, if you’re just gonna look like you want to take all his clothes off and—“

At that point, Daniel smacked Seongwoo upside the head. “Why is it that your brain’s default command is to say the most perverted things? Keep it family-friendly.”

Seongwoo sighed, placing both hands resignedly into his jacket pockets. “I’m not sure if you guys can tell, but I’m suffering from a severe lack of entertainment around this guy.”

“Indulge him already, Daniel-hyung,” Kuanlin suggested.

“Don’t be holding yourself back.” Jihoon added.

“Isn’t Seongwoo-hyung fun to be around?” Daehwi asked.
“You’re obviously whipped for him, there’s no point in denying it.” Jinyoung concluded. He might not have known the Council President for a very long time, but the sense of familiarity and intimacy he had fostered with Seongwoo despite knowing each other for a week was telling of his growing affection.

The way he looked at Seongwoo was something else, too. He wondered if he should tell the vice principal that it was probably a bad idea to keep them both in the same room for very long. They might not fight, but other sorts of things could happen in there that Jinyoung was not interested in getting into detail about.

Daniel sighed, touching the tips of his fingers to his temple. “What’s with this sudden barrage of accusations?” He cast Seongwoo an incriminating look. “How much did you pay these kids to come at me all of a sudden?”

Seongwoo brought both hands upwards, as if in surrender. “I didn’t do anything, trust me.”

“If we’re on the topic of bribes,” Kuanlin said. “I want ice cream.”

The rest of them nodded their heads vigorously, and Jinyoung couldn’t help but think of how much fun it was being around these people.

“Right then,” Seongwoo decided. “If you guys manage to make it into the Idol Project, Daniel’s treating you to ice cream.”

“Oh YEAH!” The four of them said in perfect synchronization, as Daniel looked to Seongwoo in exasperation.

“How come you get to decide what I do with my hard-earned money? We’re not married.”

Seongwoo winked at him. “Not yet.”

That effectively shut Daniel up, who then proceeded to emulate the color of a ripe tomato.

At that very moment, the loudspeakers blared across the entire Hall.

“Good afternoon everyone, promotion exams will begin in ten minutes. Class A students Kang Daniel to Jung Chaeeun, and their respective exam partners, please make your way backstage. I repeat, promotion exams will begin in ten minutes. Class A students Kang Daniel to Jung Chaeeun, and their respective exam partners, please make your way backstage.”

“That’s my cue,” Daniel said.

“Mine too,” Seongwoo added.

“And ours.” Daehwi looked to Jinyoung, who felt his nerves threatening to take over him. This was the first time that he would get to perform this early, which meant that the Performance Hall would still be filled to the brim with students who had yet to take their exams, each one poised and ready to watch his every move, probe at his voice, ridicule him for the smallest of mistakes.

Jinyoung felt Daehwi’s hand searching his, looking to lock their fingers together. Jinyoung allowed the soothing warmth of Daehwi’s touch to seep through him.

“We’ll be alright, Jinyoung-ah,” Daehwi said. “We’ve prepared well for this. If you’re worried about Yoon Taejoon… we’ll do better. I just know it.”
Jinyoung nodded. “I... I’ll do my best.”

“Jinyoung-ah,” Jihoon called out to him, just as he was about to head backstage. Jinyoung turned to his best friend, whose eyes were trained on him. Jinyoung wondered at how long he had wished for those very eyes to look at him, see him, regard him, make it known to him that everything would be alright. That they’d make it together.

*Wait for me, Jihoon-hyung. I’ll debut with you.*

*I’ll debut with everyone. Even with Lai Kuanlin.*

He gave Jihoon a nod, and then headed backstage with Daehwi’s hand still in his, completely unmindful of how the other students looked at them as they passed. It hardly even mattered. The only thing Jinyoung wanted was to make it out of promotions with his pride intact, and one step closer to his ever-elusive dream.

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“This is our song,” Jinyoung whispered to Daehwi, as they watched Taejoon completely rip off Daehwi’s arrangement for his performance from backstage. The unwelcome familiarity of the melody coursed through the air, the beautiful, haunting melody smothering Jinyoung and stifling his ability to breathe, to think straight, to remember what they had set out to accomplish.

“He’s… he’s better than I expected,” Daehwi said, and Jinyoung could hear the nervousness and uncertainty in his voice. “I didn’t think he’d manage to learn my song this fast.”

“What are we going to do now?” Jinyoung looked at Daehwi then, searching his eyes desperately for reassurance. Daehwi returned his gaze, locking eyes with him slowly. Jinyoung could almost see himself reflected in them, despite the scarcity of light.

As if the only thing Daehwi could see was him. As if they existed in a space apart, within a phantasm shared only between the both of them, in a place of silence Taejoon’s sinister song couldn’t reach, and where the opinions of everyone else had no meaning.

“Jinyoung-ah,” Daehwi said. “Before we perform there onstage together, I want you to know that this song is for you.”

Jinyoung could hardly even begin to register what Daehwi was saying.

“I picked it because of you, I arranged it with you in mind, and out there onstage… I’ll sing it for no one else but you, either.”

Daehwi took hold of both of his hands then, awakening a host of emotions that Jinyoung had no idea were lying dormant within him, waiting for the right person to coax them out of their slumber. “Just sing it with me, Jinyoung. The way you always have. I don’t care if your words aren’t meant for me. But sing them for the person you love the most in this world, and make sure that wherever he may be… he hears them. Loud and clear.”

Taejoon’s song ended then, replaced gradually by the sickening sound of applause.

“It’s our turn,” Daehwi told him. “Are you ready?”

Jinyoung closed his eyes, allowing Daehwi’s words to settle peacefully within his heart.

*For the person you love the most in this world.*
“Class A student Lee Daehwi, and Class F student Bae Jinyoung,” their vocal trainer, professor Lee Hwitaek announced as they stepped onstage. “Will you opt to perform this song as an audition into the Idol Project?”

Jinyoung and Daehwi exchanged nervous glances, frenetic energy dancing within them, then looked simultaneously to Professor Lee. This was the professor Jinyoung wished to impress the most.

“Yes, we will.”

The professor smiled at them, nodding at Jinyoung in encouragement.

“Yes, we will.”

Very well. You may now begin your performance.”

Jinyoung took a deep breath. He looked at the audience, searching it for the one person he most wished to hear his song. When his eyes found Park Jihoon, Jinyoung let himself get lost in a world where only the two of them were left standing.

In an empty Performance Hall, devoid of life except theirs, with only the sound of their hearts beating against the backdrop of an eerie, yet strangely comforting silence.

This song is for you, Jihoon-hyung. Once you hear it, I’ll finally be able to let you go.

The music began playing throughout the Hall, Jinyoung’s voice echoing alongside it.

My mom told me every day

To always be careful of guys

Because love is like playing with fire

I’ll get hurt

As Jinyoung ended his line, Daehwi’s voice came to replace his, the sound of it as sweet as honey, and as soft as the smoothest silk. Jinyoung loved that voice more than words could express.

My mom might be right

Because when I see you my heart gets hot

Because rather than fear my attraction to you is bigger

The audience had heard this before, but to Jinyoung, it felt like brand new music. As they transitioned to the chorus, Jinyoung and Daehwi began moving to the choreography Daehwi had created, letting their bodies express the feelings that were beyond their own voices’ limits.

I can’t stop this trembling

On and on and on

I wanna throw my all

Into your world

Look at me look at me now
You are burning me up like this

I can’t turn it off

Jinyoung broke his focus away from Jihoon then, turning to Daehwi then as the chorus dictated. Their voices blended together as they sang together, blurring the lines of distinction between them, as if to sing as one.

Our love that’s like playing with fire

My love is on fire

Now burn baby burn

Playing with fire

My love is on fire

So don’t play with me boy

Playing with fire

The rest of the song came in a blur to Jinyoung. The only thing on his mind was the sound of his voice, how it travelled across the hall, seeking to reach the person his song was meant for. From afar, he could see Jihoon’s smile, as if to tell him I’ve heard it Jinyoung-ah. Loud and clear.

Jinyoung caught Daehwi’s eye, who smiled at him, enveloping him in a calming fervor that cascaded and washed over the burning ardour of their song.

Jinyoung wished the moment could last forever. As they reached the outro, Jinyoung’s eyes found Daehwi’s, seeing in them a clarity that reached out to his soul, and spoke to it a truth that Jinyoung could no longer ignore.

This song is for you too, Daehwi ya. I heard yours, so I hope you’ve heard mine in return.

I can’t control it

This fire path is spreading too quickly

Don’t stop me

So this love can burn up this night

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“That was amazing, Jinyoung-ah,” Daehwi said as they stepped backstage, where none of the blinding lights could reach them. They were the only ones remaining in the area, as the last Class A student had taken her place onstage.

“Do you think the professors will believe us if we said that Taejoon copied our arrangement?”

“Only time will tell,” Daehwi said. “If we make it into the Idol Project and he doesn’t, at least we’ll know that we’ve done my song justice.”
“I hope I did,” Jinyoung said. “I don’t want to embarrass you.”

“Are you kidding?” Daehwi said, beaming at him. “You did great out there. I’m sure you’ve made Jihoon-hyung proud. It’s almost his turn now, so we’d better head back into the audience so we can cheer on him as well.”

As Daehwi made a move to leave, Jinyoung stopped him, tugging at his arm with enough force to cause him to fall out of balance, and land straight in Jinyoung’s arms.

“Sorry,” Jinyoung said apologetically. “I keep forgetting how light you are.”

Daehwi looked at him, their faces mere inches away from each other.

For a moment Jinyoung wondered what it would be like to kiss him.

Without a word of warning, Jinyoung pulled Daehwi to him, planting a kiss upon his forehead.

Daehwi looked at him in embarrassment, and Jinyoung was sure he had never seen anything so adorable in his entire life. “Hyung! What was that for?”

“Stop it with the ‘hyung’ already,” Jinyoung said. “And that was a thank you kiss, for helping me. Well at least, I don’t think I’ll stay stuck in F for much longer.”

Daehwi pulled away from him then. “If you keep on doing these things,” he said. “I’m not sure if I could hold myself back anymore.”

Jinyoung had a sense of what that might’ve meant, if their performance was any indication.

Did he really like Kuanlin? Or perhaps…

But it was far too early for Jinyoung to hope that there was a chance his relationship with Daehwi might blossom into something greater.

“Daehwi-ya, you know I still need time to get over Jihoon-hyung, right?”

“And you’re not going to accept me until then?”

“Just give me time to think and I’ll—”

But Jinyoung was denied that very luxury of thought, as Daehwi closed the distance between them a second time, this time to plant a kiss upon his cheek. Before Jinyoung could come up with a suitable reaction, Daehwi cupped his cheeks with both hands, and Jinyoung couldn’t help but watch his lips as he spoke.

“You said you needed to find a way to get over him,” Daehwi said, as Jinyoung struggled to calm the relentless thumping of his heart. “I can help you.”

A million-and-one thoughts raced through Jinyoung’s head as Daehwi spoke, and a million eternities seemed to pass before Jinyoung heard him speak again.

“I’ll help you forget how it feels to love someone who won’t ever love you back the same way,” Daehwi said. “And I’ll help you discover what it feels to love someone who will.”

Daehwi’s words rang in his ears, undoing him, unraveling him, breaking him apart.

And then making him whole again.
“So from now on, Bae Jinyoung, I want you to look only at me.”

And Bae Jinyoung, at the sight of Lee Daehwi before him, so beautiful, so brave, and so entirely unpredictable, gradually closed a door within his heart and let another one open, as his eyes misted over like the early morning dew, and his lips parted, trembling slightly, like a rose fluttering slowly into bloom.

~JINHWI 3 END~

Chapter End Notes

So what did you guys think of this chapter? I apologize if there wasn't as much fluff and comedy in it as you're used to, but I decided that the shift in mood was necessary to properly portray Jinyoung's feelings at present. I was kind of wondering whether I should frustrate you guys a bit more, but I've decided to be kinder (both to you guys and myself, because I've been wanting for Jinhwi to happen already. Haha). Also, I'm starting to feel really bad for poor baby Daehwi, so I hope this chapter made you like him even more (even if he is a bit assertive) because I personally love Daehwi's character xD Anyway, The mood of the next few chapters (especially the Ongniel ones, might be reminiscent of this one, so I really hope you guys liked it even if it isn't in my usual style! I've been trying to get a bit more creative, you see.

By the way, the name of Jihoon's ex-girlfriend, Han Ahreum, was inspired by Yoo Seonho's character from Akdong Detectives (he doesn't play a girl, but he disguises as one from time to time, and her name is Han Ahreum xD) I thought the name was fitting, because Ahreum does mean "beauty" in Korean! And did you guys manage to figure out the identity of Professor Lee Hwitaek? If you did, I love you, because Hui is amazing and Pentagon is extremely talented. But that's all there is for this chapter, I hope you guys stay tuned for the next one (that's where Minhyun and Sungwoon will appear, I'm sorry for saying last time that it would be in this one, because I was under the impression I'd be doing an Ongniel chapter next. MY APOLOGIES D:) Hope you still liked it though~
Daniel distinctly reminded Seongwoo of peaches. He wasn’t all too fond of fruits if he was being perfectly honest, but he had developed a particular craving of them since that morning.

*It must have been his scent,* Seongwoo thought, as he had caught a whiff of Daniel’s citrusy perfume as he pinned him against the wall of their bedroom, and once more against the wall of the Right Wing corridor. Seongwoo himself knew that such a display of utter shamelessness was foolish and unnecessary, but there had been no helping it as he had a tremendous lack of self-control when it came to fulfilling the demands of his instinct.

They were back in their room, resting in the space of time between practice and promotions, the calm before the imminent storm. Seongwoo had taken the liberty of sprawling himself across Daniel’s bed as Daniel changed into his performance clothes inside the bathroom.

Daniel’s sheets smelt heavily of peaches and cream, and it made Seongwoo hungry. He hadn’t eaten anything all morning, and even as he made his way to the café during practice break he had gotten sidetracked by Hyunwoo’s attempt to destroy Jinyoung reputation, and Taejoon’s attempt to plagiarize Daehwi’s song. Seongwoo smiled at the memory of Daniel playing along with his plan to intercept Hyunwoo and Taejoon before things could spiral into chaos. The experience had left him in a state of breathless jubilation, and Daniel…

Well, he had no idea about Daniel.

Seongwoo might’ve been thoroughly enjoying himself as he cracked jokes at Daniel’s expense, but the discomfiting truth was: he was unsure of whether he had any special feelings for Daniel at that point, and whether those jokes were meant to craftily conceal half-truths. They had only known each other for a week, and Seongwoo’s usual self would take much longer to open up, much less get attracted to anyone in such short a span of time. He might’ve lived his entire life with reckless abandon, danger and mischief walking in his shadows like twins— but even then, he wasn’t foolhardy enough to try and enter into a relationship unprepared, as the consequence of such folly was sure to lead him astray.

But at the very least he couldn’t deny that Daniel had begun to mean something to him. Even his earlier efforts at pissing Daniel off with his constant flirtation had been feeble attempts at masking the profound effect Daniel was beginning to have on him.

Not for the first time did he regret starting a make-believe confrontation with Daniel, whose acting was much too convincing for his own good, because after that he could no longer stop himself from noticing how attractive Daniel was whenever he got angry.

Not that he tried to anger Daniel at every passing chance for precisely that reason.

But having to acknowledge such a thing felt bizarre to him, as he was entirely unused to being the first to fall.

*Because he who falls first is the one who loses.*

And Seongwoo really, really despised losing. Especially at games he already knew he should never play.
But the cards had been dealt, and the dice kept on rolling.

The door to the bathroom swung open. Daniel stepped out of it wearing a white undershirt that hugged his figure, a denim jacket that seemed to broaden the width of his shoulders, and ripped skinny jeans that exposed the pale white skin of his thighs and legs.

Seongwoo decided that he needed to shake hands with the person who taught Daniel how to dress like that.

“So, are you really in the Actor track, or are you in the push-Daniel-to-his-extremes track?” Daniel asked, as he took in the sight of Seongwoo lying comfortably on his bed as if it was his own. “Because I honestly have no idea which one you’re better at.”

Seongwoo got up from his position to sit at the edge of the bed, resting an elbow against his knee and a cheek against his hand. He looked up at Daniel with an impish smile. “Guess I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “You take everything as a compliment.”

“That’s because I hardly think anyone would ever wish to insult me.”

“Well, I hate to break it to you, but I exist.”

Seongwoo shrugged, feigning cluelessness. “I’m not sure I know what your point is.”

Daniel grimaced at him, grabbing at the nearest pillow sitting at the foot of his bed, and chucking it in his direction. Seongwoo caught the thing in mid-air before it could ruin his perfectly-styled hair.

“Seriously, what brand of perfume are you wearing?” Seongwoo asked, breathing in the fresh hint of peach that wafted through the air. He sniffed at Daniel’s pillow tentatively. “And why do you wear it to sleep?”


Seongwoo shrugged, restoring the pillow to its original place against the headrest. “No idea. But you’re starting to remind me of peaches.”

Daniel blinked. “I remind you of Peach?”

“Not the cat,” Seongwoo clarified. “I meant the fruit. The one that’s shaped like someone’s butt.”

Daniel’s eye twitched in irritation. “Are you saying that I look like someone’s butt?”

Seongwoo snickered at him. “Who knows?”

Daniel chucked the pillow at him a second time, this time with twice the amount of effort. “Asshole.”

Seongwoo dodged the attack just in time, grateful for his reflexes as he was sure Daniel’s arm strength could knock the wind right out of him.

“While we’re on the topic of lower extremities though,” Seongwoo said. “You should really do something about that blasted cat of yours. It’s developed a rather inconvenient habit of sitting itself comfortably on my laptop keyboard whenever I’m trying to write a script. If you didn’t know how
writing scripts worked, well, let me tell you a secret: it involves me actually getting to see what I’ve managed to come up with, and I can’t do that with someone’s furry backside completely obscuring my vision of the screen.”

As if in acknowledgment of its newfound pastime, Peach walked lazily across the room from where it was resting on its bed across from Daniel’s. It strutted past Seongwoo, then began to paw gently at Daniel’s leg as if to say, aren’t you proud of me?

Daniel smiled fondly at the sight, picking Peach up from the floor and settling both of them down at the side of his bed next to Seongwoo, hugging the tabby to his chest.

“You’d do that for me, Peach?” Daniel said, beaming at the cat and stroking its fur ever so lovingly. “How sweet of you to annoy Seongwoo in my stead.”

Seongwoo wondered how many levels of absurdity he had to cross before he managed to find himself jealous of an annoying feline. Daniel looked up at him triumphantly. “Don’t count on Peach doing you any favors any time soon. This boy just knows how to please his master.”

Seongwoo smirked at him. “Huh. That last line sounded kinkier than it should have been.”

Daniel blushed, and the undertones of his skin as he did so reminded Seongwoo of... well, peaches. He could hardly think of a more gratifying exercise than repeatedly attempting to bring that very same color to life on Daniel’s cheeks with every mischievous remark. Daniel’s reactions brought to him an overwhelming satisfaction, the source of which he couldn’t quite pinpoint, but he was supremely disinterested in such an endeavour anyway.

“Stop thinking of weird things,” Daniel said. “Otherwise I might think you have actual feelings for me. Which I know can’t be true, but I—“

“Why not?”

Daniel blinked, caught off-guard by Seongwoo’s casual retort. “Excuse me?”

Seongwoo looked him in the eye as if in challenge. “Why can’t I have feelings for you?” He inched himself closer to Daniel then, the sheets of Daniel’s bed crumpling beneath him.

What am I doing? Seongwoo thought to himself. He looked at Daniel, whose nervous expression only served to entice the dangerous feeling he had tucked away so carefully within the darkest hollow of his eager heart. He could almost hear the sound of it beating furiously, still unsure of whether it was his, Daniel’s, or both of theirs in perfect harmony.

He moved even closer, until only a few inches of space were left between them, leaning into Daniel and letting the scent of peach assail his senses. He tilted his head slightly as if to move in for a kiss.

Daniel just sat there motionless, the rise and fall of his chest pausing for a moment as he held his breath. He made no move to back away from Seongwoo’s advances. Daniel simply watched him, his eyes flitting briefly to Seongwoo’s lips. Was it in fear, or in anticipation? He couldn’t tell.

Seongwoo wished for something—anything—that would serve even as the slightest indication of what Daniel might have been thinking. He no longer had any idea how to proceed from there, because even as he felt an unbearable thirst only Daniel’s kiss could slake, he knew he wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he entered them both into dangerous territory. The risk of not making it out was far too great.
With a defeated sigh, he moved his head sideways, resting it instead in the space between Daniel’s neck and shoulder.

“This isn’t fair,” Seongwoo said. “It really isn’t.” He felt the heat from Daniel’s body as it transferred slowly to him.

“What… what was that all about?” Daniel asked him, shaken. “Are you… are you feeling alright?”

“Sorry,” Seongwoo whispered. “I don’t think I know the answer to that either.” He felt Daniel’s hand as it found his cheek, each of Daniel’s slender fingers leaving a burning sensation that lingered as they touched him. Daniel moved Seongwoo’s head from where it rested on his neck to look into his eyes.

“I have no idea what’s gotten into you,” Daniel said. “Or myself, to be honest.”

“You should start being more careful around me, you know,” Seongwoo said, meaning it. He removed Daniel’s hand gently from his cheek. “I’ve been interested in men before, and god only knows how deep my feelings run for you now that you’ve teased me to this extent.”

“I’m not kidding, stop saying those things,” Daniel said, his voice shaking anew. “It’s… It’s getting annoying.”

Seongwoo narrowed his eyes at him, entirely unconvinced. “Then why can’t you prove it?”

“What do you mean I—“ Daniel began, but his voice trailed off as he spoke.

“I know you can’t take me seriously half the time,” Seongwoo said. “But I meant what I just said. If you dislike what I’ve been doing, then push me away, punch me in the face, knee me in the groin, for all I care. I’ve given you a hundred chances to do so already, and the only thing I’ve gotten in response thus far is your insistence that I piss you off. If you must know, your words mean nothing to me if your body tells me a much different story.”

Seongwoo didn’t mean to say all of that in one breath, but he guessed he must’ve been piling up frustrations he hadn’t even known were there in the first place. “Don’t even begin to think I don’t notice the way you look at me when you’re under the impression that my attention is elsewhere. I’ve been looked at that way before, so I’m not as blind to these things as you might’ve been led to believe.”

“None of that means anything,” Daniel said defensively. “Just because I look at you a certain way… you’re probably just reading into it all wrong.”

“Oh yeah?” Seongwoo said. “Alright, then. I’ll believe you.”

Seongwoo stood up from where he sat on Daniel’s bed. He faced Daniel then, challenging him with his eyes. Daniel held his gaze, and Seongwoo could tell how much effort it had cost him to do so.

And then slowly, he began loosening his tie.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Daniel demanded, as Seongwoo relished in his wide-eyed surprise.

“Giving you a taste of your own medicine, that’s what.”

After his tie had come undone and slid unceremoniously to the floor, he began unbuttoning his
polo shirt, observing Daniel’s reactions as he did so.

Daniel’s eyes were following his hand movements closely.

*Why is it that you can’t even manage to look away?*

Seongwoo set the last button free, and at that point Daniel’s hand began reaching for his other pillow.

Seongwoo smirked at him, moving his hand downwards to unclasp the belt around his waist.

“Seongwoo,” Daniel said, looking him in the eye this time. “There’s a bathroom in here, in case you’ve forgotten. Which means it isn’t necessary to strip in front of me for no reason. And if you’re trying to tease me again, it isn’t going to work.”

“Sure it isn’t. Whatever keeps you awake at night.”

Seongwoo detached the belt from the waist of his pants in one swift movement, promptly tossing it onto Daniel’s bed.

“Hey,” Daniel said, interrupting Seongwoo just as he was about to unbutton his pants. “Don’t just throw your stuff on top of my bed.”

A small smile tugged at the corner of Seongwoo’s mouth. He walked to Daniel’s side slowly, then began ruffling Daniel’s hair without incident. “I borrowed that belt from you this morning. I just forgot to ask for permission.”

“That’s what you call *stealing,*” Daniel said still blushing at the sight of him. He turned away in embarrassment, as if he couldn’t piece together a single coherent thought if all of them were going to be intercepted by Seongwoo’s distracting display of his bare torso. “Now just… go put on a shirt or something.”

“Ahh,” Seongwoo said, knowing full well that Daniel was trying to do his best not to make eye-contact. He moved his hand from Daniel’s hair to his chin, slowly tilting Daniel’s head upwards with one finger. Daniel looked up at him in surprise at the gesture, looking like his heart was about to jump straight out of its ribcage.

>This is exactly the sort of reaction I can’t understand, Seongwoo thought. *What am I to you, Kang Daniel? And why aren’t you pushing me away?*

“I found my newly-bought milk carton half emptied this morning,” Seongwoo said. “Should I call that stealing too, or does Peach know how to open a refrigerator?”

Daniel blinked at him. “That was yours? I thought I bought that for Peach.”

Again, Daniel made no move to pull Seongwoo’s hand away. Seongwoo did it of his own volition, placing both hands inside of his pockets. “Well then, I guess that makes us even. But that doesn’t mean it should happen again. I already told you what I’d do to you if you managed to upset me.”

“I thought it was a joke,” Daniel deadpanned. “You aren’t actually going to kiss me.”

A string pulled taut and tore apart inside of Seongwoo. “Is that so?”

Before Daniel could register what was happening, Seongwoo had pushed him against the bed, pinning both of Daniel’s wrists to the mattress on either side of his head, his legs on either side of
Daniel’s waist.

“That’s it,” he whispered, leaning closer to Daniel. “You’ve already done it.”

“Seongwoo? What are you—” But Seongwoo didn’t let him finish his sentence, giving him time only to close his eyes as Seongwoo planted a kiss on his forehead.

Seongwoo let his lips linger for a moment against Daniel’s skin. After a few seconds had elapsed, Seongwoo looked at him, and the expression Daniel wore was almost enough to push him over the edge.

“Whoops,” Seongwoo said, trying to interrupt his own train of thought before it led him to dangerous places. “I was aiming for your lips. Guess I missed.”

He released Daniel then, sitting himself back down on Daniel’s bed. Daniel immediately shot up from the position Seongwoo had forced him into, still wearing a dazed expression. He looked at Seongwoo in utter confusion.

“Did… did you just kiss me?”

“I thought I made it clear that I would.”

“You… you didn’t have to do it like that.”

“Why? Did you want me to do it more gently? Or perhaps you wanted me to kiss you elsewhere?”

Daniel turned away from him. “I never said anything.”

Seongwoo heard a strain in Daniel’s voice, and it sounded to him like disappointment.

“Sorry about that,” Seongwoo said, realizing belatedly that he may have gone overboard. “I didn’t mean to do it that way, either.”

“What… what’s up with an apology all of a sudden?” Daniel regarded him in puzzlement, as if Seongwoo’s concession made him sound as if he was speaking in an obscure, entirely foreign language he neither understood nor thought existed. Seongwoo supposed he couldn’t blame Daniel, as he was the farthest you could get from the remorseful, apologetic type. But still…

Seongwoo moved away from Daniel slightly, as any nearer than that would have tempted him to finish what he had started. “The way you react to me… Sometimes, it fools me into thinking you want me to do the exact same things I’ve been meaning to. If you behaved just a little differently around me, I don’t think I would enjoy teasing you this much.”

But before Daniel could ask him to explain what he meant by that, a knock came sounding from the other side of the door.

“Were you expecting company?” Daniel asked him, bewildered. His face flushed a familiar, reddish color. “And you had the audacity to do that sort of thing to me while you were expecting company? I mean, you did apologize, but… oh god, what if you had accidentally forgotten to lock the door? Then they would have seen… OH GOD NO.”

Seongwoo looked at Daniel, just as confused as he was. “What are you on about? I never said I was expecting company.”

Daniel glowered at him, entirely unconvincing. He shot a nervous glance at the door. “Who is it?”
“It’s me, Daniel. Please open the door,” a familiar voice responded, and it took three seconds for Seongwoo to recognize it as belonging to the barista who owned and ran the Imugi café. “Someone else here wants to see you, too.”

“HEY, KANG DANIEL! OPEN THE DOOR, GODDAMNIT!” Another angry, and entirely unfamiliar voice yelled a split-second later.

Seongwoo looked to Daniel then, who visibly shuddered at the sound of the second voice. “Should I open the door for Jisung-hyung, or keep it closed and pray he’ll return without his satan-spawn boyfriend, who clearly intends to murder me the moment I answer the door?”

“Is he that scary?” Seongwoo asked.

“Not at first sight, no,” Daniel said. “But you have no idea how much he orders me around. It honestly feels like I’m in bootcamp whenever I’m with him. And the never-ending accusations… I think I’m developing a migraine just thinking about it.”

Seongwoo rolled his eyes. “Just answer it, or else he might just kick the door straight out of its hinges with brute force. Don’t worry, I’ll be here praying you come back alive.”

Daniel gulped nervously, then stood up and walked over to the door. Seongwoo followed soon after, in case he needed to be near enough to prevent Daniel from getting hurt. As soon as he heard the click of the lock, the door flew open, and Seongwoo thanked his intuition for the accurate forethought, as the door would’ve collided with Daniel’s nose and broken it had he not been there to cushion the blow with his left arm.

The blow left a stinging sensation against it, but Seongwoo didn’t particularly mind. “Are you alright?” He turned to Daniel.

“Thanks, that seriously saved a life just then,” Daniel responded. His expression soured as Jisung walked through the door, with a much shorter boy in tow. “Or not.”

Seongwoo looked at the boy standing next to Jisung, whose right hand was interlocked with Jisung’s, and whose left was clinging onto Jisung’s arm right arm fiercely, as if it were his source of lifeblood. He had soft features, and honestly looked like he would never hurt a fly, and even the way he was attempting to stare daggers at Daniel made Seongwoo want to pet him and stuff him with treats.

He reminded Seongwoo of a miniature puppy, and Daniel was the jumbo-sized Samoyed pup who was deathly afraid of him.

“Hey there, Sungwoon-hyung,” Daniel said in greeting, trying to sound casual. “Long time no see.”

“Care to explain to me why you and Jisung were alone in your room this morning?” Sungwoon began with no preamble. “And don’t think I didn’t see you trying to sidestep me by rushing through the back door. I could spot you with my thief-radar from miles away.”

Daniel sighed in exasperation, as if to say not this spiel again.

“Rather than a thief-radar,” Seongwoo cut in, perfectly amused by the turn of events unfolding before him, “I think that radar of yours just alerts you to the type of guys who could steal anyone’s
boyfriend. Or girlfriend, for that matter.”

Sungwoon looked at him, then began scanning him from head to toe, regarding him in his half-undressed state. “Have we met before?” he asked, then turned to Daniel. “Where’d you manage to find this absolute hunk? He looks like some western movie actor.”

“What’s with complimenting other guys in front of me all of a sudden?” Jisung asked, pouting at Sungwoon in mock offense. “Ah anyway, this is Hong Seongwoo, and he’s Daniel’s roommate. Daniel forgot to feed his cat because this guy tried to kiss him.”

“I did not,” Daniel said, looking alarmed. “I mean, he did try to kiss me but I wasn’t so distracted that I—“

“Wait,” Sungwoon interrupted. “He tried to kiss you? Are you two dating?”

Sungwoon didn’t miss the change of tone in Sungwoon’s voice, as if he was all for the idea of him and Daniel dating.

“We’re not dating,” Daniel clarified. “We just sleep in the same room.”

“I approve of you, Gong Seongwoo,” Sungwoon said, completely ignoring Daniel and releasing Jisung’s arm from his vice-grip to give Seongwoo a thumbs-up. “You have my permission to date Daniel.”

Seongwoo grinned at him. “Thanks, hyung, but I don’t think dating Daniel is possible at the moment. That would be like dating a brick wall considering how rigid he is around me.”

Sungwoon’s excitement level seemed to drop considerably. “Is the sex not good?”

The offhand remark astonished Seongwoo, and he felt his own cheeks start to burn a flame.

“IT ISN’T LIKE THAT BETWEEN US OKAY,” Daniel bellowed, completely scandalized. “We’re not dating, we’re just roommates, and we sleep on separate beds. Not in each other’s arms, or stacked on top of each other, or whatever else it is that you’re thinking.”

Seongwoo laughed nervously, trying to fend off the barrage of inappropriate thoughts trying to force their way into his head.

“What’s this conversation I’ve just walked into?” another voice cut in, all heads turning to the source. The guy who materialized at the door looked familiar, and Seongwoo wondered if he was a member of the faculty. Or was he a model, too? He could well have been both, as he carried both an aura of intellect and sophistication about him.

“Stop it with the talk of such things already,” the guy said. “This is a sacred institution of learning.”

“Sorry about that, Minhyun-hyung,” Daniel said. “These guys were being unruly.”

“Minhyun-ah,” Jisung said then, clapping Minhyun on the back as he walked in. “Didn’t know you were in the area.”

“I haven’t seen you around in so long, either,” Sungwoon observed. “What’s this dongsaeng of mine been up to?”

“I came to see how my students were doing,” Minhyun replied, cocking his head at Daniel. “I’ve
simply been roving around the dormitory, and happened by your door as it was left slightly ajar.”

A lightbulb switched open in Seongwoo’s head then, as he began to remember why Minhyun was so familiar. He was a student of the same year as Seongwoo before his temporary leave of absence, Mireu’s Kang Daniel at the time: ranked first throughout the school, popular with the ladies, and expected to make his debut upon graduation. Not even the current members of NU’EST W, all of whom were ranked below him, were as beloved as he was at the time.

For years, the ‘W’ in NU’EST’s name that the members themselves insisted upon had a cryptic meaning that fans had been trying to crack… but at Mireu High, rumor had it that it stood for ‘Wait’, as they had trained and were set to debut with a fifth member who failed to join the line-up and make his debut.

And rumor had it that the mystery trainee’s identity was Hwang Minhyun, who had lain low since his graduation for reasons beyond the public’s comprehension. If Seongwoo had to venture a guess, it would have been because of his overwhelming popularity even as a student, much like Daniel’s now. Without an iron heart and nerves of steel, such circumstances could well have placed a burden on anyone’s back heavy enough for him to decide to just give up and run away from everything.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Minhyun asked, the sound of his voice slicing through the air and tearing through Seongwoo’s spontaneous flashback. His eyes narrowed at Seongwoo, who realized he had been staring unblinking at the man before him. “Is there something on my face?”

Seongwoo shook his head. “Nothing. I was just wondering if you had come here to ask Daniel to form a group with you if you both happened to make it into the Idol Project.”

Daniel turned to Seongwoo in surprise, and Minhyun blinked at him in awe. “Have you been stalking me or do I sleep-talk in public and not know about it?”

“Wait…” Daniel began. “You came here to tell me that?”

Minhyun turned to Daniel. “Not really, but that sort of thing did cross my mind, since I’ve been thinking of entering this project. You do know you’re one of my best students, right?” He began scratching at the back of his head in embarrassment. “Was that not a good idea?”

Daniel beamed at Minhyun then. “I think I like the sound of that,” Daniel exclaimed. “There’s room enough for at least one more person on our team if we all make it, even if Woojin and Jaehwan join in, and Jisung-hyung decides to audition.”

“Not sure how I feel about that idea, Daniel-ah,” Jisung confessed, his shoulders drooping. “I really don’t think I’m cut out for this whole idol thing, to be honest.”

“Why not?” Minhyun asked. “I’ve heard you sing before. I think your voice is quite suited to ballads.”

“Let’s go for it Jisung-ie,” Sungwoon urged as well. “Your singing is amazing. I think both of us have a fighting chance at making it.” He turned to Daniel. “And don’t you even dare think I’m going to let you two debut without me.”

Daniel smiled at Sungwoon guiltily. “Of course not hyung, I wouldn’t even dream of it.”

“Wait, back up just a bit,” Minhyun said. “That part about Jaehwan joining this group… did I hear that correctly?”
“I have no idea what he’s like, either,” Seongwoo admitted. “But yeah, pretty much.”

“I know perfectly well what Kim Jaehwan is like,” Minhyun said. “And that’s exactly where my apprehensions lie. Are you guys sure you want to form a group with him in it? Or have you not stopped to think of what that might mean for our future?”

“Sure I have,” Seongwoo said. “If what they say is true, it means we’ll have a powerhouse vocal in our midst.”

“If you guys are looking for a powerhouse vocal,” Minhyun suggested, pointing to Sungwoon. “This little guy should be more than enough, and he isn’t even half the slob that Jaehwan can be when left to his own devices for too long.”

“Agreed,” Sungwoon said, puffing his chest out. “About that vocal part, I mean. You’d better think twice about calling me ‘little’.”

“Sorry-hyung,” Minhyun said. “It’s just that you haven’t grown an inch since we last met and that was about a year ago.”


“Jimin and I aren’t short,” Sungwoon insisted. “You guys are just tall.”

Daniel scoffed at him. “If you think we’re tall, wait till you meet Lai Kuanlin.”

This conversation doesn’t seem to be heading anywhere worthwhile, Seongwoo thought to himself. Imagine the mess we’ll be in if we debut.

Seongwoo smiled to himself. Sounds like a blast to me.

“Hey, Jisung-hyung,” Seongwoo said. “If you’re still unsure about whether or not to audition, why don’t you come watch the promotion exams with the rest of us? Who knows, it might just reignite a spark within you, reintroduce you to the thrill of the performance world.”

“For once, I agree,” Daniel said. “Being there might remind you of how utterly exhilarating it is to be onstage, and how much you’ll regret it if you don’t at least try to get back up there.”

Jisung turned away, still looking dejected. “I still don’t know about this… how many chances to a restart do I even get in this life? I’m not sure I have any more left to cash out on.”

“Why count?” Seongwoo said. “Just go for it.”

Jisung looked at Seongwoo, then at Minhyun and Sungwoon, who were regarding him expectantly. Don’t take too long to decide, Seongwoo thought, stealing a glance at the clock.

“Think about it for a while, hyung,” Seongwoo suggested. “Daniel and I had better head out there now. You know how it is during promotion exams, after all. Kang Daniel always gets to open the show, so it’s best that we arrive there early.”

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Seongwoo wished that he didn’t have to stand backstage as Daniel performed.

What he wanted was to sit front row and center, and simply allow himself to get lost in Daniel’s
mesmerizing performance. He had seen Daniel practice more times than he could bother to count that morning, but the real thing was much different. As powerful as Daniel was as he practiced, nothing could compare to how much he commanded the song as he stood onstage, owning every inch of it.

Oh my, oh my, oh my god  
Jeans so tight I could see loose change  
Tipsy off that peach Ciroc  
Like la la la

Seongwoo smiled. He really liked that part. The sound of Daniel’s rich, deep voice over the microphone was the sexiest thing he had ever heard.

Ching-a-lang-lang, ching-a-ling-a-lang-lang  
Jeans so tight I could see loose change  
Do your thang, thang, girl  
Do that thang like la la la

As the pre-chorus to Jason Derulo’s Get Ugly played, Seongwoo mouthed the lyrics along with the music. He watched intently as Daniel danced to the song, an awestruck audience before him, captivated by his movements and spellbound in its entirety.

Yeah, get ugly, babe  
Get ugly  
You’re too sexy to me  
Sexy to me  
You’re too sexy to me  
Sexy to me  
So sexy  
Damn, that’s ugly

The first time Daniel lifted his shirt, screams erupted from the audience, and only then did Seongwoo realize that Daniel’s legion of adoring fangirls had occupied most of the seats on the upper box.

I’m a lucky guy, Seongwoo thought. If I get to see him like that without having to ask for it.

He sighed in resignation. Still, it would be nice if Daniel could learn to appreciate the benefits of wearing a shirt. It kept you warm at night, for example.

Bruh, I can’t, I can’t even lie  
I’m about to be that guy  
Someone else gon’ have to drive me home  
La la la  
Bang-a-rang-rang, bang-a-ring-a-rang-rang  
Bass in the trunk, vibrate that thang  
Do your thang, thang, girl  
Do that thang like la la la

At this part, Daniel moved to the center of the stage, and then began spinning on his head. As if on cue, the audience erupted, impressed by Daniel’s talent. Seongwoo could almost hear his fangirls thanking their good graces for the existence of gravity, which had worked to pull Daniel’s shirt down almost over his head as he spun. Seongwoo wondered then where Daniel had learnt to b-boy.
All of a sudden, a small memory from his childhood tugged at his heart, stilling him. Memories of another boy, so vastly different from the man who now stood before him, yet as eager to dance his heart out onstage all the same. And memories of himself, patting this boy’s his head affectionately, saying the only thing you have to remember is to enjoy every step you take, and allow the music to move not just your body but your heart.

Those were words he had learnt from his own teachers, and Seongwoo had simply passed them on. He built the little boy’s dreams up, made him believe he could go places. If Seongwoo danced to remember his father, who had given him the gift of music, this boy danced to forget, to allow himself to be taken by the hand into a world where only movements could speak, only songs could tell a story, and hurtful words were powerless against him.

Seongwoo built the little boy’s dreams up.

Before he crushed them like sand underfoot.

Seongwoo snapped out of his daydream, returning his attention to Daniel’s performance. That boy is gone now, Seongwoo. Because you robbed him of a reason to live.

But even as he watched, coherent thoughts could no longer enter into his head, as he was swept away by an overwhelming wave of emotion at the memory Daniel’s performance had managed to unearth. The more he watched, the more he felt like he was being held hostage by the sight, as if he was stranded in the middle of a vast ocean, blue stretching as far as the eye could see, and at any moment his boat could capsize, and the water could swallow him into its depths, robbing him of his ability to breathe.

That little boy would’ve wanted to become as a great a dancer as Daniel.

He could’ve done it, if only you had been a little braver.

But you were a coward, Ong Seongwoo. You still are.

Seongwoo clutched at his chest, where a searing pain unlike anything he could remember began to bloom. He turned and walked away from the stage.

***

Seongwoo had kissed a lot of girls before. Some of them behind closed doors, as he whispered sweet nothings against their necks between kisses. Some of them under the shade of the evergreen in their backyard garden, as he made promises he knew he could never keep.

Most of them, however, he kissed onstage in front of the public, to convey a feeling that did not exist, to light a flame that blew out instead of ravaged and burned.

To pretend he knew how to love.

He leaned against a makeshift wall, both his hands in the pockets of his jacket, as his exam partner Min Joorim rushed to greet him, her heels clacking against the smooth wooden surface of the stage.

“How could you just come here out of the blue like this?” she said. “I don’t even have makeup on since I’ve been home all this time.”

Seongwoo looked at her, and he felt his eyes moistening up at the sight.

This girl has come here to expect a happy ending I cannot give her.
And from another memory, far away,

*This boy has come to expect a friend he cannot keep.*

“I came out so I could get the ring back,” Joorim said. “We still have that excuse left between us, after all.”

Seongwoo could only look at her with sorrow in his eyes, knowing full well that he was bound to disappoint her. To say the very words she never wished to hear.

“Why are you looking at me like that? Didn’t you come here because you wanted to see me?”

*I did want to see you. I wish to see you still.*

“That’s right,” he responded, his voice echoing across the hall. “But I’m not sure who I may be. So it is with a heart full of fear…”

*A heart full of sadness.*

*A heat full of misery.*

*A heart full of regret.*

“…that I am leaving now.”

“What are you doing right now?” Joorim said, but it was not her voice he heard ringing in his ears.

*Where are you going Cheongie-ya? Why are you leaving?*

“I, who gives you nothing but wrong answers,” he began, looking up to face her. From the periphery of his vision he spotted Go Hyunwoo watching his performance from backstage.

Go Hyunwoo who wanted to ruin Jinyoung’s reputation.

Just like his brother, who wished to destroy an innocent life.

And Seongwoo had helped him do it.

He closed his eyes, wishing for the memory to fade away.

“I hope that this, at the very least is the right answer.”

“Don’t be like that,” He heard Min Joorim say.

“I, who isn’t alive, do not have a name.”

*Cheongie-ya, he would say. It meant ‘dummy’, and I thought that was fitting.*

*I never told him what my real name was. Because I never intended for us to become friends. He befriend a lie, an illusion, a dummy. I was never on his side to begin with.*

*But I wished to be. More than anything.*

“And I thank you for coming to see someone like me.”

Seongwoo stepped towards Joorim, a single tear cascading down his cheek. To the audience it was an act, an empty phenomenon. To Seongwoo it was a heartbreaking reminder of the past he could
no longer return to, a promise he could no longer keep.

“A grim reaper’s kiss makes you remember your past life,” Seongwoo said. “I’m scared to know who I might have been to you in your past life, but I hope that you will only remember the good memories.”

_If I could kiss away your pain, I would do it. If it could help you forget, I would do it too._

_Over and over and over again. Until the only thing that remains is the happiness we shared, the dance we learnt together._

“And that your memories of your brother will be there as well.”

Seongwoo stepped towards Joorim slowly, who backed away from him, hurt and confusion flashing in her eyes. Seongwoo reached out to her, cupping her cheeks with both of his hands, closing the distance between them.

_And yet this is not a kiss to forget, but a kiss to remember. So you will remember the pain, and the sadness. You will remember the heartbreak, and the betrayal. You will remember me, but not my name. And you will wish you had forgotten._

_Because ours is a past we cannot erase. Ours is a story that cannot be untold._

_A story wherein I was the grim reaper._

_And you were my willing victim._

From a place far away, music began playing. From a place far away, Seongwoo heard his own voice as it broke out in song.

> Like destiny, falling
> You’re calling out to me, calling
> I can’t escape
> Please hold me

>If this is a dream, please let me wake up
> Are you really my destiny?

***

After the Class A performances, a short break was announced, and Seongwoo took it upon himself to use that an excuse to get a breath of fresh air outside, away from the suffocating density of the crowd at the Kirin Hall. He hadn’t even noticed that Daniel had followed him out, when under any other circumstance he would have noticed the Council President’s imposing presence straightaway.

“Where are you going, Seongwoo?” Daniel called out to him, as he headed out of the hall towards the outdoor balcony across the corridor. “Class B performances will start in a few minutes.”

“I’ll head back soon,” he replied. “Go back in there if you need to and don’t wait up for me.”

Daniel folded both arms across his chest indignantly. “I’m not going anywhere until you tell me you’ll be back in there on time.”

Seongwoo smirked at him. “Then stay there forever.”

He crossed the corridor to the outdoor balcony, inhaling deeply at the first breath of fresh air.
Seongwoo needed a little more time to forget, as he had been entirely unprepared for how hard the memories of his lost childhood would hit him. He had grappled with his inner self to keep those memories sealed away, but the sight of Daniel’s performance had expertly turned the lock.

“Seongwoo, if you don’t listen to me this time, I swear I’ll—“

“Hello,” another voice cut in.

It sent shivers down Seongwoo’s spine immediately. Seongwoo whipped his head around, wondering if he was begin to hear words that had never been spoken, in voices he deeply wished he’d never hear again.

His eyes locked with Go Haechan’s immediately.

Go Haechan, Go Hyunwoo’s older brother.

Go Haechan, who once asked Seongwoo to destroy an innocent life.

And Go Haechan, whose life he tried to destroy in return, and succeeded in doing.

Until now.

“Seongwoo, who is this guy?” Daniel asked, the confusion evident in his expression.

Seongwoo wished he could say he had no idea. He wished more than anything for the ability to forget he had ever known or been associated with so malicious and crooked a person.

But the grim reaper always remembered, and how could Seongwoo not recognize the face of the guy who had single-handedly made almost his entire childhood miserable?

“Now this is a surprise,” Seongwoo said, trying to keep his voice level. “I had no idea you’d be here, Go Haechan.”

At the mention of Haechan’s name, Daniel let out a small gasp. Seongwoo looked to him, and almost missed the horrified look that flashed in his expression. He could almost have mistaken that look for recognition.

Did Haechan’s infamy somehow reach Daniel, perhaps? Or had they known each other from somewhere, shared a past he was unaware of? But if Haechan knew Daniel on a personal level, he made no indication to prove it. Seongwoo moved over to Daniel’s side, positioning himself between either of them.

“Have we met before?” Haechan asked, addressing Daniel. “You look awfully familiar.”

Daniel kept his mouth sealed shut, and Seongwoo noticed how Daniel’s normally relaxed gait had been replaced by considerable stiffness, as if to emulate a marble statue. Haechan scrutinized him, looked him up and down as if in an attempt to remember where they might have previously run into each other. The sight of them reminded Seongwoo of how a predator regarded its prey before it went for the kill.

“Ah,” Haechan exclaimed. “I remember now. I saw your face plastered onto one of the bulletin boards. I think it had something to do with the Council President’s opening speech for the new school year.”

“That… that would be me,” Daniel stammered. “I’m the Council President.”
“Hmm. I had no idea students of your calibre associated with troublemakers like Ong Seongwoo.”

Seongwoo scoffed at Haechan’s feeble attempt at decency. “If you’re trying to say that I’m a lowlife in a nice manner, don’t even bother.”

Haechan looked at him then, his eyes filled with bitterness and spite, each passing second a thorn pricking against Seongwoo’s side, as if to bleed him out until he was nothing but an empty shell of his former self.

He hated being looked at that way.

“We meet again, Ong Seongwoo,” Haechan said. “I came to this school only to support my little brother’s performance, but I guess fate had other plans.”

Seongwoo kept his silence. He had almost forgotten how intimidating it was being in Haechan’s presence, and he could only do so much to stand his ground and keep himself from succumbing to the paralyzing fear that Haechan’s distasteful presence stirred within him. As Haechan eyed him intently, never more had Seongwoo felt like a lowly specimen being examined under a mad scientist’s microscope, to be manipulated and experimented on, used and then thrown away. It was a feeling he neither missed nor welcomed. It made his skin crawl, made him feel as if he was being dirtied beyond any washing.

“It’s a pleasure seeing you,” Haechan continued, every word laced with a poison that sank deeply into Seongwoo’s skin, threatening to undo him from within. “Although I must admit I was under the impression that you had long since been expelled from this institution. Seems it’s the type to turn a blind eye then, although I suppose that’s because of all those strings your family’s been pulling, to save you from trouble and them from shame.”

“A pleasure, you say,” Seongwoo responded, struggling not to choke on his own words. Be brave, Seongwoo. This isn’t the first time you’ve had to deal with this guy. Let’s just hope it turns out to be the last. “I hate to break it to you, but this encounter has to be the single most unpleasant thing I’ve had to go through this entire year. And mind you, I’ve been through more unpleasant situations this week alone than I can even begin to count.”

Haechan simply smiled at him, and Seongwoo could think of nothing he hated more in the world than having to stand there without coming at him. His enmity towards the vice-principal began to pale in comparison.

“I didn’t come here to pick a fight,” Haechan said. “Although I should’ve known that would turn out to be a futile exercise, considering how loosely you let your fists fly at the slightest provocation.”

“What do you want?” Seongwoo demanded. He needed to get out of there fast, or else he might just launch himself at Haechan right then and there.

“I thought the answer to that might’ve been obvious,” Haechan said. He stepped towards Seongwoo, stealing away the oxygen he needed to breathe with each step forward. “I came to demand an apology.”

Seongwoo felt his guilt as it lodged in his throat, rendering him unable to speak or defend himself for even a small moment.

“I fail to see what it is I have to apologize for,” Seongwoo said.

At this, Haechan laughed, and the nasty sound of it turned Seongwoo’s stomach.
“Really, now? You don’t plan on apologizing for almost getting me killed? For destroying my future? For convincing my girlfriend to leave me? For making me wish you had done the job and killed me, instead of beating me unconscious and leaving me for dead?”

Seongwoo lost his ability to control his motor functions. He was petrified, rooted to the spot, and aware of how Daniel could hear as one accusation after another was being thrown at him, each one an arrow piercing straight through his being.

*And yet the arrow aims true. Why is that?*

*Because you know he isn’t lying.*

“I apologize then, if you’ve forgotten,” Haechan said. “Seems like your friend here had no idea you were the sort of sick bastard who could steal away someone else’s life without feeling even the slightest hint of remorse. I survived your attack, Seongwoo. I still exist in this world. But living and existing are two very different things, and I’ve been incapable of the former since the day you sent me to the hospital.”

Seongwoo felt like he was about to burst at the seams. Haechan’s twisted version of the truth made him out to be a relentless assailant, when he was not, and had never been anything like that.

“You destroyed my life first,” Seongwoo said. “You did so every single day for seven years. What you went through is hardly enough to call it even.”

“Avoid me all you want then,” Haechan said. “Deny me the apology I’m asking for. Serve your pride first.”

“If I apologize,” Seongwoo began. “Then what? Don’t play me for a fool, Haechan. You and I both know it doesn’t end there. It never ends. You want retribution, so my pride should be the least of your concerns.”

“You’re sharper than I thought,” Haechan conceded. “You’re right. I want to pay you back for everything you’ve done to me. Even if it means having to take away the person you love the most.”

Haechan looked at Daniel, and Seongwoo instinctively made a move to shield Daniel, extending his arm as if to cover Daniel and hide him away. A mischievous smile tugged at the corner of Haechan’s lips.

“Let’s just hope,” Haechan said. “That the person I’m referring to isn’t you.” He stole a glance at Daniel’s nameplate.

“Kang Daniel, is it?” Haechan asked rhetorically, the name rolling on his tongue, dripping in venom. “Reminds me of a certain someone.”

“Shut up,” Seongwoo said. *Don’t you even dare mention him.* “The surname is common, so shut up.”

“What’s wrong all of a sudden?” Haechan said, sniggering at him. “Don’t want Daniel here to find out about how you ruined that kid’s life too?”

“Don’t even try to pass the blame onto me, you scumbag,” Seongwoo ordered. *If only words could kill.* “None of that was my fault. You were the ones who tricked me into doing it.”

“And yet you did it anyway. Left him there. When he thought you were his friend. You were
probably the only one.”

“Stop it,” Seongwoo demanded, grabbing Haechan by the collar, wanting nothing more than to strangle him, to see the life drain from his eyes. “Just stop it.”

Haechan didn’t.

“What do you think he felt, Seongwoo?” Haechan asked, every word dripping in malice and coated in lies. “What do you think he felt when you left him there after we beat him up? After we got him expelled? He thought you were on his side the entire time. Cheongi, the only friend he had in the world. The one who first taught him how to dance.”

Seongwoo felt Daniel’s hand moving slowly to his arm, shivering slightly. He couldn’t bear to look at Daniel, to see the terrified expression on his face, as the house of secrets he had built over the years was being taken apart, brick by boring brick.

Haechan smiled, almost triumphantly. “You didn’t even bother telling him your real name. Why is that? Perhaps you were afraid that if he knew, your real intentions would soon be dragged to the surface.”

“I said,” Seongwoo repeated, tightening his grip on Haechan’s collar, looking him in the eye. “Stop. It.”

“Do you know if he still dances, Ong Seongwoo?” Haechan said. “Or have you also crippled your precious Euigyeon-ah forever?”

At the mention of Euigyeon’s name, a name he had cherished, treasured, kept safe in his heart for ten excruciatingly long years, hearing it defiled in being spoken by Haechan’s filthy mouth… something broke violently in Seongwoo’s heart, breaking his sense of self control along with it.

The only thing he could see was red. He brought his right hand up, about to punch the wry, disgusting smile off of Haechan’s face.

“Do it,” Haechan challenged. “If you want to kill me, do it.”

*I want to kill you,* Seongwoo thought. *And one day I just might.*

Seongwoo let his fist fly, waiting for the sweet release of impact as it collided with Haechan’s jaw.

It never came, as Daniel used his own body as a shield to block him, bringing both of his arms up. Seongwoo stopped himself just in the nick of time, breaking his own momentum.

“Stop it, Seongwoo,” Daniel said, his voice coming in shaky breaths, tears forming at the corner of his eyes. The sight of him looking so vulnerable broke Seongwoo’s heart all over again in an instant. “Please. Don’t be the first to initiate violence. Not again.”

Seongwoo looked at Haechan, still wanting to come at him. *Everything else be damned, I just want you out of my life for good.*

“Eager to get yourself disqualified from the Idol Project already?” Haechan asked mockingly. “A pity. When I so wanted to see how good you’ve become at being an actor. Deception is in your blood, after all.”

“Just go away,” Seongwoo demanded. “Get out of here before I lose it. And don’t ever show your face in front of me again, because the next time I see it, I’m no longer going to hold myself back.”
“Empty promises,” Haechan said. “Just like the promises you made to Euigyeon.”

At the sound of Euigyeon’s name, Seongwoo noticed Daniel flinch.

“You don’t even deserve to speak his name,” Daniel said, turning to Haechan, the look on his eyes every bit as murderous as Seongwoo’s. “And don’t pretend to know his story. Because you don’t. Not even a little.”

***

“Daniel,” Seongwoo called out, knocking on the door of their bedroom.

No response.

“Daniel,” Seongwoo repeated, louder this time. “Let me in, please.”

After Haechan left the outdoor balcony, Daniel looked visibly shaken, as if the encounter had triggered something entirely unpleasant in his memory. Without another word he had taken off for their room, leaving Seongwoo in the dust to wonder at his peculiar behavior. He had completely forgotten about staying to watch the rest of the promotion exams.

Seongwoo sighed in defeat, wondering at what had gotten into him that Daniel’s perception of him was suddenly of paramount importance to his well-being in general.

“Daniel, please, I—“ Seongwoo stopped mid-knock, coming to an embarrassing realization. “Wait a minute. This is my room too. I have the keys to this place.”

From inside the room, Daniel yelled, “ONG SEONGWOO YOU IDIOT!”

Seongwoo patted himself, trying to recall where he had placed his keys. After fishing them from within the depths of his pockets, he slotted the key into its hole and turned the knob to unlock the door.

He scanned the room for Daniel, not finding him immediately. He spotted a blanket-covered mound on Daniel’s bed.

Seongwoo walked over to him tentatively.

“Daniel-ah,” he said, tapping the blankets, trying to pull at them. “Get out from under there.” But Daniel held fast.

“Daniel-ah,” Seongwoo repeated, not giving up on their mini tug-of-war. “Please let me look at you. And let me explain.”

Moments of silence passed, each one an invisible hand reaching for Seongwoo’s throat, trying to choke him.

*Don’t hate me please.*

After what seemed like a thousand years, Daniel’s head finally peeked out from under the blanket. He turned to Seongwoo, who noticed that Daniel’s eyes had gotten swollen.

*Now I’ve done it,* Seongwoo thought. *I’ve gone and made him cry.* Daniel sat himself up, and Seongwoo reached for his face, wiping at the tears still at the corner of his eyes.

“Daniel-ah. I’m really sorry.”
Daniel made no move to remove Seongwoo’s hand, which was at least an indication that Daniel didn’t hate him. Not yet.

“Why are you addressing me with suffixes all of a sudden?”

Seongwoo blinked. He had been doing it unconsciously, as he hadn’t noticed himself.

‘I’m not sure,” Seongwoo admitted. “Maybe I thought we were close enough for me to be able to do that without you trying to use my face and your pillow for target practice.”

Daniel heaved a long sigh. “It doesn’t matter to me.” He turned away. “None of this does. Not anymore. I decided that it wouldn’t a long time ago.”

Seongwoo had no idea what he was talking about, or which one of them he was even addressing.

“Aren’t you mad? You were crying just then.”

Seongwoo removed his hand from Daniel’s cheek, Daniel’s gaze following it with a look that could have been anywhere between longing and discomfort.”

“Don’t remind me,” Daniel said. “That was really embarrassing.”

"It's alright to cry."

Something hitched in Daniel's throat. "Easy for you to say."

" What is that supposed to mean? "

Daniel looked at him, into both of his eyes. It was as if he was searching for answers, the questions to which Seongwoo longed to find just as much.

"Someone like you," Daniel said. "Are you even capable of feeling such things? Pain? Sadness? Heartbreak? Until then... It never seemed to affect you, but you carry it around you everywhere you go."

Seongwoo heard the unspoken continuation to Daniel's sentence.

You carry it around and pass it on. You inflict pain. You deliver sadness. You cause heartbreak.

And then repeat.

"I can't draw the line anymore,” Daniel said. "Between reality and myth. But I suppose I can't blame you, as I've lived the same way for years." Daniel laughed to himself, and it was the sort of hollow laughter that emptied itself out onto a boundless ocean of heartache and grief.

"Pride, and pretense," Daniel said, almost unfeeling. "Perhaps I learnt it all from you."

As painful as Haechan's words were, Daniel's words hurt even more. Seongwoo felt as if he was being torn to shreds, but by bit.

"You think I'm a monster," Seongwoo said, more a statement of fact than an inquiry. "Don't you?"

The look on Daniel's face betrayed an answer he never wished to hear. "Aren't you?"

Sure you are, Seongwoo. Detest Haechan all you want, but you're just like him. A different sort of monster, but a monster all the same.
"And if you aren't," Daniel continued. "After everything I heard just then, most of which you didn't even bother to deny... Prove it. Prove to me that he was lying."

"And how do you expect me to do that?" Seongwoo asked. "It's like asking me to pull a rabbit out of a hat when I have neither the rabbit nor the hat to begin with."

Daniel looked at him, a softer gaze replacing the earlier look of distrust. Daniel reached for Seongwoo, the very first time he had done it of his own accord. Daniel's hand found his cheek, and Seongwoo held it in his own upon contact, as if to prevent him from moving away. He let Daniel's warmth seep into him, let it embrace his broken soul.

"I just want to hear it," Daniel said. "Your story. That's all I need."

Seongwoo nodded in understanding. "Tell me where to begin."

Daniel's eyes searched him then, a certain forlornness at home within them, looking but not seeing, to a place past Seongwoo, a place Daniel's heart was chained to and caged, still yearning to be set free.

*Where does he expect to find liberation in my story?*

"I want you to begin with him," Daniel said. "I want you to begin with Kang Euigyeon."

At that moment, at the sound of Euigyeon's name on Daniel's lips, as he let slip an accent all too familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, gears began clicking to life slowly in Seongwoo's head.

*Why his story? Seongwoo thought. Why him?*

And then, all at once, a bigger, more damaging question.

*Kang Daniel. Who the hell are you?*

~ONGNIEL 3 END~

Chapter End Notes

Wow. I didn't expect to end this chapter with a cliffhanger ;--; What did you guys think? To be perfectly honest, this chapter truly stretched my creative abilities as an author, the way the previous chapter did. I'm entirely unused to writing this sort of thing, because if you've been reading through the entire story (and if you have, I love you from the bottom of my bursting heart <3) you'll know that my style is cuter, fluffier, more comedic, more like the first half of this chapter. But that can't be the case for Ongniel, because both of them have been through all sorts of hardships, and I really wanted to dig into their pasts right from the get-go. I apologize if this ended on a bittersweet note, because I normally don't end chapters this way, but I decided it was fitting. I know some of you must be curious as to the sort of thoughts running through Daniel's head right now... forgive me if you have to wait a bit longer T.T but please anticipate!

By the way, what do you guys think of my original characters? I know they're meant to be unlikeable, but I hope they add a bit of spice to the story. My personal favorite is Haechan (a.k.a. I hate him the most lol). And as for the title of this chapter, unlike the
previous ones that I've come up with myself, this one was taken from Episode 12 of Goblin, which was the scene Ong reenacted for his promotion exam! The song he sang towards the end was also from Goblin's soundtrack, Chanyeol and Punch's 'Stay With Me'. Anyway, that's it for this week! I know I do take some time to update, but these chapters are getting longer and longer (though I admit it's because I enjoy writing Ongniel the most). Please stay tuned for the next one! I love each and every single one of you <3

P.S. I have no idea if Daniel wears Calvin Klein Be, I just needed him to smell like peaches. Also, I may or may not have accidentally made my own nose bleed in writing this. Sexy Ong and suggestive Sungwoon are too much to handle sometimes xD
KUANLIN. Strength of Mind, Weakness of Spirit

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kuanlin didn’t know much about Park Woojin, apart from the fact that he was Jihoon’s roommate, a Class A junior from the Idol Track, and the type of person to crack lame, unfunny jokes at the most inopportune of moments.

But one thing he did know was that Park Woojin was an amazing dancer, and Kuanlin felt vaguely as if the exact same thought had crossed his mind that very morning. As he watched Woojin taking control of the stage, dancing to ‘Blood, Sweat and Tears’ with his own choreography, Kuanlin couldn’t help but wonder at how much time it must’ve taken Woojin to become as good as he was at dancing. He moved in perfect rhythm with the beat of the music, more aggressively as the music picked up in pace, toning them down to deliberate, sensual motions as the music returned to a softer, more haunting melody.

It doesn’t matter if it hurts, make it tighter so I can’t escape
Hold me tight and shake me so I’ll be unconscious
Kiss me on the lips, lips, this is a secret between the two of us
I am addicted by the prison that is you
I cannot worship anyone else beside you
I knowingly drank from the poisoned chalice

Kirin Hall in its entirety stood still, all eyes on the stage in thorough captivation. Kuanlin simply sat there with his mouth agape in marvel at the sight. He didn’t think anyone could have topped Daniel’s performance, which left the audience in uproar and his mob of rabid fangirls in hysterics, or Seongwoo’s acting segment, which may or may not have caused Kuanlin to shed a tear he had forgotten he had glands for (because he never cried. Ever). Even Daehwi and Jinyoung were on fire as they sang, and Jinyoung’s status as a Class F student was obliterated from his mind by their smashing performance in Daehwi’s arrangement. Nobody even seemed to mind that their song was similar to Taejoon’s, whose rendition had been consigned to oblivion, completely upstaged and overshadowed. Kuanlin could tell almost immediately that it was his plan to peg Daehwi and Jinyoung as plagiarists, but the entire thing backfired on him the instant Daehwi’s honey-sweet voice reverberated across the hall, and Kuanlin could not have been happier.

So this is what Class A is capable of.

He turned to Jihoon beside him, who was concentrating fiercely on Woojin’s performance, looking as if he could shoot lasers out of his eyes at any moment. Jihoon followed Woojin’s movements closely, unblinking, and Kuanlin couldn’t tell if the look on his face tended more towards disturbance or admiration. He supposed, however, that the logical answer was that he admired Woojin’s performance more than anyone, and that to him was precisely disturbing. Jihoon, after all, hated having to admit that Woojin had redeeming qualities that would make it even remotely acceptable for him to act like such a buffoon everywhere else.

To Kuanlin, however, Woojin’s dancing was not just his redemption, but his saving grace. It was his purpose, his reason for being, the singular work of art he dedicated all of his time and his efforts to mastering.

And his art was damn near close to a masterpiece, if not one already in a league of his own making. The music filled his ears, and the choreography filled his vision.
I’ve seen him practice, but he must’ve been holding back then, Kuanlin thought. Because this is a different level of breathtaking altogether. I’m this hyung’s fanboy for sure.

“I want to learn how to dance like that,” Kuanlin whispered to Jihoon. “If I do, I think my life would be made complete.”

“And I think I might actually be tearing up a bit,” Jihoon said. “Goddamn this performance.”

Kuanlin’s brows shot up at the remark. “You like it that much, hyung?”

Jihoon scoffed at the idea. “Don’t think you’ll live long enough to hear me admit that out loud, but I watched the entire thing without blinking, so I may or may not have gathered a pile of dust in my eye by accident and its making them water.”

Kuanlin chuckled, pinching Jihoon’s cheek playfully. “That means you like it, silly.”

“Ugh,” Jihoon exclaimed. “Kill me now.”

The instrumental changed as the song hit its bridge, accentuating the lyrics as if in response to Jihoon’s outburst.

 kill me softly
Close my eyes with your touch
I can’t even reject you anyway
I can’t run away anymore
You’re too sweet, too sweet
Because you’re too sweet

Kuanlin smiled at Jihoon knowingly as the music ground to a halt, and the audience erupted in boisterous applause. Kuanlin followed suit, but Jihoon simply crossed his arms together.

“Well at this point, I’d say he has about a ninety percent chance of making it into the Idol Project.”

Kuanlin laughed. “Where’d the other ten go?”

Jihoon shrugged nonchalantly. “No idea, but I refuse to give it to him.”

Kuanlin smiled, thinking Jihoon’s unexpected immaturity completely endearing. “You and Woojin-hyung remind me of Seongwoo-hyung and Daniel-hyung, sometimes. Always at each other’s throats, neither one willing to back down or give in. It’s quite amusing.”

Jihoon stuck his tongue out in mock disgust. “Ugh, don’t say that. Woojin and I are never going to happen.”

“And you think Seongwoo-hyung and Daniel-hyung will?”

Jihoon nodded slowly, his eyes narrowing. “I don’t just think. I know. Seongwoo-hyung looks at Daniel-hyung like a starving hyena eyeing its next meal, and Daniel-hyung blushes like a smitten teenage girl whenever Seongwoo-hyung flirts with him out in the open. Whenever those two are
around, the sexual tension in the air is so thick it’s almost suffocating.”

Kuanlin tiled his head slightly in confusion. “What does ‘sexual tension’ mean?”

Jihood coughed, turning away in embarrassment. “Uhh… Let’s just say the vice principal might’ve overlooked a few possibilities when he decided to force them into sharing a room.”

The next performance was about to start, but Kuanlin was so taken by his curiosity on the topic at hand to even notice. “What sorts of things do you think they’re doing in there?”

At this Jihoon blushed beet red. “I don’t know. But they aren’t just having a nice chat over some cookies and tea, that’s for sure.”

Kuanlin’s shoulders sagged in disappointment. He rather liked cookies and tea. “Makes me wish we had been roommates instead.”

At his bold declaration, Jihoon let out a sound that Kuanlin had no idea humans could even make. “I’m… I’m not sure I know what you’re implying.”

“Nothing,” Kuanlin replied. “I just… I think it would be fun, and I’d get to spend more time with you. Don’t get me wrong, Daehwi’s fun to be around, but it takes him a million years to get out of the shower, and he enjoys painting my face with multi-colored clay masks way too much. I think I’d like your company better.”

“I don’t think you realize how much I like showers and clay masks myself,” Jihoon retorted. “Ah… I think I’d better find some new hobbies.”

Kuanlin grinned, satisfied that Jihoon was playing along with his little fantasy, even just a little. “We could ask Seongwoo-hyung and Daniel-hyung what they like to do in their spare time.”

Jihoon turned to him in alarm. “I don’t think that’s a bright idea. Naughty things might be happening in their room for all we know.”

Kuanlin grinned. “Naughty sounds nice too.”

Jihoon turned away from him, and Kuanlin noticed how red his ear had gotten. “Go away, Kuanlin-ah.”

“Haha, no,” Kuanlin replied. “I’m going to stay right here.”

“F-fine. But go watch the performances or something.”

Kuanlin refocused his attention to the stage, where the last of the Class A students was performing a Twice song he couldn’t remember the title of. He rumpled his hair to get his fringe out of his face for a clearer view, noticing Jihoon from the periphery of his vision still looking at him. He realized too late that Jihoon had mentioned he didn’t like it whenever Kuanlin did that. He quickly withdrew his hand, accidentally brushing Jihoon’s as he did so.

“Ah, sorry.”

“That’s… that’s fine.”

Kuanlin turned to Jihoon, whose eyes were superglued to the stage as if to avoid eye contact at all costs. Kuanlin smiled to himself, deciding not to move his hand away. He covered Jihoon’s hand with his, squeezing it gently.
Forever and day seemed to pass before he felt Jihoon squeeze his hand in return.

Satisfied, Kuanlin sat back, waiting for the next round of performances from the students of Class B.

A few minutes later, Professor Lee’s sing-song voice finally rang out through the speakers. “Class B promotion exams and auditions will begin in ten minutes,” he began, and Kuanlin could feel Jihoon’s hand tensing up at the announcement. “Students Kim Jaehwan to Jo Jinri, and their respective exam partners, please make your way backstage. I repeat, Class B promotion exams and auditions will begin in ten minutes. Students Kim Jaehwan to Jo Jinri, please make your way backstage.”

“You’re up next, Jihoon-hyung,” Kuanlin whispered. He squeezed Jihoon’s hand even tighter, as if to absorb away the stress and the jitters. “Good luck.”

“God, I’m a nervous wreck,” Jihoon said. “Tell me I’ll be alright.”

When Jihoon turned to face him, searching his eyes for reassurance, Kuanlin smiled back, nodding his head once. “You’ll be alright, hyung. You’ve prepared well and you’ll make it. No doubt about it.”

Jihoon nodded to himself then, withdrawing his hand from underneath Kuanlin’s ever so slowly. He closed his eyes for five seconds, and when they reopened, a look of stern determination replaced the earlier look of high-strung uncertainty. “Park Jihoon, fighting!” Jihoon whispered to himself, balling both of his hands into fists in a fighting gesture.

If Kuanlin could give out medals for the cutest of outbursts Jihoon had come up with since then, that last one would surely have taken the cake.

Kuanlin imitated Jihoon’s gesture as best as he could manage. “Park Jihoon, fighting!”

With that, Jihoon stood up from his seat beside Kuanlin and began walking towards the stage.

Kim Jaehwan was up first, and until then Kuanlin had only ever heard stories about how fantastic his singing was. There seemed to have been a consensus within the student body that he deserved to have been moved to Class A long ago, but his promotion was stymied each time by a chaotic relationship with one of the assistant professors (his name was Wang Minhyuk something or other, but Kuanlin thought he might’ve gotten that wrong because he had an unexpected talent for butchering Korean names).

But whatever expectations he might’ve had for Kim Jaehwan’s performance was blown abruptly into smithereens by the actual performance.

He was performing ‘Skyfall’ by Adele, one of Kuanlin’s favorite artists. The song started off slow, and Jaehwan’s lower register had a certain richness to it that he could never have seen coming.

This is the end
Hold your breath and count to ten
Feel the earth move and then
Hear my heart burst again

For this is the end
I've drowned and dreamt this moment
So overdue I owe them
Swept away, I'm stolen
These lyrics remind me of Jihoon-hyung, Kuanlin thought. But then again, I’m reminded of him by most things these days.

Kuanlin laughed inwardly at the thought. Funny, because I met him last night. And only because I forgot to retrieve my necklace from my desk-drawer.

Kuanlin slowly untucked the Goro feather necklace from within his shirt, the parting gift his sister had given him before he left for Korea. He brought the necklace to his lips, as if to kiss it in thanks for letting the universe conspire for him to meet so wonderful a person.

He closed his eyes, allowing Jaehwan’s voice to penetrate his being.

Let the sky fall  
When it crumbles  
We will stand tall  
Face it all together  
At skyfall  
At skyfall

At every word, Kuanlin couldn’t help but admire Jaehwan’s excellent technique. His head voice was smooth, his falsetto airy, and his vibrato gut-wrenchingly good, its pulsating change in pitch breaking Kuanlin’s skin into goosebumps.

Where you go I go  
What you see I see  
I know I’d never be me  
Without the security  
Of your loving arms  
Keeping me from harm  
Put your hand in my hand  
And we’ll stand

Kuanlin reopened his eyes. Not for the first time did he wish he could sing, that he had the ability to express himself so clearly through music.

And then, like waves lapping against a large mass of rock, gurgling and splashing before they returned with much greater force, unwelcome feelings began settling within Kuanlin, threatening to break him down.

Feelings of unshakeable dread.

Of numbing insecurity.

Of terrifying doubt.
I’m not good enough, he began thinking. I might never be.

The performance ended, and the cheers from the audience released Kuanlin from his stupor. He palmed his brow, realizing that sweat had been beading down his forehead without him noticing. Kuanlin closed his eyes, trying to recollect himself.

At every performance, Kuanlin realized, he’d find himself in awe at the impassable level of talent on display before him, a constant reminder of how much he lacked and how little he had to offer in comparison. The thought provoked a deep-seated fear of humiliation, that had until then simply been resting in languor within him, untouched and unvisited. It was a fear he didn’t dare entertain at first, because he knew that once he let such worry overtake him, his sense of composure would collapse and his self-confidence would rupture, split down the middle and tear in half.

Kuanlin breathed in deeply, as if the shortage of air was robbing him of his self-assurance, stripping away the peace of mind he held so mightily onto in order not to break into splinters.

“Are you alright?” he heard a voice ask, interrupting his dispiriting train of thought. He looked up over his shoulder to where Daehwi and Jinyoung were hovering above him, having just returned. A look of concern was plastered on Daehwi’s face. “You looked like you were going to be sick.”

Kuanlin forced a smile, though he was sure Daehwi could see right through him. “I’m fine. Nothing to worry about.”

Daehwi and Jinyoung exchanged worried glances, then reclaimed their seats next to Kuanlin after having come to a silent agreement.

“If you’re worried about how Jihoon is about to do,” Jinyoung said. “I suggest you don’t. I’m sure that guy has a few tricks up his sleeve by now to enrapture the audience with his performance.”

Kuanlin nodded. He’s right. I should stop worrying by myself for a moment, because Jihoon-hyung needs my support.

He gripped at the handrest of Jihoon’s empty seat, as if the presence that lingered there could provide him even the tiniest fraction of reassurance Jihoon did whenever they talked, hugged, held hands. He closed his eyes, trying to hold on to the comfort the memories from this morning and the night before afforded him, no matter how small.

Strength of mind, Kuanlin. That’s all you need.

***

Kuanlin couldn’t remember a time when he didn’t think Park Jihoon was beautiful. Even last night, the moment he first laid eyes on Jihoon as peeked through the door of the practice room, Kuanlin had thought that the sight of him as he danced was unlike anything he had ever witnessed.

Kuanlin could hardly even remember his own name as he watched.

And as soon as Jihoon stepped onstage, he was instantly reminded of the way it felt to look at him for the very first time, as if he had lived his entire life in black and white, and only the sight of Jihoon was wrought in vivid color, everything in the background coming alive at his touch.

As the familiar instrumentals of EXO’s ‘Monster’ played, Kuanlin held his breath, waiting for Jihoon’s beguiling performance to commence.

She got me going crazy
At the first sound of Jihoon’s singing voice, ooh’s and aah’s began to echo across the hall from an unsuspecting audience. Half of them had likely never heard Jihoon sing, instilling a certain pride in Kuanlin for being one of the very first to hear, albeit entirely by accident.

You’re beautiful, my goddess  
But you’re closed up, yeah yeah  
I’ll knock so will you let me in?  
I’ll give you a hidden thrill

Kuanlin smiled to himself. He had seen Jihoon’s choreography to this song multiple times before, and it never failed to impress him no matter how many times he watched, completely immune to utilities of scale. As Jihoon’s hips rocked back and forth to the music, his hands moving across his body, screams began erupting from the upper box of the performance hall. Kuanlin looked behind him and upwards at them, seeing a couple of girls clutching at each other for support as they went weak around the knees at Jihoon’s suggestive movements.

Dang, Kuanlin thought. He’s really out there snatching fangirls right from under Daniel-hyung’s nose.

“Those girls had better not try and claim Jihoon-hyung after all this,” Jinyoung remarked, not failing to notice the ruckus Jihoon was causing. “We found him first.”

“Rather than that, someone should just collect this guy already,” Daehwi said. He was sitting rather stiffly, with both of his hands clenched into fists atop his knees. “I didn’t get to watch him practice this properly since we were busy working on our own song, but… Is this even legal?”

“If it isn’t,” Kuanlin replied. “I sure don’t mind having to watch him break the rules.”

Daehwi nodded absently, his ears turning red.

“Hey,” Jinyoung exclaimed, not liking the effect Jihoon was having on Daehwi as he danced. “Stop blushing already. It’s making me feel like I’ve stepped into some convoluted love triangle with arrows pointing in either direction.”

“What does that mean?” Kuanlin asked with genuine curiosity.

Jinyoung looked to him, then sighed in frustration.

“I stand corrected,” he said. “I meant a love square.”

Kuanlin was about to ask for further clarifications, but the sound of Jihoon’s voice as he sang the chorus effectively shut all three of them up.

I’m creeping in your heart babe  
I’ll flip you over, break you down and swallow you up  
I’ll steal you and indulge in you  
I’m gonna mess you up
I'm engraved in your heart
So even if I die, I wanna live forever
Come here girl,
You call me monster
I'll go into your heart

As Jihoon performed, he wore a powerful expression, and every time his eyes shot upwards to look at the girls as if to dedicate the song to them, they would begin squealing and jumping about, some of them even shaking each other violently for some odd reason. He moved across the room effortlessly, his footwork precise, and his hand movements rough yet strikingly graceful at the same time.

“I wonder what Daniel-hyung things of all this,” Kuanlin said. “His fans are swerving to Jihoon’s lane one after the other.”

“He isn’t here,” Daehwi noted. “Neither is Ong Seongwoo.”

“Where’d they go?” Kuanlin asked. “I don’t think Daniel-hyung would care too much though, but at least he doesn’t have to witness it live.”

Because there was no stopping Park Jihoon. The music changed abruptly, the lights onstage dimmed, and a spotlight shone on him, following his every moment. This was a part of the song that Jihoon had never practiced with Kuanlin before.

“He choreographed a dance break,” Daehwi said, mouth ajar in astonishment. “This is crazy.”

But even as Daehwi spoke, Kuanlin couldn’t manage to tear his eyes away from Jihoon. His movements became more harried, almost as if he was in pain. He slid to the floor in one swift movement, using his hand as an axle to spin his body around, then he stood back up and looked once at the audience, meeting Kuanlin’s gaze for a brief moment.

Before he could even process what was happening, Jihoon’s hand rose to his chest then jerked forcefully away, his leather jacket flying open and sliding partway down his shoulders, revealing abs Kuanlin had no idea Jihoon had in the first place.

Kuanlin, Daehwi, and Jinyoung gasped in surprise collectively, their hands moving to cover their faces. Despite the blush creeping forcibly upwards to color his cheeks, Kuanlin peeked at Jihoon dancing anyway. His other hand moved to cover his ear, which was being assaulted by high-pitched screaming. Even the boys in the audience had begun roaring in excitement, not ceasing until the dance break ended.

“SHIT,” Jinyoung cursed. “He really went for it. I can’t believe this guy just went for it.”

“This is most definitely not legal,” Daehwi said. “Who... who dressed him that way?”

Jinyoung shot Kuanlin an accusatory look. “You never told me he didn’t have a shirt under that jacket!”

Kuanlin shook his head. “I gave him a shirt, but I didn’t know he never put it on. He must’ve left it in the bathroom so I wouldn’t find it.”

Jinyoung groaned. “See how smart this guy is? He’s doing everything in his power to gain public appeal. Making eye-contact with Daniel’s fangirls, asking to dim the lights, choreographing a
dance break, dressing that way, even choosing a song as ubiquitous as ‘Monster’… all of that is intentional. I told you he had a few tricks up his sleeve. I just didn’t know they would be of this magnitude and of this scale.”

“He’s making it in, no doubt about it,” Daehwi said. “The response is ridiculous. If he doesn’t, at the very least he’ll get promoted to A.”

“What do you think, Kuanlin-ah?” Jinyoung asked, turning to Kuanlin and noticing his unwavering gaze. “Wait… are you alright? You’re looking a bit shaken.”

Kuanlin no longer had his wits about him, enough to formulate a response that wouldn’t come out as downright gibberish. He simply watched the rest of Jihoon’s performance, not missing every moment that Jihoon’s eyes would find him.

As if the song is meant for me.

Everyone’s afraid of me, so I'm untouchable man
But in the end, you can’t reject me
You'll hide and steal glances at me then get surprised
I'm your antinomy, I'm a part of your existence

Kuanlin released a breath, sure he had fallen down a rabbit hole, in too deep for anyone to rescue. He struggled to reconcile sweet, adorable Jihoon with seductive, jacket-removing Jihoon, and two sides of him were clashing inwardly as to which persona he liked better.

Kuanlin’s hand moved to his mouth, embarrassed by his stream of thought.

“Hyung,” he whispered to the air. “This is totally unfair.”

Before the song could reach its conclusion, he dared to cast one last look at Jihoon, whose eyes were already on him.

Creeping, creeping, creeping
Creeping, creeping, creeping
You. Creeping

When the music ended, the audience graced Jihoon with a smattering of applause, and Kuanlin rose from his seat to give him a standing ovation, clapping ferociously for Jihoon until he thought his hands might fall off. Daehwi and Jinyoung followed suit, and soon enough, a vast majority of the audience. Jihoon simply stared at them in disbelief. A moment later Jihoon’s eyes found him once more, accompanied thereafter by the brightest, most dazzling smile Kuanlin had ever seen.

Kuanlin smiled back, cheering along with the audience. Jihoon looked to the three of them, grinning from ear to ear, the very picture of bliss and exhilaration.

All of a sudden, Kuanlin felt something wet coursing down his cheek, and he immediately looked away.

“He’s amazing isn’t he?” Jinyoung said, still beaming with pride at Jihoon despite his earlier outburst, who was still bowing repeatedly centerstage, humbled by the overwhelming praise.

“Yeah,” Kuanlin agreed. “He’s amazing.”

The moment of understanding came to him slowly.

And it was a moment of agonizing defeat.

*He’s amazing. He’s perfect. He’s beautiful. And that’s the reason why… He’s completely and utterly out of my reach.*

***

When Kuanlin met Jihoon in the changing room backstage after his performance, he could hardly tell if he had gotten the timing of his visit perfectly right or utterly wrong, because Jihoon was still in the process of buttoning up his jacket.

“Need help with that?” Kuanlin offered. Jihoon’s head whipped sideways in his direction, only then sensing his presence.

“What are you doing back here?” Jihoon demanded. “I haven’t finished changing.”

“Hence the offer,” Kuanlin explained. He walked towards Jihoon. “Let me help you.”

“No need,” Jihoon said. “I can help myself.”

Kuanlin persisted anyway, not sure why he was doing it. He took hold of Jihoon’s jacket himself, causing Jihoon’s hands to drop effectively to his sides in astonishment. Kuanlin began adjusting Jihoon’s jacket, praying for his nose not to bleed before he could reach the farthest button.

“Sorry, hyung,” Kuanlin said, teasing Jihoon in order to distract himself. “I just needed an excuse to see your abs in HD.”

Jihoon’s face turned red almost instantaneously. “You’re… you’re being an idiot.”

Kuanlin sighed. “I know.”

A moment of silence passed between them, the only point of contact between Kuanlin’s fingers and the skin of Jihoon’s chest as he brushed against it unintentionally.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked, poking Jihoon’s stomach tentatively. “Now I have to rescind the whole ‘Jihoon is a fat Shiba Inu’ concept.”

Jihoon groaned audibly. “Why does it have to be a fat one, anyway?”

“It doesn’t,” Kuanlin replied. “But you did inhale your food like a vacuum last night when we went out for chicken, so I just thought of it that way.”

“Chicken’s my favorite, okay?” Jihoon explained defensively. “Besides, the topic never came up as we conversed, so I never thought to mention it. And I didn’t practice that part either because I wasn’t about to go ripping my shirt off multiple times in front of everyone. Unless you were expecting me to introduce myself and say, ‘Hi, I’m Park Jihoon and by the way, I have these nice
abs you might want to see’.”

Kuanlin laughed at the thought. “I don’t think I would have minded that.”

“Too late,” Jihoon said. “I’ve already gone and surprised everyone with my stunning physique.”

After the last button had been inserted into place, Kuanlin withdrew his hands and placed them within his pockets. “All set, hyung.”

Jihoon looked at him, something unreadable in his expression. “So, uhm… what did you think of my performance?”

Kuanlin smiled at him, then reached out to pat Jihoon’s head the way he usually did. Jihoon bristled at the touch, looking at him with eyes that reminded him distinctly of puppies… fat ones.

Ah, he thought. He’s still his old, charming self. Nothing has changed.

“You did well, Jihoon-hyung,” Kuanlin assured him. “Your performance was my favorite out of everyone’s.”

Jihoon’s eyes brightened perceptibly. “Really? Better than Woojin’s?”

Kuanlin laughed softly. “Don’t tell him I said that.”

Jihoon grinned at him, the epitome of satisfaction. “Don’t count on it. I’m going to rub it in his face until he kicks me out of the room.”

“You might want to explain yourself to Jinyoung-hyung, though,” Kuanlin added. “And bring some protection gear for your neck because he looked like he wanted to strangle you for stripping in front of everyone.”

“Ugh… Why do I have two mothers all of a sudden?” Jihoon exclaimed, scratching the back of his neck sheepishly. “I’ll just head out for a bit to speak with him. If you aren’t interested in watching the other Class B performances, then wait for me backstage.”

Kuanlin nodded. “Sure, hyung. I’ll be right here.”

Once Jihoon left for Jinyoung’s company, Kuanlin stepped out of the changing room to linger for a while backstage. He was unsure of whether there were rules against being there despite not having to perform next, so as Class B students walked around, their unease palpable in the atmosphere and their nervous energy dancing through the air, he decided to stand to the side and listen to music without bothering anyone so as not to attract unwanted attention. He fished his phone from his pocket, inserting his earphones into the jack.

Moments later as he scrolled through his music library, Kuanlin began hearing voices whispering around him.

“Isn’t this that wealthy businessman’s son?”

“The kid from Taiwan? He isn’t even in Class B. What’s he doing here?”

“The school’s letting him off the hook. Didn’t you hear? His parents are making transactions with the vice-principal in secret.”

“I bet if he makes it into the Idol Project, it’s because his parents paid for a slot.”
“How much d’you think it’ll cost? Ten million won?”

“How cares? Fucking sellout.”

Kuanlin stilled at the conversation, trepidation and panic raging within him. He struggled not to look up from his phone, to pretend that their voices were being drowned out by his music. He could tell that several boys were standing across from him, their hate-filled eyes boring through him with resentment, with bitterness, with rage.

As if to tell him, *you don’t belong here.*

*You’re nothing. Nothing at all.*

“I heard he can’t rap for shit,” one of the voices continued. “At least the kids from F don’t sound like dying monkeys when they rap.”

And then, the sound of laughter, derisive and unkind. Kuanlin bobbed his head up and down, still pretending.

*That’s all you’re good for, Kuanlin. Pretending, putting up fronts, misleading people.*

*Into thinking you’re worth their time.*

“The kid’s a rapper? He can’t even speak Korean.”

“And those professors who keep on showering him with meaningless praises? All of them are so far up his ass they’re practically in his bloodstream.”

Kuanlin had no idea that the sound of laughter could bring him so much pain.

“I bet he hasn’t had to work a day in his life. He doesn’t know what it’s like to work for his dreams like the rest of us. Everything just handed to him on a silver platter, and he takes them one by one, shoving them into our faces.”

Kuanlin shut his eyes firmly, engulfing himself in darkness, as if to close himself off from the world was to escape from the suffering it brought him.

*This is what life hands me on a silver platter. Loneliness. Torment. Heartache.*

*And all of you know nothing.*

Kuanlin looked up then, into each of their eyes, startling them.

This charade had to come to an end.

He removed his earphones, walking towards the Class B boys, none of their faces the least bit familiar. Were they even his classmates?

And yet they spoke of him as if they knew him inside out.

“I’m sorry,” he began, intimidating them with his towering height. “But your voices are much too loud. I can’t properly hear my music.”

They simply stared at him in shock, and Kuanlin looked to a point past them, unseeing. Unfeeling. Broken through and through.
“If you’re trying to backbite someone,” he said, the sound of his voice a fearsome warning. “Then at least be smart enough to do it where they can’t hear you.”

Without another word, he walked away, the feeling of despair still stalking behind him like a persistent, ever-present shadow.

***

“Where’d you go, Kuanlin-ah?” Jihoon asked him a few hours later when he returned to Kirin. Jihoon was panting heavily, short of breath after he had searched the entire hall for Kuanlin, as well as the adjacent rooms and every nook and cranny of the outdoor balcony, flying into a panic and wondering where on earth he’d gone off to.

The truth was, Kuanlin had spent the past hour alone in one of the empty practice rooms downstairs, one of the abandoned halls or bathroom cubicles, the only places of solace he could run to, away from mocking glares and condescending whispers. Even when the sun set, making it hard for Kuanlin to see through the impending dark, he stayed still, simply letting the sound of impassioned music fill him until he thought his eardrums would burst.

If only he could forget.

But the truth was, he didn’t think that the rumors about his family would spread that way, cast him in a sickening light and have him take the blame for their needless support.

He never asked for help from them, not even once.

And the reason he flew all the way to Korea and left everything he knew behind was to escape from the very privilege his family’s social status brought him.

To prove to himself and to everyone that he could make it on his own.

“Kuanlin-ah?” Jihoon asked, reaching for Kuanlin’s shoulder to steady him. “Are you alright? You look like you’re going to topple over any second now.”

Kuanlin looked at Jihoon, the sight of him an enduring source of comfort.

“I’m so nervous, hyung,” he admitted. “Everyone’s done well so far, you more than anyone. And people, they… they expect the same from me. I’m not sure if I can meet their expectations anymore, not even halfway.”

Because they’re right, he thought. I’m nothing but a conman. I don’t deserve to be here.

Kuanlin clutched at his chest, pain shooting through him like poison darts, each of them hitting the bullseye in rapid succession.

I only ended up in D because my parents bargained with the vice-principal, for me not to be placed in F where I truly belong.

And I’ll only end up in the Idol Project because my parents will ask for my reputation to be salvaged, while everyone else has to work for a spot on their own.

“I don’t deserve it,” Kuanlin said, blurring out his thoughts absent-mindedly. He looked at Jihoon, whose worried expression only served to deepen the guilt in his heart. “I don’t deserve you, either.”

“Nonsense,” Jihoon said, both his hands on Kuanlin’s shoulders now. “What are you talking about
all of a sudden? We practiced for this, didn’t we? I’ve heard it. Your lyrics are good, so just say
them like you mean them out there. Because I know you do.”

Kuanlin shook his head. “What if it just isn’t enough? I don’t… I don’t want to be the only one
who can’t make it.”

I don’t want to be left behind. Not again.

“That isn’t going to happen, Kuanlin-ah,” Jihoon reassured him. “You have to believe that you can
make it so that others will, too.”

Jihoon’s words lit a lamp at his core, pushing away the darkness stirring depressing thoughts
within him. “Is that enough? Will things happen for me just because I believe in them?”

“Not if you don’t work hard enough,” Jihoon told him. “And you’ve worked so hard, Kuanlin-ah.
You always have, and I admire you for it. More than you know.”

Kuanlin smiled sadly. “Have I? Seems to be that everything I’ve received thus far has been a gift.
My current level of skill... it just can’t compare.”

“Look at me, Kuanlin-ah,” Jihoon pleaded, gently angling Kuanlin’s head downwards to face him.
Kuanlin looked into his eyes, the complicated color of them seeming to shift before him.

The sight of Jihoon clouded slowly, as tears pooled in his eyes.

What are you doing Kuanlin? You never cry. Ever.

“I’m scared, hyung. Of what others will think of me.”

“Look at me, Kuanlin-ah. Just like this,” Jihoon continued, wiping the tears from Kuanlin’s eyes
with his thumbs before they could fall. “Up there on stage, search for where I am in the audience.”

Kuanlin nodded once, bringing his hands up to rest over Jihoon’s. He pressed Jihoon’s hands even
tighter against his feverish skin, as if they had the power to wash away his anxiety.

“And once I’ve been found,” Jihoon said. “Look only to me, and nowhere else. As if I’m the only
one here. As if no one else matters.”

“No one else matters,” Kuanlin repeated, as if saying them that way could turn them into the truth.
“You’re the only one here, and no one else matters.”

“Strength of mind, Kuanlin-ah,” Jihoon whispered. “That’s all you need.”

Kuanlin looked downwards at Jihoon. “That’s an old adage my dad used to say.”

But what use is strength of mind, when shackled by a weakness in spirit?

“If you think,” Jihoon began. “That I’m going to let you screw this performance up because your
nerves are killing you, then let me tell you now that you’re terribly mistaken.”

Jihoon’s hands dropped from Kuanlin’s shoulders to his hands, draping him in a familiar,
welcoming comfort. “You promised me you’d make your debut. You promised me you’d go out
there and do your best.”

Fingers interlaced with his, and in a rare moment of vulnerability Kuanlin wished to last evermore,
Jihoon brought them to his lips, pressing a kiss softly against the back of his trembling hand.
Eyes bore into him, the most beautiful he’d ever seen them.

“Keep that promise for me, Kuanlin-ah. Because you can do it. I believe in you.”

All at once, Kuanlin felt as if the burden of his former self that weighed him down and fettered him to the ground had been lifted, releasing him from his earlier unrest.

As if Jihoon’s words were made of magic, his very existence woven from dreams and stardust.

*I don’t deserve you, hyung,* Kuanlin thought. *But you’re giving it your best for me, anyway.*

*So I should too. If only for you.*

At that moment, Professor Lee’s voice blared through the speakers a seventh time.

“Class D promotion exams and auditions will begin in ten minutes. Students Kim Sanggyun to Zhu Zhengting, and their respective exam partners, please make your way backstage. I repeat, Class D promotion exams and auditions will begin in ten minutes. Students Kim Sanggyun to Zhu Zhengting, and their respective exam partners, please make your way backstage.”

Kuanlin breathed in deeply. *The moment of truth.*

“Wish me luck, Jihoon-hyung,” he said, smiling. “I’ll do my best.”

“You’ll make it,” Jihoon said, squeezing his hand and offering him one final word of reassurance. “I know you will.”

When Kuanlin walked backstage, it was as if he had been cut off from the rest of the world, and he was walking a solitary path only he could follow.

He breathed in deeply, letting Jihoon’s words course through his memory.

“Strength of mind, Kuanlin,” he whispered to himself, untucking his necklace and bringing gently it to his lips. “That’s all you need.”

***

Kuanlin didn’t remember the last time he performed onstage in front of an audience.

Because this time was the very first.

And across the sea of people, the eyes before him, watching and lying in wait for the first damning mistake to occur, Kuanlin found him where he knew he would be.

Watching. Waiting for him to show the world what he was truly capable of.

“Class D student Lai Kuanlin,” Professor Lee Huitaek announced through the microphone. “Will you opt to perform this song as an audition into the Idol Project?”

A deafening silence, a thousand faces looking, waiting to hear a response they already knew the answer to.

*What they think of me shouldn’t matter,* Kuanlin thought.

*Because I’m not doing this for them. I’m not doing this for anyone else, but myself.*
And for you Jihoon-hyung. And for all of our friends who are counting on me to debut.

“Yes I will.”

"Very well," the professor's voice came sounding. "You may begin."

Kuanlin knew he had stormy oceans to cross, steep mountains to climb, and rocky terrain to traverse before he could even begin to compare to the students who came before him.

But he knew in his heart that skill wasn’t the only thing you needed to become an idol.

And much like Jihoon, whose presence in his life was the stronghold he clung to, Kuanlin had a few tricks up his sleeve as well. He smiled to himself, bringing the microphone to his lips.

*Don’t think you’ve seen the last of me just yet.*

And throughout Kirin hall, across the sea of peoples, watching and lying and wait for the first damning mistake to occur, Kuanlin’s voice echoed, deep and resounding, unwilling to give them the very thing they were asking for.

> Whether it's the future  
> or whether it’s the past  
> I’m really gonna show you  
> my life is never bad  
> I’m not a character  
> like Mario I’m just me

> I didn’t know  
> the ABCDEFGs  
> when I came to Korea  
> just because I wanted to  
> But in life there’s a lot of stress  
> at the same time  
> Yes, tell me what should I do  
> what should I do?

“We should probably talk about happier things now.”

The memory of Jihoon earlier that morning popped into his head, steering him gently away from thoughts of his parents, the life he left so readily behind, the possibility of being unable to make it without them. “Are there things that you like, Kuanlin?”

> I want to be a rapper  
> I want to learn popping  
> I want to eat tasty things  
> I want to take naps  
> I want to do well on broadcast  
> Wanna listen to MGK  
> I wanna see my parents

I miss them. So much it physically hurts.

They’ve given me the world, and I haven’t thanked them enough for it. Someday I’ll return to Taiwan, tell them everything I’ve been meaning to, but…
However I’m very busy
I gotta focus on my work
like a real man
The most important time
is always now
Every day I try
with unlimited possibilities
Imma pay you back
When I make it big, wait for it

Just wait, mom and dad. Wait for me. The next time you see my face, I’ll have made you the proudest set of parents in the world.

***

“You did it, Kuanlin-ah!” Jihoon exclaimed, running towards him the moment he stepped out from backstage during break time. Kuanlin hugged him then, sighing against the warmth of his body.

“You’re here already?” he responded, laughing softly. “How was it?”

“You were amazing,” Jihoon responded, pushing slightly away to look into his eyes. “I couldn’t have asked for anything better.”

Kuanlin grinned at him. “Then if we both make it into the Idol Project, I should probably—“

He stopped mid-sentence, interrupted by his phone vibrating from within his pocket.

“I think someone’s trying to call you,” Jihoon said. “You should answer that.”

Kuanlin nodded, retrieving the phone from his pocket. As soon as he saw the contact details written across the screen, his eyes widened in surprise.

“This is…”

“Who is it?” Jihoon asked.

Kuanlin frantically swiped at his phone, bringing it to his right ear.

“D-dad? Is that you?”

“How’ve you been, son?” the voice over the phone spoke in Mandarin. “Your mother, sister and I have been missing you.”

“I’ve missed you too, Dad,” Kuanlin said, struggling to keep the tears at bay. “It’s been tough having to adjust to this country, and I’ve had to catch up on my studies too, but I—“

“When are you coming back?“

Kuanlin stilled, unable to process the inquiry. “What… what do you mean?”

“It must’ve been hard for you to endure, son. If life there becomes unbearable, you know we’ll always wish for you return.”

Kuanlin looked to Jihoon, whose expression betrayed a sense of worry mirrored in Kuanlin’s own heart.
“That’s not how it is, Dad. It’s been difficult, sure, but I’m loving it so far. I’ve learnt so much, and made so many friends and I want continue being with them.”

Kuanlin waited for a response. When nothing came, he pressed on.

“And just a while ago, they announced this Idol Project at school. If I make it and I do well, I could really debut and become an idol. Then I’ll be able to prove to you and mom that I—“

“Do you have to, son?”

Five words. That was all it took to render Kuanlin speechless, for the earlier feelings of dread and anxiety to rush back into him, threatening to knock him over and bring him to his knees.

“Do you really have to debut? This life you’ve been yearning for… I don’t think you understand how difficult it is to sustain such a lifestyle. Your every move will be up for criticism and scrutiny, your private life will be invaded upon, your studies will be put on hold. So if you make it and don’t succeed… what happens next? It’ll be hard for you to return to a normal life. People are going to think you’re a failure. That’s just the thing about that industry: everything is blown out of proportion, words are taken out of context, and stories are twisted around and churned into headlines. It’s a cruel world out there, son. You know I don’t wish for you to lose your childhood over a dream that might never come to fruition.”

His father’s words came at him one by one, each one delivering a solid punch to the gut that knocked the wind right out of him.

“Dad,” Kuanlin began, struggling to find his own voice. “The only thing I ever wanted was for you to support me. I’ve never asked for anything else.”

And yet the things I never ask for are the very things you provide me with. Privileges I don’t deserve, in an institution willing to sacrifice its integrity for the sake of profit.

“I do support you, son. I supported your dream of becoming a doctor when you were young. And then when you discovered basketball, I supported your dream of playing professionally for the national team.”

“Then why can’t you do that for me now? Do you not believe I could make it?”

Please say you do.

Please believe in me, so that others will too.

And yet the only response was a deafening silence. In its depths, Kuanlin found the answer to his question.

“The risk is far too great, son. If by chance you mess up in front of the public, our family’s reputation will be in ruins. The company—“

“The company,” Kuanlin interrupted in disbelief. “It’s always about the company.”

“You already know how much we stand to lose if anything goes wrong.”

“Won’t it be an asset to you if I do succeed?” Kuanlin insisted. “Why… why are you so convinced that I’m going to fail? That I’m going to embarrass myself?”

“Kuanlin, please. I don’t want you getting hurt.”
“Why, dad? Just tell me. Am I that horrible a rapper to you?”

He heard a sigh from the other end of the line. “Rapping... you never trained for that. Of all the hobbies you could have picked up…”

Without a moment’s notice, Jihoon’s hand found his, reminding him that he wasn’t alone.

“I’m sorry, dad. I’ve had this dream for a very long time now. If you’re trying to ruin it for me by entering into distasteful negotiations with the school, I’d like to ask you to stop. I get it now. I don’t have much to offer without you. I’m used to getting by with your help. But there’s so much more to me that I stand to discovering in doing this. Just for a while... allow me to find it. And if I ruin everything the way you imagine I will, then let me shoulder the burden for you.”

“...Kuanlin-ah. Please don’t do something you’re going to regret.”

Kuanlin smiled sadly. “To think I had hoped you called to congratulate me. Or at the very least…” Kuanlin’s voice faltered. “To greet me. Because today is…”

Kuanlin’s phone dropped to his side.

“Are you alright?” Jihoon’s voice broke through the unending quietude. “It sounded like…”

“Can we go somewhere together, hyung?” Kuanlin asked, swiping at his screen absently, hanging up.

_I miss you, Dad. But I need to make decisions for myself going forward._

“Sorry, I... I need to be somewhere else,” Jihoon said. “It’s an emergency.”

Kuanlin blinked at him, not expecting an instantaneous rejection. “Oh.”

“I’ll be right back,” Jihoon assured him. “In the meantime…” Jihoon scanned the room, his eyes locking with Jinyoung’s. “HEY JINYOUNG-AH! ACCOMPANY KUANLIN FOR A WHILE.”

Jinyoung’s eye twitched in irritation from where he was standing a few meters away. “Why me? I need to go meet Daehwi outside.”

“I’ll tell him you’re busy.” Jihoon grabbed Kuanlin by the wrist, dragging him along towards Jinyoung. He reached for Jinyoung’s hand as well, placing it against Kuanlin’s. “Make friends for a while.”

“What’s all this about?” Jinyoung demanded.

Jihoon groaned impatiently, then pulled Jinyoung to him to whisper something in his ear.

“Oh,” Jinyoung said, realization dawning in his features. “Uh... well I guess I could do that.”

“You’re a lifesaver!” Jihoon exclaimed, wrapping his arms around Jinyoung neck for a brief moment. “Meet me at the Imugi Café in thirty. You too, Kuanlin-ah. The rest of us will be there too.”

***

“So uhm...” Jinyoung began, shifting uncomfortably. They had moved out of the Kirin Hall to the outdoor balcony, attempting to stargaze even while there was nothing in sight. “This weather’s nice. Clouds, am I right?”
Kuanlin just stared at him in silence, wondering if his ears had deceived him, or if Jinyoung was trying to compete with Woojin over who could start the more pointless conversation.

He scratched at the back of his head. “Uhm… not really?”

“Oh,” Jinyoung said, suddenly developing an interest in the cold marble floor. “Well, this is awkward.”

“Hyung,” Kuanlin said. “I don’t think saying that out loud helps.”

“What else can you expect me to say?” Jinyoung glared at him. “You shut down my conversation-starter so brutally.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Kuanlin explained. “But it was taking much too long to find an appropriate response to ‘clouds, am I right’ because I didn’t think that made any sense.”

“Wow, thanks,” Jinyoung said. “Remind me again of how much I suck at making friends.”

Kuanlin grinned at him. “You suck at making friends.”

Jinyoung chuckled to himself then. “Yeah, I think our relationship is going to be quite interesting.”

Kuanlin smiled. *I didn’t think this hyung’s presence could be comforting as well.*

“Was there, uhm… anything you wanted to talk to me about?” Jinyoung began, passing the burden of finding a suitable topic for their impromptu bonding session over to Kuanlin.

Truthfully, Kuanlin wanted to tell someone—*anyone*—about the conversation he’s just had with his father. It would be easier to carry the burden that way, because he wouldn’t have to do it alone. But he knew Jinyoung had nothing to do with it, and he didn’t want to ruin the light atmosphere between them.

But there were a lot of other questions he needed answers to.

Regarding Jihoon.

But he wasn’t sure if Jinyoung was the right person to ask, especially because Jinyoung’s relationship with Jihoon was in a rocky place, and Kuanlin thought he might end up shattering Jinyoung’s composure like glass if he so much as approached the topic. But Jinyoung seemed to have access to his network of thought, as he said, “And don’t you dare even say ‘your stupid, one sided-love for Jihoon-hyung’ because we are certainly not going anywhere near that.”

Kuanlin stared at him for a long time. *So he really is in love with Jihoon-hyung. But why is he telling me?*

“Your one sided-love for Jihoon-hyung.”

*Okay, I went for it. Sorry, Jinyoung-hyung.*

Jinyoung rolled his eyes. “Do your ears selectively process information or am I not making myself clear here?”

Kuanlin looked away sheepishly. “But I never said your love for him was stupid.”

Jinyoung sighed in resignation. “Of course it is. What else could it be, when I’ve loved him all by myself for three whole years? I felt like I was going crazy, you know. I even came to a point where
I found even the way he sloppily eats and leaves crumbs around his chin extremely beautiful, and that made me want to slap myself for being so pathetic.”

“Don’t worry,” Kuanlin said. “I’m no different. I really like it whenever he’s unaware of himself, too.”

“That’s all of the time, Kuanlin-ah.”

Kuanlin didn’t miss how Jinyoung added a suffix to his name. “Exactly.”


Kuanlin had no idea why he felt a surge of competitiveness at that statement. “Jihoon-hyung has that too. I bet his aegyo is the type that could go viral.”

“Maybe so, but Daehwi’s on a different level of adorable. He’ll be the aegyo prince in our group if we make it.”

“Then Jihoon-hyung could be the aegyo king.”

“Well then Daehwi’s the aegyo emperor.”

“And Jihoon-hyung’s the aegyo god.”

“Then Daehwi’s… darn it!”

At this Kuanlin laughed, all of his troubles being released to the world in one go.

Jinyoung pressed on. “Well, he’s more of a complete package. He sings, dances, can probably rap… somehow.”

“I’ve heard Jihoon-hyung sing, dance, and rap,” Kuanlin countered, enjoying himself thoroughly. “He does all three really well.”

“But can he compose his own music, and write his own lyrics?”

“He can, uhm... eat more food than anyone.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“I dunno, I just needed a counter-argument.”

At this Jinyoung laughed out loud, the sound of it surprising Kuanlin.

_Somehow I think I’ve made a new friend._

“You know, I…” Jinyoung began, changing the topic completely. “I think I made the right decision in letting him go.”


“Don’t sound too excited,” Jinyoung responded. “And don’t think I did it for you. I was simply growing tired of pining after someone who would never look at me the same way. And besides, if I continued to pursue him despite knowing how desperately in love he is with you… that would make me look even more a fool than I already am.”
“What makes you think he’s interested in me?” Kuanlin deadpanned.

“Do you guys not make eye contact?” Jinyoung asked him. “Or do you not see the way he looks at you all starry-eyed and dreamy? What about the way he blushes or… or the way he lets you touch him so readily?” Kuanlin almost missed the strain in Jinyoung’s voice, as if he was trying his best not to falter.

Or not to cry.

“If you didn’t know, those are telling signs that someone is in love.”

“Which source are you quoting from, exactly?”

“The magazine for teenage girls I used to model for,” Jinyoung said. “It was in this article called ‘How To Tell if He Likes You Back’ or some other lame-ass title like that. May not seem like it, but those magazines are practically gospel. Their personality tests are too accurate, it’s almost frightening. It kept me awake at night once, thinking someone was secretly looking over my shoulder and publishing all of my thoughts for the public to scrutinize.”

“Hyung,” Kuanlin said. “I didn’t know you read magazines for teenage girls.”

“I don’t. But that’s what love does to you. It makes you search for explanations even in the strangest of places.”

“I wonder what he’d find likeable about me,” Kuanlin said. “I’m not particularly good at anything. And we met last night, it hardly makes any sense for him to start liking me so soon.”

“When did love ever make sense?” Jinyoung said. “It sure didn’t when it told me to fall in love with my best friend, as if that wouldn’t lead to a million complications I’d rather not have to deal with.”

“Still… I wish I could enter into his head and find out what he really thinks.”

“He doesn’t think,” Jinyoung said. “His brain probably goes into overdrive and crashes whenever you’re near. It’s like he’s in constant awe of you and doesn’t know how painfully obvious he’s being about it. I don’t think he even fully believes you could be human.”

“If I’m not human, then what am I supposed to be?”

Jinyoung shrugged. “Who knows? I bet Jihoon-hyung thinks you’re an angel sent straight from the heavens, since there’s no way two mere mortals could have come together to create someone as perfect in his eyes as you are.”

Kuanlin grinned at him. “Is this the part where you ask me if it hurt when I fell from the skies?”

“Yeah, let’s not take steer this conversation in that direction,” Jinyoung told him. “I might be gay, but only for my best friend. And for, uhm…”

“Daehwi?” Kuanlin asked, his forwardness shocking Jinyoung.

“Hey!” Jinyoung exclaimed. “I never said that.”

“Hyung,” Kuanlin said. “Your face is even easier to read than those magazines you like so much.” Jinyoung turned away from him them, completely embarrassed. “Then don’t look at me.”
Kuanlin smiled. Inwardly, he thanked Jinyoung for sharing his deepest of feelings with him, because it must’ve taken a lot of courage to tell him far less than that.

“Does it not hurt?” Kuanlin asked him. “Having to ask me these questions and tell me these things? I’ve never been in love, but I can imagine that it must take a bit of time to get over a love that lasted for so long.”

“You’re right,” Jinyoung confessed. “It does hurt. But pain is easier to endure if you meet it with openness instead of resistance.”

Jinyoung looked at him then, his eyes steady and unwavering.

“And I may have wanted to punch your face once or twice for stealing Jihoon away so effortlessly, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to harbour a grudge against you. I’m not that petty. Besides… I don’t think I could hate the person Jihoon likes so much, no matter how hard I tried.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about this, to be honest,” Kuanlin began. “But then again, I’m not sure about most things when it comes to talk of love. I like Jihoon-hyung… But it’s too early to tell what he’s truly like, or if I’ve simply superimposed an ideal I’ve come up with myself onto him without meaning it.”

What if this is all just too good to be true?

“And if he likes me the way you claim he does,” Kuanlin continued. "A part of me is afraid that it’s because of my appearance and nothing else. That he looks at me, but doesn’t see who I am.”

Jinyoung nodded. "Yeah. I understand."

“I want to know more about him,” Kuanlin admitted. “But I want him to know more about me too, because there are issues I have yet to deal with, and I don’t want him getting hurt because of them.”

Jinyoung looked at him for a long moment, then sighed in defeat. “Like I said, I couldn’t possibly hate you no matter how hard I tried. You’re much too likeable for your own good. Or mine.”

Kuanlin smiled at him, and Jinyoung smiled slowly back.

At that very moment, Jinyoung’s phone rang.

“Ah, it’s Jihoon,” he explained, staring at the screen of his mobile. “We need to head to the Imugi Café right now.”

***

“Why are the lights off?” Kuanlin asked as he and Jinyoung stepped into the Café. “Is this place closed?”

“It shouldn’t be,” Jinyoung said. He tapped Kuanlin’s shoulder once. “The switch is over here. Go turn the lights on.”

So Kuanlin did, and the next thing he knew, he was being smothered with hugs from all sides, excited greetings ringing in his ears.

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, KUANLIN-AH!”

Kuanlin could hardly believe what he was seeing. Daehwi, Woojin, and Jisung were crowding
around him, looking at him excitedly.

“Kid,” Jisung began. “You never told us it was your birthday! Good thing I own a café, so I’ve come prepared for this sort of thing.”

“Thanks, hyung,” Kuanlin said, still in utter disbelief. “I’m sorry for not telling.”

“Happy birthday, you punk!” Woojin greeted him then, punching his arm with more force than there should have been for a friendly gesture. “Whoops. Forgot how reedy you were. Anyway, you’re a year older now! But goddamn, still a minor… Guess I have to wait a few years before we can begin talking about interesting things.”

“Maybe in ten years,” Kuanlin said, grinning. “Or tomorrow if I’m up for it.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Daehwi exclaimed, turning him away from Woojin, then clinging onto his arm affectionately. “But Kuanlin-aaaaah, how could you? If I had known it was your birthday I would’ve gotten you a gift.”

Kuanlin smiled at Daehwi, noticing that Jinyoung was staring in irritation at Daehwi draped across Kuanlin’s arm. He pulled Daehwi away gently. “Uh, yeah, that’s enough. Why don’t we sing this guy a song?”

Behind everyone else, Kuanlin spotted Jihoon, bearing a chocolate cake, seventeen lighted candles decorating its edges. He recognized it as one of the cakes Jisung had on display at the shop, which he had been raring to try for so long.

“One, two, three!” Jihoon’s voice rang out, as the five of them broke into song.

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Kuanlin, happy birthday to you!”

Kuanlin blew out the candles gently, as the rest of them clapped in delight.

“Sorry,” Jihoon began. “I was listening to the conversation you had with your dad and pieced things together so I… I thought I’d prepare you a little something.”

Kuanlin stood there, searching for the right words to say. Jihoon-hyung. How many countries did I defend in my previous life for me to deserve you?

“Thank you,” he began, smiling at each of them in turn. “This… all this means a lot to me. You guys are the absolute best.”

“Hell yeah we are!” Woojin exclaimed. “Now let’s go ahead and eat that cake.”

“Don’t you dare,” Jihoon glared at him. “This is Kuanlin’s, not yours.”

Woojin rolled his eyes. “You asked me to buy that with my pocket money.”

Kuanlin laughed, amused by the exchanged. “I don’t mind us sharing,” he said, then scanned the room, feeling distinctly as if something was missing. “Where are Seongwoo-hyung and Daniel-hyung?”

“Ah,” Jisung said. “Those two are late. I sent them on an errand to buy you a gift and they haven’t returned.”

“You didn’t have to,” Kuanlin said, scratching his nape shyly. “I wouldn’t have minded either
“Nonsense,” Jisung said. “If I say you’re getting a gift for your birthday, you’re getting a gift for your birthday.”

Jisung grinned at him once, then turned to Jihoon, asking him to hand the cake over. Jisung settled it atop one of the tables, then grabbed a hold of both his and Jihoon’s arms, pulling them towards the practice room.

“What are you doing?” Jihoon demanded. “Are you trying to lock us in here?”

“Consider this guy your genie in the lamp for a day,” he said simply, addressing Kuanlin. “Ask and you shall receive.”

With that, the door to the practice room slammed promptly to a close behind them.

“This is ridiculous,” Jihoon said. “By the time he lets us out of here, your cake will long have gone into Woojin’s stomach.”

Kuanlin laughed, agreeing that such a thing was bound to happen. “Don’t worry. There are plenty other chances to have some cake. It’s an excuse for us to go out on a date, don’t you think?”

Jihoon looked at him shyly. “Guess so.”

Kuanlin’s brows shot up in surprise. “You’re agreeing on a date?”

Jihoon blinked at him, then cast a bashful gaze downwards. “I thought you were asking. Ask and you shall receive, remember?”

Kuanlin beamed at him, delighted at the prospect.

This is a chance to get to know him better. “Then it’s set.”

Jihoon nodded, still actively avoiding eye-contact. “Have you, uhm… settled things with your dad?”

Kuanlin didn’t wish to be reminded of his parents at that moment, and part of it was because he was feeling guilty for not giving them a chance to greet him a happy birthday. But Jihoon at least deserved to know.

“Not yet. I’m working on it, though.”

“That’s a relief. I hope… I hope he realizes how much you like it here. I’m sure he will, soon enough.”

Kuanlin looked at Jihoon, whose eyes were now trained on him.

“He asked me to return to Taiwan.”

Something flashed in Jihoon’s eyes, passing into nothing a split-second later. “Are you going to?”

A few moments passed between them before he spoke, shrouded in fear and expectancy. “I am.”

“You are?” Jihoon asked, the disappointment apparent in his voice. “But I thought you…”

As his voice quavered and his words trailed into nothing, Kuanlin took the chance to close the
distance between them, pulling Jihoon into a warm embrace.

“I’m returning to Taiwan, but I’ll do it as an idol,” he clarified. “So before that happens, I’m going to stay right here.”

Kuanlin could feel Jihoon’s body trembling slightly in his arms. Jihoon’s hands moved upwards hesitantly along his back, tugging at his shirt slightly.

“God,” he heard Jihoon whisper. “Don’t scare me like that. I… I thought you were going to leave me.”

Butterflies fluttered gradually to life in Kuanlin’s stomach, his heart beating frantically until he thought it might explode. Kuanlin pushed Jihoon away from him ever so slightly, touching their foreheads together. Their breaths melded into one, and Kuanlin was conscious of the fact that Jihoon’s lips were close enough for him to kiss them.

*I want to kiss them. Maybe someday.*

*But for now…*

“Come home with me, Jihoon-ah. When I return home to Taiwan, I want you there right by my side. Along with the rest of them.”

Jihoon looked to him then, pulling away, his eyes like stars against the canvas of a moonlit sky. Kuanlin watched them twinkle with longing, committing the colors of them to memory. “I will, Kuanlin-ah. Of course I will.”

Kuanlin smiled. He tried to reach for Jihoon, eager to touch him.

But this time, Jihoon beat him to it. Kuanlin found himself in Jihoon’s arms, wrapped tightly in a hug. Once Kuanlin could manage to get over the shock from the initial sensation of Jihoon’s intimate gesture, Kuanlin slowly brought his arms up once more, around Jihoon’s waist, burying his head in the crook of Jihoon’s neck. He breathed in the familiar scent of musk and vanilla, warmth and contentment coursing through him. His arms tightened around Jihoon’s waist, afraid to let him go.

*I want to keep you in my arms like this,* he thought.

*Because this feels exactly like home.*

“Thank you, Jihoon-ah,” he whispered. “That means the world to me.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” Jihoon responded. “Consider it a gift.” Jihoon smiled at him, and Kuanlin found himself wishing moments like that, ephemeral and fleeting, could be captured in suspension and made to last for a lifetime.

“Happy birthday, Kuanlin-ah. Happy, happy birthday.”

~PANWINK 4 END~

Chapter End Notes
I keep on constantly outdoing myself with the length of these chapters, so if you're the type to prefer shorter ones, I apologize ;-; But I couldn't help myself on this one, because so many events had to be squeezed into it before I could move on to Daehwi's. For succeeding chapters though, I might revert back to writing around 5k - 8k word chapters (keyword: might) but that still depends on how many ideas come crashing into my head all at once. That being said, I hope you guys liked this! It was weird for me to write Kuanlin's dad as unsupportive, because in real life he's such a sweetheart... but as you now, I need a little drama in these stories. So there you have it xD For context, Kuanlin's family in this story is EXTREMELY wealthy, his dad's the founder of a multi-million dollar corporation in Taiwan, and Kuanlin was supposed to be the heir apparent. Nice, huh? (Not for poor baby Kuanlin though...) And oh, I'm sorry if there wasn't much Ongniel in this chapter (because those two have their own issues to work around) but I hope the Panwink, Jinhwi and surprise, surprise: Pandeep moments can make up for it somehow. I actually think Pandeep's dynamics here is pretty darn cute~

By the way, are the Jihoon stans out there still alive? Lol sorry for making him strip (sort of) but it had to happen that way. I actually got the idea from Baekhyun's solo in EXO'rDIUM(?) if I'm not mistaken. And if you didn't now, yes, Jihoon does have abs, proof of it is in the recent fanmeet in my country, where he lifted his shirt for Burn It Up. Not as toned as Daniel or Woojin's, but they're there. It's kinda cute how he's getting more confident onstage! And I hope you liked that birthday scene! This story's timeline is set last month (when the story first started) just to give you guys an idea of where they're at. So basically, the group is debuting around January of 2018 instead of August of this year :) But that's it for this chapter! Again, I thank everyone who has read through the entire thing, Y'all are amazing <3

P.S. If you're wondering why I spell Kuanlin's name with a K, it's because he signs his name with a K. I only follow the way he writes it, but I don't mind either way. I hope it doesn't bother any of you too much :3 See you next time!
Whenever Daehwi had nothing better to do, he’d often find himself counting things. The lights on the ceiling winking steadily at him, the silver-stained cars parked across the street, the tapioca pearls swimming leisurely about in his wintermelon tea. He often thought such mediocre a pastime was a meaningless, mind-numbing exercise he reverted to in order only to distract himself, a defense mechanism he developed against the plodding monotony of noontime lectures.

He didn’t even care enough to recall the final count. He’d think of it once, turn it over in his head, then let the memory of it wander away, a leaf lost to the wind.

*Only because I have nothing better to do.*

Today, however, was a glorious exception. A fifteen-minute break had yet to elapse between Class C and D performances, and Daehwi, as anyone can guess, was counting things. At each count he’d stop himself, repeat the number thrice, implant it into his memory before it had a chance to slip away.

*One. The number of moles on Jinyoung’s face, just above his right eyebrow.*

Daehwi and Jinyoung were at the Imugi Café, sitting across from each other at one of the tables farthest from the entrance. They were whiling away the time before it was Kuanlin’s turn to perform, snacking on a plate of marshmallows Jisung had offered them to soothe their insatiable tummies. Daehwi was productively making use of his respite to stare at Jinyoung as he spoke, trying to memorize the planes of his face, the curve of his jawline, the shape of his eyes, as if to prepare for an all-important exam.

“Oh, Daehwi-ya, are you listening?” Jinyoung’s voice cut through his head trip momentarily.

Daehwi nodded absently, hearing without understanding, his mind half-adrift in a faraway daydream.

He saw Jinyoung’s hand move upwards to scratch at the side of his head awkwardly. “Well, okay then.”

*Two. The number of piercings on Jinyoung’s left ear.*

Daehwi had never been into accessories, and neither did he particularly care for them on anyone else, but Jinyoung’s double-studded earring made for the perfect statement piece, drawing Daehwi’s eyes to his face, like magnets drawn helplessly to steel. Jinyoung stole a glance at him then, waiting impatiently for him to break the uncomfortable silence.

When Daehwi said nothing, Jinyoung fidgeted awkwardly, twiddling his thumbs together.

*Fifteen, the number engraved on his ring, and four, the number of times he likes to twirl it around his index finger in one go.*

*His fingers are quite slender,* Daehwi thought, recalling all of a sudden how they would wrap around his svelte frame as Jinyoung held him, how they quavered almost imperceptibly upon contact.
Daehwi retracted his hands from atop the table to settle them restlessly against his lap, a paltry attempt at keeping his hands to himself before they reached for Jinyoung of their own traitorous accord.

From now on, Bae Jinyoung, I want you to look only at me, his own voice rang in his ears, an undying, persistent echo of his earlier audacity. Daehwi cringed at the thought, slapping at his cheeks in embarrassment and mortification.

What were you thinking, Daehwi? Have you lost your mind?

“Yeah, something’s clearly not adding up here,” Jinyoung observed, eyeing Daehwi watchfully. “Your reactions aren’t syncing with my statements.”

Daehwi blinked at him in perplexity, uncertain of where their one-sided non-conversation had arrived at that point. “Were… were you saying something?”

“I was saying,” Jinyoung clarified. “That Jihoon-hyung should’ve cautioned us at the very least about his master-plan for the promotion exams.”

Jinyoung looked away, a blush creeping on his cheeks and stabbing at Daehwi’s heart inadvertently. “Now I need to douse myself in holy water because some idiot thought it was a bright idea to launch a full-scale surprise attack on everyone.”

Daehwi sighed. Twenty-seven. The number of times he’d spoken Jihoon’s name that past hour alone.

“And then,” Jinyoung continued, oblivious to Daehwi’s supreme disinterest on the matter, “You began slapping at your cheeks, as if you’ve gotten caught thinking of something highly inappropriate. You weren’t conceptualizing a sequel to that performance in your head, were you?”

Daehwi stared at him in bewilderment. “I, uhh… No.”

If there was a continuation to all this, Daehwi thought guiltlessly. I’d think of you instead of him.

Mental screenshots of Jinyoung baring his torso to the world flashed in his head in alarming succession. Beyond his limited control, Daehwi’s mind spiraled into thoughts of what Jinyoung’s abs might look like.

He did have them…right? He was a model after all, and…

Daehwi blushed a violent shade of pink at his shameless train of thought.

“I don’t like this one bit,” Jinyoung declared, narrowing his eyes at Daehwi. “if thoughts of Jihoon-hyung are eliciting those sorts of reactions from you, I swear I’ll—“

“It’s not,” Daehwi interrupted, shortstopping Jinyoung’s faulty logic before he could spout even more of the absurd. “It isn’t him.”

“Oh,” Jinyoung said, ashamed of his reckless assumptions. “Then who exactly…”

As realization dawned on his face, Daehwi looked away from him in a useless attempt to cloak his embarrassment at getting found out so easily.

A few seconds later, he risked a small peek at Jinyoung’s expression, whose cheek was reclined against his knuckle, one elbow resting casually on top of the table. Jinyoung’s eyes were locked on
him, a knowing expression etched so overtly within them. A breath escaped Daehwi before he could manage to collect himself.

“Were you thinking of me, then?” Jinyoung asked him, a mischievous smile forming at the corners of his lips. “So what have I been wearing in your fantasies? Is it nice?”

Daehwi struggled to find his voice. “It’s… it’s nothing.”

Jinyoung’s perfectly-shaped brow shot upwards. “I’m wearing nothing?”

Daehwi’s eyes widened in shock at Jinyoung’s bold accusation. “That’s not what I meant!” he exclaimed, grabbing at the plate of marshmallows and chucking one of them at Jinyoung’s head. Jinyoung anticipated his movements somehow, catching the snack mid-flight before promptly tossing it into his mouth.

“Thanks,” Jinyoung said, grinning at him playfully. “I was getting kind of hungry.”

Daehwi pouted at him. “Meanie.”

At that moment, Jisung stepped out from behind the counter, a tray of drinks balancing precariously on hand.

“I sure do hope,” Jisung announced. “That the both of you haven’t been entering into a friendly competition on who can do a better job of littering the pristine floors of my café.” He walked towards their table, settling the tray down between them. The delicious smell of milk and coffee wafted instantaneously through the air, making Daehwi’s mouth water. “If you guys end up breaking something valuable in here because you’re just pitching the nearest thing your hands can find at each other, then have it be known that I’m deducting whatever the costs amount to from Jihoon’s salary.”

Jinyoung’s head whipped towards Jisung in alarm. “Oh god, no. He’ll ask for my head on a pike if that happens.”

“Sorry, Jisung-hyung,” Daehwi apologized. “Let a loyal customer off the hook for once. Jinyoung-ie was just… teasing me way too much.”

Jisung’s eyes narrowed into slits at him. “You went from Jinyoung-hyung to Jinyoung-ah to Jinyoung-ie within a twelve-hour span. Seriously, this relationship is progressing faster than the superhuman rapping from those BTS cyphers my boyfriend loves so much.”

“Is that so?” Jinyoung said. “I’ve hardly noticed a thing.”

“Well,” Jisung replied. “Good thing you’re as dense as a hollow block, because this guy’s been staring at you as if you’re about to vanish into a cloud of smoke at any minute.”

His gaze returned to Daehwi, who gulped nervously, unable to provide a counter-argument in his defense.

“Anyway,” Jisung continued, removing the drinks from atop the tray to abruptly redirect the topic. “One Honey Green Tea for Lee Daehwi, and one Iced Cappucino Special for Bae Jinyoung.”

“Thanks,” they said in unison. “Smells amazing.”

Anything else you guys might want?” Jisung’s eyes moved back and forth between them, scanning each of their faces. “Apart from each other, that is.”
Daehwi’s eyes met Jinyoung’s briefly, before they turned away simultaneously in embarrassment. A few seconds elapsed in painful silence.

“So I’m talking to myself here? Okay, noted,” Jisung said then, rolling his eyes in exasperation. “I’ll just be in the kitchen if you guys need anything else. Though I would recommend against ordering cake; Those cloying looks you’ve been giving each other are more than enough to contract diabetes.”

Daehwi and Jinyoung laughed nervously, looking for a random spot on the walls to gape at in order not to make eye-contact.

“We weren’t uhm... staring at each other or anything,” Daehwi began, lying through his teeth. “You might’ve seen things wrong.”

“And we aren’t a couple, hyung,” Jinyoung said. He coughed awkwardly. “I mean… Not yet, but I...”

“Yeah right,” Jisung exclaimed, not buying into any of their excuses. “Report back to me in two weeks, and we’ll see about that.”

He placed one hand inside the pocket of his apron, and used the other to point to the kitchen. “Like I said, I’ll be in there if you guys need assistance. I’d hate to be in the line of fire while you guys ogle at each other for the rest of the evening.”

With that, he removed the tray and marched back to the kitchen, his footsteps echoing noisily across the café.

Jinyoung’s eyes followed Jisung as he left.

“What’s gotten into Jisung-hyung all of a sudden?” Jinyoung asked, looking to Daehwi for answers. “You think he’s jealous, or something?”

Daehwi shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe if we had some clear indication that he misses his boyfriend, then—“

“SUNGWOON-IEEE,” they heard Jisung wailing from within the kitchen. “COME BACK TO ME ALREADYYY.”

“Singing practice?” Jinyoung suggested, trying and failing to stifle a laugh.

“Nope,” Daehwi responded, failing just as miserably. “Clear indication that he misses his boyfriend.”

Jinyoung grinned at him then, and Daehwi was eternally grateful for the comic relief Jisung provided to break the growing tension between them.

“Speaking of which,” Jinyoung began, using the wafer sticks submerged in his drink to stir the whipped cream into messy circles. “Do you think Jisung-hyung’s going to audition for the Idol Project?”

“I hope so,” Daehwi said, reaching for his own drink. “I’ve heard him sing a couple of times, and he’s quite capable. The thing is, I’ve had to remain stealthy about listening in, as his stage fright is just about as serious an issue as yours.” Daehwi sipped at the tea tentatively, painfully aware of the weight of Jinyoung’s stare as he did so. He wiped at the stain his cherry lip-balm left on the plastic straw, letting the clashing tastes of tea and honey distract him from meaningless thoughts.
“Daehwi-ya,” Jinyoung said, the sound of his name on Jinyoung’s lips a pleasing lullaby to his ears. “I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

Daehwi looked at him, noticing a pained expression cutting through his features. He heaved a small sigh, retrieving his purse from the depths of his pocket. He unzipped it, extracting a freshly minted silver coin.

“Here you go,” he said, sliding the coin across the table over to Jinyoung. “A penny for your thoughts.”

Jinyoung smiled at him. “More of these?” He inspected the coin carefully. “Ah, it seems the value of my thoughts have multiplied fivefold.”


Jinyoung grinned at him, pocketing the coin graciously. “Thanks, Daehwi-ya. I’ll return these to you later on.”

Daehwi shook his head. “No need for any of that. Besides, it’s my sincere wish to hear of the things that have been running through your mind lately.”

Jinyoung looked at him, hesitation and doubt evident in his expression. “I’ve been meaning to ask you about Lai Kuanlin.”

Daehwi blinked at him, utterly taken aback. For once, Jinyoung wanted to talk about someone whose name didn’t start with a P and end with an –ark Jihoon.

“Kuanlin?” Daehwi repeated, proceeding with caution. “What about him?”

Jinyoung paused for a long moment, looking dubious with regards to how he might attempt to frame his convoluted stream of thought. “What… what sort of person is he?”

Understanding of Jinyoung’s intentions came to him then. "You want to find out if he’s good enough for your best friend."

Jinyoung nodded. "I did tell you that I’m giving up on him, didn’t I? But that doesn’t mean I’ll hand him over to just anyone. I have to find out if this roommate of yours is worthy, because I know next to nothing about him, other than the fact that he’s maddeningly good-looking.”

Daehwi nodded, steeling himself inwardly. Just a little more, Daehwi. Endure for just a tiny bit more.

“A couple of months ago,” Daehwi began. “Kuanlin left Taiwan to pursue his dream of becoming a rapper. His parents strongly disapproved of such a hasty decision, thinking it was ill-advised and largely inconsiderate, as Kuanlin had a bright future ahead of him as a basketball superstar. He was the captain of their Junior High varsity, and led his team to a clean sweep of the finals last season. The league named him Most Valuable Player, and because of that had schools lining up before him, offering one scholarship after another. He immediately rejected every single one.”

Jinyoung folded his arms across his chest, visibly agitated. “I can’t tell if that makes him remarkably brave or disappointingly imbecilic,” he said, grabbing his drink and sipping uncomfortably. “He’s toeing the line between courage and stupidity.”

Daehwi had to agree. “I thought so too, at first. But the thing is, Kuanlin’s been groomed as the heir-apparent to his father’s company since he was very little. He hasn’t had much in way of
freedom, you see. The only thing he ever learnt to do was obey the stringent rules his parents set for him, memorize scripts for the press and the media to gobble up, suppress his own desires and ambitions in order not to set his father’s company to ruin. You’ve heard of Tàiyáng Group haven’t you?”

Jinyoung almost choked on his beverage. “WHAT? You’re telling me the guy’s a billionaire? Everyone knows what Tàiyáng Group is. Hell, half of the appliances we have at home are theirs.”

Daehwi nodded. “So as you can tell, much was at stake when he left. He was going to become a world-renowned athlete playing for one of the most prestigious schools in Taiwan, and then succeed his father’s company soon thereafter. And yet he left so dazzling a future behind to enter into a different industry altogether.”

Jinyoung nodded, still shell-shocked at the revelation. “So what does any of this have to do with Jihoon-hyung?”

Twenty-eight, Daehwi counted. If he makes it to thirty, will I reach my breaking point?

“What I’m getting at,” Daehwi continued, suppressing his innermost thoughts. “Is that Lai Kuanlin isn’t someone to take lightly. Despite everything he’s been through, how he’s lived his entire childhood like a marionette with no control over its own destiny, he’s managed to move past that to blaze a trail towards the dream he’s had for so long. If I were in his shoes, I’d have given up a long time ago.”

Daehwi looked at Jinyoung then, whose eyes were staring into the distance past him. “He’s an amazing person, Jinyoung-ah. He’s willing to do whatever it takes to succeed, to regain his parents’ trust… and he’s been through so much in spite of his youth. And with all those rumours spreading like wildfire about the privileges he’s been receiving from the school… half of the student population sees him as the enemy. Views him as an outsider. Regards him as a joke. The last thing he needs is another antagonist to enter into his life to bring him down and tell him he isn’t good enough.”

Daehwi took both of Jinyoung’s hands in his, squeezing them gently with reassurance. “Jihoon-hyung is lucky to have someone like Kuanlin by his side,” he said, meaning it. “So there’s no reason for you to worry about him. He’s completely deserving of your trust. If you have it in your heart to befriend him… then please do. Let him in. I’m sure he’d appreciate a friend like you.”

Guilt flashed in Jinyoung’s expression.

Along with heartache.

Along with pain.

And then, within a single heartbeat, an overwhelming rush of acceptance.

“I surrender,” Jinyoung said finally. “I really am no match for him. He has everything going for him, while I…” he sighed in defeat. “The only thing I can do is wallow in my own misery, because Jihoon-hyung chose to love him over me.”

Daehwi looked at their hands clasped together, Jinyoung’s gripping at his tightly as if to anchor to him for support.

It hurts, Daehwi thought to himself. To hear you speak of yourself as if you are nothing.

Because you’re everything to me, Jinyoung-ah. I wish you could see that.
“You don’t have to give up,” Daehwi whispered, half-wishing for Jinyoung not to hear. “If you love him, it doesn’t have to mean that letting go is the only answer.”

Jinyoung looked at him then, something unreadable in his expression. “Would you prefer that?” he asked. “If I continued to chase after him?”

Daehwi closed his eyes. What is the price to be paid for my honesty?

“No,” Daehwi said simply. “I wouldn’t like that at all.”

Jinyoung smiled at him, then withdrew both of his hands, releasing them slowly from Daehwi’s grasp. He fished his pocket for Daehwi’s coin.

“Here,” he said, handing it back to Daehwi. “I think I’ll cash in on this one. Your turn, Daehwi-ya.”

Daehwi looked at Jinyoung, whose eyes were regarding him with so tender an expression, that Daehwi thought his fragile heart might implode that very instant.

“I don’t know where to begin,” he admitted. “There’s so much I have yet to say.”

And I’m afraid that if you hear them, I’ll end up scaring you away.

“What are you afraid of?” Jinyoung asked him, as if to see straight through to his core. “If you wish, just go ahead and tell me everything.”

“If that’s the case,” Daehwi offered. “Then ask me anything, and I’ll provide you with as genuine an answer as I can manage.”

Jinyoung leaned back against his chair. “Are you sure you’re up for that?”

Daehwi gulped nervously. He felt as if he was skating on thin ice, and at any moment a gaping chasm could open beneath his feet and swallow him whole.

“I’m sure,” he said anyway. “So go ahead before I change my mind.”

Jinyoung paused for a moment, deep in thought before he finally cleared his throat to speak. “Alright then. Since we’re on the topic of Lai Kuanlin…” Jinyoung turned his attention to the glass of cappuccino sitting on the table before him. He shifted in his seat uncomfortably, unable to look Daehwi in the eye. “I remember you mistakenly admitting to me that you liked him.”

Oh no, Daehwi thought. Please don’t remind me.

Daehwi nodded. “Yeah, I do.”

Jinyoung gaped at him, blanking out completely. “Oh. Uhm… did you mean that romantically, or…”

Daehwi stirred at the contents of his tea with his straw, poking absently at the cubes of ice.

“My feelings for Kuanlin are purely platonic.”

Daehwi almost swore he heard Jinyoung breath an audible sigh of relief. “Right. That makes sense. Because a while ago, you uhm…”

Oh no, Daehwi thought. Please don’t remind me.

“You were saying something about wanting me to look at you, and helping me discover what it
means to have my feelings returned.”

Daehwi bit hard at his lip, embarrassed beyond belief. He wanted nothing more than to melt into a puddle of slime and disappear into the cracks on the floor.

“You did say that, right?” Jinyoung pressed on. “And I, uhm… I may or may not have taken that to mean that maybe there was a chance that—“

“I like you,” Daehwi interrupted, delivering the final blow himself. *Things will end quicker this way.*

“Yeah,” Jinyoung said. “That you liked me.”

*He doesn’t understand,* Daehwi thought. *Not what I’ve been trying to tell him.*

*Then help him Daehwi-ya,* a voice within him urged. *Just like you said you would.*

Daehwi closed his eyes momentarily.

*Listen Daehwi-ya,* the voice pressed on. *Listen to the melody of your lovesick heart.*

*Feel its beat, dance to its rhythm.*

*And then play it. For all the world to hear.*

“Daehwi-ya, are you alright?” He heard Jinyoung say.

*Because the world is your stage, and the rest of us your admiring spectators.*

“I like you,” Daehwi repeated, louder this time. “So if you were thinking that I was just joking around and teasing you when I said those things… you’ve misread me. Because I really do like you, and I’ve liked you for a very long time.”

He looked Jinyoung in the eye, who was gawking at him, absolutely dumbfounded.

Daehwi held his gaze, watching for one excruciatingly long moment how a rosy flush of color spread upwards from Jinyoung’s neck to his cheeks, all the way to his ears.

“I, uhm…” Jinyoung began, still in a daze after Daehwi’s startling declaration. “Did I… did I just receive an outright confession?”

Daehwi turned away from him then. “Don’t ask me to repeat myself.”

Jinyoung nodded, his mouth still agape, a thunderstruck expression still plastered on his face. “I mean, the idea that you might’ve liked me instead of Kuanlin did cross my mind, but I… I thought it didn’t make much sense if we… we just met, and everything, and I…”

Jinyoung rumpled his hair in frustration. “Ah, sorry. I’m a mess.”

Daehwi gave him time to collect himself, beginning to wonder if he had made the right decision in confessing to Jinyoung out of the blue. “Sorry about that,” he said. “I didn’t meant to dump everything onto you in one go.”

Jinyoung shook his head. “No, I… thanks for telling me. It must’ve been hard, having to keep things to yourself.”
Daehwi smiled to himself sadly. “Nothing worthwhile ever comes easy.”

A moment of arduous silence passed between them, neither one saying a word.

“Daehwi-ya,” Jinyoung said then, breaking through the quietude. “Am I allowed to ask one more question, or have I exhausted the capabilities of your five-hundred-won coin?”

Daehwi smiled at Jinyoung, thankful for an excuse to ease the suffocating tension. “Just one more.”

Jinyoung hesitated for a brief moment. “Why… did you fall in love with me?”

“Why not?” Daehwi responded simply. “You’re perfect.”

Jinyoung laughed softly, his hands moving to cover his mouth. “Ah, I’m used to receiving compliments, but this is getting kind of embarrassing.”

Daehwi tilted his head slightly in confusion. “Should I stop?”

Jinyoung shook his head. “No, but… the effect your words have on me are quite strange. Feels nice.”

Daehwi grinned at him in satisfaction. “Good to know,” he said. “One small victory at a time is enough.”

Jinyoung looked at him, and it was a look that until then, Daehwi had only ever seen directed at someone else. “I’ll accept them,” Jinyoung said, each word pounding Daehwi’s heart into stillness. “Your feelings. Thank you, Daehwi-ya. They mean a lot to me.”

As the words left Jinyoung’s lips, Daehwi’s heart leaped out of his chest, soared through the sky and shot straight through the clouds in boundless euphoria.

*I’ll accept them,* Jinyoung’s words rang in his ears. *Your feelings.*

“Ah,” Daehwi said. “I don’t… I don’t think I’ve ever been this happy.”

Something wet streaked his cheek, and Jinyoung reached across the table then, wiping Daehwi’s tears away with the sleeve of his shirt. “Sorry, Daehwi-ya. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

Daehwi smiled at him, pressing his cheek against the palm of Jinyoung’s hand. Jinyoung smiled back, and Daehwi wished he could capture moments like that, preserve them in glass jars and keep them alive for all eternity.

“You guys done filming a k-drama over there?” Jisung called out from behind the counter. “Just got a text from Sungwoon. Break time is over and Class D performances are about to start.”

Jinyoung and Daehwi exchanged glances, nodding once.

“You’ll be kind to him, won’t you?” Daehwi asked, standing up from his seat. “Kuanlin needs our support.”

Jinyoung patted his head affectionately. “Then let’s cheer on him together.”

Jinyoung extended a hand towards him, and Daehwi took it without hesitation, thanking his heartstring melody silently for playing him so wonderful a song.
“Just go for it Jinyoung-aaah,” Daehwi urged, moments after Kuanlin’s performance ended. They were standing awkwardly to the side, waiting for Kuanlin to reappear from backstage. “He did well, didn’t he? It can’t be that hard to offer him a word of congratulations.”

“Yeah, but…” Jinyoung began. “Won’t he freak out if I just approach him all of a sudden?”

Daehwi rolled his eyes. “You’re going to tell him he did a great job,” he said. “Not try to convince him aliens exist and are threatening to take over the planet.”

Jinyoung snorted. “I bet he’s the type to buy into that sort of absurdity.”

Daehwi smacked Jinyoung playfully against one arm. “Don’t be mean.”

“I wasn’t being mean, I just—“

“Not to Kuanlin,” Daehwi clarified. “To aliens. Don’t just call them absurd for no reason.”

Daehwi frowned at Jinyoung, his lower lip jutting out slightly. Jinyoung laughed, slinging one arm across Daehwi’s shoulder.

“You’re really cute,” Jinyoung admitted. “Did I ever get to tell you that?”

Daehwi brought one hand up to hold the hand resting against his shoulder, interlacing Jinyoung’s fingers with his. “Not really. But you know what I’d really like to hear?”

“What is it?” Jinyoung asked.

“That you’re going to congratulate Kuanlin for doing well on his performance.”

Jinyoung groaned. “I’ll do it. Just… give me some time to compose myself.”

Daehwi patted Jinyoung’s chest with his other hand. “Nice going, Jinyoung-ah. I’ll go ahead and wait for you at the outdoor balcony.”

“Can’t you do it with me?”

Daehwi shook his head. The truth was, he’d been meaning to come at Kuanlin with bear hugs since his rap about delicious food, but he needed to find a way to get Jinyoung to take the first step towards fostering a non-hostile relationship with his once-perceived archenemy.

“I’ll do it later,” Daehwi said. “Or I’ll text him. I have his number, after all.”

“You do?” Jinyoung said. “Then why don’t I—“

“BYE JINYOUNG-AH!” Daehwi said, waving a hand in farewell before he made his escape, sprinting out the back door at breakneck speed.

He made his way to the outdoor balcony, looking behind him every so often just to check if Jinyoung had given chase. Fortunately enough, there was no one in sight.

Daehwi inhaled slowly, breathing in the fresh afternoon air. The sun was setting in the horizon, tinging the sky a resplendent shade of orange. He walked towards the balustrade, extending one hand outwards as if to reach for the sun before it could take cover behind the clouds for the rest of the evening.
How many seconds does it take for the sun to set, and for the moon to climb up its celestial ladder to take its place among the stars?

Daehwi had nothing better to do, so he began to count.

One, two, three.

Daehwi rested both hands against the railing, feeling the soft breeze whip at his hair and at the thin fabric of Jinyoung’s shirt.

Four, five, six.

His fingers began tapping at the cold marble surface, playing an invisible piano. Daehwi smiled at the sudden remembrance of his earlier performance with Jinyoung, wishing more than anything for a chance to relive the moment.

Seven, eight, nine.

He heard footsteps approaching him from behind, the sound of them cutting through the blissful tranquility.

“Jinyoung-ah?” he called out. “Is that you?”

Daehwi turned to look behind him, finding himself face-to-face with Yoon Taejoon.

Daehwi’s breath hitched in his throat, overcome with panic and dread.

“I’ve been looking all over for you,” Taejoon said, leering at him. “And now, here you are right before me.”

“What do you want?” Daehwi demanded, trying to keep his voice steady. “I have nothing to say to you.”

“Is that so?” Taejoon said, walking towards him haltingly, each step forward fraying at the edges of his composure. “Because I was thinking you might’ve been meaning to ask me a few questions regarding the… overlap in our performances.”

Jinyoung-ah, Daehwi thought to himself. Where are you? I’m scared. So scared.

Daehwi tried to back away from Taejoon, but his spine was already pressed against the railing, and he had nowhere left to run.

“I don’t care about the overlap,” Daehwi said, his voice shaking perceptibly in fear. “What’s done is done. We… We have nothing left to talk about.”

Taejoon sneered at him. “I don’t think so.”

Daehwi leaned forward to gather momentum, holding Taejoon’s gaze even as he weakened at the knees, his legs threatening to give out.

“It’s a never-ending game of cat-and-mouse with you, Daehwi-ya,” Taejoon said. “But this time…”

Daehwi broke into a sprint, ducking to the side as Taejoon clawed at him. He closed his eyes, praying for an exit.
But he simply wasn’t fast enough.

“I’ve caught you.” Trepidation and horror washed over him as he felt sturdy fingers closing around his wrist. Taejoon pulled him backwards, backing him against the balustrade. Taejoon’s hands cinched around his wrists in arrest, gripping at them tight enough to restrict his blood flow.

Tears pooled at the corner of Daehwi’s eyes, the trauma from his previous violent encounter with Taejoon washing over him.

“You should never have tried to provoke me Daehwi-ya,” Taejoon said, leaning into him and violating his personal space. “If you didn’t I would never have tried to play dirty, either. Was it so hard to accept my feelings?”

It took him forever and a day to find his voice. “I never liked you, Yoon Taejoon,” Daehwi whispered. “And I never will.”

He heard the sound of Taejoon’s pained laughter, felt the warmth of his breath against his neck.

*I can’t just wait for Jinyoung-ah to arrive,* Daehwi thought. *He has nothing to do with any of this.*

*But I’m scared. So scared.*

“If you aren’t going to give yourself to me willingly,” Taejoon said, covering Daehwi’s mouth with one hand to stifle any attempts at a scream. “Then I guess I’ll have to take you by force.”

Daehwi’s eyes squeezed shut, and just as he felt lips brushing against the skin of his neck, fear and revulsion coursed through him, along with something else he wasn’t quite expecting: burning, white-hot rage.

*Only Bae Jinyoung has the right to kiss me.*

He brought one leg upwards with all the strength he could muster, his knee colliding with the area between Taejoon’s legs.

Taejoon let out an anguished howl, releasing Daehwi instantaneously. Moments later, something heavy thudded against Taejoon’s skull, who sank to his knees in an instant.

Daehwi blinked in an attempt to gather his bearings.

“Daehwi-ya! Are you alright?” Jihoon was standing before him, looking immaculate in his black leather jacket and ripped skinny jeans, the wind whipping at his hair and making him look like he jumped straight out of an action movie.

…Except he was missing a shoe.

Daehwi gaped at him in stupefaction. “Did you… did you just knock him unconscious with your sneaker?”

“Seems like it,” Jihoon said, walking towards him. He rested his hands against both of Daehwi’s shoulders, searching his eyes for any signs of distress. “You okay?”

Daehwi nodded. “I’m fine. Thanks for helping me out.”

Jihoon smiled at him, heaving a sigh of relief. “No worries. Although I’m starting to think you weren’t in need of my help, after all.” He looked at Taejoon passed out on the floor. “Did you just permanently disable this guy’s testicles or were my eyes playing tricks on me?”
“I may have,” Daehwi confirmed. “Serves him right.”

Jihoon chuckled, his eyes twinkling in mischief and pride. “Now I know why Jinyoung likes you so much. You’re a force to be reckoned with, aren’t you?”

Daehwi smiled at Jihoon. *I know why he likes you, too.*

“Thanks for being my knight-in-shining-armor for a day,” Daehwi said. “But this guy’s probably gotten a concussion. We can’t just leave him here.”

“How do you suggest we go about this?” Jihoon asked. “I didn’t mean to knock him out cold, but the way he was manhandling you had me going haywire. Should we tell Kuanlin and Jinyoung? They’re having a chat at the other balcony.”

Daehwi shook his head vigorously. *We can’t disturb them. Not now.*

“Let’s just call a doctor ourselves,” Daehwi said.

“What if he wakes up and tries to pin the blame on us?”

“No CCTV cameras, remember? Let’s just use his own strategem against him.”

Jihoon nodded in understanding. “So we ring up the school clinic. And then what?”

“And then we get the hell out of here.”

***

“IT’S HIS BIRTHDAY?” Daehwi bellowed, insulted that Kuanlin hadn’t thought to mention something as important as his own coming into the world. “Why didn’t he tell me? I feel betrayed.”

They were sitting at one of the tables at the Imugi Café, waiting impatiently for Jisung and Sungwoon to arrive from Kirin Hall after Jihoon had sent them messages claiming an emergency in need of an immediate response.

“He never told me, either,” Jihoon explained. “I just kind of… found out, as it happens.”

Daehwi’s eyes narrowed at Jihoon suspiciously. “Were you eavesdropping into a private conversation?”

Jihoon rolled his eyes. “How come that’s the first thing you can manage to think of? Can’t I just have randomly come across the info?”

“These are dark times we’re in,” Daehwi said, trying to keep a straight face. “Trust is a luxury we can ill-afford.”

“Whatever that means,” Jihoon said, giving up on the pointless exchange. “We need to come up with a game-plan for his surprise birthday party.”

“Cake sounds nice,” Daehwi suggested. “I know chocolate is Kuanlin’s favorite. We can all just pitch in to buy him one from Jisung-hyung’s Imugi collection.”

“I have a better idea,” Jihoon said, grinning at him impishly. He extricated his phone from within the depths of his jacket pocket, dialling Woojin’s number.

“Hey Woojin-ah,” Jihoon exclaimed after Woojin picked up successfully. “Buy us a cake for
Kuanlin’s birthday.”

Daehwi leaned in to listen into the conversation, straining to hear Woojin’s response from the other end of the line. “Why am I shouldering the entire cost all of a sudden? What’s in it for me?”

“Just this once,” Jihoon pleaded. “If you buy him one, AND IT HAS TO BE CHOCOLATE, I’ll let you join the group we’re planning on for the Idol Project.”

“Did you say group? Who’s in it?”

“No one special,” Jihoon said, winking at Daehwi. “Just you and me, the birthday boy, my best friend, Jisung-hyung and his boyfriend, musical genius Lee Daehwi, actor extraordinaire Ong Seongwoo, Council President Kang Daniel, vocal legend Kim Jaehwan, Minhyun-seonsaengnim, and I thought you– “

“CHOCOLATE CAKE, WAS IT?” Daehwi heard Woojin yelling through the phone. “SAY NO MORE.”

Woojin hung-up a second later, both Jihoon and Daehwi erupting into fits of uncontrollable laughter.

“That went well,” Daehwi observed. “Woojin-hyung seems like a fun guy to be around.”

Before Jihoon could passionately refute Daehwi’s statement, the door to the café flew open.

“We’re back,” Jisung said, appearing through the door, his boyfriend in tow.

“Are these your customers?” Jisung’s boyfriend asked, walking towards the both of them. Daehwi was surprised to find that they were about the same height, as Daehwi had gotten used to craning his head upwards just to look people in the eye.

“I’m Ha Sungwoon,” Jisung’s boyfriend introduced himself. “You are?”

“Lee Daehwi,” Daehwi said, bowing politely in greeting. He gestured towards Jihoon. “This is a friend of mine, Park Jihoon. But you already know him, since he works at the café part-time. ”

Jihoon bowed politely at Sungwoon as well, who nodded at the both of them approvingly.

“Well-mannered children you’ve got here,” Sungwoon exclaimed, turning to Jisung. “You sure these are Daniel’s friends?”

“You’re starting to sound like my grandma, Sungwoon-ie,” Jisung said. “And just let Daniel be, for once. He’s the one who managed to convince us to audition for the Idol Project, after all.”

“You’re auditioning?” Daehwi asked, unable to hide his excitement. “That’s great news, hyung!”

“You’ll make it in,” Jihoon assured them. “And if you do, you’ll make a great leader.”

Jisung smiled at the both of them, and Sungwoon beamed at Jisung with pride.

“Let’s not count our chickens before they’re hatched,” Jisung said. “Speaking of Seongwoo and Daniel, though… where have those two been these past few hours? Neither of them are answering their phones.”

“Aren’t they in their room?” Jihoon suggested.
Jisung shook his head worriedly. “I checked the room a couple of minutes ago. It’s empty.”

“That’s strange,” Daehwi observed. “It isn’t like Seongwoo-hyung at all to ignore a phone call. And what’ll we do if Kuanlin asks for them?”

“Make something up,” Jisung replied. “I’ll say I’ve sent them on an errand, or something. Truthfully, I bet those two are probably just out on a date somewhere and are not-so-subtly trying to tell us not to disturb their peace and quiet.”

“I second that motion,” Sungwoon agreed. “Besides, once we manage to establish contact, we should probably ask them to buy Kuanlin a birthday gift, anyway.”

The four of them nodded at each other in mutual concession.

“You guys head inside the kitchen first,” Jisung said. “Let me just deal with this customer for a moment. He’s been bombarding my phone with messages asking for me to reserve him some chocolate cake.”

“A new customer?” Jihoon inquired.

Jisung swiped at the screen of his mobile phone. “Seems like it. Any of you know a certain Park Woojin?”

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Park Woojin was a mess.

Daehwi found it hard to imagine that this was the same guy who danced so effortlessly to ‘Blood, Sweat and Tears’ just a couple of hours prior, and Daehwi couldn’t help but gape at Woojin as he ate, flecks of sauce dotting his chin as he slurped hungrily at his ramyeon noodles.

The surprise for Kuanlin had been a success, and Woojin did manage to buy him a cake on time. Kuanlin and Jihoon were sharing a slice of it between them at the table across from them, and Daehwi couldn’t help but check on Jinyoung every now and then just to see if the sight of them was causing him any discomfort. He didn’t seem to think so, although he supposed such indifference was a side-effect of his wonderment at Woojin’s ability to fit impossible quantities of noodle into his mouth in one go.

“Hyung,” Jinyoung said, watching the noodles disappear into Woojin’s mouth at an alarming rate. “When was the last time you had a proper meal? You look like you haven’t eaten in ages.”

“A proper meal?” Woojin said in between helpings. “Sorry, but I don’t think the term exists in my vocabulary.” He lifted the bowl to his lips, using his chopsticks to empty it of its contents.

“Hey kid,” Sungwoon called out from the table adjacent to theirs, addressing Woojin. “Have your tastebuds been deactivated, or have I simply forgotten how to read in Korean? Because I could’ve sworn that packet you’ve emptied read ‘Samyang Super Spicy Fire Noodles’, and there’s no way you could’ve managed to scarf down the entire thing in a matter of seconds.”

“Speak for yourself,” Woojin countered. “I’m not the one who can drink four bottles of soju in one night and can’t even be bothered to pour the damn thing into a shot glass.”

Sungwoon cast him an offended glare. “Hey! Just because I bought four of them tonight doesn’t mean I plan on binge-drinking the lot.” He held up an empty glass for Woojin to see. “And if this isn’t what you call a shot glass, then I don’t know what is.”
Jisung grinned at Sungwoon knowingly. “But remember that one time when—” Sungwoon brought a finger to Jisung’s lips, silencing him. “Not now, honey. The children are listening.”

Daehwi and Jinyoung exchanged troubled looks.

“Seriously though,” Jihoon chimed in. “Who even brings four bottles of soju to a high school crawling with minors? It’s a good thing Jisung-hyung closed the café early.”

“Besides, hyung,” Daehwi added. “You didn’t have to forego Kuanlin’s birthday surprise just to pay the nearest convenience store a visit.”

“Didn’t I help prepare for all this?” Sungwoon said. “They were having a promo, if you must know, and promos are friends to adults in this economy. My broke ass has to pay the bills, somehow.”

“Yeah,” Daehwi agreed. “By not wasting your money on alcohol.”

Sungwoon threw his hands up in the air. “Why does everyone think I’m a drunkard all of a sudden? I didn’t buy these for myself. Blame Ongniel and Minhwan for not making it on time.”

“Onghwan who?” Woojin asked, still picking at the leftover noodles on his plate. “Am I missing something here?”

“Don’t mind him,” Jisung said. “He’s just taken it upon himself to give our friends proper couple names.”

Kuanlin raised his hand eagerly. “What’s a ‘promo’? Sounds like fun.”

Jihoon supressed a laugh. “I see you still haven’t moved past that.”

They went on like that for a couple more minutes, bickering and quibbling about, poking fun at each other. Kuanlin seemed to be having the most fun out of them, and Daehwi felt a surge of accomplishment in knowing that they had managed to make him happy for his birthday.

At that moment, Daehwi’s stomach grumbled, silencing the rest of them.

“Are you hungry, Daehwi-ya?” Jinyoung asked him with genuine concern.

“I can whip up a fresh batch of noodles, if you’d like,” Woojin offered. “Just don’t ask me why I lug around a pot to cook them in.”

Woojin disappeared into the kitchen, and within minutes had managed to serve up another plate of steaming hot ramyeon, the scent of roasted chicken assailing his senses.

“Proceed with caution,” Woojin said, handing him a pair of chopsticks. “These noodles take some getting used to.”

Daehwi accepted the chopsticks, eyeing the plate warily, wondering if was about to do something he’d eventually regret. His stomach grumbled in response, as if to say, *just go for it already.*

Daehwi brought the noodles to his lips, biting hungrily into a handful all at once. He chewed at them tentatively, letting the savory taste of chicken simmer in his mouth.

*Hmm,* he thought. *This isn’t half bad.*

And then, all at once, his mouth burned at the overwhelming strength of the seasoning, the
blistering aftertaste scalding his tongue. He blew out a hasty breath, scrambling out of his seat.

The only thing he could think of was: *I need a glass of water.*

“Daehwi-ya, what are you—“ Jinyoung began.

But before any of them had a chance to stop him, Daehwi had made his way to Sungwoon and Jisung’s table, downing the contents of the nearest glass.

All at once he coughed and sputtered, an unfamiliar taste stinging his throat.

“Oh no,” Sungwoon said, a horrified expression on his face as he stared at the empty shot glass before him. “Daehwi-ya, that isn’t water.”

“Oh god,” Jinyoung exclaimed, scurrying to his feet and running towards the kitchen to retrieve a bottle of water. He returned to Daehwi in a matter of seconds, pressing the mouth of the bottle to his lips.

Daehwi gulped down the refreshing beverage, trying frantically to wash away the horrible taste from his mouth.

“Is he going to be okay?” Jihoon asked, alarmed at the sudden turn of events. “I don’t think a body as skinny as his can tolerate alcohol very well.”

“This must be his first time too,” Kuanlin added. “It might’ve been just one glass, but we never know what could happen.”

“Just how spicy are those noodles of yours, anyway?” Jinyoung asked, glowering at Woojin. “Daehwi looked like his tongue was about to ignite into flames and melt right off.”

“I gave him the 2x Spicy ones,” Woojin said. “Those were the only ones I had left.”

“2X SPICY?” Jinyoung repeated. “Are you out of your mind?”

Woojin looked to Daehwi guiltily. “I did warn him about it, but I wasn’t expecting him to launch himself at Sungwoon-hyung’s table just then. Was that… was that my fault?”

“It might have been mine,” Sungwoon cut in. “You’re right. This was a bad idea.”

Daehwi shook his head then. “It isn’t either of your faults. I shouldn’t… I shouldn’t have done that in the first place.”

Jisung sighed, rising to his feet. “This is no time to be pointing fingers,” he said, turning to Jinyoung and ushering him towards the exit. “Just get Daehwi out of here for now. I have a nagging feeling that he’s type to get drunk all too easily, so we’d best make sure he’s safely tucked in bed before the unthinkable happens.”

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Daehwi’s mind was spinning.

His legs had turned into jelly, and he found himself unable to walk in a straight line for extended periods of time without Jinyoung’s arm having to wrap around his waist to steady his movements.

“I think you’re getting tipsy,” Jinyoung said. They were at the outdoor walkway, almost to the residence halls, so close and yet so far away. “I should probably carry you to the dormitory from
“No,” Daehwi insisted, his head whirling out of control. “Let’s stop to rest here for a while.” He pointed to one of the benches that lined the circumference of the outdoor plaza, tugging at Jinyoung’s arm. Jinyoung let himself get dragged away, settling himself beside Daehwi as he sat down.

“Hyung,” Daehwi began. “I think my consciousness is headed for a different dimension.”

Jinyoung nodded. “Sure, Daehwi-ya. Which is why we should probably get a move on before it reaches its destination.”

Daehwi shook his head once. “I don’t think so. Why is the plaza so quiet anyway? Where did everyone go?”

“Promotion exams,” Jinyoung replied. “Class F is still performing, and the rest of them have probably retreated to their bedrooms. It’s a tiring day, after all.”

Daehwi leaned against the backrest, feeling lightheaded enough to topple over without support. “Then why haven’t you?”

Jinyoung looked at him then, his eyes traveling across Daehwi’s body. “I can’t just leave you, Daehwi-ya,” he said. “I have to make sure you return safely to your bedroom.”

“And Jihoon-hyung? Aren’t you supposed to be with him?”

“He’s with Kuanlin-ah right now. And he doesn’t need me half as much as you do, at the moment.”

_If I tell him the truth… is he going to believe me? I’m drunk and can’t even think straight. And yet…_

Daehwi reached for Jinyoung’s hand, which jolted in suprise at his touch. They looked at each other for a long moment, as if the rest of the world had crumbled into the dust and the only thing they had left was each other.

“Then why don’t you just love me, instead?” Daehwi asked him, his own voice a maddening echo in his ears.

_Drunken mouths speak sober words._

Jinyoung smiled tenderly at him. “Why don’t I just love you, huh?” Jinyoung leaned against the backrest, mimicking Daehwi’s position. He looked upwards at the constellations of stars, each one weaving intricate webs of light across the darkness.

And Daehwi, unable to tear his gaze away, watched him as he watched the stars flickering like lamps against the grand canvas of the autumn sky, transfixed by his beauty as he lay there underneath the blanket of the infinite cosmos.

Jinyoung’s hand moved to clutch at his heart. “This thing inside of me…” he said. “It’s asking me the same thing.”

Daehwi closed his eyes, in partial surrender to the torrent of sleep washing over him. “Do you remember… me telling you I’d help you get over him?”
“Mmm,” he heard Jinyoung say. “I remember.”

Daehwi reopened his eyes, hearing the comforting sound of music playing beyond an invisible skyline.

*My heartstring melody.*

*What is it saying?*

“Do you wish,” Daehwi said. “For me to show you how?”

Jinyoung looked at him, the very same way he always wished to be looked at. With longing, and with hunger, like the sun slowly making its descent downwards to kiss the sea glittering gold in the horizon.

*My heartstring melody.*

*It says: go for it.*

*Lay your heart bare.*

*And love him, until your heart bursts aflame and sets the world on fire.*

Daehwi reached for Jinyoung, cupping his cheeks gently, looking straight into his eyes.

Lost in their color, as vivid as the night sky.

And within those eyes, he found himself. Crooked, bent, and yet entirely unbroken, each one a mirror to his delicate soul.

“Daehwi?” Jinyoung’s voice echoed in his ears.

But the voice of his heart carried a much louder sound, thundering so ferociously within him.

He leaned in without a moment’s hesitation, pressing his lips tenderly against Jinyoung’s.

“Soft,” was the very first word Daehwi could think of, as his thoughts crashed into one another, his ability to reason collapsing into a blundering heap. *His lips are really soft.* Daehwi opened his eyes, pulling momentarily away to look at Jinyoung before him.

Jinyoung was staring at him in wide-eyed surprise, his lower lip quivering ever so slightly.

“D-Daehwi-ya, that…” Jinyoung stuttered, unsure of where to begin.

“One more,” Daehwi whispered.

Jinyoung’s eyes traveled downwards from his eyes to his lips, their cherry red color already in splotches.

“Is this…” Jinyoung blinked at him. “Is this a dream?”

Daehwi’s hands moved downwards from Jinyoung’s cheek to his chest, tugging slightly at his shirt to pull him forward.

“If you hold yourself back less in your dreams,” Daehwi told him. “Then yes. That’s all it is.”

Their lips met a second time, Daehwi sighing against the taste of him, peppermint leaves and iced
Daehwi’s eager lips moved to part Jinyoung’s slowly, waiting for him to offer resistance.

There was none.

But more than not trying to stop him, Jinyoung kissed him back.

And that was when the sky broke open and everything Daehwi knew of the world crumbled away, to make space for a reality he never knew could exist.

Jinyoung’s hands moved to his neck, thumbs caressing his cheek gently, fingers trembling against his feverish skin. Daehwi’s eyes squeezed shut, and for a while the world seemed to stop in its tracks. The stars seemed to give up twinkling, suspended in motion. The moon seemed to pause temporarily in orbit, and only their hands and lips moved against each other.

Taking. And receiving just as much.

No. This can’t just be a dream.

Jinyoung pulled away then, the scent of his shampoo and cologne an addicting perfume wafting through the air.

Daehwi watched him beneath heavy-lidded eyes.

“That’s enough,” Jinyoung said, taking Daehwi by the wrists, whose fists were still knotted into his shirt. “Any more than that and you’re going to kiss me insane.”

Daehwi looked at him longingly, begging him silently for another kiss.

“Please don’t look at me like that,” Jinyoung told him. “You’re drunk, Daehwi-ya. My self-control has its limitations, and I’m not letting you do anything you’re bound to regret once you’ve managed to recover.”

Daehwi insisted, frowning. “One more.”

“Ah,” Jinyoung exclaimed, ruffling his fingers agitatedly though his air. “Someday, you’re just going to drive me nuts. And I’m just going to let you do it.”

Jinyoung leaned towards him, pulling at his slim waist with one hand and planting an innocent kiss upon his cheek. “There. Just to appease you.”

Daehwi smiled at him, giggling softly.

“On my back,” Jinyoung urged, bending on one knee against the untrimmed grass of the outdoor plaza. “I’ll carry you home.”

Daehwi wrapped both arms around Jinyoung’s neck, letting Jinyoung sweep him off his feet and onto his back. Jinyoung’s strong, sturdy hands held him tightly, making sure he wouldn’t accidentally fall off.

The memory of their kiss swam past him, hovering briefly in the air before drifting gently away. Daehwi sighed contentedly against Jinyoung’s back.
My heartstring melody.

What is it saying?

“I love you, Jinyoung-ah,” Daehwi whispered. “So much, it hurts.”


It says: love him.

Until he says he loves you back.

Daehwi closed his eyes slowly, then began counting once more in his head.

One. The number of days we’ve known each other for.

Daehwi rested his head against the back of Jinyoung’s, breathing into his neck.


Two. The number of minutes it took for me to fall so hopelessly and catastrophically in love with you.

His arms tightened around Jinyoung’s, his eyes squeezing shut, the alcohol in his system threatening to overtake his consciousness.

“Are you asleep?” Jinyoung asked him, bending forwards slightly in an attempt to steady his grip against the back of Daehwi’s thighs. From an angle, Daehwi could see the glossy patch of skin on Jinyoung’s cheek, the lip-shaped mark he left there still untouched.

Three. The number of kisses we’ve shared, each one just as sweet as you are.

Daehwi smiled to himself, giggling in helpless intoxication. He pressed another kiss against the back of Jinyoung’s neck.

“Hey!” Jinyoung exclaimed, utterly taken aback. “This is getting out of hand, seriously.”

“Doesn’t it feel nice, Jinyoung-ah?” Daehwi asked him. “I’ll give you more of them if they do.”

The sound of Jinyoung’s laughter resonated through the chilly night air. “Sure, but if you attack me with more of them, I might end up dropping you to the ground. The last thing I’d want is for you to get hurt, so let’s save all the kisses for later.”

Daehwi nodded in perfect understanding, despite the alcohol screwing with his mental capabilities, the bitter aftertaste of soju still lingering and stinging at his throat every so often. Jinyoung bent himself forwards slightly, attempting to steady his grip against the back of Daehwi’s thighs.

Four. The number of times you’ve held me in your arms, just as terrified of letting go as I am.

Daehwi’s eyes fluttered, his vision blurring at the seams. Anytime now, and the world will fade to black.

“I want more of them, Jinyoung-ah,” Daehwi whispered, his consciousness slipping away. “Those numbers we share between us. I want more.”

Against the current of sleep washing over him, Daehwi heard Jinyoung’s voice in reply.
Stirring his heartstring melody, bringing its gentle song to new life.

I’ll give you anything, Daehwi-ya.

For you, anything.

***

Daehwi woke up the next day to a splintering headache, his hair sticking out in various directions and his mouth tasting distinctly like death. He groaned audibly, bringing the tips of his fingers to his temple where it throbbed uncontrollably. He blinked a couple of times to reset his vision, the light from the early-morning sun forging through the bedroom window.

Daehwi angled himself upwards, resting his forearms against the mattress to take stock of his surroundings. He noticed the triangular clock ticking steadily across from him, its face reading 7:32 AM.

Not mine, Daehwi thought.

He looked to his side at the mahogany desk drawer adjacent to the bed, littered with multi-colored Post-Its taped haphazardly to its surface. Reminders were scribbled hastily onto them in handwriting he couldn’t quite understand, let alone recognize.

Not mine, either.

Daehwi looked to the nearest wall, where individual posters for each I.O.I. member were plastered messily and at odd angles, Pinky’s smack dab in the center.

Daehwi’s eyes narrowed. Something isn’t quite right here.

He attempted to remove the blanket from atop his legs, but for some mystifying reason it wouldn’t budge, no matter how forcefully he jerked at it. Daehwi grunted in irritation, turning his head to the side.

Jinyoung was lying on the bed right beside him, watching him closely, head propped against one arm.

Jinyoung flashed him a blinding smile. “Good morning.”

At that very instant, Daehwi let out an ear-splitting scream. Jinyoung’s eyes widened in shock as he scrambled into a sitting position to move a hand swiftly over Daehwi’s mouth.

“Stop that,” Jinyoung said. “You’re disturbing the neighbors.” He pointed behind him to the bed across from them, where Kim Jaehwan was snoring loudly, surprisingly undisturbed. Daehwi squinted at him, noticing that his noise-cancelling headphones were still in place.

“Does he…” Daehwi began, his mind still reeling in utter confusion. “Does he normally wear those to bed?”

“The headphones? No.”

“Then why is…”

“Let’s just say he had a prophetic vision last night telling him that someone would come for him at daybreak to jolt him awake with their high-pitched screeching.”
“Sorry about that,” Daehwi apologized. “I just… I have no idea what I’m doing here.”

“About that,” Jinyoung began. “I couldn’t manage to find the keys to your bedroom once we arrived at your door, and I couldn’t shake you out of your slumber no matter how hard I tried, so against my better judgment I decided to carry you to our room instead.” He cocked his head at Jaehwan. “And don’t worry, this guy has no idea you’re here. I hid you underneath the blankets and pretended I was cuddling a pillow instead of an actual human being.”

Outwardly, Daehwi simply gave a brisk nod of his head in comprehension. Inwardly, however, the only thing he could think of was: **We cuddled for an entire night? How and why did I manage to sleep through all this?**

“How are you feeling?” Jinyoung asked him then, pressing the back of his hand against Daehwi’s forehead. “Does your head still hurt?”

“A little bit.” Daehwi closed his eyes, straining to recall the things that happened last night.

“Was it your first time?” Jinyoung asked. “Drinking alcohol?”

*Alcohol.* Images from the night before flashed before him like a movie sequence.

Woojin’s plate of fire noodles. The burning sensation in his throat.

Four bottles of soju and one shot glass, emptied entirely of its contents.

“My first time drinking alcohol,” Daehwi repeated absently.

“Yeah,” Jinyoung said. “Although it seems you’ve forcibly taken a lot of firsts from me, too.”

Daehwi stared at him in dread. “What do you mean by that?”

Jinyoung grinned at him, mischief dancing in his eyes. “My first onstage duet, my first taste of soju and fire noodle... my first kiss.”

Daehwi let escape an inhuman sound. “Your first WHAT?”

"The soju and fire noodles, I tasted from your mouth indirectly," Jinyoung said. “Interesting flavor combo. But all those things you did to me...” He folded his hands across his chest as if to curl into a defensive position. "You’ve already managed to forget? How could you Daehwi-ya?"

At that very moment, the rest of the night played out in shocking detail, the lucid memory of stolen kisses tearing Daehwi asunder.

“Oh god,” Daehwi exclaimed. “OH GOD.”

“Daehwi-ya,” Jinyoung said, laughing softly at him. “Calm down.”

“I’m so sorry,” Daehwi burst out. “I didn’t mean to. It’s just that I was starving and gobbled up the ramyeon in one go and my mouth felt like it was being scorched in one fell swoop and I—"

“Hey, calm down.”

“—and I had forgotten about Sungwoon-hyung’s drinking habits and the soju and OHMYGODI’MSOSORRYIreallyreallydidn’tmeantokissyouevenifI’vekindabbeenwantingtoandyou’reana—“
“DAEHWI-YA, JUST CALM DOWN.”

Jinyoung shook Daehwi out of his delirium, pressing both of his cheeks together. “Calm down, for once. I’m not mad at you, alright? No need to go ballistic.”

Tears pooled in Daehwi’s eyes anyway, a tidal wave of guilt flooding through him. “But your first kiss, I… I never meant to…”

“I know,” Jinyoung assured him, wiping at the corners of Daehwi’s eyes with his thumb. “I know that already. But I kissed you back, remember? It isn’t just your fault. So please don’t start telling me you’re regretting what you’ve done, because that would upset me more than anything.”

Jinyoung peeled his gaze away, both hands falling to his sides. “It was a good memory, Daehwi-ya. So let me keep it. I’ll… I’ll give you proper kisses in the future, but I don’t want to have to forget about this one, either.”

Daehwi stared at him in wonderment, then slapped himself across one cheek.


Jinyoung laughed at him. “What was that for?”

“Sorry. A part of me still thinks I’ve been waylaid in a dream. I was just trying to swim ashore to reality.”

Jinyoung watched him then, his gaze falling to Daehwi’s lips. Daehwi bit at them consciously, looking away from Jinyoung in a pointless attempt to circumvent his piercing gaze.

“That was your first kiss too, wasn’t it?” Jinyoung asked.

Daehwi nodded. “It was. Of course it was.” He recalled the great lengths he had to go to in order to protect his virgin lips, most of them against Taejoon’s unrelenting advancements.

It never crossed his mind that one day, he’d give his first kiss away under the influence of alcohol.

“Daehwi-ya,” Jinyoung whispered, tilting Daehwi’s head upwards to look at him. “I can tell that you’re still beating yourself up over this. And I know it’s because I’ve asked for you to wait.”

You’re right, Daehwi thought. You’ve asked for me to wait, and I just couldn’t do it.

“But I’ve gotten sick of waiting,” Jinyoung said. “So I’m not going to ask you to do the same.”

Daehwi stared at Jinyoung in uncertainty. “Then… what am I supposed to do?”

“Anything. Anything at all. If you want to hug me until I’m out of breath, go ahead. If you want to kiss me senseless, go ahead.”

Jinyoung took Daehwi’s hands in both of his, pressing them to his cheeks. “And if you want me to fall in love with you, then I will.”

Daehwi could find no words to say, and nothing would ever have been enough to express what he had felt in that moment. He simply watched as Jinyoung entwined their fingers together, the warmth of his skin intimate and reassuring.

Alright. I’ll make you fall in love with me.
“I’ve been meaning to ask you this,” Jinyoung said. “But these bruises on your wrist… where did these come from?”

Daehwi followed Jinyoung’s gaze to patches of skin on either of his wrists, streaked a sickening shade of violet.

“Tell me,” Jinyoung repeated. “Who did this to you?”

Daehwi sighed deeply, the memory of his encounter with Taejoon filling him with discomfort. “I met Yoon Taejoon at the outdoor balcony last night. Long story short, I may have damaged his reproductive system, and I’m not feeling even the slightest ounce of remorse because of it.”

Jinyoung drew in a breath. “I don’t think people like him should be spawning themselves anyway. Although you should probably be telling me these things from now on, because I need to know how best to protect you.”

Daehwi nodded, regarding Jinyoung with a smile that reached his eyes and crinkled them at the corners. Jinyoung smiled back at him, then pressed tender kisses to each of wrists, as if to heal his wounds.

“Now that that’s settled... want to grab some breakfast with me?” Jinyoung suggested.

Daehwi nodded, exhilaration and fear beginning to ebb and flow within him, at odds with each other within the deepest hollows of his heart.

*I’m so happy, Jinyoung-ah.*

*So when the day comes that all this will have to end... what will become of me then?*

But Daehwi said nothing, and simply let Jinyoung take him by the hand and lead him out the door.

“Let’s head to the Café,” Jinyoung said. “It’s back in the swing of business, so I’ll treat you to something nice.”

Daehwi squeezed Jinyoung’s hand, content to follow him anywhere, even to the ends of the earth.

*I’ll go anywhere, Jinyoung-ah.*

*With you, anywhere.*

~JINHWI 4 END~

Chapter End Notes

So, uhm... yeah, that just happened :D I'm not sure if anyone was expecting for the Jinhwi kiss to come first (or for it come at all) but I've been playing around with the idea of an accidentally-drunk Daehwi for a while now, so there you have it xD I didn't manage to reduce this chapter to below 10k words, but I don't think most of you mind the lengths of them anyway, especially because I don't update fast enough (so sorry about that. I'm a graduating senior in college, and life is tough at this point D:) The
thing is though, I may have found a pattern to what the couples like doing best: Panwink likes hugs, Jinhwi likes kisses, and Ongniel likes... doing naughty things together lol. So expect more kisses to come in the future! As this is my first work of fiction, this is also my very first time writing a kissing scene, so I hope you guys liked it. If not, I'll do better next time ;-;

By the by, the number engraved on Jinyoung's ring doesn't mean anything important, it's just his birthday (May 10, 2000, or written another way, 5/10/00, and those digits just add up to 15), so I hope you didn't start overthinking that one, as it's come to my attention that some of my readers have been starting their own theories with regards to what's about to happen next in this story, which is SO COOL. I think Ongniel should be the biggest mystery, though, and just to build up anticipation for Daniel's chapter, they're not missing in action because they're out on a date. Something else is going on between them, so please prepare for lots of angst T.T It shouldn't be anything too complicated though. By the way, if any of you are confused by the timelines to these chapters, this chapter happens at around the same time that the previous one does, so Daehwi and Jinyoung's little breaktime date at the cafe happened before the Pandeeip moment in Kuanlin's chapter (and no, Jinyoung didn't actually get to congratulate him. The conversation got sidetracked by other things, as you know). Also, the Samyang 2x Spicy Fire Noodles Woojin served Daehwi are THE REAL DEAL. They sell them at my school so I've tried them, and BOY ARE THEY HOT (just like the next Ongniel chapter, wink wink ;) Lol kidding idk I haven't written it xD). Anyway, that's it for this update~ See you guys next time, and as always thanks for reading <3

“Wake up, Euigyeon-ah,” I hear a soft, sylph-like voice call out. A hand nudges at my shoulder gently. “Wake up. It’s the first day of school.”

I get up slowly, rubbing the tiredness out of my eyes. As they adjust to the unfolding scenery, I begin to wonder at where exactly I am, still dazed from a restful night’s sleep. Two eyes shaped like almonds peer at me, and I realize that a small, willowy figure is sitting at the edge of my bed, hands clasped together on her lap.

“Auntie,” I say, smiling at her in recognition. “It’s the first day of school!”

“Yes it is,” she says, stroking my hair affectionately. “So you’d better get up and out of bed before the school bus departs. First impressions matter, after all.”

I nod my head, thinking of what the kids at my new school might be like, as I moved into auntie’s small, one-bedroom apartment in Jamsil last week. It’s a beautiful district in Seoul, which means that I have to transfer into a new school in the city as well. I don’t fully understand the process of moving in as the current school year is in progress, but I don’t particularly mind. I’m not the one responsible for all the heavy paperwork anyway.

“You’re the best, auntie,” I say, wrapping both arms around her. “I’m really excited for today.”

“It does seem like it,” she says, patting my arms fondly. “My, my. You certainly have gotten quite a bit healthier over the summer, haven’t you?”

Shame fills me, and my arms fall to my sides with a heavy thud. I pout at auntie accusingly. “I’m sorry for being fat.”

She laughs, and the trilling sound of it is a gentle comfort to my ears. “I never said you were. Besides, it’s normal for kids your age to grow in size.” She reaches for me and tickles my tummy, and I giggle as she does so, swatting her hand away. She smiles and pinches my cheek instead.

“I’m just happy you’ve been eating well,” she tells me. “The decades I’ve worked as a cook haven’t been for naught if it means I get to make food for you to heartily gobble up at record speed.”

“The way I always do,” I agree. “No escape even for the smallest grain of rice. Auntie, I think I like your cooking more than I like you already.”

“Is that so?” she says. “Well then. You’d better be out of bed in fifteen seconds, young man, or else the table will have been emptied by the time you arrive at the dining area. I’ve made your favorite, so it’d be a shame if—“

“IS IT TOAST?” I interrupt, my mouth watering at the sound of breakfast. I scramble out of bed, and race past her out the door.

Pleasant laughter fills the air. “Well, now. Wasn’t that easy?”
The table is loaded with sumptuous treats of all kinds: cakes, pastries, red bean and jam-filled breads, omelettes, eggs, and other delicacies I’ve never seen in my life, which I assume must’ve been baked with foreign recipes in mind. I gawk at the sight, feasting my eyes on the appetizing display before me. The toast is sitting on a massive plate at the very center of everything. “Is this… is this all for me?”

“Don’t think you’ve gotten that lucky,” Auntie says as she materializes behind me. “Most of these are for the bakery.”

“Oh,” I say dejectedly. “May I have the plate of toast then? Pretty please?”

“If you promise me you’ll have fun in school today,” she tells me. “I’ll pack the toast into your lunchbox.”

I beam at her happily. “YAY! I’ll do my best to make friends, auntie. I have a feeling that the people here are nice.”

A look of forlornness passes through her features. “Are you sure you’re alright? If someone teases you again, don’t hesitate to tell me about them. I may only be a fragile, old lady, but that doesn’t mean I’ll let anyone get away with bullying you.”

She walks towards me slowly, then envelops me in a tight embrace. “Not again. Your mother worries about you enough, as it is.”

I nod at her sadly. “Tell mom not to worry. I’ll do my best.”

I don’t want to get bullied either, I think. But even if I do, I may have already gotten used to it enough for it not to matter.

I sigh resignedly against auntie’s arms. It shouldn’t matter. Right?


Saturdays are my favorite days of the week. Not too surprising, because Saturdays are everyone’s favorite day of the week. My new school, Jamsil Elementary, doesn’t give out homework on the weekends either, which means that I get to enjoy freedom outdoors for the day. I asked auntie last night if she could tour me around Seoul, but she’s told me that she’s about to head out to the wet market, and I don’t think that’s any fun to explore at all.

So instead, I’ve been given permission to traipse about the neighborhood, as long as I don’t manage to get lost.

I attempt to change into a shirt beforehand, but I find it difficult to fit my arms through the shirt holes, so I give up and dig around the closet for a baggier sweatshirt, even though it’s much too hot outside to be wearing sleeves, and sweatshirts don’t really wear baggy on me, either. I remind myself to size up for the next purchase, as I think I’ve grown even bigger and don’t plan on giving up on food just to fit into my existing wardrobe.

I realize that I’ve made a mess by burrowing into my cabinet drawers and tossing everything into a cluttered heap on the floor, but I’m way too impatient to reorganize everything, so I simply grab my Walkman from underneath the duvet, dashing out of the room and praying that I return home before auntie does.
Once I step out of the apartment building, the rays of the sun hit my face, and I am forced to avert my gaze from the blinding afternoon lights. Did it ever get this hot in Busan? The climate over there is much milder.

I scan the vicinity, wondering in which direction I should go to kickstart my mini-expedition around Jamsil. The streets seem busier due west, so I decide to walk that way first.

As I walk, I take note of the architecture around the residential area. Multiple lot areas are occupied by towering buildings that reach to the skies, and I squint up at them in amazement. My neighbourhood in Busan is much different, where the houses are spaced far apart instead of cramped together, and most are only one to two stories tall. Around the corner of the apartment complex is a large market, and I walk into the busy hubbub of shop costumers as they look through various knick knacks and haggle with peddlers. Smoke rises from where street food tents are located, the delicious scent of grilled tteokbokki and dakocchi assailing my nostrils, making me hungry even though I just ate. I walk towards one of them as if in a trance, wondering if I carried enough money to buy myself a chicken skewer or two.

I fish around the pockets of my jeans and come up empty. Oh well. There’s always a next time.

As I’m about to walk away, I catch sight of a tall, lanky boy standing near one of the stalls across from me. Immediately we make eye-contact and I startle, wondering how long he’s been staring at me. Do I know him? I think. If not, why is he eyeing me so intently? Do I look funny? I whip my head in either direction just to make sure he isn’t looking elsewhere. Besides myself, I don’t see anyone around apart from the shop vendor and his customers, backs turned to the boy in question.

I look back at him then, jumping in surprise as I realize he’s now only a few feet away and brisk-walking towards me. I blink at him in confusion. What does he want from me? I think, panicking inwardly. Have I offended him, somehow?

The boy reaches for me at that moment, and both his hands land on my shoulder. My eyes widen in bewilderment, as I take in the sight of him just inches away from my face.

“You,” he begins. I gulp nervously, anticipating a complaint. “Where’d you get that sweatshirt?”

I cough, releasing the breath I’d been holding, clarity and relief flooding through me. “I, uhm… it was a gift.” I stare down at myself, regarding the pastel pink sweatshirt I’d gotten for my tenth birthday, which had a picture of Super Junior’s Eunhyuk screen-printed across the front of it.

“Really?” The boy said, looking at me in awe. “That’s amazing! You listen to Super Junior?”

I nod, enthused by the prospect of launching into a lengthy conversation regarding my favorite idol group. “I do. Eunhyuk-hyung’s my favorite.”

“Cool! I rarely meet people my age who like them as much as I do,” the boy says, eyes twinkling in delight. “Most of the fans I meet at concerts are noonas, which kinda sucks because they like to pinch my cheeks a lot, and that really hurts as I don’t like having to push girls away.”

“You go to concerts?” I say, wishing I could go too. “Sounds nice.”

“It is,” he agrees. “What’s your favorite song? I love you!”

I gape at him, dumbfounded that I managed to receive a confession from a random stranger. In English, no less. Should I politely reject him? I don’t know what this means. I’m only eleven!

“You like the song, too?” the boy continues, looking at me expectantly. It takes me a while to
realize that he meant to say that he loved ‘U’, the hit song Super Junior released a year ago. I laugh nervously, ashamed of myself.

“Yeah, I love ‘U’ too,” I say. An awkward silence passes between us. “But, uhm… my favorite’s ‘Don’t Don’. I like the beat.”

“Don’t Don’s my second favorite!” the boy exclaims, grinning from ear to ear. He relaxes his death grip on my shoulders. “Did you want to become an idol, too?”

I shake my head, laughing at so preposterous an idea. “Me? I can’t dance. I’m much too fat to be sticking my limbs out at odd angles the way they do in music videos.”

“Why does it matter if you’re a little plump?” The boy argues, catching me entirely off guard. *Don’t appearances always matter? If they don’t, then I’ve suffered all these years for nothing.*

“You’re a fan of them aren’t you?” he says. “Super Junior. Then surely, you must know that one of the members is built the way you are, and next to Eunhyuk-hyung, he’s the best at dancing.”

I blinked at him in confusion. He might’ve been right, but members like that were more the exception as opposed to the norm. Furthermore, the idea of becoming an idol never crossed my mind. *I wouldn’t even dare. Why does he think I have what it takes? I’m ugly, I’m fat, I can’t dance.*


“The problem with never trying,” he says. “Is that you’re bound to miss out on something life-changing.”

He walks towards the street food tent, gesturing for me to follow along.

“If you wanted to learn,” he says excitedly. “I think I could help you. Ahjusshi, two *dakkoхи* skewers, please!”

Once he receives the *dakkoхи* and pays for them in exchange, he hands one over to me. “Here you go. My treat for—”

I grab the stick from him mid-sentence and bite into the juicy flesh, grumbling in delight at the smoky, delectable taste of grilled chicken.

“That was quick,” the boy observes. “You seem hungry.”

“*Shooperjoonershkoodbuhhlhlikechercknevrnbuttr.* Super Junior is good, but I like chicken even better.”

“Gotcha,” the boy says. “Even though I have no idea if you’re an alien and tried to communicate an assault command to your brethren just then.”

I laugh at his absurd suggestion, swallowing my food. “I think you play way too many video games.”

“You’re right,” he agrees, flashing an impish grin. “My mom says that, too. But what can I say? I prefer games to being forced to hang out with…ahh, never mind.”

He looks away then, and I wonder if we’ve somehow breached a sensitive topic.
None of my business. I shrug, chomping at another block of meat.

“You remind of bears,” he declares. “I’m deathly afraid of bears.”

“I’m not going to eat you,” I reassure him. “Unless you taste like chicken.”

The boy blinks once, and then bursts into a fit of laughter, the sound of it even more delightful than auntie’s.

“Sorry about that,” he tells me. “And don’t worry, I’m not afraid of you. Instead of a grizzly bear, you remind me of a stuffed animal. You’re pretty cute.”

I don’t think I’ve ever received a compliment on my appearance before, so the comment stuns me into silence. I nibble at the chicken tentatively.

“No need to hold back,” he says. “I’ll buy you one more if you can finish the whole thing.”

I peer at him cautiously, trying to gauge if I should take that last statement seriously.

“I meant it,” he confirms.

I proceed to wipe the remaining cubes of grilled chicken clean off the stick.

“Wow,” he says, amazed by my bottomless appetite. “You like it that much, huh?”

I nod. I’ve been meaning to buy one for myself, but I’ve got no money. Good thing you came around to offer freebies.

The boy reached for me then, touching one hand to my forehead and the other to his own.

“What are you doing?” I squawk at him in protest, unused to careless skinship.

“You don’t seem to have a fever,” he says, removing his hands and restoring them to his sides. “But why are you wearing a sweatshirt? You aren’t dressed for the weather, so I presumed that something must’ve been wrong with your internal temperature.”

We learned this in science class, I think to myself. But I never listen, so I have no idea what he’s talking about.

“I’m not sick,” I tell him simply. “I was just running out of clothing.”

“Do you have any more of these, then?” he asks, pointing to my sweatshirt. “Preferably one in blue with Siwon-hyung’s face stamped onto it.”

I shake my head vigorously. “I don’t have one. I’m loyal to Eunhyuk-hyung. And even if I did, I’m twice your size, so it would probably fall right off your shoulders.”

“Shame,” he says, still grinning. “Ah, I don’t really need it though.”

“What does that mean?”

“You know,” he tells me. “It’s actually my birthday today. And somehow it feels like I’ve already been given a gift.”

“It is? HAPPY BIRTHDAY!”
He laughs again, and I wonder how expensive a toothbrush I need for my teeth to be as blindingly white as his. “Thanks!” He says. “Although I wasn’t expecting you to wail a greeting like that.”

I ignore the comment. “What’s this about a gift?”

“We met, didn’t we?” He says. “Entirely by accident. I was having a bad day, but I think it’s been remedied now.”

“Ahh,” I say grinning. “Maybe I’m your happy virus.”

“You sure are!” he agrees, reaching to pat my head. “Now I’m glad I got hungry and stepped out of the house to buy some food.”

“What’s your name?” I ask him. “I’m Kang Euigyeon.”

“Oh, right!” he exclaims, having forgotten to introduce himself entirely. “My bad. The name is, uhm…”

I tilt my head slightly, waiting impatiently for a response.

“I’m Cheongie,” he says, finally. “Min Cheongie.”

I erupt into a fit of giggles. “Your name’s ‘dummy’? That’s funny.”

“Hey, dummy!” A loud voice slices through the air. “Where are you? Come back here!”

“Was that meant for you?” I inquire. So his name really is dummy.

“Didn’t think he’d find me here,” the boy mutters under his breath. “Sorry Euigyeon-ah, I need to be somewhere. The devil’s in need of his servant today.”

“That’s—that’s alright,” I respond, attempting to make sense of that last statement.

He smiles warmly, extending one hand towards me, clenching it into a fist. I hesitate for a short moment before bumping my fist against his.

He smiles, and then waves a hand at me. “Goodbye, Kang Euigyeon! I hang around at this market almost every day at this time, so I guess I’ll see you around.”

He then turns away from me and jogs around the corner, and I stand there watching his back before he disappears from sight completely.

“Goodbye,” I whisper to the air, smiling to myself and trying to contain my excitement.

By some miracle, I think I’ve made a new friend.

***

“Why didn’t you tell him your real name?” Daniel asked, as he listened to stories from Seongwoo’s past. Seongwoo was sitting at his bedside and looking as if the skies had fallen onto his shoulders, straining not to collapse under the impossible weight of them. “Things would’ve been much easier if you decided to tell the truth from the very beginning.”

“You’re right,” he agreed, shoulders sagging against the burden of memory. “But at the time, I had
no intention of befriending him, at least for extended periods of time. I didn’t want Euigyeon asking around for me, because if the wrong person found out what he was up to… things could get quite ugly.”

“By the wrong person,” Daniel said. “You mean Haechan, don’t you? The devil in your story.”

Seongwoo nodded. “Haechan made a conscious effort to trample over any friendships I might’ve made. There was no doubt in my mind that he’d hurt Euigyeon as soon as he found out.”

“What’s wrong with him?” Daniel whispered under his breath, unable to imagine how much Seongwoo must’ve had to suffer through if his every action was closely monitored throughout his childhood, given little to no freedom to do the things he might’ve wanted to. “Why does… why does he exert so much force over you? It isn’t fair. He doesn’t have the right to your life unless he gave it to you himself.”

“My relationship with him is complicated,” Seongwoo admitted. “He’s only three months older than I am, and yet he had me wrapped around his pinky finger since he and his father moved into our home.”

“Moved… into your home? Why is that?”

“When we were eight,” he began. “His mother died of a heart disease. She was my mother’s older sister, and my grandfather’s most beloved daughter. As you can expect, that meant Haechan was his favored grandson—he showered him with affection and love, and gave me little to no attention. And when his brother Hyunwoo came along, I was pushed even further to the side lines.”

“So you mean to tell me,” Daniel said in disbelief. “That this snake that likes to call himself Go Haechan… he’s your cousin?”

Seongwoo grimaced in disgust. “I don’t particularly appreciate being reminded of that. Grosses me out.”

Daniel tried to wrap his head around the facts, but it made no sense that Seongwoo would share blood and family with someone as corrupt and perverse as Go Haechan. “But a while ago, he spoke of you as if you weren’t related.”

The accusations Haechan threw at Seongwoo flashed briefly through Daniel’s memory. Those strings your family’s been pulling. Deception is in your blood.

“He doesn’t think of me as family,” Seongwoo explained. “And neither do I think of him as mine. It’s the only thing we can manage to agree on.”

Daniel clasped his hands together, knuckles turning white. It was the only way he knew to keep them from shaking so uncontrollably. “Is that why you were unable to stand up for yourself against him? Because you’d hate to displease your grandfather?”

Seongwoo shook his head sadly. “Not only that.”

Great, Daniel thought. There’s more to this twisted saga than I bargained for. “What else is there?”

“My mother would never let me pick fights with Haechan, no matter the cost. She always did tell me that despite everything, we were family, and that dad, he… he would’ve wanted me to be the better man.”
Daniel noticed Seongwoo’s pained expression, and only then did it occur to him that Seongwoo might’ve grown up without a father. There was more to Min Cheongie than met the eye, and he found himself in awe of how resilient a twelve-year old might’ve been to brave through Haechan’s temper all by his lonesome.

“And yet,” Seongwoo continued. “I knew that more was at stake. After Haechan’s mother died, my mother was next in line to receive the inheritance, the company my grandfather built from the ground up. But if I misbehaved, broke even the tiniest of rules… my mother would end up in a dangerous position. Previously, grandfather had already threatened to retract my mother’s privileges to the company if I overstepped my boundaries, and more than anything I would hate to force her into a compromise. I wanted my mother to ascend to the presidency. Because I knew better than anyone that she always wanted that, too.”

“That doesn’t make sense to me,” Daniel said, still unable to fathom how closed-off their mind sets could have been. “Even for preferential treatment, your grandfather’s crossed to the extremes. He’s let his emotionality get the better of him.”

“As much as I’d love to transfer the blame,” Seongwoo responded. “I can’t do that because I’m aware of how much he loved Haechan’s mother. She reminded him so much of his late wife, and I… I understand what it’s like to lose someone that important, and know that you won’t be able to see them until you pass on from this life to the next. At times, the heartache drives you to insanity.”

Seongwoo took Daniel’s hand. “You understand where I’m coming from, don’t you? Haechan himself is at fault here, and to a certain extent, his father. Go Haechan exploited grandfather’s weakness and used it to keep me on a tight leash, and Go Junho impelled him to do it.”

“Go Junho? The name sounds familiar…” Daniel struggled to recall where he might’ve heard the name before. “Isn’t that the mayor of Seoul?”

Seongwoo nodded. “Sure is. The guy’s manipulative, and unkind. Ever wondered how he rose to power despite a severe lack in political experience? It isn’t through good and honest service to the country, that’s for sure.”

“Why would he want Haechan torturing you?”

“If my mother were to lose her inheritance… guess who’d be able to stake his claim thereupon.”

“Don’t tell me Go Haechan could potentially run your grandfather’s company,” Daniel said, horror etched onto his face. “How large of a business is it that we’re dealing with?”

“Ever heard of Yoon San Entertainment?” Seongwoo said matter-of-factly. “That’s the one. It’s an actor agency, and the primary reason my mother wishes for me to become one. She knows that if I get into acting, I’d be able to learn more about the industry’s inner workings, and become a better candidate for succession.”

“This… all this is getting harder and harder to digest in one go.” Daniel said. “How much wrong has your family committed, to be exact?”

Seongwoo closed his eyes in distress. “If we paid for our sins in blood,” he whispered. “We’d drown in a river of our own making.”

Daniel tried not to think of the implications of that statement. “And what of Kang Euigyeon?” he said carefully, unsure of whether he wished to learn more of what had transpired ten years ago, or simply let the truth go and never bother to prod at it again, lest it come back to bite him.
He pressed on anyway. “Where does Euigyeon fit into all of this? He had nothing to do with your family. He was innocent.”

“I knew that,” Seongwoo said. “And that’s why I didn’t want him getting involved. It’s why I never disclosed my identity. But remember how I told you… that once Haechan found out I’d befriended him, he’d go after Euigyeon and torture him for it?”

Daniel nodded.

“Our escapades worked for a while, after that initial meeting. Euigyeon and I met each other at the Saemaul market after school was over, then I’d walk him home through a different route as their apartment complex was only a few blocks away from my family’s mansion. It was fun for a while… until I decided it was a good idea to bring him home.”

Daniel flinched at the memory, hoping Seongwoo didn’t notice how deeply the story affected him.

“What happened when you brought him home?”

“I had to sneak him in, because even though no one was home… the servants liked to poke their heads into the children’s business. I brought him to the backyard, and taught him how to climb up trees.”

“Did… did the servants find out you’d let an outsider into your home?”

“Not only that,” Seongwoo said. “Haechan returned home earlier than expected. He saw us together, and recognized Euigyeon as the transfer student to his school almost immediately. So I had to pretend as if one of the kitchen staff had spotted us instead, before we scampered out the backyard door.”

Daniel swallowed nervously, even though he already knew what was to become of this story.

“What… what happens next?”

“What happens?” Seongwoo repeats. “All hell breaks loose, pretty much.”

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3rd of September, 2007.

Making friends is much harder than I thought. Kids in the fifth grade, especially, don’t seem to like the idea of having to expand outside of their existing friendship circles. I tried talking to both of my seatmates a while ago, but one of them pretended not to hear me, and the other glared at me as if I’ve wronged him. If so, I wonder what it is I’ve done wrong.

I begin wishing for dismissal to arrive sooner, because then that would mean that I’d get to go home and ask Cheongie if he wants to come and play again. I smile to myself, remembering how yesterday we snuck around their house and climbed up the trees in their backyard to pluck out some fruits, then ran for our lives through the back gates before the servants could figure out who I was.

_I don’t think I’ve had that much fun before._

Cheongie’s absence is much more noticeable as I walk along the corridors alone. I can feel eyes trained on me, the center of attention all of a sudden even though nobody seems to want to give me
their time of day whenever I try to approach them.

*It feels like I’m part of a circus, I think. They’re all watching me so closely.*

*But I don’t have any tricks to show.*

“Hey, fatso!” I hear a voice calling out. I already know that whoever it is, they’re addressing me. Somehow I’ve claimed that nickname as my own, as I’ve heard it thrown my way too many times before.

I turn around to pinpoint the source, and see a tall, stocky kid standing in front of me. He’s completely obscured my vision of whoever’s standing behind him, as his shoulders are much too broad for a normal eleven year old. And even though I’m bigger than most kids, I feel myself shrinking before him, intimidated by his domineering presence.

“You’re the transferee, right?”

I let a few seconds pass in silence before I muster a reply. “Yes, that would be me.”

He snickers at me. “So it’s true that you aren’t from around here. Your accent is funny.”

Two other boys are standing to either side of him, and begin murmuring to each other in a broken imitation of Busan satoori.

*I already know where this is going, I think. This is how it always starts.*

“Did you need something?” I ask him, trying to divert the conversation into an opening that can finally get me out of there and as far away from them as possible.

“Nothing in particular,” he says. “Just wanted to introduce myself to the new student, that’s all.”


He smiles at me then, and his eyes as I look at them are unsettling cesspits of darkness and deceit.

“Kang Euigyeon,” he repeats. “Interesting name. I’ll see you around school then, Kang Euigyeon. The name’s Go Haecheon by the way. It’s nice to meet you.”


“I’m a kid, Cheongie-ya,” I tell him. “Not a wizard. I can’t possibly have learned the routine that fast.”

Despite my protests, Seongwoo drags me by the arm to the area beyond the shade. We’re on the roofdeck of the school building, and he’s trying to teach me how to b-boy.

“Sure you can,” he tells me. “You’re a wizard, Harry! Isn’t that how it goes in the movies?”

“I don’t knooooow,” I whine helplessly. “Can’t we do this some other time?”

“The only time is now,” he insists. “Come on. I’ll press play on this audio player, and once the music starts, just have a go at it. Just like I taught you.”

“What if I embarrass myself?” I tell him.
“So what? You always embarrass yourself, and so do I. Besides, you’ll never know that you can’t do it until you try.”

Cheongie turns to face the surrounding landscape, then raises both hands to either side of his cheeks. “I BELIEVE IN YOU EUIGYEON-AH!” He yells at the top of his lungs. “YOU CAN DO IT!”

I sigh deeply. He’s much too stubborn, isn’t he?

“Okay, okay, I’ll do it,” I give in. “I’ll try it just once.”

“ALRIGHT!” Cheongie exclaims, jogging merrily to the portable media player. “Here goes.”

As the music blasts through the air, I start dancing. I go for basic steps first, raising my right leg to cross it over my left, then lift my arms into a T-shape, repeating the same movements the other way around.

*That’s called the ‘top rock’,* I remember Cheongie saying. *You should learn this first before anything else.*

I attempt to lift my left foot and place it behind my right, turning my body clockwise as I do so, aware of how clumsy I must look while dancing.

“Oh hey,” Cheongie exclaims. “That isn’t half-bad! Just dance with a little more certainty, Euigyeon-ah!”

Spurred by his encouragement, I do a kick and twist motion with my feet, swinging my arms loosely, letting myself relax a bit more.

*Ahh, being able to do this feels nice.*

I repeat the same three dance steps just for practice, Cheongie applauding me excitedly all the while.

One spontaneous moment of fearlessness washes through me, and I try my luck at a more advanced movement. I bend over backwards to attempt a swipe, but as I do so, I rock off balance, and fall flat to the floor. My bum hits the cement with a thud, and Cheongie dashes towards me in alarm.


“EUIGYEON-AH, ARE YOU ALIVE?” Cheongie yells in my ear.

“I just spoke, didn’t I?” I tell him. “No need to try bursting my eardrums. That hurts, too.”

“Sorry about that,” he says, helping me to my feet. “I got worried for a bit there.” He walks over to the media player, and the sound of music is immediately replaced by silence.

“That’s enough for now,” he says. “I’ll teach you how not to tip over tomorrow.”

I nod in agreement. *That might’ve been fun, but I need to work on this at my own pace.*

“The sun’s about to go down,” Cheongie observes. “We should head home.”

“The long way ‘round?” I ask him.

He nods. “Only the long way ‘round is permissible.”
“What are we hiding away from, exactly?” I ask. “And why do our meetings always have to be at the rooftop after hours? I don’t even go to this school!”

Cheongie turns away from me. “If we went to your school instead of mine, it would be much harder to sneak in and out. We lessen the chances of getting caught this way.”

“By whom? Why would anyone get mad at dance practice?”

“Maybe,” Cheongie says. “Because they’re sick in the head. Is there anyone you know that might be like that?”

I muse over the answer to this question, and it doesn’t take long for me to find an answer.

“There’s this student from the year above me,” I confess, and from the periphery of my vision, Cheongie flinches as if in pain. “He and his friends mess with me a lot. I try to resist them, but it’s of no use.”

“What have they done, exactly?” Cheongie asks carefully.

“Sometimes,” I begin. “They… they demand that I do their homework for them. And when I can’t get the answers right, they get really mad, it frightens me. And if by chance this guy likes the food auntie’s prepared for me, he insists that I hand everything over, so I have to go hungry for an entire day. Most of the time, though… they bump me in the halls and call me names. The guy’s friends like to imitate my accent.”

“Is it..” Cheongie begins, hesitant. “Is it impossible for you to defy this person?”

I shake my head, terrified of what he might do should I dare oppose him. “I can’t do that. The other students are going to get mad at me, too. Everyone wants to get on his good side after all, because he’s the congressman’s son. If he likes them, they get to play at his mansion.”

Cheongie turns away from me, his hands clenching into angry fists at his sides and quiver in rage. “It’s Go Haechan, isn’t it?”

“You know of him?” I say, utterly taken aback. “How come?”

“Let’s just say that he’s notorious for bullying other kids,” Cheongie says. He walks over to me, wrapping his skinny arms around my waist, resting his head against my shoulder.

“Don’t you worry, Euigyeon-ah,” he whispers softly. “Min Cheongie is here to protect you.”

A murky haze clouds my vision as moisture forms at my tear ducts, and I squeeze my eyes shut to let them fall. I wrap my arms around Cheongie’s waist.

*Forgive me, Cheongie-ya. If only I could defend myself.*

“You’re going to protect me?” I ask him just to make sure.

‘Sure I will,” he responds. “I’m much tinier in comparison, but I’ll be your knight-in-shining-armor, if you’d like.”

I nod into his warmth. *Yeah, I’d like that.*

*And I like you too, Cheongie-ya. So very much.*

*If I could wish upon a star… I’d wish for us to remain friends forever.*
7th December, 2007.

I don’t understand why he’s doing this to me. I clutch at my stomach as the pain spreads throughout my body, emanating from where Haechan punched me. I stumble to the floor, my back against the wall. I take short shaky breaths, and my left eye is swollen shut completely.

Cheongie-ya, where are you?

“You know what I like about you, Euigyeon-ah?” Haechan says. I struggle to incline my head upwards, to stare at his face as he watches me suffer. “It’s that you’re so easy to play around with. You offer no resistance. It’s like messing around with a jumbo-sized toy.”

A toy, I repeat in my head. An object without feelings.

Is that all I really am?

One of Haechan’s friends kick at my shoulders, and I collapse to the side, unable to lift myself to my feet.

If I don’t have feelings, then why does it hurt so much?

“What’s a country bumpkin doing at our school, anyway?” one of them says. “Isn’t he much too stupid to have passed the entrance exams?”

“What a peabrain,” the other snickers. “I bet his mother bribed the school principal.”

“Don’t,” I plead, and it takes of all my strength to find my voice. “Don’t bring my mother into this.”

“You’re ordering us around now?” Haechan says, crouching beside me. I open the only working eye to look at him, and he’s smiling at me. I start feeling nauseated, and I wonder if it’s because of the beating I just received or the vile expression on his face. “Fine, then. Who else should I get involved in all this?”

No one, I think. I have no one else.

Or have you dragged him into this, too?

“What about your precious Min Cheongie?” Haechan says, and I pull myself together momentarily to grab at his collar.

“If you hurt him too,” I warn feebly. “I’m not going to forgive you.”

The repulsive sound of Haechan’s laughter fills the air. “I’m not asking for anyone’s forgiveness. If anyone should be sorry, it’s Cheongie. He’s a traitor, did you know that? I keep on telling him he’s mine, and yet he’s befriended garbage like you. I’ve reached my limit, and so here we are.”

His fist collides with my jaw, and pain shoots through me anew. I almost forget how to think.

“It’s annoying,” Haechan says. “That everyone says he’s better than me. He’s smarter, more talented, more handsome. And yet… he’s betrayed you, hasn’t he? Where’s your knight-in-shining-armor now?”

He’ll come for me, I think to myself. He’ll keep me safe, just like always.
“He lied, Euigyeon-ah,” Haechan coos in my ear. I want to push him away, but the strength to lift my limbs has left my body entirely. His two friends are standing to the side, watching as Haechan’s wrath unfolds. “In fact, he’s already here, watching everything. But he’s not going to come for you.”

*He’s here? I think. Where is he?*

“He isn’t yours,” I whisper, my voice hoarse. “He isn’t anybody’s possession.”

*Has he damaged my vocal chords? I don’t know. I don’t know anymore.*

“Then he isn’t yours, either,” Haechan tells me. “He was never on your side, Euigyeon-ah. Because as long as he’s loyal to our family, I have him under my control. And he would never keep a friend like you.”

My head swivels to the side, and from the corner of my weakening vision, I see him.

Min Cheongie, standing there.

Watching.

And he’s too far away for me to see the expression he’s wearing.

*Much too far away.*

A moment later he disappears entirely.

“Where are you going Cheongie-ya?” I call out to him weakly. “Why are you leaving?”

But before I can hear the answer, my body is emptied of stamina, and the world fades into nothingness.

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“I have no idea,” Daniel said. “What sort of excuse you can manage to come up with for leaving him like that.”

Seongwoo buried his head in both is hands, unable to look Daniel in the eye.

“I do have an excuse,” he said. “It isn’t a very good one, but it’s the only excuse I have.”

“What is it, then?” Daniel demanded, his voice rising in pitch and in volume. “Why did you do that?”

*Why did you leave me alone?*

*I thought I was going to die.*

*And I thought you were going to protect me.*

*What happened to that promise?*

“I always knew,” Seongwoo began. “That Haechan was a psychopath. He was in sixth grade when he did that to Euigyeon, and that wasn’t something a normal twelve-year old should have been
Seongwoo moved to clamp his hands together as if in contrition, to ask for mercy and vindication for the unjust and the unforgivable.

“I knew that if I stepped in to save Euigyeon… if I told everyone that Haechan beat him up,” Seongwoo said. “Haechan would blackmail me for it. He’d threaten me with lies. He’d tell grandfather that I started everything, and my mother would lose her inheritance, no questions asked.”

Daniel watched as Seongwoo recounted in harrying detail the memories he’d long since buried.

“So I just stood there, unmoving,” Seongwoo whispered, more to himself than to anyone else, reminding himself of how wretched his childhood had been. “I watched them tear him apart, a gutless, two-faced coward.”

“It doesn’t end there, does it?” Daniel said, knowing full well that the worst was yet to come.

*Because it ends when I am forced into leaving.*

*And it ends when Min Cheongie deserts me. When he leaves me behind, abandoned and forsaken.*

*Alone, all over again.*

“I couldn’t protect Euigyeon,” Seongwoo said. “So out of bitterness I took it out on Haechan’s friends. I may have been skinny, but I knew how to throw punches. So I left both of them the way they left Euigyeon, unable to stand and fight for their lives.”

Daniel watched as the sweat beading at Seongwoo’s brow cascaded down his face.

“A few weeks later,” Seongwoo continued. “The principal announced a pre-expulsion meeting, to deliberate on whether or not Euigyeon should get kicked out of the school for triggering the dispute that would leave him and two others severely wounded, even though the cuts on Haechan’s friends were my own doing.”

Daniel closed his eyes, unwelcome memories of the trial flooding through him. “You blamed Euigyeon for your own behavior, didn’t you?”

“I did,” Seongwoo confessed. “But only… Only because Haechan tricked me into thinking that should the blame fall on Euigyeon, the school would grant him pardon. Our family had been entering into distasteful transactions with the administration beforehand, you see… and Haechan explained that grandfather would want the case under the wraps to keep our spotless reputation intact, and getting involved in an elementary student’s ouster would prove an unnecessary hazard. And so, thinking I’d be able to salvage both Euigyeon’s place at the school and my mother’s rights to the company… I lied. I lied and told everyone that Euigyeon started everything, and Haechan had nothing to do with it. The rest of the student body was on my side because of Haechan’s influence, so there was no doubt in the minds of the authorities that Kang Euigyeon was entirely at fault.”

Daniel turned away from Seongwoo, afraid that he might notice how much the narration of his most disastrous experience was affecting him.

“And yet… and yet they kicked him out anyway,” Seongwoo continued, his voice shaking
audibly. “Things didn’t happen the way Haechan said they would. I don’t... I don’t understand how desperate I must’ve been to set things right that I put my faith in him so readily. And do you know... do you know what my grandfather said to me when I told him the truth? When I disclosed to him that Euigyeon didn’t deserve an expulsion? He laughed, Daniel. He laughed, and said to me, ‘whether or not he gets expelled, we have the power enough to contain the situation. So why must he be given pardon? He’s nothing to me.’

Seongwoo buried his face in both hands, and Daniel knew that very moment that Seongwoo’s floodgates had opened and he had begun to cry.

“After that,” Seongwoo said. “Euigyeon, he... he left the school, and I never saw him again. I assumed that he must’ve returned to Busan with his mother.”

*How painful must it have been, Daniel thought. For you to have kept such things to yourself for ten years?*

“That mother of his...” Seongwoo continued. “She was at the meeting, and it killed me to see her lamenting what had become of her son. And Euigyeon... to the very end he was an innocent victim caught in the crossfire.”

Daniel reached for Seongwoo’s face, wiping his tears with the back of his sleeve.

*This is as much as I can do for you, Ong Seongwoo.*

*Because my heart to this moment is devoid of intent to grant you forgiveness.*

**But why is that?**

“The memory of him haunted me years after that,” Seongwoo admitted. “He meant so much to me, and it felt like the greatest tragedy on earth that I myself would become his downfall, when my only intent was to keep him safe.”

“What exactly did he mean to you?” Daniel asked, afraid to hear the answer.

*I always did think he meant nothing to you. Nothing at all.*

“Everything,” Seongwoo said. “He meant everything to me.”

Daniel looked up at Seongwoo in utter disbelief, the sound of his own beating heart pounding rhythmically in his ears.

“Kang Euigyeon,” Seongwoo continued. “Was my first love. And a part of me still wishes he could have been the last.”

It took forever and a day for Daniel to find his voice. “Why is that so impossible?”

“Because he’s gone, Daniel,” Seongwoo whispered. “And not just for the time being. He’s gone from this world, and I’d be a fool to wish for him to return.”

“Where...where did he go?”

“Up there,” Seongwoo said. “Where people can no longer hurt him.”

“I don’t... I understand what that means.”

“It means he’s dead,” Seongwoo clarified, looking like it pained him the most to have to say such a
thing out loud. Daniel, on the other hand, was utterly shell-shocked by Seongwoo’s confession, the color draining from his face instantaneously.

_He thinks I’m dead, Daniel thought. When all this time, I thought…_

“Who even told you that?” Daniel demanded, almost outraged. “And why would you believe them?”

_Was it possible that he…_

Daniel chided himself. _It can’t have been him_.

“When I first enrolled into Mireu High six years ago,” Seongwoo began. “I went on a trip to Busan, the same way I did every single year for his birthday.”

“Every single year…” Daniel whispered. “For… for his birthday?”

Seongwoo nodded, smiling sadly to himself. “We made a promise as children to celebrate the occasion at his hometown someday, so whenever that time of year came around, I would go there. Spend the entirety of my meagre savings for a trip. And every single year until then, I made my way up the Busan Tower at Yongdusan Park, where once we agreed to meet, and where I foolishly hoped for a chance to find him.”

“That was stupid of you,” Daniel remarked, not knowing what else to say. He clutched at his chest, a poor attempt to make sure that it was still beating soundly within him. “You were a minor. How could you travel to Busan unaccompanied?”

“Don’t get me wrong,” he said. “I did have a chaperone, and each time I left my mother would sit me through a four-hour lecture on filial piety for putting her through airline paperwork. But that didn’t stop me from going anyway. I’d always tell myself, ‘what if he’s out there somewhere? I can’t keep him waiting forever’.”

_Isn’t that what I’ve just done? Daniel asked himself. I’ve kept him waiting._

_He still is._

“You didn’t find him,” Daniel stated matter-of-factly. “Did you?”

“I never managed to,” Seongwoo admitted. “But I managed to find his mother.”

Daniel’s heart skipped two beats, and his breath hitched in his throat. _My mother. He found my mother._

“She told me,” Seongwoo forged on. “That he was gone. That he’d… he’d ended his own life a long time ago. And when I asked her…” he put a hand to his mouth then, a few short breaths away from crying. “When I asked her why he’d do such a thing, she looked at me as if I should’ve known the answer.”

His hand fell lifelessly to his side, drained of emotion as he laid his heart bare, relived his painful childhood, and called to mind his irrevocable youth.

“An irrepressible part of me knew,” he whispered. “That it was because of what I’d done to him. Because I was too much of a coward to tell the truth, even though I knew it was the right thing to do.”
10th December, 2011.

“Son,” she tells me, wrapping me in a warm embrace. I can feel her hands shaking, and it isn’t from the cold. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry. I’ve done something unforgivable.”

“Mom,” I tell her. “What is it? What have you done?”

“Someone came looking for you,” she says. “And I just couldn’t think straight once I found out what he had come for. I…”


“I told him you’d gone and killed yourself,” she whispers. “Because if he thought you no longer existed, there’d be no reason for him to come back and find you.”

“Did… did you ask for his name?”

She shakes her head. “It was one of those boys at the pre-expulsion meeting.”

*It’s Go Haechan, I think to myself. It must’ve been him. Because Cheongie, he… he wouldn’t come to Busan for my birthday.*

*Because he promised he would.*

*And Min Cheongie never keeps his promises.*

“And what if they come looking for me, again?” I ask. “Mom. You can’t expect us to hide like fugitives for the rest of our lives. Sooner or later, the truth will emerge to the surface.”

“And when that time comes, I’ll have found a way to atone for my sins,” My mother assures me. “But for now, at least… My only concern is to keep you safe. Away from the people most likely to hurt you.”

“Haechan might know where I live,” I warn her. “If he asks the neighbors…”

“I’ve already undergone countermeasures for that,” she assures me. “I’ve asked the neighbors who know of us to help me conceal your identity. To act as if they know nothing.”

“Mom, this is insane,” I say. But even as the words leave my mouth I come to a startling conclusion.

*I’ve meant so little to other people, that I can pretend to have already left this world without having to fake my own death for it.*

“We need to forget about them, Euigyeon-ah,” she tells me. “We need to restart our lives afresh.”

I nod at her absently. “And how do you suggest we go about doing that? Am I supposed to change my name, then? To shed my identity like snakeskin, and take on new character altogether?”

“You know, Euigyeon-ah,” my mother says, cunning and trickery dancing in her eyes. “That doesn’t sound like the worst idea.”
“I returned from the trip then, and the next time I saw Haechan…” Seongwoo paused, and Daniel could tell how hard it was for him to have to recall what happened between them. “I got desperate. To pin the blame on someone… anyone. For them to be made responsible for Euigyeon’s death. And Go Haechan… back then, I really believed it was his fault. All of it. For tricking me. For lying about getting Euigyeon expelled. For blackmailing me into leaving him there after they hurt him.”

Daniel wished he could offer comfort. Wished he could ease the pain.

But there is nothing left for me to give you. I’m just as broken and as bruised as you are.

“I couldn’t help myself,” Seongwoo admitted. “Somehow, no matter the consequences… I had to exact revenge for what had happened to Euigyeon. Because he didn’t deserve to die, and his mother didn’t deserve to lose her only son. And so the moment I laid eyes on Haechan, unbothered and untouched, ignorant to the very last moment… I snapped.”

“So you beat him up?” Daniel whispered.

“So I beat him up. The same way I’d been meaning to if he didn’t keep on threatening to tell me off to grandfather. I broke his nose, I fractured his ribs. I smashed him into a bloody pulp. And I promised to myself that however much he tortured Euigyeon before he died… I’d pay him back for it fifteenfold.”

“A life for a life,” Daniel whispered, shuddering at the thought that the man sitting before him could have been capable of manslaughter at sixteen if he had just a little less self-control.

“He was rushed to the hospital,” Seongwoo continued. “And took years to recover, both physically and emotionally. Grandfather was seething in rage after he found out, and as you can imagine, my mother lost her rights to the company almost immediately for being unable to keep me in check. To this day she despises me for it. And now that I’ve decided to become an idol and audition for program that could potentially land me a contract as an artist for a rival agency… She must think the idea an utter travesty, and her son a massive disappointment.”

Seongwoo heaved a long sigh to recollect himself before he continued.

“I went on a leave of absence from the school as my grandfather forced me to wait for Haechan’s full recovery,” he pressed on. “To reflect on my actions and repent for my transgressions. I was banished to a different apartment in Garosugil, forced to live alone, but I was kept on house arrest anyway with guards and servants watching my every move, as if to warden a criminal. I lived that way for three years.”

“And did you?” Daniel asked him. “Did you repent for your actions?”

“I was sorry for what had happened to my mother. I still I am, because I know how much it hurt for her to have to throw her dreams away because of me.”

“Won’t you ever tell her?” Daniel asked. “If she really loved you… she must be able to understand that you did that only because Haechan had it coming. Because he made you suffer.”

“Someday, I might,” He tells me. “At the moment I’m still working on asking her for forgiveness.”

Daniel touched his fingers to his temple, feeling as if an enormous headache might bloom there at
any second. “Three years… that must’ve been such an ordeal for you. How could your own grandfather put you through such a thing? It’s like he’s put you through prison, and I doubt that’s even legal.”

“My mother said as much, even though she detested what I’d done,” Seongwoo said. “But she could only go as far as words could carry her. She wouldn’t dare to cross grandfather any further.”

Seongwoo sat back against the bed, his eyes closed, and Daniel watched the steady rise and fall of his chest as he spoke.

“There wasn’t much to do at home, apart from practice,” Seongwoo continued. “I spent most of my confinement thinking of Euigyeon, so in a way it wasn’t so massive a waste of time. At the very least, once I returned to school… I was able to forget him, and then after that, let go.”

“I don’t understand…” I said, my cheeks streaked with tears. “How could you… how could you have accepted his death just like that? You didn’t even ask for proof.”

Seongwoo shook his head. “How could I doubt his mother? And even if… even if I ask for where his remains were laid to rest, I… I don’t think she’d have strength enough to tell me. And you know, it made sense at the time… that he’d do such a thing. Even during the four months we spent together, I could already tell how sensitive he was to certain stimuli. How close he was to his tipping point.”

Seongwoo’s hand tightened around Daniel’s. “And that’s why I wanted to protect him. To give him a reason to continue on living. It’s why I taught him how to dance.”

“Did you ever get to ask the neighbors?” Daniel pressed on, wanting to get to the bottom of everything.

Why did you stop looking for me?

“What was I supposed to think?” Seongwoo responded. “Every single person I asked… they told me the exact same thing: ‘We don’t know of a Kang Euigyeon’. I looked everywhere, searched the internet for him, even. And yet I’ve found no trace. Nothing at all. At some point, I began thinking that maybe I simply hallucinated Euigyeon into existence because of how desperate I was for company.”

Daniel reached for Seongwoo, to wipe away the single tear that had cascaded down his face.

You blamed yourself that much, he thought. Enough for you to accept that all this was your fault.

But it wasn’t, and I get that now. If anything, we are to share the blame for our agonizing past.

Because you lied, and resorted to violence.

And because I was much too quick to believe that you intended to betray me from the start, when the four months we shared together was a clear indication of something much, much different.

“I’m sorry,” Daniel whispered, almost too softly for Seongwoo to hear. “All this time, I thought you were in league with the enemy, when that is the farthest I could’ve gotten from the truth.”

Seongwoo laid a hand against Daniel’s, leaving soft kisses against his palm.

“You know,” he whispered. “Sometimes, when I look at you, I can almost believe that you and Euigyeon could have been the same person. And when you spoke his name a while ago… it felt as
if I was staring into the eyes of his reincarnation.”

“Is that so?” Daniel said, trying to keep himself from revealing the true nature of his dual identity. “Why is that?”

“I never used to think you looked anything a like,” Seongwoo replied. “As your build is so much different from his, and your personalities don’t overlap where it counts. You’re made of confidence, when he lived in constant reluctance and doubt. You’re fearless onstage, when he couldn’t even begin to fathom the idea of performing for an admiring audience. But at times, I trick myself into seeing them, all those similarities you share. The lines in your eyes. The way you smile, the way you laugh. Even the sound of your voice…”

Seongwoo searched Daniel’s eyes for confirmation, but Daniel refused to yield.

No, Daniel thought. Not yet.

“So much can change about a person in ten years,” Seongwoo continued. “If Euigyeon… if Euigyeon had lived, more than I could ever bring myself to hope for, there’s a chance that he could’ve grown up to be just like you.”

Seongwoo smiled to himself, then shook his head slowly.

“But then again, it’s too much to hope for such a thing. I don’t have pictures of Euigyeon, and I never thought to take them. So in the end, I may have already forgotten what he looked like in the first place. It’s been ten years, after all, and the image of him I have in my head fades a little more with each passing day, since I first decided to let the memory of him go.”

Daniel looked at their hands still intertwined together against Seongwoo’s cheek. “It doesn’t seem as to me as if you’ve forgotten.”

“I should’ve known they would come rushing back,” Seongwoo said. “They always do.”

He pulled Daniel’s hand away from his cheek, resting it instead against his lap. “That’s why I’ve always been terrified of commitment. Why most of the time, I just fool around with other people, and then leave before the relationship has a chance to deepen. Because the very few times that I’ve let myself love again, it’s always the same damn thing in the end. A relentless cycle of hurt and regret. Someone pinning the blame on me for the relationship being unable to work, because I’m incapable of loving them wholly. And me just standing there, simply enduring the allegations they hurl at my face, powerless to deny any of them. Because for that longest time, that one hollow in my heart I’ve carved out to make space for new love… it’s been occupied by the same person for a decade.”

Throughout the ordeal of Seongwoo baring his innermost thoughts and deepest desires, Daniel listened, half-unable to process the implication of his words.

He’s loved me for that long.

And all this time… have I loved him back?

“Are you still hoping for him to return?” Daniel asked.

“I like to tell myself that just isn’t the case,” Seongwoo murmurs. “I stopped traveling to Busan a long time ago. I’ve spent the last three years trying to forget him, and it worked for a time.” His eyes met Daniel’s then, an unmistakable look of fondness at home within them. “And then you came into my life… and things have stopped making sense for me all over again.”
Daniel wondered what that might have meant, and he wished to ask the question. His treacherous lips however, would not budge.

*Have you fallen in love with me, Ong Seongwoo?*

*And as for Kang Euigyeon… what do you intend to do if he does return?*

“If there was a chance that he might return,” Seongwoo whispered as if in prayer. “I’m going to tell him everything. I’ll make sure he knows. How much I loved him then… and despite my resistance, how much I wish to love him anew.”

Seongwoo reached for Daniel’s other hand, his touch leaving imprints of warmth against Daniel’s cool skin.

“Then I’m going to take him by the hand,” Seongwoo said. “And never let go.”

***


Cheongie and I are sitting at the rooftop of his school, having snuck in after hours. The night air is frigid, and only Cheongie was smart enough to lug around a jacket. I’m still dressed in my school uniform, and despite the thick fabric, I tremble uncontrollably, chilled to the bone and extremely uncomfortable.

“You look like you’ve been frozen in solid ice,” Cheongie observes, and Euigyeon watches his breath mist into clouds as he speaks. “You should probably start getting used to the erratic weather.”

“I’m bad at remembering these things,” I tell him, rubbing my own arms for warmth.

Cheongie studies me for a solid minute, before resolving to divest himself of his jacket. He hands it to me almost reluctantly, shuddering as the frosty air greets his skin.

“You can have this,” he tells me. “I don’t need it anyway.”

I stare at him, perplexed. If you’re not in need of it, then why are your fingers trembling that way?

I take the jacket anyway, as the biting weather nips at me progressively.

I throw it over my shoulder, mindful of the fact that Cheongie’s clothing is half the size of mine, and I may end up ripping his jacket into shreds if I so much as attempt to put my bulging arm through it.

“Thanks,” I tell him. “This feels better.”

He smiles at me, then unzips his backpack to rummage through its contents. After he manages to find what he’s looking for, he yanks it out from underneath his notebooks and hands it over to me.

It’s an airtight box filled with snacks from the Lotte Mart.

I giggle, relieving him of the goodies delightedly. “Fish pastries and banana milk again?”

He nods eagerly. “I knew these were your favorite, so I picked these up when we visited Lotte
World this weekend. It’s great that I live close by, and get to return periodically to buy you these things.”

“You don’t have to,” I tell him, fishing the bangeo-ppang and binggrae milk out of the bag anyway. “If you keep on feeding me sweets, I might expand to twice my size. And that’s four Seongwoo’s in total.”

“Oh? You’re getting better at maths,” Cheongie teases me.

I frown at him, shoving him slightly. He topples over anyway.


“You know,” he tells me, as he repositions himself. “You should probably stop doing that or else you might end up accidentally pushing me off a cliff or down a hill.”

I nod, reminding myself not to go anywhere near where a cliff or a hill might be.

“I’m really sorry. I’ll eat less in the future.”

Cheongie waves both his hands frantically in front of my face, as if to tell me that’s a horrible idea.

“Don’t do that! You’re too young for a diet. Besides,” he says inching closer towards me, then wrapping me in a snug embrace as best as he can manage. “If you were much thinner, this wouldn’t feel half as nice. You’re like a really warm pillow.”

“Ah,” I exclaim happily. “My mother tells me that, too!” I stare at the Orion fish pastry I’m holding, then bite into half of it eagerly, relishing in the rich taste of sweetened red bean.

“Alleetlotshandlothshaftthesinthfyoochr.” I’ll eat lots and lots of these in the future.

So that I’ll receive more warm hugs from you.

Cheongie releases me from his bear hug, smiling at me contentedly. “I knew it, I’m happiest when I see you eating, somehow.” He strokes my hair affectionately. “Hey, Euigyeon-ah, want to visit Lotte World with me on your birthday next week?”

I blink at him, uncertain of what to say. Ahh, there’s somewhere else I’d like to go.

As the seconds tick by in silence, Cheongie’s keen expression turns blue. “You don’t like the idea, huh?”

I shake my head. “That’s not it, Cheongie-ya! I’d like to go but…”

“Were you thinking of something else?”

I nod timidly. “I wanted to return home to Busan. I’m starting to miss mom, already.”

“Oh,” Cheongie exclaims. “I understand. Then… can’t I go with you?”

It dawns on me that I didn’t think to consider that. I turn to him, misty-eyed. “Really? You’d accompany me to pay mom a visit?”

Cheongie smiles. “Sure, I will! But in return, take me somewhere nice.”

I nod excitedly, wishing for time to go at full speed and catapult us into my eleventh birthday.
“Did you want to go anywhere specific?” I ask him.

“Hmmm,” he says in contemplation, scratching at his chin. His lower lip juts out cutely, and I almost laugh out loud at his silly expression.

“I know!” he exclaims, clapping his hands together. “Let’s go to a place with a view of Busan. I’ve always wanted to feel like I’m on top of the world.”

“A place with view?” I repeat, knowing exactly where such a place may be found. “Then what about Yongdusan Park? We can climb up the Busan Tower to get a clear view of the skyline. I’ve been there, and the scenery is breathtaking.”

“Sounds nice,” Cheongie says dreamily. “If it’s like that, I’ll come over every single year for your birthday.”

I beam at him happily. “Really? I’ve never celebrated my birthday with a friend before. You’ll really come over every time?”

Cheongie nods, laughing cheerfully. “Of course I will.”

“Pinky promise me,” I tell him, extending my smallest finger towards him.

He takes it with his own, crossing our fingers together. “Pinky promise.”

Both of us look at each other then, and the sound of laughter fills the atmosphere, momentarily warming the chilly night air.

“Cheongie-ya,” I call out.

“What is it, Euigyeon-ah?”

“I’m really, really, seriously, completely, totally happy… that I’ve met you.”

***

“I was happy to have met you,” Daniel whispered to himself. “I was happy.”

But why can’t I bring myself to forgive you just yet?

He stole a glance at Ong Seongwoo.

Because every time I look at you, I see the face of betrayal.

I see the Grim Reaper, come to bargain for my life.

And he never takes no for an answer.

“I’m sorry,” Daniel said, untucking himself from under the blankets and scrambling out of bed. “I need a moment to think.”

“Where are you going?” Seongwoo asked, grabbing him by the hand to prevent him from leaving.

“You’re not… mad at me, are you?”

“To tell you the truth,” Daniel said, looking him firmly in the eye. “I have no idea. It takes time to
contemplate these things. For now, I just need some time alone.”

“You’ll return,” Seongwoo said then, breathing life into a memory of his former self, of a little boy whose only wish was to spend his birthday with the friend he held dearest to his heart, and cherished more than anything. “You’ll return. Won’t you?”

Daniel smiled at him, holding to light the vestige of a promise. “I’ll return. Of course I will.”

Seongwoo nodded, relief flooding through him perceptibly. “Alright, then. I’ll wait until you’re ready to open up to me. But before the time comes… I’ll be waiting after class hours until the sun sets, at the rooftop of the Right Wing building.”

***

Two excruciatingly long weeks had passed since Daniel last talked to Seongwoo. He didn’t think he’d take that long to confront his own feelings, but every time he attempted to drag himself to the rooftop, somehow his heart would palpitate until it volleyed into a fusillade of overpowering emotion.

If I forgive him… will he betray me again?

Or am I to believe that everything he’s unveiled to me was nothing short of the truth?

How can I trust him, when I haven’t known him that long?

“You look like you’re trying to lift that glass of orange juice with your eyes,” Jihoon stated, interrupting his stream of consciousness. “Do you or do you not actually have telekinetic abilities? That is the question.”

“I think the answer is that he doesn’t,” Jinyoung said, sighing deeply. “Also, that you watch too many movies. Lay off on the X-Men, for once.”

“Are you alright, hyung?” Kuanlin asked, addressing Daniel. His eyes were beset with genuine worry.

“I’m fine, thanks,” Daniel said. “I was just… thinking of someone.”

“Let me guess,” Daehwi said then, raising a hand as if to gather points for recitation. “You’re thinking of Seongwoo-hyung.”

“That isn’t much of a guessing game, Daehwi-ya,” Jinyoung told him. “We all know he’s thinking of Seongwoo-hyung. Who else could it possibly be?”

“The both of you have worried me since you went missing two weeks ago during Kuanlin’s birthday,” Jihoon confessed, sipping at his peach tea glumly. “To think we’d find the both of you alone on both the Left Wing and the Right Wing rooftops. Were you guys meditating on something? When Kuanlin and I found you, you were just standing there leaning against the railing, and Daehwi and Jinyoung here tell me Seongwoo-hyung was sprawled against the cement. They thought he had died of a heart attack.”

“And if I didn’t hold Daehwi back in time,” Jinyoung added. “He would’ve performed cardio-pulmonary resuscitation on Seongwoo-hyung, which I assume neither you nor I would have liked.”
“Sorry about that,” Daehwi said sheepishly. “I was so surprised when I saw him there, I thought my eyes might pop right out of their sockets. I wasn’t thinking straight.”

Daniel smiled, thankful for the temporary reprieve his dongsaengs afforded him.

_I should confide in them, shouldn’t I? They’re my friends, and they deserve to know._

Daniel sucked in a deep breath.

“If someone you once knew,” he began. “Walked into your life all of a sudden, after having left for ten years… would you readily accept him into your life?”

“Depends,” Jihoon said. “Did he do something unforgivable?”

Daniel struggled to answer that question. “I thought he did. But as it turns out… I simply hadn’t been in possession of all the pages to that story. And now I… I’m afraid that I might’ve been tricked into thinking that way again, and I’ve trusted him far too easily.”

“Seongwoo-hyung does have a way with words, doesn’t he?” Daehwi agreed. “His silver-tongue is quite dangerous. I suggest you think about this one more time… oh wait. You’ve been thinking about the exact same thing for fourteen days.”

“I agree,” Kuanlin said, nodding his head. “I’m starting to feel bad for Seongwoo-hyung already. He’s been waiting for you to acknowledge him for the longest time. And since you’re roommates… it’s doubly hard for him to pretend you aren’t around just because you’ve asked him to give you some space.”

“The four of us even have to plan out our schedules just so that we’re evenly spread out in spending time with either of you,” Jinyoung says. “It gets to be a chore sometimes. Make up with him already.”

Daniel gaped at the four of them in awe. “How come you guys have figured things out this quickly? I never even said that I was referring to Seongwoo.”

“Like I said,” Jinyoung reiterated. “Any attempts at denial are in vain.”

“None of you are being helpful,” Jihoon scolded. “Daniel-hyung’s clearly in distress over this. Say hyung, why don’t you just go with what your heart tells you?”

Daniel blinked at him. “I don’t think it’s that easy.”

“Sure it is,” Daehwi insisted, backing Jihoon up. “I’m pretty sure that if you listened to it hard enough, you’ll find that you had the answer to your question all long. You’ve simply been too scared to address it.”

Daniel hated to admit it, but Daehwi was right. He had been meaning to make his way to the rooftop at the Right Wing since day one, but day fourteen had come and gone and he still hadn’t climbed a single stair because he’d been ridden with uncertainty and doubt.

_Didn’t Cheongie always used to say that my crippling doubt would be my undoing?_

“I think,” Kuanlin concluded. “That you just have to take one leap of faith. And then go wherever the road leads you from there.” He gestured to the four of them, each one smiling sweetly at him, nodding in reassurance. “We’ll be here to help you along the way.”
Daniel returned each of their smiles. “Thanks guys, you’re all lifesavers.” He thought of meeting up with Seongwoo then, sparing a glance at the clock on the café. It read 5:30 P.M.

He’ll be there until sunset.

As soon as he thought of reconciliation with Seongwoo, his knees felt as if they were about to buckle, even though he was sitting as comfortably as humanly possible.

Oh god. Can I really do this?

“Hyung,” Kuanlin exclaimed. “Where were you supposed to be meeting him again?”

“At the rooftop of the Right Wing,” Daniel said. “Why?”

“Uhm…” Jihoon said, exchanging nervous glances with the other three. He pointed to the floor-to-ceiling window adjacent to their table. “It’s been raining for almost half an hour now. If he’s still waiting for you up there… you should hope he thought to bring an umbrella.”

Daniel’s heart galloped in his chest. “Shit. I don’t think he even has one to begin with. The only one I see in our room is mine.”

“Well then let’s hope he’s stolen yours?” Jinyoung offered as consolation.

Daniel shook his head, scrambling out of his seat and retrieving his jacket from where it was perched on backrest of his chair.

“Seongwoo may be a liar,” he declared. “But unless we’re dealing with clothing, he certainly isn’t a thief. I’ll head out there now, sorry about this.”

“Go ahead hyung,” Jihoon told him, and the rest of them gestured at him as well, telling him he was free to leave. “Tomorrow once we meet up for breakfast, we expect nothing less than the both of you arriving here together.”

***

The very first time Daniel had laid his eyes on Ong Seongwoo, he had been half-convinced that he and Min Cheongie were the same person. If only they shared the same name, and Seongwoo was studying to become an Idol instead of an Actor. The idea, no matter how ludicrous, would have made enough sense for him to consider it.

Daniel however, was a strict non-believer in the sheer force of coincidence, and neither did he think that serendipity was a principle that operated beyond clichéd love stories as told on the silver screen.

And if Lady Fortuna loved me, he thought. She would never have paved the way for Cheongie and I to meet a second time, when I’ve no desire to see him ever again.

Not after I’ve found out what he’s truly capable of.

But as he made his way up the stairs to the rooftop, as the door flew open and the wind howled in his direction, sending droplets of rain splattering across his face, the only thing he could think of was this: Lady Fortuna loved me. And so did Min Cheongie.

Because through thick and thin, he waited.
Over the hills and mountains, he waited.

Beneath sun and rain he waited.

And he never, ever left.

And sure enough, standing before him was Ong Seongwoo, soaked in rain, eyes to the sky, more beautiful than anything he’d ever seen.

Waiting for him at the very place they promised to meet.

Just like when they were children.

Daniel walked towards him slowly, rainwater sloshing beneath his feet with each passing step. Seongwoo turned in his direction as soon as he heard the movement, watching him cautiously as Daniel closed the yawning distance between them.

“You’re an idiot,” Daniel said. “You know that?”

“Well,” Seongwoo shrugged. “I’ve got to admit I expected a more touching reunion, but I guess ‘you’re an idiot’ works, too.”

Daniel removed his jacket, throwing it across Seongwoo’s shoulders and over his head to keep the rain from drenching him any further. Daniel examined his water-logged state, noticing how the fabric of Seongwoo’s uniform had clung to his skin. He would never understand why Seongwoo stubbornly refused to wear a jacket.

“You’re a total idiot. If you keep this up, you’re going to get sick.”

“Tough love,” Seongwoo remarked. “But I suppose I’ve gotten used to this. And haven’t you asked for me to wait?”

“I never…” Daniel began. “I never asked for you to jeopardize your own health for the sake of keeping a promise.”

Seongwoo stared at him for a long time, eyes heavy-set with longing. “There are certain things,” he said. “That I’ve been more than willing to give you without you having to ask for them.”

Daniel wiped at the moisture that striated his face, unsure of whether they had fallen from the skies or from the corners of his eyes. “Like I said. Idiot.”

Seongwoo pulled Daniel into his arms then, crowding the both of them beneath the limited protection of Daniel’s jacket. “Sounds like you’ve missed me.”

Daniel grabbed at the sleeve of his jacket, pulling it even further above their heads. “I think I’ll leave the answer to that for when we manage to find ourselves some shelter.”

Without another word, the both of them ran arm in arm towards the exit and out the door, before releasing each other and leaping down the flight of stairs two steps at a time. They made their way across the corridors and through the outdoor walkway, not a single word passing between them.

Once they managed to make it to their room, both of them collapsed onto their beds, breathless, enervated, and sopping wet from tip to toe.

Daniel couldn’t even care less that he might’ve gotten his blankets dirty, or that neither of them were willing to get up and turn on the bedroom lights.
After a long while, he forced himself into a sitting position, then made his way towards the bathroom to retrieve a couple of towels from the rack. Once he had them, he grabbed a chair from the dining set and walked gingerly towards the foot of Seongwoo’s bed, dragging the chair behind him. Without another word, he settled the chair right in front of Seongwoo, sat himself upon it, then began drying Seongwoo’s hair with the towel.

“Ouch,” Seongwoo exclaimed, his eyes forcing closed as Daniel beat at his face with the towel. “Are you trying to sponge me down or pull all my hairs out?”

Daniel stopped, his hands falling to Seongwoo’s shoulders and the towel dropping around Seongwoo’s neck. “You really shouldn’t have done that,” he whispered. “You’re much too reckless for your own good.”

“If you were going to worry about me this much,” Seongwoo told him. “Then you shouldn’t have ignored me for fourteen days straight.”

Daniel sighed heavily. “I didn’t think I’d need that much time to think things through.” Slowly, he reached for the topmost button of Seongwoo’s shirt, then made to undo it. He heard Seongwoo draw a sharp breath, and only then did Daniel become fully aware of what he was about to do. He pulled back immediately, frightened by his own alarming oversight.

*My walls have been broken down entirely, he thought to himself. I’ve become fearless at this sort of thing.*

Seongwoo looked at him warily, his gaze lingering for a short while around Daniel’s mouth still slightly ajar, before trailing downwards to his neck and the shirt that adhered to his skin and become partially transparent as the water soaked right through it.

“Ahh,” Seongwoo exclaimed, turning away. “I know you didn’t mean for that to happen, but you should probably take your shirt off.”

Daniel nodded, embarrassed that Seongwoo just had to spell it out. “Yeah. You should probably take yours off too.”

*Crap,* Daniel thought immediately. *It didn’t sound that scandalous in my head.*

“Right,” Seongwoo said simply, then began undoing his shirt. For a long moment Daniel watched him as he did so, before unbuttoning his own in order to distract himself from the provocative display before him.

*Why is it so hot in this room all of a sudden? Did someone turn down the air conditioner?*

As soon as he managed to peel his shirt away, Daniel seized the other towel and began patting himself dry. He risked a peek at Seongwoo, whose eyes were glued onto him. He looked away before Seongwoo’s half-naked state could fill his vision.

*Why isn’t he moving?*

“I don’t suppose,” Daniel said. “That you, uhm… still need any help with that.” He cocked his head slightly at the towel sitting untouched on his lap.

“Oh,” Seongwoo said. “I’m fine, thanks.” He removed the towel from his lap then began wiping at his own body, and Daniel couldn’t do much else apart from mirror his movements and count the seconds that ticked by in silence.
Before he could reach a count of ten, Daniel felt strong arms pulling him into an embrace, leaving him utterly breathless.

“I’m sorry,” Seongwoo whispered into his ear. “But having to keep my hands to myself with you looking like that is pure torture.”

Daniel could feel the heat from Seongwoo’s body transferring to him as their bare bodies pressed even tighter against each other, but Daniel made no move to push him away.

*I can never do it*, Daniel thought. *And now I think I know why.*

Daniel nudged at Seongwoo’s right arm gently, asking for release. Seongwoo’s hands moved from around his neck to his shoulders, then down his arms and to his hands, both of which Seongwoo held in his own.

“Look at me, Kang Daniel,” Seongwoo told him, and for once Daniel obliged without resistance. “If by chance, you might dislike what I’m about to do, then as always you’re free to push me away.”

“I can never do it,” Daniel whispered, as Seongwoo leaned into Daniel’s space, moving in to kiss him. “And now I think I know why.”

Once, when Daniel had been little, he had been watering the lawn of his mother’s garden in Busan when he began to realize that it was raining a mile away. He could smell it, the scent of the earth mixing with ozone, the thick fog masquerading as clouds against the graying backdrop of the gloomy skies. He knew he should turn off the hose, drop it to the ground and then duck for cover, and because the rain was coming from so far away, he had plenty of time to do all three. Instead, he just stood there, his feet planted firmly in the grass. And even as the first drop of rain settled onto the bridge of his nose, he waited, and closed his eyes until the rain pounded heavily against the pavement, and the storm washed violently over everything.

That storm was in this kiss, and Daniel wanted even more of it. As Seongwoo’s velvet-soft lips pressed against his, Daniel moved his own earnestly against them, sighing against the warmth of Seongwoo’s body. He tasted like rainwater, and hibiscus tea, and something else Daniel couldn’t place, but hungered for nonetheless. Seongwoo’s hands were no longer holding his, and they were roving along his body, fingers trailing fire against his skin and sending his heart up in embers.

When Seongwoo pulled away, Daniel’s eyes fluttered open. Beneath the dim lighting of the bedroom, Daniel could almost see the unmistakable flush of color tinting his cheeks.


Seongwoo smiled at him, then leaned in once more to press a kiss onto his shoulder. “I wasn’t going to.” Seongwoo pulled at Daniel’s arm almost violently, and before he knew what was happening, Daniel’s back was laid flat against Seongwoo’s bed, and Seongwoo was trailing kisses upwards along his body, his collarbone, his throat, before moving to capture his mouth. Daniel received his kisses eagerly, his hands moving to Seongwoo’s cheeks, to his neck, downwards to his chest, absently exploring his body.

“God, I missed you,” Seongwoo whispered in between kisses of tender sweetness.

“Yeah,” Daniel whispered back. He closed his eyes, tears escaping him before he could stop them from falling. “I missed you too.”

Seongwoo leaned forward to kiss him, his silken hair tickling Daniel as they glided along his skin,
this time moving his mouth against Daniel’s slowly. Daniel savored the taste of him, aching all over for his touch. At first, Seongwoo kissed him softly, almost reverently, and whenever he pulled away, he touched a finger to Daniel’s lips, as if never to say goodbye. Daniel reached for the back of his neck and pulled him even harder against him, asking for more. Seongwoo let loose a soft groan, and then all of a sudden he was kissing Daniel faster, deeper, and with so fervent a desperation that Daniel could no longer remember a time during which they’d shared a moment more honest and truthful.

It was a moment he wished could carry on for eternity.

“Promise me,” Seongwoo whispered breathlessly. “That tomorrow, when we wake up, you aren’t going to regret what’s happening between us.”

Daniel pushed him away ever so gently to look into his eyes, smiling contentedly as he drank in the disheveled state of him. “I won’t,” he said in reassurance.

“Pinky promise?” Seongwoo persisted.

Daniel laughed softly. *The tables have turned, haven’t they?*

Daniel tugged forcefully at Seongwoo’s arm, pulling him downwards as he sat himself up and over Seongwoo, effectively swapping their earlier positions.

“Pinky promise,” he said, smiling playfully, brushing away the strands of hair splayed messily across Seongwoo’s face.

“Now this is a surprise,” Seongwoo said. “I take it that you wanted another kiss?”

Daniel nodded once, before leaning forwards to reclaim Seongwoo’s lips.

To kiss away the sadness.

And kiss away the pain.

***

“Not to kill the awkward mood,” Seongwoo began. “But I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

Daniel and Seongwoo were sitting at the dining table of their room the very next morning, waiting for Jisung to call them for breakfast. Daniel had tried with all his might to skirt the topic of what had occurred between them last night, and he was a hundred percent sure that Seongwoo was about to interrogate him regarding the very same thing.

“Why did you let me do those things with you?” Seongwoo asked carefully.

*Oh boy,* Daniel thought. *Here it goes.*

As Seongwoo turned his head away, Daniel thought that might be the first time he’d seen Seongwoo looking even remotely embarrassed. “I do remember mentioning that my relationships with other people never work out because I’ve been hung up on Euigyeon all this time without even knowing it. God… I’m a mess. I’ve been in love with an eleven year old for years. This is madness.”

Daniel blushed, wishing with all his might that he could disclose his identity, and scream ‘HEY ONGCHEONGIE! IT’S ME, YOUR UNDYING FIRST LOVE’ at the top of his lungs.
But of course that wasn’t a possibility. Not at the moment.

“So what you’re saying,” Daniel began. “Is that what happened between us last night was just a product of impulse? That it meant nothing to you?”

Seongwoo looked up at him, completely offended. “Of course not. You really think I’m capable of that? Of course it meant something. I was almost sure you could hear my heart hammering in my chest every time you touched me there.”

Daniel blushed an even brighter shade of red. “Don’t remind me.”

“What I’m trying to say is that I’ve never been so unsure of my own feelings,” Seongwoo admitted. “And I’m afraid that this attraction of mine… is because I’ve fooled myself into thinking you could be his replacement.”

Daniel inhaled deeply, calming himself down. “I guess it takes time to move on from these things, and I get that already. Which is why I’m fine with you and I…” He looked up at Seongwoo, whose hair was still dripping wet from a recent bath and smelling strongly of soap and fresh laundry.

Daniel coughed awkwardly, sure he was about to say something embarrassing just then. “I hope you’re feeling better now at least. Didn’t you get sick?”

Seongwoo shook his head. “I’m quite fine, thanks. And this is the happiest I’ve been in a long while.”

“Why’s that?”

“Goes without saying,” Seongwoo said, grinning at him playfully. “Doesn’t it?”

Daniel shook his head. “I want to hear the reason straight from those lips.”

“Selfish bastard,” Seongwoo laughed softly, and the sound of it was a familiar, welcome tune to Daniel’s ears.

_I should’ve known they were the same person from the very beginning._

“Well if you must know,” Seongwoo said. “I may be feeling more than just a little confused at the moment, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t thoroughly enjoy myself when last night you—“

Daniel chucked an empty cereal box at Seongwoo’s head. “Don’t you even dare.”

Seongwoo ducked away, and the box fell abruptly to the floor. “You asked for it.”

Daniel groaned loudly. _Why did he miss being around such a bothersome person, again?_

“Sorry about that,” Seongwoo said then, turning serious out of the blue. “If the memory of last night makes you uncomfortable… I really didn’t mean for that to happen. It’s just that the cold-shoulder treatment sucks ass, in case you couldn’t already tell, so I might’ve missed you far too much and ended up doing things that normally would stay within the confines of my wildest fantasies.”

Daniel’s hand rose to his mouth then, completely embarrassed. Memories of him and Seongwoo kissing, touching, and rolling on the bed flooded through him like a heavy deluge.

“Okay, maybe not the wildest,” Seongwoo backtracked. “Oh god, I’m messed up. I swear I’m loyal.”
“Yeah okay, just shut up about last night, already,” Daniel demanded. “And about Euigyeon… don’t think too hard about it. Just a little more, and everything will start to fall into place.”

He smiled sadly. Someday you’ll find out who I am.

Someday you’ll realize that the things you’ve been hoping for aren’t as far out of reach as you might think they are.

“Fall into place, huh?” Seongwoo said. “If only this jigsaw puzzle that I like to call Ong’s-shitty-life didn’t have half its pieces missing entirely.”

But you’re right, Seongwoo, Daniel thought. I am a selfish bastard. And this selfish bastard wants you to see the person he’s become, not the person he once had been.

He wants you to look at Kang Daniel, without the memory of Kang Euigyeon stalking closely behind him.

Because then he’ll know that your heart belongs to him alone.

“For the time being,” Daniel suggested. “Why don’t we just call it a truce? Let’s be mature about this, for once. We aren’t going to enter into a relationship at this time, because neither of us ready, or even certain about our feelings for each other. But we aren’t going to force ourselves to keep the distance, either. If last night repeats itself, then it repeats itself. No hard feelings if both of us willingly give in.”

Daniel stared down at his hands, both of which had curled into fists on his lap out of sheer tension.

“There’s a happy medium between these things, you know. You and I just have to find it.”

“I don’t believe this,” Seongwoo said then, eyes traveling down the length of Daniel’s body. “How mind-blowingly sexy can you get?”

Daniel reddened at the remark, and not for the first time did he wish that his skin tone didn’t make the flush in color so painfully obvious. Seongwoo flashed him a blinding smile. “This intellectual side of yours is stupidly attractive.”

Faithless jerk, Daniel thought, then repealed the notion almost immediately. Wait. Did the Euigyeon in me just get jealous of the attention Seongwoo’s giving the Daniel one?

“Great going, Kang Daniel,” he muttered under his breath. “Who’s the idiot now?”

“You say something?” Seongwoo asked him. “I could’ve sworn that you called me an idiot just then, so I may need to rethink my overall brand if you’re going to address me that way for no conceivable reason.”

Daniel laughed, reminded of all the reasons why he liked Ong Seongwoo in the first place, despite everything.

“These chains that bind us,” Daniel said then. “Let’s tear them apart, pull them to pieces, do whatever we want from now on. And that way set ourselves free.”

“Are you sure about this?” Seongwoo asked him. “That you’d want to get involved with a guy like me?”

Daniel smiled, nodding once. “I’m sure Kang Euigyeon would tell you the exact same thing.”
Seongwoo smiled wistfully to himself, and not for the first time did Daniel wish he could put Seongwoo out of his misery, admit to him that Kang Euigyeon was very much alive and standing right before him.

“You’re right,” Seongwoo said then, his upbeat tone an indication of a return to his former, devil-may-care self. “If Euigyeon knew just how disgustingly obsessed I’d been with him the idea of finding him… he might’ve already run as fast as his legs could take him in the other direction. I wonder if he knew, and that’s why he hid from me all those years.”

Daniel snorted. “Yeah, fat chance of that happening.”

Seongwoo laughed, ostensibly content being back to the easy banter that had become part of his morning routine since rooming with Daniel.

“That happy medium of yours,” he said. “I think I know what it’s called.”

“Is that so?” Daniel said, impressed.

“Yeah. It’s called friendship.”

Daniel laughed, taken entirely by surprise. “Who would’ve known?”

“So,” Seongwoo said, extending a hand towards Daniel and clenching it into a fist. “Friends?”

Daniel gladly reached out with his own, bumping Seongwoo’s fist with his. “Yeah. Friends.”

*Just like we promised.*

*Just the way it’s always meant to have been.*

“I’m still going to annoy you, though,” Seongwoo declared. “You said to do whatever I wanted, so there you go.”

Daniel grumbled in irritation. “Fine. Then I’ll do whatever the hell I want as well and enforce stricter curfews upon you.”

“What’s the punishment for breaking curfew?”

It was Daniel’s turn to flash Seongwoo an impish grin. “Cold shoulder treatment.”


Daniel stuck a tongue out at him, relishing in the brief moment of victory.

‘Hey, Daniel,” Seongwoo said. “If in case Haechan returns to bother you… I’d like it if you tell me about whatever happens.”

“Why?” Daniel asked him. “You think he’ll be back?”

“Who knows what he might’ve been scheming while at the hospital?” Seongwoo said. “I had hoped I’d never see him again, that I’d have frightened him away, but… I’m starting to think I might’ve gotten the wrong impression. He doesn’t seem to be afraid of anything.”

Daniel nodded in understanding. “Then you and I… we should protect each other, shouldn’t we? Have each other’s backs.”
Seongwoo smiled at him. “Yeah. Exactly.”

Alright then, Ongcheongie, Daniel thought to himself, returning the smile outwardly. I’ll give you another chance to keep your promise.

So don’t you dare waste it.

At that very moment, someone knocked loudly at the door.

“YOU GUYS!” Jisung’s voice came barking through. “PERFORMANCE RESULTS ARE OUT! THE CONTESTANTS FOR THE IDOL PROJECT HAVE BEEN ANNOUNCED!”

As one, Daniel and Seongwoo’s heads spun to face each other, tumult and apprehension flooding through them both.

“The moment of truth has come,” Seongwoo said. “Should we go check those results out?”


~ONGNIEL 4 END~

Chapter End Notes

First of all, I’d like to apologize for this chapter being a dialogue-heavy info-dump regarding OngNiel’s past and family background, because I understand that it can get overwhelming (which is why I highly, highly suggest a reread, just in case it’s gotten confusing). But wow. That was one hell of a ride ;-; I’m not sure if this chapter managed to evoke the feelings I’ve meant for it to, but I have to admit: this by far was the hardest chapter I’ve ever had to write (read: I kinda made myself cry in the process, just imagining the sort of things Daniel and Ong had to go through as children. Why must I torture myself this waaaay T.T)

But I really hope you guys liked it, as I feel rather accomplished in knowing I’ve answered a lot of the questions you guys might’ve had before this (though I will for sure introduce a fresh batch of plot twists and villains as the story progresses, so I’d like to apologize for that in advanced as well lol this story just became 100x more intricate than I’ve originally intended, and to be honest, I already have SO MANY ideas for future chapters lined up, that I’ve become unsure of when this fic will even end anymore xD) Feel free to ask me any questions as well, if there’s anything you need clarified regarding the story (provided it doesn’t require a massive spoiler to answer). And how did you guys like that Ongniel kiss? To be honest I’m not the best at writing this sort of content, but I’m quite proud of my first attempt nonetheless! And I know some of you may have hoped Ongniel would get together, but I’ve decided that it’s best for them to remain friends for the time being to give their wounds some time to heal, and also because it would be out of character for them to decide to enter into a relationship so quickly. I hope that makes sense~

And before I forget to mention this, the reason why I’ve decided not to split this chapter in two despite it being almost ten times the length of my first one is because
I’ll be away on a leadership business summit from the 9th until the 13th of November (yes, I’m a Management major, lol), which means that the Panwink chapter update might take longer to drop, so I’ve decided to bless you guys with lots more content for this update. I sincerely hope you liked it, and see you next time!

P.S. My apologies if the flashbacks are confusing. I’ve decided to use first-person present-tense as it’s supposed to read like a diary, and writing it that way would make it easier for readers to place themselves in Euigyeon’s shoes. That being said, I hope the change in format isn’t too jarring! (but if so, do tell so I can make the appropriate adjustments).

P.P.S. I have belatedly realized that the members’ ages are a year off when it comes to their grade level, so let’s just pretend that it’s the norm in this story. I just don’t want to have to make excuses for why they all got delayed, because quite frankly, I don’t have any xD Sorry about that!

P.P.P.S. Does anyone else think that the idea of 12-year old Ong falling for 11-year old Daniel who’s like, twice his size is cute? Because I do :3 (and he’s been love with that cutie-patootie for ten whole years. DO YA BELIEVE IT)

P.P.P.P.S. Apologies for the multiple post-scripts, I’ve no idea why I just added one more lol
Before Jihoon auditioned for the Idol Project, mornings at the Imugi Café were peaceful. At six in the morning, Jisung would arrive on-campus, and by that time Jihoon would already have rolled up the steel shutters, set the sign hanging across the front door to ‘Open’, and made his way inside to wipe the windows and tables clean before hungry customers came rushing in for their usual breakfast fix.

The café itself enjoyed its peak hours at around midday, as noon-time breaks were universal, and Jisung served lunch specials on the regular for loyal customers. Mornings, in comparison, were much less hectic, and only a handful of tables were waiting to be served at a time. This gave Jihoon plentiful opportunity to cram in homework during the idle intervals, which was of utmost importance to someone like him, who suffered from a particular allergy to his general subject requirements.

In other words, Jihoon liked mornings.

Or at least, he used to.

The day after promotion exams, Jihoon found (to his utmost surprise and horror) that a group of girls had camped out at the store front gate, waiting for him to appear. Once he’d been spotted, they began whispering to each other in hushed tones, and before he knew it, they had seated themselves at the table nearest to where he worked the counter, the clicking noises their phones made distracting him from the task at hand as they snapped stolen pictures of him in alarming succession.

Things didn’t change as the days went by, apart from that same group of girls slowly increasing in number, until two weeks later to the present day, they managed to occupy an entire row of tables for the whole duration of his four-hour shift.

Jihoon didn’t know whether or not he should be worried that their actions bore resemblance to Daniel’s troop of rabid fangirls, or thankful that at the very least they didn’t crowd around him in a circle, screech incomprehensibly in his ear, or shove pens and papers into his face in an attempt to receive his autograph.

Either way, he was becoming uncomfortable.

“I’d tell you to contain those pheromones you’ve been releasing around these ladies recently,” Jisung said. “But business is booming and my ‘Park Jihoon Approved’ menu set is selling like hotcakes, so I don’t mind them swarming the café half as much as you do.”

Jihoon sighed, his brows furrowing in exasperation. “They’re selling like hotcakes because they are hotcakes, hyung. It’s why we keep on running out of batter, remember?”

A week ago, Jisung introduced a couple of breakfast sets entitled the ‘Park Jihoon Approved’ menu to the public. Each one was a combination of Jihoon’s personal favorites, which, for the most part, comprised of hotcakes, strawberry drizzle, and impossible varieties of tea-infused hot chocolate. Such a gimmick proved both an effective marketing strategy and a logistical nightmare, as they could never have anticipated the tremendous demand for Jihoon’s special
recommendations.

“I should never have agreed to this,” Jihoon muttered to himself. “If they keep on wiping the shelves clean of hotcake mix… what’s left for me at the end of the day?”

“A fatter paycheck, that’s what,” Jisung said. “Now get back to work, Jihoon-ah. I’ve been meaning to turn this into a permanent breakfast menu, but I’ll take it down next week just to placate you. Besides, your discomfort takes away from productivity, and I’m not about to start a massive fanwar in this café once your admirers begin encroaching upon Daniel-supremacist territory. Those tables over at the back next to the practice room are theirs, if you must know.”

“I know that, already,” Jihoon said, gathering the tea and sandwich plate onto a tray. “I’m not complaining.”

I’m working here for my mother, after all. Any ordeal is made worth it for that alone.

Jihoon stepped out from behind the counter, heading for one of the occupied tables. A group of girls were sitting around it, looking excitedly at each other as he strolled towards them.

“One Chamomile Tea and Cheese Injeolmi Toast for Jaehee, one Matcha Espresso Fusion and Strawberry Vanilla Pancake for Eunjung, and one Berry Mix Pancake and Jasmine Citrus Chocolate for Hyejeong.” Jihoon carefully settled the tray onto the table, his balancing act coming to an abrupt close as he distributed the plates and cups to their owners. “Anything else you might need?”

“You’re Park Jihoon, right?” the girl to his left spoke up. Jihoon squinted at her nameplate, which read Kim Jaehee. “Your Monster performance was amazing, by the way.”

“Thank you, Jaehee-ssi,” Jihoon said, smiling at her. “I’m glad it made you happy.”

Jaehee giggled at him shyly.

“I wonder why we never noticed you before that,” Eunjung remarked, settling her elbows on top of the table and her cheeks against both hands, staring at Jihoon dreamily. “You’re so attractive… Totally my type.”

“You don’t have a girlfriend, do you?” Hyejeong pried. A few days ago, such intrusive a query would’ve taken him by surprise, but the same question had come up a number of times over the course of two weeks, and Jihoon almost wished these girls would start a group chat on KakaoTalk already for everyone to know all at once that he was single, just so he didn’t have to answer the question himself twenty times over.

“I don’t have one,” Jihoon said, flashing as warm a smile as he could muster given how stiff he was in situations that required him to share personal details to strangers.

He wished he could say, why is that any of your business? But he knew more than anyone that his privacy would be even harder to cling to once he made his debut, so instead he kept his mouth shut.

“Am I your type, then?” Hyejeong pressed on. “Because if so, I’d like to go on a date with you.”

“My apologies,” Jihoon said, picking up the food tray. “But I’m not interested in seeing anyone at the moment. I thank you for the support, though. And do come again.”

With that, Jihoon brisk-walked away from the table, heart hammering violently in his chest.
Twelve, Jihoon counted in his head. *This is the twelfth date invite I’ve received this month alone.*

And the eleventh I’ve had to refuse.

Jihoon’s cheeks flared up in vivid color, memories of Kuanlin asking him out on a date whistling through his memory.

*I wonder if the date’s still on. He hasn’t mentioned it since his birthday.*

Disappointment welled up inside of him, before he crushed the feeling into sand and let it slip between his fingers.

*Keep yourself in check, Park Jihoon, he chided himself. And don’t do anything stupid.*

Before Jihoon could re-enter the kitchen to take care of the next order, the door to the café creaked open, chimes clinking merrily. Jihoon whipped his head around for the customary welcome, but his breath escaped him instead as he took in the sight of the person standing at the entrance.

“Hi there,” Kuanlin greeted him, the smile on his face melting Jihoon into a lovesick puddle. “I see you’re hard at work, hyung.”

“Yeah,” Jihoon said absent-mindedly, distracted by Kuanlin’s wind-whipped hair and the way it fell across his right eyebrow. “I, uhm… I see that too.”

Wait, Jihoon thought. *That doesn’t make any sense.* He squeezed his eyes shut, ashamed of how easily Kuanlin’s dazzling visuals managed to stir him into a bumbling train wreck. Kuanlin walked over to his side slowly, heads turning as he did so. Excited whispering ensued around them, and Jihoon could only do so much to keep himself from yanking at Kuanlin’s arm to haul him away from the penetrating gazes of their female spectators.

“What’s up, hyung?” Kuanlin asked as he reached Jihoon’s side. “You look like you’re plotting something sinister.” Jihoon craned his neck upwards to look at him, beginning to wonder if Kuanlin had grown an extra centimeter or two over the weekend.

“Don’t make eye-contact with any of the girls at the tables,” Jihoon said before he could stop himself. “I don’t like the way they’re ogling at you.”

“No need to get jealous,” Kuanlin teased, leaning in slightly and reaching for Jihoon, to wipe away a stray eyelash that had fallen onto his cheek. “I wasn’t about to look anywhere else to begin with.”

Jihoon reddened straight away, turning his back to Kuanlin as further exposure to the glorious sight of him would’ve ignited Jihoon into a luminous fire and set the entire café to flames in one go.

*This is why they say you shouldn’t be looking directly at the sun.*

“What is that supposed to mean?” Jihoon asked tensely.

A few moments passed between them in unbearable silence, and Jihoon could feel Kuanlin’s heavy gaze still on him, stubborn and unmoving.

“You know hyung,” Kuanlin began. “I… I’ve been meaning to tell you something.”

Jihoon gulped nervously, turning around once more to look at him. “What is it?”

Kuanlin took one step forward, and before Jihoon could make sense of what he was doing, his right foot had taken one step back, keeping the distance between him and Kuanlin even.
Hurt and confusion flashed in Kuanlin’s expression momentarily.

_What are you doing?_ A voice within him chided. _There’s nothing to be afraid of._

Kuanlin eyed him hesitantly, looking as if he was trying to gauge where Jihoon’s comfort bubble began and ended, in order not to step unwittingly into his personal space.

“Excuse me,” Jisung interrupted, quashing the moment between them. “But if you were about to proclaim your everlasting love for each other just then, I highly suggest you don’t lock lips out here in the open. Otherwise you might end up starting something even more cataclysmic than a massive fanwar.”

Kuanlin looked to Jisung, the pale skin of his face flushing in rosy color. He took a deep breath before stepping away.

“He’s right,” Kuanlin said, shamefaced. “There’s a time and place for this sort of thing, and both of those should be just right before I can let anything else happen.”

“Y-yeah,” Jihoon stammered, still buzzing with nervous tension.

_Was I about to receive a confession just then? _ Jihoon thought. _No way…_

At that very moment, the principal’s voice rang out through the public service announcement system installed within the café.

"Good morning students. As of today, promotion exams have been evaluated and their respective grades finalized, and as such, results have been posted and are up for viewership at the North-Eastern Bulletin. Furthermore, The SBC Channel will be conducting a special broadcast of the results of the School Idol Project auditions, so please do tune in at 8:00 AM sharp to find out who’s made it through. Thank you, and good day to everyone!"

As soon as the announcement ended, Jihoon stole a quick glance at the clock above the counter.

“It’s 7:52,” Jihoon whispered, already feeling anxious and on edge. “Eight minutes to go.”

Kuanlin nodded, taking him by the hand. “Our lives are about to change forever, hyung,” Kuanlin said. “And I’ve never been so ready for anything.”

***

All of them had gathered to watch the special broadcast in Jihoon and Woojin’s room, and until then Jihoon didn’t think their unit was capable of accommodating eleven full-grown men all at once.

“One minute left,” Jaehwan said skittishly. “I think I’m going to pee myself.”

“I’m letting you do no such thing,” Minhyun said, yanking Jaehwan by the ear. “Come here, and just let me hold your hand. It’s easier not to feel nervous that way.”

Jaehwan took Minhyun’s left hand in both of his, still sweating bullets.

“I sure do hope you’ve washed these hands of yours,” Minhyun sighed regretfully. “Otherwise I’m going to kill you.”
“OH GOD THIS IS IT!” Sungwoon interrupted, as the logo of the School Idol Project flashed animatedly onscreen. “This is really it.”

“Two weeks ago, special auditions were held at the Mireu High School for the Arts,” the voice-over announced. “To search for the 101 contestants who will make it through to the first round of the much awaited idol search program. Scores have been tallied, discussions undergone, and performances reviewed... The judges have spoken, ladies and gentlemen! Here are their picks! In 3, 2, 1...”

As soon as the first name appeared, everything in Jihoon’s world fell silent, suspended in time, halted mid-motion. The only thing he could see was himself, staring back at him through the lenses of a camera.

1. PARK JIHOON (Dancer, Year 3) – 492 points

Promotion: Class B to A

Recommendation: Idol (Additional Track)

As his name flashed onscreen in bold lettering, next to high-definition stills of his solo dance break, and underneath the number he never used to associate himself with, Jihoon’s hand flew to his mouth in utter disbelief, his knees buckling as they turned into jelly.

First. I managed to rank first.

“Congratulations on first place, hyung!” Kuanlin exclaimed, pulling him into a hug and sweeping him right off his feet, as the rest of them crowded around him.

Jihoon closed his eyes for a moment, arms wrapped around Kuanlin’s neck as he let reality sink in, his overwhelming joy a riptide rushing to overtake him with emotion. Apart from snatching first place, he’d gotten promoted to Class A, and recommended into the Idol Track.

This can’t be real. He returned his attention to the screen, just to make he wasn’t lost in a dream.

2. KANG DANIEL (Idol, Year 4) – 489 points

Recommendation: Dancer/Rapper (Additional Track)

3. KIM SAMUEL (Idol/Dancer, Year 1) – 486 points

4. AHN HYUNGSEOB (Idol, Year 3) – 485 points

Promotion: Class D to A

Recommendation: Dancer (Additional Track)

5. IM YOUNGMIN (Idol/Rapper, Batch 2014) – 484 points

6. ONG SEONGWOO (Actor, Year 4) – 481 points

Recommendation: Idol (Additional Track)

“Second place, huh?” Daniel said, beaming. “I couldn’t have asked for anything better.”

He turned to Jihoon, looking to him with pride, no trace of bitterness or regret evident in his
features. “You deserved first place, Jihoon-ah,” Daniel said, patting his shoulder lightly. “You were phenomenal out there. I bow down to the new king.”

“Don’t I get a congratulatory hug, too?” Seongwoo said, interrupting the rare moment between them.

Jihoon laughed softly as Daniel turned to Seongwoo, eyeing him with mock irritation.

“Congrats on sixth place,” Daniel said, moving in for a hug. But before he could do so, Seongwoo reached for both of his cheeks, pulling him into a slow kiss.

The rest of them could only stare at the intimate display in shock.

‘Whoops,” Seongwoo said, grinning at Daniel triumphantly after successfully claiming his lips. “I was aiming for your cheek. Guess I missed.”

Daniel turned scarlet instantaneously. “You idiot.”

“I see the both of you have reconciled on your differences,” Jisung noted. “Took you long enough. Sungwoon even——”

“JISUNG-IE!” Sungwoon shrieked. “THAT’S ME ON TELEVISION!”

7. NOH TAEHYUN (Idol/Dancer, Batch 2012) – 480 points

8. HA SUNGWOON (Idol, Batch 2013) – 479 points

... 

11. TAKADA KENTA (Idol, Batch 2014) – 477 points

... 

18. LEE EUIWOONG (Rapper, Year 1) – 472 points

Promotion: Class C to B

Recommendation: Idol (Track Movement)

19. LEE WOOJIN (Idol, Year 1) – 471 points

Promotion: Class B to A

20. PARK WOOJIN (Idol, Year 3), 469 points

Recommendation: Dancer/Rapper (Additional Track)

21. KIM DONGHYUN (Idol, Year 4) – 468 points

Promotion: Class B to A

...

30. LEE DAEHWI (Idol, Year 1) – 462 points

...
40. KIM JAEHWAN (Singer, Year 4) – 458 points
Promotion: Class B to A
Recommendation: Idol (Track Movement)

55. KIM DONGHAN (Idol, Year 4) – 444 points
Promotion: Class D to B

61. KIM SANGGYUN (Rapper, Batch 2014) – 440 points
62. HWANG MINHYUN (Singer, Batch 2014) – 439 points
As their names flashed onscreen one by one, the eleven of them rejoiced in the limited space of Jihoon’s bedroom, exchanging hugs, high-fives, and cheers of celebration.

“I came in 20th, huh,” Woojin said. “Now if only I lifted my shirt…”

“Congratulations, you snaggletooth,” Jihoon said. “Would you look at that, we’re nineteen ranks apart.”

“Oh god,” Woojin said, grimacing at Jihoon. “Now I’m never going to hear the end of it.”

“OH HEY!” Jaehwan exclaimed, the moment his name came up 40th. “I’m in Class A! Serves you right, Hwang Minhyun. Who’s the emperor now?”

Minhyun inserted his index finger into his left ear. “Is there a ghost in here? I’m starting to hear these voices.”

Jaehwan leapt at him then, pulling him into a chokehold. “Be nice to me for once, would you? I said I was sorry for breaking your toilet brush!”

Minhyun inserted another finger into the other ear. “Now if only I could communicate with spirits and tell them that toilet brushes only cost six thousand won at FunMart…”

“That’s eight of us down,” Daehwi whispered, his fingers intertwined with Jinyoung’s, whose name had yet to appear, eyes still glued to the screen. “Only three more to go.”

72. BAE JINYOUNG (Singer, Year 2) – 431 points
Promotion: Class F to C
Recommendation: Idol (Track Movement)

73. KIM YONGGUk (Singer, Batch 2015) – 430 points

78. HUANG JUSTIN (Dancer, Year 1) – 427 points
Promotion: Class D to C
80. YOON JISUNG (Singer, Batch 2010) – 422 points

84. ZHU ZHENG TING (Dancer, Batch 2015) – 420 points

As soon as Jinyoung and Jisung’s names came up, cheers erupted anew across the room. Daehwi ran elatedly into Jinyoung’s arms, causing him to topple off balance and both of them to fall to the floor.

“JINYOUNG-AAAAH,” Daehwi wailed. “YOU MADE IIIIIT!”

Jinyoung laughed softly as he caressed the back of Daehwi’s head, tears pooling at the corners of his eyes. “I made it, Daehwi-ya. I’m not even in F anymore. All thanks to you.”

“That’s my best friend,” Jihoon said, choking up with tears of his own, knowing how much Jinyoung waited, and how hard he practiced for his skill to receive acknowledgment. “You deserved it, Jinyoung-ah. You really did.”

“Jisung-hyung,” he heard Kuanlin say, as the rest of them crowded around Jisung, who had sunk to his knees and begun drowning himself in tears. “Our leader-nim is finally here.”

At that point, only Kuanlin’s name had yet to come up onscreen, and the agony of waiting for it to appear sent Jihoon’s frenzied heart into overdrive. As the numbers dwindled down into the 90s, Jihoon looked to Kuanlin, seeing the worried expression on his face as he began to lose hope.

“I don’t think I’ll make it,” Kuanlin whispered to himself. “What should I do if I don’t? Should I just go home?”

Jihoon strode over to his side, taking his hand and squeezing it between his own. “Don’t say that, Kuanlin-ah,” Jihoon said. “It doesn’t end here for you. Not just yet.”

Once the student in 98th place had been announced, and only three spots were left for the taking, the eleven of them formed a tight circle around the room, hands clasped together. As soon as the colors onscreen shifted, Jihoon risked a peek at the names spelled out before them.

99. LAI KUANLIN (Rapper, Year 1) – 418 points

Promotion: D to C

Recommendation: Idol (Track Movement)

99. YOO SEONHO (Singer, Year 1) – 418 points

Promotion: F to C

Recommendation: Idol (Track Movement)

101. KWON HYUNBIN (Rapper, Batch 2016) – 417 points

All at once the circle broke, as each of them ran towards Kuanlin to smother him in hugs.
“Our maknae’s made it!” Sungwoon exclaimed. “I think I’m going to cry.”

“Congratulations, Kuanlin-ah,” Jinyoung said, patting his shoulder. “I forgot to tell you as much after your performance, so I’m saying this long overdue.”

“Thank you,” Kuanlin said, addressing everyone. “I couldn’t have asked for better hyungs than all of you.”

Kuanlin looked to Jihoon, extending a hand towards him. Jihoon took it without a moment’s hesitation. “You did it,” he said, winking. “I told you as much.”

Jihoon tried to remain calm outwardly, but his insides had turned effectively into smush.

_I get to be with him for a while longer_, was the only thing he could think of.

_Why am I so happy about that? I don’t understand._

“So all of us made it through,” Daniel said finally. “Now it’s time for us to go win this thing.”

The rest of them cheered, hardly able to wait for the first elimination round to start.

“Anyone up for some breakfast?” Jisung offered, grinning from ear to ear. “It’s on the house.”

“I’M IN!” Ten eager voices spoke up in unison. They filed out of the room one by one, until only Jihoon and Kuanlin were left standing inside the bedroom.

“There is cause for celebration, isn’t there?” Kuanlin said then. “Should we go on a date as promised?”

“Oh,” Jihoon said, feigning calm, as if he hadn’t been _dying_ to hear those very words since the first mention of a date on Kuanlin’s birthday. “That… that would be nice.”

Kuanlin nodded. “Are you free tomorrow?”

Jihoon shook his head slowly, planning out his schedule on the spot. “It’s a Saturday, so I have work at auntie’s kitchen.”

If truth be told, Jihoon had asked for a day-off and gotten one. He simply needed enough time to mentally and emotionally prepare himself for the date before it happened.

“Right,” Kuanlin said. “Then when exactly….”

“Since both of our classes end early every Monday,” Jihoon suggested. “Why don’t we go out then? We can lay out our itinerary as we go along.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Kuanlin said. “The date is set, then. I’ll pick you up from your bedroom at two o’clock sharp.”

“I’ll be waiting.” Jihoon replied, the sound of his own heartbeat pounding in his ears like drums.

“Aren’t either of you hungry?” Jisung said, his head poking into the room. “Breakfast is served at Imugi, so don’t keep the rest of us on standby.”

“We should probably make our way there now,” Kuanlin suggested. “I’m hungry.”

In true Jihoon fashion, his stomach grumbled loudly in response.
“Yeah,” Jihoon agreed. “I still have work to do, but so am I.”

***

“Is there a reason,” Woojin said. “Why all of us in here, yet again?”

Ten of them, with the exception of Kuanlin, were packed inside of Jihoon and Woojin’s room, the day after performance results were announced.

Daniel shrugged. “Jihoon called an emergency meeting.”

“Sometimes, I regret not opting for a room of my own,” Woojin said. “But then I realize that would mean I wouldn’t have the opportunity to bother Jihoon every morning, so all is well this way. Trade-offs are essential, after all.”

“Care to explain what we’re in here for?” Jinyoung said, his hair still sticking upwards in every direction, looking as if he’d just been zapped by lightning. “I cut short my beauty sleep just for this.”

“Wait a minute,” Daehwi interjected. “Kuanlin isn’t here yet. I should probably give him a call.”

As soon as Daehwi reached into his pocket to retrieve his phone, Jihoon leapt at him and snatched the device away.

“Don’t… don’t do that,” he pleaded. “He isn’t supposed to be here at all.”

“Why not?” Daehwi asked, his head tilting slightly to the side in confusion. “Isn’t he a part of the group, too?”

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Minhyun said then. “But doesn’t this emergency meeting have to do with our future on the Idol Project? Though I admit I may have wondered why you’d want to discuss such a thing before the mechanics have been explained in detail.”

Jihoon met each of their eyes, ashamed of his own nerve to trick them into thinking he had a helpful game plan up his sleeve. “It isn’t about that at all.”

“What are we here for, then?” Seongwoo said. “Don’t tell me Daniel and I skipped out on our morning cuddle just to—“

Before Seongwoo could finish, Daniel clamped a hand to his mouth to silence him. “Don’t listen to this guy,” Daniel said, laughing nervously. “There’s no such thing.” Seongwoo tugged at Daniel’s hand forcefully, pulling it away.

“There isn’t?” he said. “Then what do you call it when every morning before we get out of bed, I give you a kiss and—“

Daniel’s hand flew back into place to muffle the sound of Seongwoo’s voice. “THERE’S NO SUCH THING.”

“I don’t understand what he’s trying to say,” Jaehwan commented. “Let him say his piece, for once.”

Daniel gulped hesitantly, retracting his hand slightly to allow Seongwoo some breathing space.
Seongwoo’s narration returned in full-blast volume.

“—and then you beg for me to do it one more time so I—“

This time, both of Daniel’s hands moved to cover Seongwoo’s mouth. “For the love of all things beautiful in this world, Ong Seongwoo,” Daniel pleaded. “Do shut up.”

“I sure do hope you’re using protection,” Sungwoon said, addressing Seongwoo. “Not that I’m assuming fixed positions between you. Might be best to change things up from time to time.”

Daniel groaned loudly. “Not you too, hyung. Like I said, Seongwoo and I are friends. IT ISN’T LIKE THAT BETWEEN US.”

“The ones that need protection,” Jisung interrupted. “Are the precious maknaes you guys are corrupting with your shamelessness. Am I right, Jihoon-ie?”

But Jihoon was no longer following the conversation, as his mind drifted into thoughts of the future.

_Someday, he told himself. I’ll have to think about those sorts of things too. Kuanlin and I aren’t going to stay innocent forever._

He looked up at Seongwoo and Daniel, wondering if he and Kuanlin would ever be like them.


At this, Woojin moved to shield himself, wrapping both hands around his shoulders in cross-formation. He inched away from Jihoon slowly. “No, Jihoon-ah,” he said. “It isn’t going to be like that between us. I won’t allow it.”

Jihoon grunted at him, bonking him upside the head. “Dream on, you idiot.”

“I’m sorry,” Minhyun said then, eyes rolling. “I still have no idea what any of us are here for.”

Jihoon heaved in a deep breath, fidgeting uncomfortably. “Remember how… I told you Kuanlin asked me out on a date? So I—“

“KUANLIN ASKED YOU OUT ON A DATE?” Jinyoung screeched. “How come you never told me?!”

“Did I forget to mention that?” Jihoon said, looking sheepish.

“My children grow up too fast,” Jisung remarked, wiping at an invisible tear with the tips of his fingers. “But no matter. May the both of you find happiness in each other.”

“Hyung,” Jihoon said. “We’re going out on our first date. Not getting hitched.”

“But I still don’t understand how a date classifies as an emergency,” Daniel said. “Unless you were asking for some advice?”

Jihoon twiddled his thumbs consciously, gaze sliding downwards to the floor. “I needed help with my outfit.”

An awkward silence ensued.
“Was that it?” Seongwoo said. “I doubt you needed all of us cramped in this narrow space just to help you pick out something date-appropriate from your closet.”

“Hyung,” Jinyoung said, shaking his head wearily. “I’m not sure you understand the severity of what you’re about to get into.”

Seongwoo blinked at him, bewildered. “It can’t be that bad…right?”

“Ready, Jinyoung-ah?” Daehwi said, walking towards Jihoon’s closet, reaching tentatively for both handles.

Jinyoung nodded. “Unleash the monstrosity.”

All at once, they were greeted by tie-dye shirts, plaid sweaters and other clashing prints, oversized tees in blinding colors, cartoon-print hoodies, rainbow socks, sweatshirts with vague obscenities written across the front of them, and a vast assortment of neon shoelaces.

“See what I mean?” Jinyoung said. “You could never have been prepared for this.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re breaking several rules all at once wearing these together,” Sungwoon remarked. “I hope you don’t, for goodness’ sake.”

“You know, Jaehwan said. “If the idol dream doesn’t work out for you, I’m sure you could found a neon shoelace museum with this much stashed in your drawer.”

“Forget the shoelaces,” Daniel said. “Is this what I think this is? Pink, strawberry print underwear?”

Jihoon scratched at the back of his head. “I bought matching socks for those.”

“You’re right,” Seongwoo said, covering his mouth at the unexpected tragedy that was Jihoon’s sense of style, or lack thereof. “This is an emergency. This… this is a disaster. A fiasco. The absolute worst.”

Jihoon sighed in defeat. He already knew that he looked like a moron every time he stepped out in casual clothing, and he already knew that the stares he received as he passed others in the street weren’t out of admiration, but out of mockery and worry for his well-being in general. He himself had no idea why he enjoyed dressing in outlandish clothing. He guessed it might’ve been a combination of wanting to stand out, and not knowing what he was doing half the time.

“Look on the bright side,” Minhyun said. “We could’ve discovered something even nastier than these. There are all sorts of things boys Jihoon’s age could’ve kept hidden underneath this massive pile of clothing.”

“If it’s those indecent magazines you’re looking for,” Jihoon said. “You’re looking in the wrong place. I suggest you move one cabinet over.” He gestured to Woojin’s closet.

“Hey!” Woojin exclaimed, offended. “If you wanted to borrow them, you could’ve asked nicely instead of sneaking around to unearth my stash.”

Seongwoo grinned at Woojin knowingly. “I like how you didn’t even bother to deny that you had a stash to begin with.”

Woojin shrugged. “I’m a teenage kid with no girlfriend and a shit-ton of raging hormones. Deal with it.”
“Ahem,” Daehwi coughed, trying to steer the conversation back into place. “You all know what this means, right?”

Everyone save for Jihoon nodded in perfect understanding.

“Hell if I knew,” Jihoon muttered under his breath. “I’m just hoping you aren’t planning to steal all of my clothing in the night and use them as logs for the festival campfire.”

“No such thing,” Jinyoung assured him. “But if you’re thinking what I’m thinking…” he turned to everyone else.

Jaehwan nodded. “Someone needs to take Jihoon out shopping.”

At Jaehwan’s suggestion, nine eager hands shot readily into the air. “I volunteer.”

***

“Oh no, sweetie, no!” Jisung shrieked. “You’re headed towards the wrong place.”

It was eleven in the morning the very same day, and everyone save for Kuanlin had taken practice time off to accompany Jihoon as he shopped around for clothes at COEX Mall, while Jinyoung and Daehwi had gone elsewhere within the shopping complex, apparently to meet up with one of Daehwi’s friends from middle school.

The place was gigantic, and much too easy to get lost in if you didn’t know your way around. So all of them walked around in single file with Seongwoo taking the lead, making sure they didn’t huddle together in enclosed spaces and blocked off the pathways for other customers to come through.

They had been walking around the department store for over an hour, and the moment Jihoon spotted racks of colorful shirts as they passed, his feet gravitated towards them immediately.

“But the tie-dye shirt…” Jihoon trailed off as Jisung dragged him forcibly away. “And on sale, too…”

“Someone should walk behind Jihoon,” Jaehwan suggested. “Just to make sure he won’t sneak out to buy something horrific from under our watch.”

“Do you, or do you not want Kuanlin to fall head over heels in love with you during your date?” Seongwoo asked him. “Because if you do, tie-dye is a no-go. A hard pass.”

“We’re here,” Woojin said, pointing to the fitting room and handing over the periwinkle blue and white varsity jacket he picked out for Jihoon.

“Your features are quite soft,” Minhyun explained. “So lighter colors should work best on you. And if you can’t have neon… pastels are the next big thing.”

“Just keep the shirt simple,” Seongwoo advised, handing over a plain white tee. “A clean label is enough. No need for loud prints, because the individual pieces themselves should work together to make a statement.”

“You can never go wrong with these either,” Daniel said, throwing in a pair of black skinny jeans. “You do have nice legs, so play to that advantage.”
“But if you’re really going for pops of color,” Sungwoon said, adding a pair of black and gold low-cut sneakers to the pile. “Shoes in contrasting colors are the way to go.”

“And for an extra touch,” Jaehwan added. “These spectacles look nice on you. They aren’t prescriptive, but they do accentuate your eyes.”

“I do think Kuanlin does like your eyes very much,” Jisung said, nodding agreeably. “He stares at them much too often.” Jisung turned him around, gesturing towards the changing room. “Now go in there and try them on. I think you’ll look fabulous.”

Jihoon walked towards the room, wondering what he had gotten himself into. As he stood in line, waiting for his turn, he noticed someone standing across from him near the tie-dye rack, dressed in head-to-toe black, wearing a large cap, wayfarer eyewear, and an expensive silver wrist-watch. Jihoon squinted at him to get a better look. The man’s right hand moved to his sunglasses, pushing them downwards to give Jihoon a better view of his expression. As soon as he made eye-contact, the corner of his lips turned up into the semblance of a knowing smile.

*Is he staring at me?* Jihoon thought. *I don’t think I know him.*

“Your turn, sir,” the saleslady said, motioning for him to come over and have his clothing inspected. Jihoon turned away to look at her, thinking himself delirious after not having gotten enough sleep.

*Relax, Park Jihoon, he told himself. You’ve got nothing to worry about.*

***

“What’s up next on today’s agenda?” Jaehwan asked, after Jihoon returned from the cashier and wiped his savings account clean to purchase a complete outfit for his date.

“I’m buying Kuanlin a gift,” Jihoon decided. “I’m charging it to this week’s salary.”

“Fair enough,” Jisung shrugged. “I’m getting rather hungry, though. You don’t mind if we grab a snack from over there, do you?” he said, pointing to the coffee shop behind them.

Jihoon shook his head. “You go on ahead, hyung. I’ll look around on my own.”

“We’ll be right here, then,” Seongwoo told him. “Don’t you get lost.”

After leaving the area, Jihoon roved around the mall, looking through shop windows and center isle displays. He wondered what sort of gift Kuanlin would appreciate, wishing he had the guts to ask for even the slightest hint of what he might’ve wanted for his birthday.

He looked through bookstores, console booths, and hobby shops, only to become aware of the fact that he knew nothing of what types of books Kuanlin liked to read, which games he liked to play, what he enjoyed doing in his spare time.

*It’s as if I never knew him at all,* Jihoon thought. *And yet it feels as though I’ve known him since we were little.*

After that, Jihoon entered into a couple of apparel outlets, though he realized he had no idea what Kuanlin’s shirt size was either, and was afraid that he’d end up dressing him in something
Jihoon sighed, thoroughly exhausted, spent, and running out of ideas.

*If only inspiration fell from the skies like rain,* he thought. *If only.*

“Good morning, sir!” someone called from behind him, snapping him out of his zombie-like trance. “Are you looking for a gift for someone’s birthday?”

Jihoon turned to the source, where a sales clerk was standing behind him, surrounded by glass cabinets and display cases, each one a secure containment for the vast array of bracelets, necklaces, and rings winking enticingly at him. The booth display read ‘Bunny & Chick’, and it was a brand Jihoon didn’t think he’d ever heard of before.

“I, uhm…” he began, not knowing what else to say. “Yeah. I guess I am.”

“Perfect!” The sales clerk exclaimed, clapping both hands together. “We do have something you might be interested in.”

She brought out a catalog of their latest accessories, pointing to it excitedly. “This is our latest design, simple and sleek. And we’ve got it at a discount for our tenth anniversary.”

Jihoon checked out the item she was referring to, and it was a plain, silver ring with a tiny infinity symbol carved out at the very center. The band was rather thick, and Jihoon thought such an accessory would look amazing on Kuanlin’s slender fingers.

“If it’s for a girlfriend,” the sales clerk continued. “We have an even better deal. These are couple rings you can get for the price of one. We accept customizations as well, if you’re planning on getting them engraved with your initials.”

As soon as he heard the word ‘girlfriend’, Jihoon blushed beet red.

*Girlfriend, huh?*

“What if…. He said, coughing awkwardly. “What if it’s for a boyfriend? Does… does that work, too?”

If the sales clerk was astonished to find out he wasn’t interested in women, she offered no such indication.

“Oh, of course it does!” she said simply. “I can get you a matching ring in a larger size, if you’d like.”

“His fingers…” Jihoon said. “They’re quite wispy. I don’t think adjustments are all too necessary.”

She nodded in understanding, retrieving a sample from within one of the cabinets. “Would a ring of this size fit?”

Jihoon nodded, taking the ring and inspecting it closely. Kuanlin liked to hold his hands, which meant that Jihoon knew by heart the measurement of his fingers. “Yes, it’s perfect. I’ll take them.”

“Great!” the saleslady exclaimed. “And as for your initials?”

“That’s uhm… KL and JH.”
“Perfect. That’s a hundred thousand won for both.”

Jihoon nodded, trying not to assess how many zeroes were in that number and how big of a hole he’d have to burn through his wallet to account for them. As he paid for the gift in cash and waited for the sales clerk to fill out his receipt, Jihoon saw a flash of movement from the periphery of his vision. He turned around, finding the same man from a while ago still watching him.

Jihoon rubbed his eyes slowly. As he reopened them, he saw the man still rooted to his spot, his sunglasses making it unclear as to whether or not he was looking at Jihoon or elsewhere entirely. His attire had morphed into something else, too, as this time he wore a khaki overcoat, a striped v-neck and a pair of denim jeans. The same silver watch, however, was still ticking steadily against his right wrist.

“I think I’m hallucinating,” he whispered to himself. “I need to grab a drink.”

After the successful transaction at Bunny & Chick, Jihoon bought himself lemonade, then made his way to the nearest restroom, just to wash the sleep out of his eyes. He had tossed and turned the entire night, Kuanlin’s date invite stuck in his head like a broken record on repeat. As he stared himself down in front of the mirror, he made a mental note to himself to invest in a new stick of concealer, as his dark circles and under-eye bags were beginning to make an unwelcome comeback.

After washing his face with water, he walked over to one of the cubicles to relieve himself.

As soon as he reached for the knob, however, the door to the cubicle opened, someone large and impossibly tall bumping into him as he made his way out.

“Sorry about that,” the man said in a low voice, the ghost of a smile dancing in his features. “Didn’t quite see you there.” In a flash of recognition, Jihoon noticed the wristwatch he was wearing, the very same one he had observed on the man that had been watching him since that morning.

Panic rose to Jihoon’s throat.

_I need to get out of here_, Jihoon thought. _And I need to tell everyone what’s happening._

***

“Guys,” Jihoon said, as soon as he managed to find his companions at Starbucks, seated comfortably nearest to the wall. He had spotted the same man a couple more times since the bathroom incident, stalking him from a distance, a constant, threatening presence following him around like a shadow underneath the sun. “I think someone’s following me.”

“Is it a sasaeng?” Daniel asked, wide-eyed. “Where is she?”

“I don’t think it is,” Jihoon shook his head. “It’s a guy. Muscular, broad-shouldered, even taller than Kuanlin is. And he’s worn a different set of clothes each time I’ve come across him. It’s as if he’s prepared to stalk me on this day out.”

“Are you sure it’s the same person? Absolutely positive?”

Jihoon nodded, dread filling his system like water flowing into a yawning reservoir after days of barren stagnation. “It’s the same build, the same facial structure. And I’ve noticed the one thing he
never takes off, no matter the disguise. A silver-strapped Daniel Wellington timepiece with a
sterling black face, set one hour behind Seoul. It’s the exact same one each time.”

Jisung gaped at him, dumbstruck. “How could you have come to notice so small a detail?”

Jihoon wrapped both hands around his arms, shuddering at the remembrance. “He came much too
close for comfort, once.”

“You didn’t happen to make eye-contact did you?” Jisung asked warily.

“I did,” Jihoon admitted. “Once, as I stood in line to fit my clothing. I took a gander at his face, and
ended up getting caught red-handed.”

“Did he react to you sighting him, by any chance?”

“He smirked at me. As if he knew what I was up to. And a while ago…” Jihoon closed his eyes,
heart pounding in his chest. His breathing had become uneven, overtaken by panic and
consternation. “I bumped into him while inside the bathroom. He did apologize, but I didn’t like
the encounter even one bit.”

“This doesn’t sound good,” Minhyun said. “You don’t suppose we’ve got a felon on the loose, do
you?”

“Might be a sexual predator,” Daniel warned. “Or a thief, waiting to catch you off guard and take
you by surprise.”

“Or,” Seongwoo exclaimed, a grave expression on his face. “Haechan’s requital could have been
set in motion, and this guy is the first of a series of thugs he’s hired to endanger us. And since the
performance results have been televised, he’s targeting the highest-ranked contestant first before
making his way down the list.”

“Is that something Haechan’s capable of doing?” Jihoon asked. “Sounds like an elaborate
conspiracy.”

“When it comes to Go Haechan’s cunning,” Seongwoo muttered. “I’m afraid there are no limits.”
Seongwoo looked to him, noticing belatedly the panic-stricken expression Jihoon wore after
having taken in the implications of his suggestion.

“That being said,” Seongwoo backtracked. “I hope my instincts are dead wrong, and Haechan’s
actually about to turn up dead in a ditch somewhere.”

"Guys," Jihoon said, spotting the same man across from them, terror threatening to overtake him.
"He's standing right behind you, to Seongwoo-hyung's seven o'clock. What... what do we do
now?"

“Proceed calmly,” Jisung instructed. “For now, act as if nothing’s wrong. Don’t look in his general
direction, as if we’re discussing something completely unrelated to him. Later on after we’ve
formulated a way out of this, Seongwoo and Daniel will stay behind and wait until he leaves or
follows us downstairs.”

Seongwoo’s eyes flitted momentarily to Daniel, not liking the idea. “And if he stands his ground?”

“Then wait a few minutes before you decide to go,” Jisung advised. “If he’s spying on us, then the
both of you are to serve as counter-espionage. It’s alright if he thinks you’re onto him; I doubt he
can take on the both of you at once, after all.”
“You didn’t happen to notice anyone else tracking your movements besides him, did you?” Seongwoo asked, turning his attention to Jihoon. “If we’re dealing with a gang of troublemakers here, that could be a problem Daniel and I would be incapable of handling.” He leaned towards Daniel, settling an arm around his waist protectively. “And I’m not letting Daniel get hurt ever again.”

“Hey,” Daniel whispered, looking at Seongwoo worriedly. “You can’t expect to hold them back alone.”

“No, hyung,” Jihoon shook his head, bolstering the both of them. “Unless he happens to be the weakest link in terms of camouflage, then I’m sure he’s acting in isolation. I never noticed anyone else, and I scanned the vicinity each time I happened to come across him.”

*Now that I think about it,* Jihoon thought. *Maybe I shouldn’t have been too transparent about sensing something fishy. He probably knew right from the start that I’d noticed his presence.*

“This is no time to panic,” Woojin said, interrupting Jihoon’s thought process. He crossed both arms against his chest, and Jihoon didn’t think he’d ever seen Woojin looking so stern and contemplative. “We might’ve been over-analyzing the actions of someone completely harmless. He could simply have been meaning to ask Jihoon where he managed to score his banging attire from, in which case we’ve been paranoid for nothing. But just in case we’re dealing with some sort of mobster…” He turned to Sungwoon and Jisung, cocking his head to the side.

Both of them nodded in understanding.

“He’s right,” Sungwoon said. “We should probably leave before things get ugly.”

“So what’s the plan?” Jaehwan cut in. “I don’t think we should file out all at once. And keep the expression neutral, you guys. If he’s observing us as closely as Jihoon thinks he is, then we’re done for.”

“The five of you,” Jisung said, gesturing to everyone sitting around the table sans Seongwoo and Daniel. “Turn around and head for the escalators near Cashier 28, then make your way to the first floor. Don’t forget to act normal.” He gulped nervously, smiling at each of them, pretending for Jihoon’s sake that nothing was wrong.

“And whatever happens,” he continued, still smiling. “Don’t even dare to look behind you.”

“What goes next?” Jihoon asked.

“We bolt straight for the exit.”

***

The very next day, another surprise was in store for Jihoon at the Imugi Café.

Apart from his mystery pursuer (whom they managed to lose successfully after heading out of the mall and vaulting for the nearest taxi line), one other person liked to keep track of Jihoon’s movements, blowing up his phone on occasion by attempting to call him every five seconds. As she sat on one of the barstools farthest from the entrance, engaged in passionate conversation with Lai Kuanlin, Jihoon could hardly even begin to form a suitable reaction to the unforeseen state of affairs unfolding right in front of him.
“Mom?” Jihoon said, slowly making his way to where they were seated. “Is that you?”

As soon as his mother turned around to regard him, she leapt off her seat and ran straight into his waiting arms.

“Nae adeul!” she exclaimed. “Where’ve you been? I’ve been waiting ages for you.”

Jhoon blinked at her, still unable to process the situation. “Where’ve I been?” he repeated. “Asleep in my room, of course. It’s nine on a Sunday morning.”

“Is that so?” his mother said, beaming at him proudly. “I heard the news that you’d gotten first place. As soon as I found out, I booked a ticket straight to Seoul.”

Jihoon smiled at his mother, ever-grateful for the constant support. “Thanks mom,” he said. “I didn’t think you’d come here in person just to congratulate me, so that in itself means the world to me already. Have you eaten breakfast?”

“This dashing gentleman over here,” his mother said, gesturing for Kuanlin to come over. “He’s a friend of yours, isn’t he? He recognized straight-away that I was your mother, and offered to pay for my meal.”

Jihoon turned to Kuanlin, embarrassed. “Hey. You didn’t have to do that.”

“Are you kidding me?” Kuanlin said, laughing softly. “Of course I had to. She’s just as beautiful and amazing as you are, you know. I did insist to pay for her breakfast, but it felt more like a treat I was giving myself, considering the wonderful time I had in meeting her.”

“Omo!” Jihoon’s mother exclaimed, wrapping both hands around Kuanlin’s arm giddily. “What a sweetheart you are! Somehow it feels as if I’ve found another son.”

“Alright, this is getting out of hand,” Jihoon said. “You already have both hands full having to watch over me, and Jaehyun-hyung does nothing to lighten the load. Another son is the last thing you need.”

“Nonsense,” his mother argued. “Anyone would be lucky to call themselves Kuanlin’s mother.”

*There’s no winning against her,* Jihoon thought, sighing in defeat. *And this is why they say I take after my father.*

Jihoon unslung his backpack from his shoulders, reaching into the side pockets to retrieve a small, bulky envelope.

“Sorry, mom,” Jihoon said, handing the envelope over. “This is as much as I can give you for the month. I actually used up the rest of my salary to…”

*To buy Kuanlin a gift.*

“You’ve always been wise about your expenses, adeul-ah,” Jihoon’s mom told him, taking the envelope graciously and patting Jihoon’s hand with both of hers affectionately. “So if you’ve gone and spent some of your money, I trust that it’s for something important. Don’t let me get in the way of that. You’ve already done so much for me.”

Jihoon nodded. *I’ll do even better next time, mom. I’ll do you proud.*

“But Kuanlin is such a nice boy, isn’t he?” Jihoon’s mother said then. “He’s extremely handsome,
too. He almost looks like a model!"

She pulled Jihoon towards herself with her other arm, leaning forwards to whisper in his ear. “If you were a daughter of mine instead of a son, I’d marry you off to him in a heartbeat.”

Jihoon blushed strawberry red, knowing full-well that his mother’s talk-whispering was loud enough for Kuanlin to hear.

“I’d marry Jihoon-hyung, too,” Kuanlin said, playing along to appease his mother. “I think he’d make a great wife.”

“Ohoho!” his mother exclaimed, grinning at Jihoon smugly. “Well then, you have my blessing!”

Jihoon groaned loudly, covering his face with both hands, blushing until he could almost feel plumes of smoke rising in columns around him, his entire being going swiftly into overheat.

“I’ll take my leave now,” his mother said then. “Congratulations on first place, adeul-ah. Now do behave yourself.”

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As soon as his mother had left, Jihoon waited for Jinyoung, Daehwi, Seongwoo and Daniel to arrive before he ordered a mid-morning snack. The café was busy as usual, bustling with even more customers now that people knew it was a place he and Daniel (and Seongwoo and Jinyoung, for that matter) frequented. At the moment they were sipping on coffee and tea contentedly, waiting for Kuanlin to return after having offered to accompany Jihoon’s mother to Line 6 of the Apgujeong Station.

“I really do love Sundays,” Jinyoung said, stirring his spoon lazily around his coffee cup. “Nothing to worry about on days like this one.”

“We’ll be busy with practice for the Idol Project in the weeks to come,” Daniel said. “So I guess we should enjoy our downtime while it lasts.”

At that moment, an expensive Bentley pulled into view, parking at the spot by the window nearest to where they were seated.

“Woah there,” Seongwoo exclaimed, sizing up the luxurious automobile in front of them. “I wonder who came to visit.”

The door to the driver’s seat flew open, and a tall, gorgeous man stepped out of it, dressed entirely in designer clothing. He was a little over six feet tall, had model-like proportions, and a jawline sharp enough to cut through diamonds. As soon as he walked into the café, the girls seated at the tables by the entrance swooned collectively at him.

He looks familiar, Jihoon thought. Where have I seen him before?

Jihoon squinted at him, studying him carefully.

“Oh god,” he exclaimed, realization dawning on him as he caught sight of the familiar timepiece around the newcomer’s wrist. “I think I know who that is.”

“You do?” Daehwi asked, incredulous. “Is he a friend of yours? He seems awfully popular with the
ladies.”

Jihoon watched him closely as he stalked towards the counter. He was dressed in a navy blue trench coat, a striped turtleneck, pointy leather boots, and the tightest pair of jeans Jihoon had ever seen on a guy his size and stature. As he walked past, customers goggled at him, admiring his impressive physique and excellent proportions. Without the cap and oversized sunglasses, he looked less like a mobster come to stir up trouble than an A-list celebrity come to bless his fans with the fortune to bask in his distinguished presence.

“Aren’t there one too many heartthrobs at this café all at once?” Seongwoo said, his eyes narrowing at the new customer as he placed an order at the counter. “I don’t think I’d vibe with this guy at all. He gives me the creeps.”

“You say you’ve met this guy, hyung?” Jinyoung asked, addressing Jihoon. “How come?”

“Remember how I told you someone followed us around at COEX yesterday?” Jihoon exclaimed. “I think that’s him. I’m almost certain.”

Jinyoung and Daehwi exchanged apprehensive looks.

“He doesn’t look anything like an offender,” Daehwi said. “As a matter of fact, I’d wager that those girls standing in line behind him would gladly volunteer to get themselves kidnapped.”

Jihoon shook his head, convinced that his hunch was on target. He couldn’t let himself get hoodwinked by a potential mugger, just because he looked like a Kris Wu incarnate.

*If looks could kill,* Jihoon thought. *Then this guy’s got one hand on the holster and handgun on my heart, one click away from pulling the trigger.*

At that very moment, Kuanlin stepped into the café through the side entrance, having already accompanied Jihoon’s mother to the subway station. He walked slowly over to where the five of them were seated, looking rather accomplished.

“Hyung,” he exclaimed, as he took his place at the seat adjacent to Jihoon’s. “I think your mother really likes me.”

Jihoon only half-heard his remark, as the newcomer turned around after claiming his drink, immediately establishing eye-contact with Jihoon. An unwelcome shiver ran up his spine, color draining from his face in trepidation.

“What is it, hyung?” Kuanlin asked, noticing the terror-stricken expression on Jihoon’s face. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Rather than a ghost,” Jihoon whispered. “I think I’ve spotted a criminal.”

Kuanlin followed Jihoon’s line of sight over to where he was looking, locking eyes with a guy in question.

Recognition dawned on his face immediately.

“HYUNG?” Kuanlin exclaimed, rising abruptly from his seat. “What are you doing here? I thought you were back in Taipei!”

Kuanlin bounded towards Jihoon’s stalker delightedly, running into open arms.
Jihoon’s mouth fell open as he watched Kuanlin hugging his would-be-assailant like an orphan reunited with its biological parent.

“Hi there, Kuanlin-ah,” the guy in question said, patting Kuanlin’s head affectionately. “Missed me?”

“Of course I did,” Kuanlin said. “You never answered any of my calls or my text messages. I was beginning to think you’d forgotten about me.”

“Well this is unexpected,” Jinyoung said. “Seems you’ve been replaced, hyung. He’s got a lover in Taipei and never thought to tell you.”

“That’s absurd,” Daehwi countered. “I don’t think their relationship is anything like that. Seems more like brotherhood to me.”

“They’re making a scene out there,” Daniel observed. “I think those girls watching them just died and went straight to heaven.”

“Hey, Kuanlin-ah!” Seongwoo called out. “Care to introduce us to your new best friend?”

“Right,” Kuanlin said, tugging excitedly at the newcomer’s arm, directing him over to where they were seated. He pulled a chair from the empty table nearest them, offering his companion a seat. From up close, Kuanlin’s buddy seemed incapable of hurting a fly, but Jihoon knew better than to take others at face value.

“Hyung, these are my friends from school,” Kuanlin said, gesturing to each of them. “I’d introduce them to you, but I’m sure you already know who they are.”

The guy nodded, a knowing smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “This is your roommate, Lee Daehwi, and his exam partner, Bae Jinyoung. This is Ong Seongwoo, model and actor, and Kang Daniel, Student Council President. And this,” he said, pointing to Jihoon. “This is a friend of yours, Park Jihoon. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“I’m sure this isn’t normal,” Seongwoo said, voicing out each of their thoughts, eyes narrowing into slits. “This guy’s a walking information database.”

“I’d say it’s a pleasure to meet you,” Jihoon told him. “But I wouldn’t classify getting stalked for an entire day a particularly likable experience.”

“You did what, now?” Kuanlin said, quizzical. “Hyung! I don’t recall asking you to tail my closest friend from afar and give him a heart attack for it. When did this happen?”

“I apologize,” the guy said, turning to Jihoon. “Should I have startled you, rest assured that wasn’t my intention.”

“Startled,” Jihoon said. “Is a colossal understatement. I thought you were about to slit my throat!”

“Of course not,” he replied. “Murder is always the last resort.”

Daniel’s eyes widened, completely horrified. “Why is murder even an option, in the first place?”

“Kuanlin-ah, who is this guy exactly?” Jinyoung said. “It’s stressing me out, not knowing what to call him.”

Kuanlin turned to his friend, uncertain. The words left unspoken hung unsettlingly in the air.
“Everyone,” Kuanlin began. “This is Jung Wooseok. Criminal investigator, forensic scientist, and
detective school prodigy. He used to work as an understudy at the National Intelligent Service.”

“Criminal…criminal investigator?” Jihoon exclaimed. He was unsure of whether or not to feel
relieved that he wasn’t in fact on someone’s hit list, or aghast that all of a sudden the cops were at
his heels. “Does he think I’m a suspect for something? What am I under investigation for?”

Kuanlin smirked at him playfully. “Hyung, I already told you it was illegal to be this attractive.”

Jihoon rolled his eyes. “I was born this way. How is that my fault?”

“I’m not here to arrest you,” Wooseok assured him. “I ran a simple background check, and from
there decided it was best to observe you, albeit from afar. I was rather hoping I’d be able to carry
on my mission for a little while longer.”

“He might be the most promising detective of his generation,” Kuanlin said, shaking his head.
“But he’s not the best at keeping up disguises, to be perfectly honest. His towering height doesn’t
help him remain inconspicuous, either.”

“What does any of this have to do with me?” Jihoon demanded. “I don’t recall doing anything that
would warrant close inspection by a professional agent.”

“In case young master Kuanlin here forgot to mention it,” Wooseok said, sipping coolly on his
Iced Americano Grande. “I’ve worked as his personal bodyguard for the past four years.”

“PERSONAL BODYGUARD?” The five of them repeated, astounded by the surprising revelation.

“As such,” Wooseok carried on. “It is my duty and obligation to keep him safe from harm, and
make sure the people he surrounds himself with are worthy of his friendship and attention.”

Jihoon nodded absently, unable to process even the basest information.

This is insanity, Jihoon thought. Utter madness.

“I’d like to know then,” Jihoon said in challenge. “The extent of your knowledge on my personal
background.”

Wooseok smirked at him, taking the bait, and Jihoon wished he’d kept his mouth shut.

“Park Jihoon,” Wooseok began. “Nineteen, lived in Masan, South Korea for twelve years before
moving to Itaewon with his mother and older brother in 2011. Educated at Shindong Elementary
and Yongban Middle School, and was a Class B Dance Track student at Mireu High School, before
his promotion into the A Class after making it through to the Idol Project. Has been friends with a
certain Bae Jinyoung for six years, and went through his first major heartbreak at fifteen after
breaking up with a girl named Han Ahreum. In his spare time, plays video games and goes through
dance practice with his roommate, Park Woojin, who also happens to be in the Track he’s aimed
for since enrollment. Likes sweets and spicy foods only in moderation, and dislikes getting scolded
by his professors. Is a big fan of EXO’s Baekhyun and BTS’ V, and aspires to meet them someday.
Apart from his studies, he works two jobs to help his mother pay off his school fees, odd
weeknights waiting tables at the Imugi Café in Apgujeong, and Saturdays in the kitchen at the
Little Byeongari in Hongdae. And just two weeks ago, he met the young master by accident in
Room 215-B at the Left Wing, and since then they’ve been inseparable.”

As Wooseok did a recap of his findings on Jihoon, the rest of them could do little more than stare
at him as he spoke, gaping at him in wonderment.
“I’m not…” Jihoon began. “I’m not even going to ask you how you managed to find most of that out.” He shuddered at the thought of Wooseok having tracked him and followed him around, long enough for him to practically gain the ability to write Jihoon’s biography without missing even the slightest detail.

“I wouldn’t even be surprised if he knew the color of your underwear at the moment,” Jinyoung remarked. “His surveillance skills are off the charts.”

“It’s baby blue with his initials stitched in at the back,” Wooseok said, if only to prove a point. “I forgot to mention how much he likes that color.”

“Thanks for telling me,” Seongwoo remarked sarcastically. “Because I really needed to find that out.”

“Was there an objective to all this, Wooseok-hyung?” Kuanlin asked. “You know I adore you, but I fail to see the point of you spooking Jihoon-hyung out by stalking him like a crazed fanatic just to dig up this sort of information on him.”

“It’s true that Park Jihoon is an innocuous personality with a spotless record,” Wooseok agreed. “But if I may be direct about this, I find there no reason for the young master to wish to keep his company, either, as his background is positively underwhelming. He doesn’t come from money, either.”

“Is money all that matters?” Seongwoo exclaimed. “How about ranking first on the Idol Project? Does that mean nothing to you?”

“Once Jihoon-hyung takes the world by storm,” Daehwi added. “You’ll regret ever coming here to say that.”

“You have a long way to go before you can prove yourself to Kuanlin’s father,” he said, addressing Jihoon. “I’m here only because he sent me, and at the moment it’s safe to say that he doesn’t like you even one bit.”

*Great,* Jihoon thought to himself. *I don’t think I like him one nano-bit, either.*

“My latest discovery,” Wooseok added. “Complicates things even further.”

“What is it now?” Kuanlin grumbled agitatedly.

“It seems,” Wooseok said, turning to Jihoon. “And I say this with utmost certainty… that the young master has fallen in love with you.”

Jihoon drew in a sharp breath at the bold declaration.

“Th-that’s…” Jihoon stammered. “That’s a baseless assumption, and you know it.”

A part of Jihoon wished Kuanlin would speak up, say something, confirm their suspicions.

*I want to know, too,* he thought. *What it really is that you think of me.*

“And if his father finds out that such a thing may have happened,” Wooseok added, breaking the painful silence. “I assure you he will do everything in his power to make sure you never see each other ever again.”

“Is it so wrong for Kuanlin to love another guy?” Daniel said. “I don’t think his father understands
how lucky Kuanlin is to have Jihoon in his life. I’ve never seen him any happier.”

Wooseok shook his head, as if none of what Daniel mentioned even mattered in the slightest.

“The young master’s been betrothed, you see,” Wooseok explained. Across the table, the other members gasped collectively in utter disbelief, and Jihoon felt his heart dropping to his stomach. “He’s already set to marry the eldest daughter of the Yuèliàng Group, and President Lai Ter-chien will not have anyone standing in the way of such important an arrangement. Especially not a boy whose family can’t even afford him the means to enter into this establishment without having him work part-time for it.”

Kuanlin stood up from his seat abruptly, hands slamming violently against the table, the sound of his fury reverberating across the entire café. Heads whipped in his direction, in an attempt to make sense of the fuss he was making.

“That’s a lie,” Kuanlin said, voice shaking in doubt. “My… my father would never plan such a thing without my consent. He knows I’d never agree to it.”

“Isn’t that the point?” Wooseok shrugged. “He knows you’ll never approve of involuntary union, and that’s why he’s plotted the entire thing behind your back.”

“I’ve never met this girl,” Kuanlin said. “And father’s never mentioned Yuèliàng Group outside of his presentation to the Board of Directors on competitive profiles. He would never marry me off to a rival company.”

“He would never do anything to handicap me as I struggle towards my dream,” Wooseok said plainly. “Isn’t that what you said so just a few months ago? And now look at what he’s done.” Wooseok turned away from Kuanlin, and Jihoon could see the ghost of a pained expression inscribed in his features. “He’s asked me to step in and bring you home.”

“If you think we’re going to give up our precious *maknae* for the sake of some contrived espousal,” Seongwoo interrupted. “Then think again. He’s making his debut with the rest of us, so Lai Ter-Chien can kiss his prized alliance goodbye.”

Daniel’s hand moved to Seongwoo’s wrist, restraining him.

“Stop it, Seongwoo. This is Kuanlin’s father we’re talking about. You can’t just—“

“I don’t care anymore,” Kuanlin said. “If you’re telling the truth… how could my father do this to me? And you, Wooseok-hyung… All this time I thought you were on my side.”

Wooseok’s hands clenched into fists atop the table, his knuckles turning white. Jihoon looked at him then, and knew, without the shadow of a doubt, that it upset Jung Wooseok to have to go against his young master’s wishes.

“Your father is my employer, Kuanlin-ah,” Wooseok whispered. “So as long as I remain in service to this family, my loyalties rest solely in him.”

“This is insane,” Kuanlin said. “I’m not listening to this drivel any further.”

He turned to Jihoon then, whose hands were in fists against his lap, trying with all his might to keep them from shaking.

With doubt.
With disappointment.

With fear, and recognition.

_How could I have been so blind?_

“So,” Jihoon said, already knowing the answer to his question even before the words could leave his lips. “What is it that you’ve come here for?”

“Simple,” he said. “I’ve come to resume service to the young master.”

“And what exactly does your ‘service’ to him entail?”

“Keeping a watchful eye on you,” Wooseok stated matter-of-factly, as if Jihoon was a former convict still in need of rehabilitation. “And once in a while, convincing him to return home.”

Kuanlin moved to Jihoon’s side, leaning towards him to reach for his arm and pull him to his feet. “Let’s go, Jihoon-hyung. This conversation is over.”

Jihoon followed Kuanlin out the door, legs threatening to give way. Each time he recalled Wooseok’s words, candid and pretenseless, immobilizing pain would shoot through him like bullets, rendering him inert and utterly defenseless.

_What right does he have to speak of me as though I mean nothing?_

But in his heart of hearts, Jihoon knew.

That someday, he’d have to come face to face with reality, look it in the eye and stare it down.

He’d come to realize that despite everything, he and Kuanlin walked on different paths two worlds apart, and no force of gravity or wish upon a star could pull them any closer to each other.

Lai Kuanlin was the heir to a multimillion-dollar company, a superstar in his own right, the pride of his country.

Park Jihoon was the son of a humble cook, who waited tables and scrubbed windows clean in order to get himself through school.

He had nothing to his name, and the only thing of value he truly possessed was his dream.

There was no way he could compete against the Yuèliàng daughter, who, unlike him, equalled Kuanlin in pedigree, in esteem, in luxurious upbringing. Furthermore, it was evident to Jihoon that Tàiyáng’s merger with Yuèliàng through wedlock was a diplomatic decision on Lai Ter-Chien’s part, as their families would come together to usher in a new generation of influence and wealth even greater and more powerful than all of their predecessors combined.

And for a country boy like Jihoon to get in the way of so important a union… Jihoon shook his head, pain blooming in his temple. _I’d be a fool to get myself involved in all this._

To Kuanlin’s father, Jihoon was but a speck of dust, a small insignificance to rid himself of and never bother to deal with again.

_And that’s why he sent Jung Wooseok to find me, and tell me just as much._

***
“Kuanlin-ah,” Jihoon said weakly. “What are we doing in here?”

The both of them were standing inside an empty studio, the place where Mireu’s agency conducted photoshoots for their artists. Someone had left the studio lights on by mistake, which meant that soon enough, they’d come to correct their lapse in memory and find Jihoon and Kuanlin in there without authorization.

“Sorry, hyung,” Kuanlin said. “I just needed to get away from there and pulled you through the nearest open door on a whim.”

Jihoon stood awkwardly across from him, shifting uncomfortably and poking distractedly at the umbrella lights hovering above him, both of which cast his features in a soft glow. He kept his other hand behind his back, still holding the paper bag he had gotten from Bunny & Chick.

In the midst of his spat with Wooseok, Jihoon had completely forgotten to hand Kuanlin his gift.

“I’d like to apologize for Wooseok-hyung’s behaviour,” Kuanlin told him. “He means well, but he’s forthright and has a sharp tongue. He doesn’t like to beat around the bush, either, at least where words are concerned. I hope you didn’t take his earlier statements to heart.”

Jihoon turned away from Kuanlin.

Too late, he thought. I’ve already let him shoot me through the heart before walking away.

Kuanlin walked towards him then, noticing his uncharacteristic stiffness.

“You alright, hyung?” Kuanlin asked, eyes traveling to the hand Jihoon kept behind him. “Are you holding something?”

He strode towards Jihoon, reaching him in no time. “You’ve got something behind your back.”

“Late birthday gift,” Jihoon whispered. “I meant to give it to you, but I got side-tracked before I could find the right timing.”

Kuanlin leaned towards him then, reaching behind his back to grab hold of the paper bag, the musky scent of his expensive perfume assailing Jihoon’s senses.

“What is it?” he asked. “I’d like to know.”

Kuanlin pulled at the tape that kept the bag sealed, before reaching in to retrieve the velveteen box that housed his present, unlidding it ever so slowly.

“Is this…” Kuanlin murmured, taking in the sight of the identical silver rings. “Is this for me?”

Jihoon’s gaze slid to the hardwood floor, embarrassed beyond belief. “Well, one of them is, since the other is mine. It’s a matching set.”

Does he like it? Jihoon thought to himself. Have I gone overboard?

He watched anxiously as Kuanlin removed both rings from where they were inserted into the cushion.

“I thought they’d engrave our respective initials onto each of our rings,” Jihoon explained. “But it seems I’ve misunderstood as they engraved both of our initials onto both rings instead. Do… do you mind?”
Kuanlin shook his head, placing one ring onto Jihoon’s outward-facing palm. “Even better,” he said. “This way, it’s as if I’ve been bound to you somehow. Tied to you inextricably. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

*Someday,* Jihoon thought. *You’ll be somewhere else far away from me, exchanging rings with someone else I’ve never known.*

*You’ll tell her you love her, and she’ll say the words back.*

*And I wonder if I’ll be there, standing by the church pews, wishing I had the courage to tell you how much you meant to me, before she came into your life and swept you away.*

Kuanlin looked at Jihoon then, and for a moment Jihoon forgot his own name, lost in the radiant beauty of Kuanlin’s eyes and lips as he spoke. “Thank you,” Kuanlin said. “This means a lot to me.” He took Jihoon’s other hand, sliding the ring he was holding onto Jihoon’s index finger, the warmth of his touch coursing through Jihoon as the pad of his thumb brushed his skin.

“You aren’t leaving,” Jihoon whispered, more to convince himself of the truth to his words than to ask for Kuanlin to stay. “You aren’t leaving anytime soon.” Jihoon took Kuanlin’s hand in his this time, placing the ring around his finger where it belonged. As soon as the ring had been set in place, Kuanlin’s hand dropped to Jihoon’s waist, pulling him into a hug.

“We’ve already made a promise to each other,” Kuanlin assured him, as Jihoon rested his head lightly against Kuanlin’s shoulder, tiptoeing slightly to lessen the gap between their heights. “That before I return home, we’re going to make our debut.”

Jihoon placed a hand against Kuanlin’s chest, leaning into his warmth. “That as we stand onstage for the very first time,” Kuanlin continued. “We stand as one, and as we wave our goodbyes to the audience for the very last, we bid farewell just the same. Together.”

Jihoon closed his eyes just as Kuanlin touched a hand to his cheek, pressing a kiss gently onto his forehead, “And that’s a promise I intend to see through.”

*I’d be a fool to get myself involved in all of this,* Jihoon thought once more.

*I’m a fool.*

*So be it.*

“What is it exactly…” Jihoon said, half lost in a state of reverie. “That’s drawn you over to me like this? A part of me doesn’t understand. It thinks you’re a dream.”

“It isn’t something that I can explain, either,” Kuanlin told him. “The only thing I know is that you’re a person I can’t manage to live without. Not anymore.”

Jihoon wished, more than words could begin to express, for the capability to return Kuanlin’s promise with one of his own, that to the very end they’d stand right by each other’s side.

“I don’t deserve you, Kuanlin-ah,” Jihoon thought for the thousandth instance, this time out loud. “The way you’ve come into my life when I needed someone like you the most… it’s nothing short of a miracle.”

Kuanlin smiled at him, all the stars in the infinite sky alight within his eyes. He laid a hand against Jihoon’s nape, pulling him in as he leaned closer to touch their foreheads together. The door to the studio was wide open, and anyone could have entered by mistake and seen them standing there,
beneath the winking lights, with not a care in the world except for each other.

Jihoon’s hands moved to Kuanlin’s chest, tugging at his shirt slightly to pull him even closer, ring glinting against the studio lights hanging above them. Kuanlin’s slender fingers moved to cover his, his own ring jangling slightly against Jihoon’s, a constant reminder of the unbreakable friendship they now shared between each other, and a lasting memento of the hope for something more.

_What is it really... that I feel for you, Kuanlin-ah? Jihoon asked himself. Is it fondness, affection, love?_

Jihoon’s hand fisted in Kuanlin’s shirt, his promise ring digging slightly into Kuanlin’s skin.

_In the end, it doesn’t even matter._

_Because the heart wants what it wants, and I’m here to give it what it’s asking for._

“I just want to be with you, Kuanlin-ah,” Jihoon said. “That’s all there is to it.”

Kuanlin nodded, stroking Jihoon’s cheek tenderly. “If they keep you away from me,” Kuanlin said then, and Jihoon wished he knew words enough to describe what the moment felt like. “Know that I will split seas and cross oceans for you, and whatever else it takes to get you back. I will find you, and I will be right there, holding a candle to your light even if it burns me. And when the light has long since blown out, I will stand in the darkness holding what remains, because no matter what happens I can never let you go.”

Kuanlin took Jihoon’s hand in his, soft lips brushing against Jihoon’s fingers and the cool metal of his ring, sealing the promise of their future with a kiss.


~PANWINK 5 END~

Chapter End Notes

First of all, can I just say that I am ULTRA SUPER MEGA PUMPED for Wanna One's comeback? Their repackaged album just dropped and I streamed the entire thing for hours on end. 'Beautiful' is (for the lack of a better word) a beautiful song, so sweet and heartbreaking, and I love the lyrics to it as well. Moreover, my ultimate ship Panwink does a couple rap in the song, and I couldn't be happier for it ;-; I bet you can tell how long I waited for this, 'Nothing Without You' is a masterpiece, truly.

Back to the story! I'm not sure if you've noticed, but Pentagon members do make appearances here, and they will continue to once I find suitable roles for each of them. So far, Huitaek is a Vocal Coach and Professor, Wooseok is Kuanlin's bodyguard, and I've got something in store for Yanan and Yuto as well. I really didn't think I could manage to write a story without paying homage to the bias that came before Lai Kuanlin (shoutout to you, Jung Wooseok, I love you with all my heart <3) because without him, I would never have discovered Kuanlin and Produce 101 in the first
place, and this story might not have existed. So there's that! And no, he is not a villain in this story! Haha, just to clear that up! I'm sorry if you were hoping for an action scene of some sort, but he really isn't a bad guy! The Wanna One members just like to sensationalize everything xD And as for where Panwink is headed, they aren't half as clueless now as they were when this story started, and that has a lot to do with the two-week time skip, which means they've had more time to get to know each other better. It still isn't nearly enough though (at least not for me) so expect more challenges in store for this couple, especially once I begin to flesh out the Yuéliàng plotline even further. And oh, if you're wondering why I skipped some ranks for the announcement, it's because those trainees won't make individual appearances in the story. Only the ones that appeared do!

And once again, I've failed to cut this chapter short, but I'm beginning to think I should stop apologizing for that already xD but has anyone noticed how much Daniel likes to call Seongwoo an idiot? It's going to be a thing from now on, because for some reason, imagining Daniel just saying "Pabo-ya~" everytime Seongwoo does something stupid is so goshdarn cute :3 I've also added some minimal Minhwan and 2Sung in here, but as per the advice of a wonderful writer friend of mine, I've decided not to focus on them too much, since juggling three couples is hard enough (shoutout to heartykeykeke! Have you read her stories? If not, check them out if you're on AFF and immerse yourselves in some honest-to-goodness beautiful writing, they're at the very top of the Panwink/Ongniel/Jinhwi tags so I'm sure you'll be able to find them!) That being said, Minhwan and 2Sung will make hilarious cameos throughout the story so expect lots more of them in the future! (and if you're wondering if Minhwan is a romance and not a bromance... I'm not sure just yet. Poor eleventh wheel Woojin though T^T) But that's it for now! I hope you enjoy, see you when I see you~

P.S. Another shoutout goes to leenaeun for always being one of the very first to read this story! Love you lots <3
The last situation Jinyoung thought he’d ever find himself in was an aggressive pillow fight with Lai Kuanlin.

Which was funny, considering how he’d spent the past fifteen minutes hurling the entirety of Daehwi’s sofa-cushion collection one by one at Kuanlin’s head, fending off counter-attacks with his fluffiest throw-pillow, and then darting across the room to retrieve Daehwi’s cushions before Kuanlin could pilfer them from under his nose.

It was late on a Saturday afternoon, and Jinyoung had just returned home from accompanying Daehwi to an offhand reunion with his friend from middle school. The friend in question, Jeon Somyi, was a tiny little thing. She was even tinier still than Daehwi himself, and as it happened, was also the younger sister of Jeon Somi, who debuted in IOI a couple of years back. Had Jinyoung not gotten enough sleep the night before, he would’ve been convinced that the sisters were one and the same, as the resemblance between them was that startling.

After having returned, they were greeted almost immediately by the principal’s familiar, sing-song voice blaring through the loudspeakers installed near the lobby of the dormitory, alerting them to an assembly at Kirin Hall for the contestants of the Idol Project, and they were expected to arrive at the venue by eight o’clock sharp. Thinking they’d at least make themselves look presentable should the assembly turn out to be a televised affair, the eleven of them had retreated to their respective bedrooms in order to change into a fresh set of clothes.

Jinyoung, however, failed to bring his keys and had gotten locked out of his own room, and Jaehwan for some reason refused to let him in, either because he was fast asleep or wearing those massive noise-cancelling headphones.

So he was left with no other choice but to borrow from Kuanlin’s wardrobe for the time being.

The pillow fight would ensue not too long after.

It reminded him of one of those capture-the-flag type of games he used to play as a kid for hours on end with the children from across the street; only this time, he was ambling around within the limited confines of Kuanlin and Daehwi’s shared bedroom, and Kuanlin’s wingspan was about thrice the length of the neighbourhood children’s.

*How is a seventeen year old this tall, anyway? Jinyoung thought. I need to find out which brand of magical vitamin or mystical potion he’s been ingesting all these years, and get me some of that before I’m well past puberty.*

“Aren’t you getting tired of this, already?” Jinyoung asked. “I said I was sorry for accidentally reading through your composition book.”

Another pillow soared in projectile motion through the air, barely missing Jinyoung’s right shoulder as he ducked to the side.

“How was that an accident?” Kuanlin accused. “You were holding my notebook up with both hands like an encyclopedia!”
Jinyoung sighed. Kuanlin was right that as he changed into a new outfit inside the bathroom, Jinyoung had taken the liberty of flipping through the pages and browsing at the contents of his notebook. That being said, he would’ve asked for permission to dig further in had he not gotten completely engrossed in Kuanlin’s unexpected knack for sentimental lyricism.

And as luck would have it, Kuanlin had caught him in the act and snitched at his phone from atop the dresser as payback, and little did Jinyoung know that his knee-jerk reaction of reaching for the nearest piece of furnishing and lobbing it at Kuanlin’s freshly made-up face would set into motion a pillow-throwing and face-hitting contest that had yet to end even at that point.

Jinyoung had managed to recover his phone, but Kuanlin was unrelenting in attempting to scroll through its contents, which Jinyoung was out on a limb for to keep safe and away from prying, judgmental eyes.

The reason? His photo gallery was chock-full of images and videos of Jihoon taken and saved over the past couple of months, from his ‘Monster’ dance practice to him sleeping peacefully throughout History class. And because it was no longer Jinyoung’s favorite pastime to look through them and laugh idiotically by himself at Jihoon’s antics, he’d already forgotten he had such a massive compilation sitting in his memory card in the first place, and therefore had also forgotten to have them deleted. And were Kuanlin to find out just how stupidly infatuated he’d been with his best friend enough to uninstall his favorite applications just to make space for new Park Jihoon material (and Jinyoung vividly recalled having to let go of his progress on Mystic Messenger, a game he’d spent a good month and a half trying to beat) he would undoubtedly lose the remaining scraps of dignity he had left and would have to live the rest of his days a lonely, reclusive hermit.

“Just a peek, hyung!” Kuanlin exclaimed. “I’ve already looked through the permanently scarring contents of Woojin-hyung’s phone, so I should be mentally prepared for whatever it is that you’re hiding in there.”

Kuanlin clasped both hands together, blinking at Jinyoung cutely. “Just a quick peep. Pretty please?”

Jinyoung shook his head, backing away suspiciously. “Puppy-dog eyes don’t work on me,” He said, still brandishing Daehwi’s pillow like some glorified piece of weaponry. “You’ll need a much better tactic than aegyo.”

Kuanlin’s brow shot up, skeptical of Jinyoung’s bravado. “It worked yesterday when Daehwi asked for you to grab him a juice refill,” Kuanlin stated. “You stood right up and bolted straight for the dispenser.”

“That’s different,” Jinyoung said, blushing at the infuriating precision of Kuanlin’s visual acumen. “Daehwi’s an exception to every rule.”

“You don’t have a thousand and one pictures of Daehwi clogging up your phone storage, do you?” Kuanlin said, eyeing Jinyoung mistrustfully. “And if not… are they Jihoon-hyung’s, then?”

“It’s not like that!” Jinyoung exclaimed, guilty as charged. He hid his phone frantically behind his back.

*If Kuanlin found out,* Jinyoung thought, flying into an upsurge of panic. *Sooner or later Daehwi will too, and the last thing I want is for this to snowball into a useless misunderstanding.*

“Just give me some time to delete these,” Jinyoung offered. “And I’ll let you use my phone as
much as you’d like. It’ll only take a minute.”

Kuanlin’s eyes narrowed at him, before eventually conceding and gesturing for Jinyoung to go ahead before he made his next move.

Jinyoung breathed a sigh of relief, grateful for the temporary reprieve from having to constantly parry the soft blows he received as Kuanlin came at him with his fattest pillow. But the very second he let his guard down, just as he was about to reach the destination folder he intended to wipe clean of damaging evidence, Kuanlin lunged for him and snatched the phone right out of his hand with one lightning-quick swipe.

“HEY!” Jinyoung exclaimed, jumping at the phone that Kuanlin was holding up and out of arms’ reach. “THAT WASN’T FAIR!”

Kuanlin stuck a tongue out at him, pleased with himself for convincing Jinyoung that such a truce was possible between them. “This is revenge for trying to read through the lyrics of the song I wrote for—”

But before Kuanlin could finish the rest of his sentence, Jinyoung side-stepped behind him and sprinted for his notebook, and Kuanlin let loose an audible gasp, unable to anticipate Jinyoung’s blitz attack. He sent a pillow flying through the air, and before he could stop himself, Jinyoung instinctively raised his leg and rolled his hip over, effectively roundhouse-kicking the pillow and sending it flying straight back, over Kuanlin’s head before landing it neatly on top of his bed.

Kuanlin’s head followed the pillow as it arced above him, mouth ajar in wonder.

“WOAAAHH,” he exclaimed, gaping at Jinyoung in stupefaction. “What was that, hyung?”

Jinyoung cleared his throat, embarrassed that he’d let slip his hidden dexterity. “Nothing. Just a lucky strike, that’s all.” He moved backwards, still gunning for Kuanlin’s notebook. “Give me back my phone and I’ll return this to you.”

“No, I want my notebook first!” Kuanlin negotiated. “You looked through it first, anyway.”

It was Jinyoung’s turn to stick his tongue out at Kuanlin. “No can do, buddy. I’m not making any promises before you stay true to yours.”

“Well then,” Kuanlin said. “Let’s just see what you’re keeping inside of this—”

“NO, STOP IT!” Jinyoung bellowed, throwing himself at Kuanlin with enough force to topple him over, and send the both of them landing on top of Kuanlin’s bed.

“Just give me my notebook back!” Kuanlin said, both hands clasping at Jinyoung’s wrists to push him away.

Jinyoung shook his head. “Not until you give me back what’s mine.” He leaned forward, extending a hand outwards to reach for his phone.

At that very moment, the bedroom door swung violently open. Both Kuanlin and Jinyoung’s heads snapped to the side, their bodies frozen in place and unable to move even the barest inch.

Okay, Jinyoung thought. We’re officially done for.

Jihoon and Daehwi were standing in the doorway, wide-eyed and pale-faced at the sight of Jinyoung straddling Kuanlin on top of his bed.
“J-Jinyoung-ah?” Daehwi squeaked. “What… what are you doing?”

“I… I can explain,” Jinyoung began, struggling to find the right words to say. “This isn’t what it looks like.”

“Hyung,” Kuanlin whispered. “You should probably let go and get off of me already.”

Realizing belatedly that he still hadn’t relinquished his hold on Kuanlin’s left wrist, Jinyoung let go immediately, horrified and confused, scrambling backwards until his bum hit the bedframe.

“I’m giving you ten seconds,” Jihoon said, seething in rage. “To explain yourself before I detonate.”

Jinyoung gulped, not knowing where to start. “He wanted to look through my phone,” Jinyoung said, pointing to Kuanlin. “I was just trying to get it back.”

“Oh please,” Jihoon said, entirely unconvinced. “Even I know that you safeguard your phone with the most complicated passcode known to man, so don’t you dare even think for a second that I’m buying that excuse.”

Jinyoung gaped at Jihoon, stunned by his contentious speech and floored by his own disappointing lapse in memory. The truth was, he’d been caught up in his fear of getting found out, that it managed to slip his mind that his phone was heavily protected by an elaborate trifecta of passwords, fingerprint scanners, and even facial-recognition software, just for good measure.

“About that,” Jinyoung began. He cast a nervous glance at Daehwi, anticipating the waterworks that were sure to come. “Well you see, I… uhm…”

The split-second of hesitation did him in.

“Jinyoung-aaah,” Daehwi sniffled. “YOU TRAITOR!”

Before any of them could move in to stop him, Daehwi rushed out of the room and out the corridor, and Jinyoung could do little else than stare after him as he disappeared entirely from view.

“DAEHWI-YA, WAIT!” Jinyoung called out. “Ahh… your shirt buttons were misaligned, too…”

“Now look what you’ve done,” Jihoon said, shaking his head and tsk-ing at both of them in disappointment. “Poor Daehwi… he was but a victim of unforeseen circumstances…”

Jinyoung rolled his eyes. “Oh, spare me the dramaticized monologue, already.”

“And as for you,” Jihoon said, turning to Kuanlin. “What have you got to say for yourself?”

“Nothing,” Kuanlin shrugged. “I was just cultivating my newfound interest in bothering other people.”

“Yeah, right,” Jihoon muttered. “If you’re going to recycle from Seongwoo hyung’s master list of excuses, at least cite the source.”

“Great going, Kuanlin-ah,” Jinyoung whispered animatedly. “You’ve triggered Jihoon’s inner ahjumma, and now we’ll have to sit through a thirty-minute lecture entitled ‘Plagiarism is Illegal’.”

“So you’re telling me,” Jihoon continued, actively ignoring Jinyoung’s remark. “that Jinyoung over here just happened to be wrestling you against the bed right as Daehwi and I were about to walk in?”
“Pretty much,” Kuanlin shrugged. “You’re good at this, hyung.”

“And why…” Jihoon continued, scanning Kuanlin’s bare torso for three seconds too long. “Why… why aren’t you dressed in anything?”

“What do you mean, hyung?” Kuanlin said, pointing to the jeans that hung low at his waist, the labelled garter of his Calvin Klein underwear peeking out from underneath. “I’m dressed in these.”

“That…” Jihoon began, red -eared and even redder-faced. “That isn’t nearly enough.”

Jihoon shuffled over to the nearest rack of clothes, tossing Kuanlin the shirt at the very top of the pile. “At least put this on.”

Kuanlin did as he was told.

“That outfit looks good on you, hyung,” he observed, pointing at Jihoon’s all-white ensemble as he fit his arms through the shirt-holes. “I haven’t seen you looking this attractive in a long while.” He winked at Jihoon playfully.

Or at the very least, he tried to, Jinyoung thought. That non-wink of his needs a ton of work.

“That wink of yours needs a ton of work.” Jihoon deadpanned. “And when I say ton, I mean a full-on lesson on how not to look like you’re suffering from astigmatism.”

“I don’t know, hyung,” Kuanlin teased in response. “Your visuals may have actually blinded me.”

“Yeah it’s settled,” Jinyoung said then, rising abruptly to his feet. “I’m not sitting my ass through this torture.”

“Where do you think you’re going?” Jihoon demanded.

“Nowhere near this embarrassing exchange, that’s for sure,” Jinyoung said, throwing on the oversized sweatshirt hanging lazily by the coat rack. “I’ll be at Kirin Hall once the Idol Project Assembly starts, and you guys had better be through with checking each other out by then. In the meantime, I’ll just go and find out where Daehwi’s gone off to.”

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It was already dark out when Jinyoung found Daehwi at the outdoor plaza, crouched near the grass by the flowerbeds and absently plucking at the petals of a fallen chrysanthemum.

“He loves me… He loves me not…He loves me… He—”

“Hey there,” Jinyoung said, interrupting Daehwi’s bizarre ritual. “Would you happen to know where a kid about your size might be hiding? Same build, same hairstyle, talks to himself in English, screeches like a banshee and perpetually complains about his non-existent baby fat…”

Daehwi snorted. “If you happen to come across someone doing some sort of back-breaking squatting exercise,” he said. “That would be him trying to collect the smattered fragments of his broken heart.”

Jinyoung sighed defeatedly, settling himself beside Daehwi. “You don’t actually think Kuanlin’s my type, do you?”
Daehwi frowned, puffing out his cheeks, causing Jinyoung’s brain to autopilot into a rapid-fire debate on whether or not to pinch him or kiss him silly. “Do you even have a type?”

“Sure I do,” Jinyoung confirmed. “Petite, cherry-lipped and small-nosed, alcohol intolerant and cries over useless things… you know, that sort of thing.”

Daehwi turned away. “Your type of guy sounds like a massive pain in the neck.”

Jinyoung laughed, reaching for both of Daehwi’s hands before standing up and pulling Daehwi along with him. He gave Daehwi’s rumpled state a quick once-over, then began readjusting and refastening the buttons of his checkered polo, dusting off stray petals and blades of grass as he went.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” Jinyoung said. “Even though it was an accident, I’m sure it made you feel rather uncomfortable.”

Daehwi looked to the ground, fidgeting awkwardly. “And I’m sorry for running away,” he apologized, stepping forwards to wrap Jinyoung in a warm, reconciliatory embrace. “I never meant to make you worry. It’s just… It’s just that I can’t help but feel insecure, even over the most trivial, nonsensical of things.”

Jinyoung stroked Daehwi’s hair affectionately, circling his delicate waist with the other hand. “I understand that. But can’t you have just a little more faith in me, Daehwi-ya?”

“I’m trying,” Daehwi assured him. “But there’s never any certainty when it comes to you. I always feel as if one day I’m going to blink and lose you in the space between.”

Jinyoung rested his cheek against the side of Daehwi’s head, breathing in the scent of shampoo and fresh laundry.

I wish things didn’t have to be this way, Jinyoung thought. I wish you didn’t have to constantly look over your shoulder just to make sure that I haven’t already left you.

“There isn’t space enough in this heart of mine for two lovers,” Jinyoung assured him. He placed a hand underneath Daehwi’s chin, gently urging him to look upwards and into his eyes. “It’s all you from this point forwards. I hope you know that.”

Daehwi smiled, burying his face in the fabric of Jinyoung’s shirt. For a while, Jinyoung let him stay there, one hand still at Daehwi’s waist and the other gently combing through his soft, silky hair.

Afterwards, Daehwi pushed Jinyoung away slightly, looking a little guilty. “Somehow, it feels like we’re being watched.”

Jinyoung scanned the vicinity, finding no signs of sentient life save for themselves, and the host of dragonflies circling low above their heads. “There’s no one here, Daehwi-ya,” he said. “We’re all alone.”

“Jinyoung-ah, look,” Daehwi said then, head tilting upwards to the infinite sky. “I think I’ve spotted them. The ones watching us.”

Jinyoung followed his gaze to the constellation of stars painting an ethereal picture of radiance across the skies, all at once wondering how it could be that from afar they were a sight to behold, when from up close they were nuclear fireballs of light, torrid enough to burn you to a crisp and eat you alive.
There are two sides to everything, and only one of them can be seen at a time.

He turned to Daehwi then, whose eyes were still transfixed upon the stars.

When we die and go to heaven, Jinyoung thought. Do we become one with them, watching over our loved ones and guiding them through the dark?

“I always did like the stars,” he murmured. “But I never thought to consider what they meant, what they were for, and why they’re even up there in the first place. But I do remember reading from a book that all of us are stars in one way or another.”

Daehwi nodded. “The individual atoms that make up the human body emerge from the same atoms that used to make up the stars billions of years ago. And what they were made of are the exact same things that make us up. They simply exist now to create an altogether different entity.”

“Is that so?” Jinyoung said, smiling to himself. “I guess that’s why my mom always tells me I’m like a star to her, too.”

“Jinyoung-ah,” Daehwi said, and the way Jinyoung’s name sounded on Daehwi’s lips sent chills through him, the way the frigid night air never could. “Haven’t you ever thought about it? How an atom that once upon a time had been part of a red giant, now makes up a part of your ear? How a small part of your little finger could once have been a supernova? How a slice of the nebula now has the privilege of calling your smile its home?”

It took Jinyoung forever and a day to find his voice.

“In other words, we all are made of sky and stardust.” Daehwi said. “Imagine that.”

“Yeah,” Jinyoung said. “Imagine that.”

“And did you know this, Jinyoung-ah?” Daehwi whispered. “Of the seven billion smiles that exist in this world, yours is my absolute favorite.”

Jinyoung’s brow shot up in curiosity. “And why is that?”

“It’s the sort of smile that inspires the stars to climb up into the sky and light up the whole world.”

He laughed softly, amused by Daehwi’s romantic outbursts. “Daehwi-ya, has Shakespeare’s ghost possessed you again? I thought he only came to visit whenever you wrote those depressing love songs about me.”

“He comes and goes at random,” Daehwi shrugged. “More and more with each passing day.”

“If that’s the case,” Jinyoung said. “Then can’t you write me a song that isn’t about unrequited love?”

“Nonsense,” Daehwi said, shaking his head vigorously. “When it comes to ballads, only the infinite curse of a love unreturned is at its very core a heart-rending masterpiece.”

“If you say so,” Jinyoung sighed defeatedly. “But I must admit, I never knew that you paid enough attention in class to know of those things you’ve just taught me.”

“That depends,” Daehwi said. “Algebra is a snoozefest, but Cosmology lends itself to a wellspring of knowledge I’d like to tap even further into.”

Jinyoung nodded in wholehearted agreement. He gazed upwards, at the night sky that shone ever
so brightly, illuminated by the light of the only stars visible from where they stood. Jinyoung saw them flicker, in and out, small bursts of movement that made it seem as if they were alive, gazing back at the peculiar sight of them from where they were permanently etched onto the surface of outer space.

*Are they even real?*

“They’re time travellers,” Daehwi said.

“What?” Jinyoung replied, not quite understanding.

“You see,” Daehwi began. “The only reason why we can even see the stars from this distance is that they’re big enough. In reality, however, they’re millions and billions of miles away. By the time their light reaches the surface of the earth close enough for us to view them, they may already have passed into non-existence.”

Jinyoung gaped at him, stunned by the knowledge. “I hadn’t even known they could die. They look so majestic up there. As if they’ve been up there forever.”

“A million years can seem like forever,” he replied. “Which is why I like to live my life as if I’m going to die tomorrow. Because to those stars, humans live lives as fleeting as drops of rain falling to the ground, so I like to pretend that my life will pass just as quickly if I don’t grab solid hold of every opportunity that comes before me.”

Jinyoung nodded, amazed by the amount of wisdom such a tiny little boy could possess. “Kind of like this?” Jinyoung asked, grabbing at both of Daehwi’s hands.

“Yeah,” Daehwi giggled. “Exactly like this.”

Jinyoung smiled, pressing a feather-light kiss onto Daehwi’s cheek.

*Daehwi-ya, he thought. Why is it that at times like these, you shine so very brightly?*

*It’s as if you’re one of them, those stars up there, an illusory dream fading in and out through the murky twilight.*

Jinyoung closed his eyes, leaning forwards to press their foreheads together.

*How have you come to be, Daehwi-ya? And how have you come to love me?*

“I love you, Jinyoung-ah,” Daehwi whispered. “And I will never tire of saying that, no matter how many times I’ll have to bear your silence as the only response.”

Jinyoung squeezed his eyes even tighter shut.

*Do I love him back? He wondered. And if so, why does it feel as though saying the words is a giant leap over the edge of a cliff, and instead of making it to the other side, I’ll end up dashing my head against the rocks beneath?*

“I’m afraid I’ll be the one to hurt you,” he said. “I’m so terrified of being the one to break your heart, when you deserve no less than a man who will run through hell and back just to keep it whole.”

Daehwi shook his head, smiling sadly.

“You’ve already broken it, Jinyoung-ah,” Daehwi said. “And still you break it into even tinier
pieces with each passing day. But that won’t stop me from loving you this way. Even if you crushed my porcelain heart into powder, each microscopic shard will continue to beat for you as one.”

Jinyoung reopened his eyes, letting himself get lost in Daehwi’s words.

“William,” he said. “Is that you?”


“Shakespeare,” Jinyoung said, grinning. “Just then it felt as if you were reciting his sonnets to me.”

Daehwi giggled. “The lyrical genius within me is flattered.”

“I bet you could have turned that spiel into a new song.”

“Why?” Daehwi asked. “Does it have to do with unrequited love?”

Jinyoung stared at him, alarmed. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Relax,” Daehwi said. “I wasn’t trying to make you feel bad. Besides, I’d hate to exert undue pressure on you. And if by chance you’re already feeling burdened by me … I’m really sorry for that, too.”

“You know,” Jinyoung said. “The depth of your love for me is the only ocean I’m willing to drown in.”

Daehwi laughed, and the trilling sound of it was music to Jinyoung’s ears. “William? Is that you?”

“Yeah, we should probably stop invoking his spirit from now on,” Jinyoung said, chuckling lightly. “It’s starting to give me the creeps.”

For a moment the both of them just stood there, gazing at the stars, the only movement passing between them the steady rise and fall of their chests as they watched on.

“By the way, Jinyoung-ah…” Daehwi began, pushing at Jinyoung’s chest slightly.

Jinyoung evaluated Daehwi’s expression, who looked as if he was stuck at a crossroads dotted with signboards pointing every which way.

“What is it?” Jinyoung asked him. “You can tell me anything. I won’t mind.”

Daehwi swallowed nervously. “What… what exactly were you trying so hard to hide from Kuanlin, anyway?”

“Ugh,” Jinyoung grumbled. “Way to kill the mood.”

“Would it kill you to tell me?”

“I’d rather tussle with a pack of starving lions, to be honest. At least then, I won’t have to sacrifice my respectability.”

But then again, Jinyoung thought. I’m sick and tired of keeping secrets.

My heart is already filled with them almost to bursting, and if I tried to squeeze in just one more, I’m sure it would hurt beyond any stretch of the imagination.
“Just promise me,” Jinyoung said. “That you aren’t going to fly into a jealous rage once you find out.”

“A jealous rage, no,” Daehwi said. “But a hissy fit, maybe.”

Jinyoung sighed defeatedly. “Somehow, both of those sound like the exact same thing.”

He retrieved his phone from within the depths of his coat pocket, tapping at the home button lightly and holding the phone to the light in order for the facial-recognition software to work its magic. Once he heard the familiar click of the phone as it unlocked, he began scrolling through the widgets until he arrived at the shameful folder. He handed the phone over to Daehwi, turning 180 degrees to escape from having to witness as Daehwi riffed through his digital gallery.

A few seconds passed in excruciating silence.

“Is this…” Daehwi began. “Is this a virtual Park Jihoon cyber-sanctuary you’re building?”

Jinyoung buried his head in both hands, utterly ashamed. “I wish you’d stop saying these things in present tense,” he sighed. “I was just about to get rid of the entire thing, too.”

“You sure about that?” Daehwi asked. “This must’ve taken an awful lot of time to curate.”

Jinyoung squirmed uneasily.

The depressing truth was… Jinyoung still wasn’t over Park Jihoon.

Or at least, not entirely, and that had much to do with his uncertainty on deciding once and for all to embrace his own undeniable feelings for Lee Daehwi. Overtime, however, the sharp pang of bitterness and hostility he used to languish through had faded to an almost insignificant tingle, and the heart once left tattered in bruises and peppered with wounds was slowly beginning to work itself into perfect restoration.

One day, Jinyoung promised. I’ll gather enough of the courage to say the words back.

But when the time comes… will you have already given up?

Jinyoung closed his eyes, frightened of the possibilities as they stretched on endlessly in either direction.

“I need to help myself move on, too,” Jinyoung mumbled, weaving his hand underneath Daehwi’s to press at the trash-bin icon and hit delete. “And while I’m at it, I need an upgrade on my phone’s storage capacity. It’s getting kind of laggy.”

Jinyoung reached for Daehwi’s cheek, drinking in the sight of him as the moonlight cast his features in a soft, almost iridescent glow.

“So throw me a bone here,” he said. “Tell me you appreciate the effort.”

Daehwi giggled, nodding eagerly. “Thanks, Jinyoung-ah,” he whispered sweetly. “I have something else to tell you.”

He made a small come-hither gesture with his right hand, and Jinyoung leaned in forwards slightly, letting Daehwi whisper straight into ear.

“If by chance,” Daehwi said. “You’re playing around with me and have copies saved onto an external hard drive, I’m going to bitch-slap you so hard you’ll fly all the way to Jupiter.”
Jinyoung laughed nervously, inching away from Daehwi carefully. “That’s adorable, Daehwi-ya, but I hope you don’t actually mean that.”

He ran a quick analysis on Daehwi’s expression, cycling between fearing for his own safety and calculating how many newtons of force it would take to catapult him onto the surface of a planet circling the sun two orbits away.

**Why’d you skip Mars?** Jinyoung thought uselessly. **Am I that annoying?**

“I, uhm… I do have an external hard drive,” Jinyoung admitted. “But all I’ve done so far is download a couple terabytes’ worth of blockbuster movies and noon-time hits, so it’s a negative on those backup files you’ve been expecting. Unless you aren’t a fan of those, too?”

“I was kidding,” Daehwi said, grinning triumphantly at Jinyoung’s shaken expression. “I don’t mind either way. After all, these things do take time.”

“Right,” Jinyoung muttered. “So those tiny fists of yours only come at Seongwoo-hyung full force? Duly noted. I’ll make sure to tell him not to stand within a ten meter radius of you from now on.”

“Hey!” Daehwi said, looking offended. “Why am I the dangerous one all of a sudden?”

“Ever watched ‘Weightlifting Fairy’?” Jinyoung asked, abruptly changing topic in order not to give Daehwi another excuse to resent him.

Jupiter is enough, Jinyoung thought. **If he threatens me with Pluto, I’m done for.**

“Is it a movie or a television series?” Daehwi asked.

“Television,” Jinyoung replied. “I must admit, it isn’t particularly profound, and neither is the plotline thrillingly complex or life-changing, either, but it does keep the boredom at bay from time to time. You’ve never heard of it?”

Daehwi shook his head then, and Jinyoung wondered when he’d ever stop thinking that Daehwi’s every movement was a fluff attack waiting to happen.

“What’s it about?” Daehwi asked. “Sounds kinda fun.”

“It’s this coming-of-age story about a group of college athletes,” Jinyoung explained. “Who find love in one another as they fight for their dreams. The main protagonist is a weightlifting phenom, hence the title. She reminds me of you, to be honest… Small, passive-aggressive, pulls the cutest expressions and likes to threaten other people with physical violence—“

Daehwi punched at Jinyoung’s shoulder lightly, pouting at him angrily. “Stop it with the insults already. I don’t need a run-down of my worst characteristics every five minutes.”

Jinyoung laughed, reaching out to tousle Daehwi’s hair affectionately. “Sorry,” he said. “I just like to remind myself of all those little quirks and habits of yours that I love and adore so very much.”

At his words, Daehwi blushed beet red, eyes traveling upwards to meet Jinyoung’s beneath wispy eyelashes.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Jinyoung asked. “Did you want something?”

Daehwi nodded, tugging lightly at Jinyoung’s shirt, and that on its own was all it took for Jinyoung
He leaned forwards, touching his lips to Daehwi’s. Before long, both his hands were moving upwards, traveling the length of Daehwi’s upper body to both of his cheeks, stroking them gently as their mouths moved together.

“Jinyoung-ah,” Daehwi whispered between shaky breaths. “Are you sure you don’t mind doing this out in the open?”

“Why should I?” Jinyoung whispered back. “If anything, I should be proud to show the world that I’m the lucky guy that gets to kiss you.”

Daehwi smiled at him, giddy with delight and contentment, before claspng both hands together behind Jinyoung’s neck, asking him for more.

So for a long moment they stood in place, exchanging slow, tender kisses under the watchful gaze of the starlit crescent, oblivious to potential spectators.

If someone had come to Jinyoung a couple of weeks ago, claiming that he’d be the one to initiate skinship with others in no time, Jinyoung would have laughed in their face and told them to get some more sleep.

He never would have known that it was, in fact, possible for him to muster enough of the confidence to kiss someone else, and a boy just like him at that, without stopping to care for what others might think of him.

Jinyoung tugged lightly at Daehwi’s arms, asking to break away for air. He studied Daehwi’s appearance for a short while, before moving to smoothen out his rumpled shirt.

“Huh,” Jinyoung said, noticing Daehwi standing on his tiptoes. ‘If I grew any taller, I’d be even harder to reach, so maybe I should forego those magical growth supplements I’ve been meaning to ransack from Kuanlin’s medicine cabinet.’

Daehwi blinked at him in utter confusion. “What’s this about magical cabinets all of a sudden?”

Jinyoung coughed. “Nevermind. That’s not important.”

He angled Daehwi’s face upwards with his index finger, planting a gentle kiss full upon his burning lips. “Was that enough?”

Daehwi frowned. “Not even close.”

“You’re a spoiled brat, aren’t you?” Jinyoung said, laughing softly. He inched forwards to offer Daehwi another loving kiss, but halfway through the bells tolled the hour, signalling the start of the Idol Project Assembly.

The both of them stopped what they were doing, waiting for the chimes to recede.

“Guess those kisses will have to wait,” Jinyoung said, unable to hide the disappointment in his voice. “We’re late for the assembly.”

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As soon as Jinyoung and Daehwi reached their assigned seats at Kirin Hall, the last of the
contestants to arrive, the principal made his way on-stage, dressed in a curious combination of pinstripes and polka dots, hair gelled backwards to reveal even more of his shiny forehead.

He stood atop the raised platform, tapping at the microphone lightly before his voice rang loud and clear across the entire hall.

“Good morning gentlemen, and congratulations on making it into the Produce 101: School Idol Project! Today marks the official start of your journey as contestants on this program, and signifies a step... no, a leap further towards your dream of debuting as idols. An impressive variety of challenges and training sessions are in store for each one of you, each one tougher and more high-stakes than the last, and each group will be placed under the watchful care of the best producers, performers, and artists in this industry, to help you carve out and identify your own unique image and sound.”

Jinyoung found himself nodding eagerly at every word, thrilled beyond belief and humming with copious amounts of nervous energy.

“Contestants, are you ready?” the principal asked.

A resounding ‘YES!’ rang throughout the hall.

The principal smiled, delighted by the enthusiastic response, the image flashed onto the projection screen behind him changing abruptly from the school crest to the Idol Project logo.

“After the evaluations, each of you were given a chance to form groups of up to eleven members, and the current seating arrangements and the numbers that have been assigned represent the fifteen groups that have made it to this program.”

“We’re the first group aren’t we?” Jinyoung asked.

“Right you are,” Jihoon said. He was seated to Jinyoung’s right, the fingers on his left hand tapping frantically against the armrest of his chair, his left foot mimicking the same restless motion.

“I’m scared out of my wits, Jinyoung-ah,” he whispered. “Why am I like this?”

Jinyoung sighed, reaching out to squeeze his hand gently. “Calm down, hyung. It hasn’t even started yet.”

“Keep in mind, however,” the principal continued. “That such arrangements are impermanent, and your positions may be moved around should the judges see fit to place you elsewhere.”

Jinyoung could hardly believe what he was hearing.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Jinyoung said. “But does that mean the judges have the power to kick us out of our own groups?”

“Seems like it,” Daehwi said, brows furrowing. “Somehow I don’t like the sound of that. Are they going to insert us into another group, then? That would totally mess up their dynamics.”

Jinyoung breathed in deeply.

I’ve got to work double, he thought. To make sure I don’t lag behind the rest of them, or even drag them downwards with me.
“If in case that sort of thing happens,” Jinyoung whispered. “Let’s just hope I won’t get dumped in with Taejoon and Hyunwoo.”

Jinyoung stole a terse glance at the group seated to their right. It was an eight-member group, made up of some of the youngest, most prodigious individuals at school.

Kim Samuel was only sixteen and already a Double Track student, well-known for performing original compositions and choreographies during promotion exams. He never ranked outside of the top ten despite being younger than most of his peers.

Ahn Hyungsob was an idol extraordinaire, jumping the farthest out of everyone in terms of class, as he moved from D to A in one go. Throughout Mireu’s entire history, only one other student had managed to skip more than one class at a time, and he turned out to become the leader of world-renowned idol group NU’EST W.

Lee Euiwoong was quite possibly the best rapper in his year, famous for spitting bars at lightning speed, and incidentally also worked part-time as a model. His top-tier visuals were said to rival Jinyoung’s own, and in time, so would his growing fan base.

Lee Woojin was the youngest student in the entire school, almost two-and-a-half years younger than most freshmen. Labeled a child prodigy, he entered into Mireu already part of the A Class, excelling in his general subjects and electives to boot.

Huang Justin was the campus heartthrob from China, and despite being only in C, was one of the greatest fan attractors in his group, given the sheer volume of his noona army. Their leader, Zhu Zheng Ting, also hailed from China and graduated two years prior at the very top of the Dance Track pool, and was returning from a two-year-long training period with Yuehua Entertainment.

Yoo Seonho was quite possibly the underdog of the group, but he was not to be underestimated as he had also managed to jump two levels to Class C, the same way Jinyoung did.

And then of course, joining their ranks were the campus roaches, Yoon Taejoon and Go Hyunwoo. Granted, both of them were in A and had extraordinary learning curves, but that didn’t stop Jinyoung from wondering what the other six members might’ve done to deserve groupmates as nasty as those two.

Jinyoung shuddered to think of what might happen if he was forced into mutual cooperation with either of them, so in order to distract himself from such hair-raising thoughts, he instead turned his attention to the principal as he droned on.

“Furthermore, individual contestants may be eliminated even as the rest of their group continues on, so each one is expected to perform to the best of his abilities to prove to the public that he is worthy of the place reserved for him onstage.”

Jinyoung groaned. “I thought this was supposed to be a happy occasion.”

“Don’t fret, Jinyoung-ah,” Daehwi said. “You aren’t going to get eliminated before the rest of us. We’ll make sure of it.” He extended his right hand outwards, and Jinyoung took it, grateful for the small comfort it afforded him.

“At present, there are fifteen groups vying for the top spot, which means that each of you stand a one-in-fifteen chance of making your debut by the end of the year. After the voting period for the first round has ended however, only seven of you will remain and move on to round two.”

“So they’re eliminating half the groups in one go?” Seongwoo said, seated to Kuanlin’s right.
“This is madness.”

“The challenge for this round is simple: each group is to perform a cover to an existing song in full, that will formally introduce to the public the group’s unique image and concept, and will properly showcase the individual members’ abilities in vocals, rap and dance. The song will be agreed upon by the members no later than Friday next week, and group leaders are to draw lots one by one beginning with the top-ranked group first, to find out which trainers you are assigned to work with for this round.”

“I hope we get NU’EST W,” Jaehwan said, rubbing his hands together. “Jisung-ah, you’d better use your fairy mojo to draw a favourable lot.”

“I don’t have fairy mojo,” Jisung said. “Sungwoon’s the fairy, remember?”

“I don’t think it matters either way,” Minhyun countered. “The other trainers are reputable professionals, too.”

“Awww but I want to work with NU’EST W!” Jaehwan wailed. “I want toooo.”

“And I want you to stop being so noisy,” Minhyun said, slapping a hand across his own face exhaustedly. “If you wanted to meet NU’EST W this much, you could’ve asked me to hand over their numbers.”

“During the preparation period, each group is to set aside four hours of practice at the assigned room. For this round, no alteration of song arrangement or choreography will be tolerated, and only the lyrics may be rewritten if need be. However, groups are expected to provide their own unique spin to the song given the restrictions, so practice is crucial and proper time management indispensable. The preparation period is to last three weeks, before the School Idol Project officially makes its television debut as the first round is aired nationwide.”

“I knew it,” Jinyoung said, his legs already shaking. “Televised performances. How am I supposed to survive that when I barely even made it through performing in front of hundreds of people? Millions of them is a tremendous stretch.”

“After performances, a three-day voting period will take place, with half of the votes from public viewership, and half from the judging panel. The amount of votes will also be levelled out, to take into account the differences in group sizes. As such, groups cannot expect to survive on this show based on the popularity of their individual members alone.”

“We have to work our asses off for this,” Daniel said. “It doesn’t matter who’s had more pre-debut fame or public exposure now. All of us stand on level playing field.”

“That makes things even harder for us doesn’t it?” Kuanlin said. “Can we really do this?”

“Of course we can do this!” Woojin exclaimed, ever the ray of sunshine. “We’ve already made it in, so we’ve succeeded as far I’m concerned. Now the only thing left to do is our utmost best at everything.”

“So do your best everyone,” the principal said, reinforcing Woojin’s words of encouragement. “And keep in mind our school’s mantra: ‘Mighty is the dragon that weathers every storm, and even mightier still the hero that tames him into submission’.”

He nodded at the audience, smiling heartily. “Your first dragon is upon you, my dear students. So don’t you fear it, for on its back you are to reach your dreams.”
Thunderous applause rumbled throughout Kirin Hall, and all at once, the venue broke out into scattered murmurs, as the students chattered amongst themselves excitedly.

“And before I forget,” the principal added. “Contestants Park Jihoon and Bae Jinyoung, Lai Kuanlin and Yoo Seonho, Ong Seongwoo and Kang Daniel, Lee Daehwi and Kim Jaehwan, Ahn Hyungseob and Park Woojin, and Kwon Hyunbin and Hwang Minhyun, you are expected to head to the studio at Room 315-B after the assembly. Do come in pairs. The rest of you are free to leave.”

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When their names had gotten called, Jinyoung was expecting to get into trouble.

He was not, however, expecting an impromptu interview by one of the SBC staff members, an entire crew of which had attended the assembly, waiting until the contestants were free to exit the venue.

Apparently, they’d won some sort of popularity poll on the Internet based on their audition stills, and were thus rewarded with the chance to introduce themselves to the viewing public and ask for their support.

“How long have you two known each other?” the interviewer began.

“Since junior high,” Jihoon said. “But I’d seen and heard of him even before we met, since he modelled for the magazines my mom collected when we were little.”

“Yeah,” Jinyoung agreed. “And he was the kid who always slept through History lectures and complained that the cafeteria lunches tasted like brick and sawdust.”

Funny, Jinyoung thought to himself. How this is the perfect opportunity for me to roast Jihoon-hyung as payback for his ignorance.

“You’re not airing this on national television, are you?” Jihoon inquired, scratching at the back of his head. “Because if so I’d like to request for that part to be edited out.”

The interviewer smiled thinly, pressing on. “What else was Jihoon like?”

Jinyoung took a moment to gather his thoughts. “Nerdy, unkempt, spent way too much time hogging the television. What was that show again, the one you liked to dance to?”

“Shugo Chara,” Jihoon supplied excitedly. “The one where the protagonist goes 'nae maeum soge, jaojang!”

He winked at the camera, and Jinyoung noticed the shutters moving as the lens zoomed in on his face.

“When did you first dream of becoming idols?”

“I’ve had that dream for as long as I can remember,” Jihoon said. “I guess I knew that I had a knack for the performing arts, and that if I could manage to debut, I’d be able to pay back my parents for everything they’ve given me.”

The interviewer nodded, turned to Jinyoung and waiting expectantly for an answer.
Jinyoung shrugged. “Where Jihoon-hyung went, I followed. That was it.”

The interviewer’s brow quirked upwards. “You were that loyal to him?”

Jinyoung turned his head sideways, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

*I’m pretty sure they’re going to post this somewhere Daehwi can see,* Jinyoung said. *Will he mind if I accomplish this interview with the utmost honesty, or should I attempt to skirt the subject instead?*

Jinyoung swallowed nervously. *But I can’t possibly fool the public.*

“I was a fan of Jihoon-hyung back then,” Jinyoung said. “I wanted to become like him, so I practiced day in night in order to close the gap between our levels of skill. Can’t say I’ve made any progress, though.”

Jihoon elbowed him playfully. “Hey, don’t say that. You’ve done well so far. That’s why you’re here.”

“Excellent answers!” The interviewer exclaimed. “Next question! What do you think your visual strong points are?”

“Ugh,” Jihoon grimaced. I’m not much of a visual, but I do have abs, if that helps.”

“And I’m small-faced,” Jinyoung remarked. “Helps whenever I’m trying not to get recognized. It’s harder to spot me from farther away.”

The interviewer nodded, pleased. “I also heard that you’ve received the nicknames ‘Wink King’ and ‘Deep Dark’. Care to explain where they might be from?”

“I’m sure the viewers already know,” Jihoon said simply, winking once more at camera. Jinyoung tried his level best not to roll his eyes at the gesture.

“As for me,” he said. “I used to stare at the ground whenever I performed, which is funny because the tiling patterns they use at this school are horrific. But I guess I much preferred the sight of them to the hundreds of people watching my every move, so I kept my eyes glued to the floor just to mitigate the risk of blanking out midway through.”

“Impressive,” the interviewer observed. “I saw footage of your audition, and I didn’t think you had any stage fright at all.”

“I second that,” Jihoon agreed. “He even made eye-contact with me at some point, and I was almost sure the real Jinyoung was still hiding away in the dressing room and I was staring into the eyes of a decoy.”

Jinyoung smiled to himself. “I don’t think Daehwi would appreciate you making up conspiracy theories regarding our performance. Can’t my newfound confidence have been a by-product of his next-level mentoring? He really was a godsend, you know. I couldn’t have done much of anything without him.”

“Fair enough,” Jihoon shrugged. “Daehwi is a genius, after all.”

“Back to the main question,” the interviewer cut in. “My sources tell me that your ‘Deep Dark’ nickname stems from a different origin. I hear you had a quite the fearful reputation as a middle-schooler.”
Jinyoung stilled. *How come you know that?* He barely ever addressed the issue, and at times he could even manage to forget that he was anything but a massive pacifist.

*Did the ‘Deep Dark’ nickname really come from that? If so... who’s been spreading the information?*

“You’re right about that,” Jihoon exclaimed, stepping in to defend him. “He was ruthless against bullies, and protected me at all costs. So in that sense, he did have a certain darkness to him deep within, a side to him you would never expect from someone who looked like he could never even swat at a fly.”

“So he was your guardian angel of sorts, back then,” the interviewer concluded. “Am I right?”

“I guess you could say that,” Jihoon said, hesitant. “Jinyoung, after all, is an unexpectedly gifted fighter.”

“Final question,” the interviewer exclaimed, looking satisfied with the material he’d managed to coax out of them. “I hear both of you entered into the Idol Project wishing to debut with someone in particular.”

Jihoon and Jinyoung exchanged worried glances. *Why is he bringing this up now? And how come he knows of all this?*

“Any words for who they might be? Whoever they are, I’m sure they’ll be watching. You can ask for the fans to vote for you too, while you’re at it.”

“I, uhm…” Jihoon began, coughing awkwardly. “I’d like to thank you for being one of the very first to believe that I can make it. I’m sure that our roads are to diverge at some point, but I’d be really happy if we could stay by each other’s side as brothers from here on out. And apart from voting for me, I’d like the fans to vote for him too. I’m sure you already know who it is I’m referring to.”

The interviewer nodded at Jihoon approvingly before angling his camera towards Jinyoung.

Jinyoung stared at both of his hands as they trembled.

*Just a little honesty, Jinyoung-ah, he thought to himself. That’s all it takes.*

“Hyung…” he began. “I know I’ve been a burden to you all these years, but you’ve never held anything against me in spite of that. You’ve always been a limitless source of encouragement and inspiration, and I’m sure you’ll continue to be the same for others. And you’re right... at some point in the future, you and I will have to go our separate ways, but I’ll be more than happy to take my place by your side until then. You’ll always have a friend in me, hyung. Don’t ever forget that.”

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The next day, Jinyoung woke up to his phone buzzing in his ears.

“Hyuuuung,” Jinyoung croaked, swiping at the screen to pick up Jaehwan’s call. “Why so early in the morning?”

“Haven’t you heard?” Jaehwan hollered. “It’s all over the Internet!”

“You’ve gone viral on Pann and on Naver,” Jaehwan explained. “And so has Jihoon.”

“This effectively woke Jinyoung up, activating every cell in his body.

WHAT?” he exclaimed, sitting up in alarm. “What… what for?”

“Look it up yourself,” Jaehwan said. “I’m sure it won’t be that hard to find.”

As soon as Jaehwan hung up, Jinyoung logged onto the Internet, typing in Naver using the search bar. Sure enough, as soon as the website homepage turned up, he caught a glimpse of the article at the very top of the trending news list.

“The Idol Project’s First Official Couple,” Jinyoung whispered, heart pounding violently in his chest as he read through each word. “Group One’s Park Jihoon and Bae Jinyoung.”

Jinyoung gulped, pressing a shaky finger to the screen, clicking on the title.

**The Idol Project’s First Official Couple: Group One’s Park Jihoon and Bae Jinyoung**

Yesterday, the much-anticipated Idol Project channel posted the very first Netizen Popularity Poll introduction video on their official Naver and Youtube accounts. The video featured two of the contestants from Group One, Park Jihoon who ranked first, and Bae Jinyoung who ranked seventy-second. The two have been inseparable since attending Yongban Middle School together, and in the video shared their thoughts on being friends and working towards the same dream, concluding with heartfelt messages to each other that fully warmed all of our hearts. Watch the full video below to find out more!

“What…” Jinyoung muttered. “What am I supposed to make of all this?!”

He scrolled furiously to the very bottom of the page, looking through the top comments.

- *They’re so freaking cute together! We need to give them a couple name, and I vote for Winkdeep~* [+2645, -220]
- *Those messages towards the end were so sweet… why are they so sweet??* [+2377, -168]
- *I ship this so much, and I don’t even know them TT TT* [+2091, -104]
- *This is crazy, you can really tell how much they like each other… I will support this couple until the day I die, okay? You have my vote, boys!!!* [+1832, -92]
- *I’m not saying that they look good together, but they look good together <3* [+1536, -87]
- *Both of them are so freaking handsome, I want a boyfriend like them too… but noona understands that you already have each other, so I’m fine just like this TT TT* [+1284, -100]
- *I will fight anyone who stands in the way of this couple, seriously… love them so much already!!! Let’s only walk on the debut path, Jihoonah, Jinyoung-ie~* [+903, -54]

“Oh god,” Jinyoung whispered. “I already have a bad feeling about this.”

At that point, his phone started ringing, and as soon as he read Jihoon’s name, he tapped at the return-call icon with enough force for him to think he’d almost broken the screen with his finger.

“How you doing?” Jinyoung exclaimed. “Hyung! Have you seen the article?”

“Come to my room, it’s an emergency!” Jihoon bellowed over the phone. “Kuanlin won’t stop clinging to me. I can’t breathe anymore!”
“Isn’t it because of that article?” Jinyoung asked. “He isn’t jealous, is he?”

“Forget jealous,” Jihoon exclaimed. “I think he’s trying to asphyxiate me already.”

“I want a ship name too, hyung!” Jinyoung heard Kuanlin saying from the other end of the line. “Why is it that only you and Jinyoung-hyung get to have one?”

Jinyoung pressed two fingers to his temple distractedly. “You guys have any idea where Daehwi have gone?”

“Where else?” Jihoon said. “When in doubt, search the Imugi.”

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Under any other circumstance, Jinyoung would’ve liked going viral. And to a certain extent he did, because it meant that the public found his personality appealing, and many of them were willing to support his dream based on that alone. He wasn’t much of an ingrate either, so he couldn’t help but feel beholden to the voting populace for helping grow his steady fan base by publishing an article on his brief introduction.

But under any other circumstance, he wouldn’t have Daehwi to worry about.

As soon as he arrived at the Imugi Café, Jinyoung’s eyes automatically roamed around the room in search of him. He was sitting at the table farthest from the entrance, half-hidden behind the counter from where Jinyoung stood. He was alone, alternating between sipping gingerly at his tea and staring out the frosted windows.

“Daehwi-ya,” Jinyoung said as he approached from behind. “What are you doing in here?”

“Having breakfast,” Daehwi said plainly. “Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do inside a café?”

“Right,” Jinyoung said, only then realizing how senseless his question had been. He sat at the chair opposite Daehwi’s, trying to find an opening into a conversation he’d honestly rather not have at the moment.

“You’re here to ask me about the article, aren’t you?” Daehwi asked, stunning Jinyoung into silence.

More of it, at least, because he was already at a loss for words in the first place.

“I thought you might’ve gotten angry,” Jinyoung confessed. “So I came here to check on you.”

Daehwi wordlessly set his cup of tea down on top of the table. For a while he simply sat there, twiddling with his thumbs, mind adrift in a realm apart. And for a while Jinyoung simply watched, waiting for him to say something, **anything**, that might serve as indication that he wasn’t actually on the brink of a meltdown.

“I’m getting confused, Jinyoung-ah,” Daehwi confessed, breaking the excruciating silence. “You’ve told me before that you’re prepared to fall in love in with me. And at times, I’ve convinced myself that you already have… given all the hugs, the kisses, the sweet nothings we like to whisper in each other’s ears while the rest of them aren’t listening in.”

At this point, he buried his face in the palms of both hands, distressed and insconsolable.
It broke Jinyoung’s heart once to see him like that, and twice in the knowledge that he’d been at the very core of everything, the root cause of his repeated heartbreak.

“I’m afraid I’ve gotten greedy,” Daehwi whispered. “At some point I think I’ve begun craving for your full attention.”

Daehwi sighed deeply, returning his gaze to the window, where tiny drops of moisture were beginning to form and clump together, foretelling the advent of heavy rainfall, and even farther away the arrival of winter.

“And that’s why when I first read the article,” Daehwi said. “I thought maybe I’d been wrong to want to keep you to myself this way. That maybe all this time, I’ve been unfair, that I’ve forced my feelings upon you and misled you into thinking that you might one day return them.”

Jinyoung shook his head. “It really isn’t like that at all.”

“I admit,” Daehwi continued. “That I’m being difficult in putting you through this. Shouldn’t I be happy for you? You’ve gained widespread recognition and are beloved to the voting public. In fact, apart from my insatiable greed, there isn’t any cause for alarm at all.”

He wrapped both arms around his shoulders, as if in an effort to console himself.

“But therein lies the problem, you know,” he whispered. “I think… I think I can already tell that you still haven’t managed to give up on him. A part of your heart belongs to Park Jihoon, and I can’t possibly hope to take away from him what is rightfully his. I’ve got no claims to stake. None at all.”

Jinyoung heard it then, the way Daehwi’s voice broke, how it cracked along with the fragile piece of him that Jinyoung fought so hard to look after. He stood from where he sat across the table, walked over to Daehwi’s side and knelt in front of him.

“Daehwi-ya,” he urged. “Look at me.”

Daehwi did as asked, without a moment’s hesitation. “I’m looking,” he said. “That’s all I’ve ever done.”

Jinyoung took hold of both of Daehwi’s hands, kissing them softly one after the other. “You know I… I’ve come to realize that we might be on the same page here.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Daehwi asked.

“I’ve let uncertainty cripple me, too,” Jinyoung said. “I’ve let it sow the seeds of doubt, and hurt you in the process. When all this time I’ve been trying not to.”

He pressed a cheek against Daehwi’s open palm, letting the warmth of his body seep into him. “I understand that you aren’t going to wait for me forever. Patience has an expiration date, and yours is fast approaching.”

Daehwi nodded, unable to look Jinyoung in the eye. “My mother once told me,” he said. “That it wouldn’t do to let the heart that won’t ever love me back keep me from losing myself in the one that will.”

Jinyoung closed his eyes, not wanting to hear the rest of it.

“And I’m afraid that the longer it takes for you to return my feelings, the easier it becomes for
Jinyoung felt something warm splashing against the side of his hand, and nothing could bring him more clarity than Daehwi’s tears as they helplessly escaped him.

“That one day, I’ll just realize that I’ve been caught in an uphill battle I’m all but ready to lose,” Daehwi continued. “And I’ll realize that I’m tired of fighting. That for once, I want to be fought for, and elsewhere downhill is war already being ravaged for the sole purpose of earning my favor. Would I not be compelled to give up then? It would certainly be the easy way out.”

“I’ve kissed you, haven’t I?” Jinyoung thought to himself. “I’ve taken a chance on us.

Have I been wrong to do that? Should I have waited until I was ready, bided my time until I was sure?

“I’m so sorry,” Jinyoung whispered. “I wish things didn’t have to be this way. I wish I could go a day without breaking your heart or making you cry.”

He got up from one knee, burying his head in Daehwi’s chest.

“I don’t deserve you at all, and I’ve come to terms with that a long time ago,” he said. “And yet… And yet I’m selfish enough to want you all to myself, when I can’t even promise you much of the same. I’m messed up, and it kills me that you have to deal with that.”

He felt Daehwi’s hand moving to his head, fingers gently entangling themselves in his hair.

When I’m older, Jinyoung thought. I don’t want to look back upon this moment between us and think, ‘we could’ve been magnificent together.’

We could’ve been, but I was afraid.

Instead, I want to look back upon this moment and think, ‘fear and uncertainty tried to cheat me out of the best thing I had in my life.’

They tried to, but I never let them.

“So you can’t…” he whispered. “You can’t give up now. Not because of something like this.”

Both of Daehwi’s hands moved to his cheeks, urging him to look up.

For the first time in what felt like an eternity, their eyes met, and Jinyoung held fast to that moment of connection, unwilling to be the first to let go.

“When all is said and done Bae Jinyoung,” Daehwi said. “I’m afraid giving up is not an option at the moment. Because whatever the stakes, I don’t fold. I just go all in and hope for a miracle.”

Jinyoung smiled up at him, leaning in slightly.

“There must be a way for me to make it up to you somehow,” he said. “Did you want another kiss?”

Daehwi’s eyes lit up momentarily before deciding against it. “If you start getting used to my kisses, they’re going to start meaning less to you further down the road.”

Something sharp pricked at Jinyoung’s insides, and he knew, without the shadow of a doubt, that it had been disappointment.
Somehow, he really had gotten used to Daehwi’s kisses, but the familiarity of his lips only served to fuel his desire to taste them just one more time.

For now though, something else would have to do.

“Then how about a bribe?” he offered. “I know you just had breakfast, but… is there perhaps room enough for dessert?”

“D-dessert?” Daehwi said, eyes widening into saucers.

“Did you want something in particular? I can run to the nearest ice cream parlour for you, if you’d like.”

Guilt flashed in Daehwi’s expression. “But… I can’t ask for you to run errands on my behalf…”

Jinyoung smiled to himself. “Right then. If you’ve got no special requests for me, the offer expires in seven, six, five…”

Daehwi bit at his lip agitatedly.

“Four, three, two—“

“ONE MEGATON BAR,” Daehwi yelled in Jinyoung’s ear. “Just… just one. I really want one, Jinyoung-ah.”

“Got it,” Jinyoung said, standing himself up. “One Megaton Bar coming right up.”

He patted Daehwi’s head affectionately.

“You wait here, alright? I’ll only be a couple of blocks away.”

***

Jinyoung was wrong about ‘a couple of blocks away’. As it turned the out, the ice cream parlour he had in mind had long since gone out of business, so he had to ask around for the nearest convenience store before attempting to locate it.

It didn’t take very long for him to get lost.

“Well this is lame,” Jinyoung muttered. “I’m pretty sure I’ve circled around this back alley before.”

He walked towards the rickety building he’d passed en route to his destination, utterly perplexed.

*If I can’t even make my way there, he thought. Then how am I supposed to find my way back?*

He heard the sound of leaves rustling behind him, and from the periphery of his vision he spotted movement. Jinyoung whipped his head around to pinpoint the source, and found himself standing face to face with Yoon Taejoon.

Or face to chin, to be more accurate, as Taejoon towered well above him, and was easily twice his size.

“Well, well, well,” Taejoon smirked. “Look what we have here.”
Jinyoung regarded him distastefully, wondering how unfortunate he must have been to run into Taejoon in a place as remote as an abandoned back alley.

“I’d offer you a chest bump or a bro fist,” Jinyoung said sarcastically. “But I only have time enough in my day to buy Daehwi his ice cream, so that’ll have to wait.”

He moved to side-step Taejoon, but Taejoon matched his movements with his own, effectively blocking his only way out.

“You know,” Taejoon said then. “I really have no idea what Daehwi sees in you that he’d choose to keep your company instead of mine.”

“I dunno,” Jinyoung shrugged. “Common decency? Respect for his personal space? I could go on for a couple hours more, but like I said, I’m rather busy at the moment, so I’d appreciate it if you could stop wasting my time.”

All of a sudden, Taejoon burst into fits of laughter. “What’s gotten your panties in a twist, Jinyoung-ah?” he said, the suffix on Jinyoung’s name churning his insides. “You think I’m here to pick a fight?”

“I don’t know what you’re here for,” Jinyoung admitted. “And neither do I care.”

All he wanted at that very moment was to get the hell away from Taejoon, because he knew that just the slightest provocation would be enough to set the place to ruin.

“I’m sure,” Jinyoung added. “You wouldn’t like to find out what I’m like once you’ve angered me. So before that happens, let’s just agree to go our separate ways from here.”

For a while he just stood there, looking into Taejoon’s eyes, searching them for any sign of understanding.

He found none, as they seemed to have been devoid of anything save for hostility. Eventually, Jinyoung gave up on waiting for a response, so he moved to leave the place the way he’d done once before.

*Please don’t try to stop me, he thought. Or else I’m really going to lose it.*

He moved past Taejoon, brisk-walking in order to get away from him even faster.

Seconds later, meaty hands closed around his wrist, pulling him backwards with such force that he almost toppled off-balance, feeling as if his arm would get severed from the rest of his body.

“You’re not going anywhere until I say so.”

Something clicked inside of Jinyoung at his touch.

“Now you’ve done it,” he muttered under his breath. “Now you’ve really done it.”

In a flurry of movement, he stepped backwards, pivoting in and locking Taejoon’s right arm tightly in his, pulling at him with enough precision to effectively throw Taejoon over his shoulder.

Taejoon yelped as he landed against the cement.

“My bad,” Jinyoung said, still holding Taejoon’s wrist with one hand and his arm with the other. “I might’ve forgotten to mention that I’ve got a third degree black belt in Hapkido. So if you think that you can intimidate me with brute force, I highly suggest you rethink your strategy.”
He let go of Taejoon then, who scrambled to regain his footing.

“You’re crazy,” Taejoon said. “You’re fucking crazy.”

“Hey,” Jinyoung exclaimed. ‘Enough with the cuss words already. Let’s keep this child-friendly.”

Taejoon charged towards him angrily, and Jinyoung met him as he did so, readying his stance for impact. As Taejoon’s fist flew towards his face, he seized at it mid-air and within half a heartbeat pulled at Taejoon’s wrist, switched hands to grab at the outer edge of Taejoon’s hand, using his middle fingers to grab inside of Taejoon’s elbow joints. This effectively collapsed Taejoon’s arm, forcing it against his back.


Taejoon tried to move away, writhing in pain as the effort contorted his muscles.

“Does Daehwi know about this?” Taejoon demanded. “That you’ve got a few screws loose?”

“Of course not,” Jinyoung said, still holding Taejoon in place. “And so what if he finds out? You think he’ll become scared of me and come running to your side? Is that it?”

“He will, eventually,” Taejoon insisted. “He has to.”

“Doubt it,” Jinyoung said. “If anything he might find me even more attractive.”

“I’m not stopping you know,” Taejoon insisted, ignoring him completely. “Until I’ve made him mine.”

“Well that’s too bad,” Jinyoung said simply. “Because guess what? He’s already taken.” Jinyoung pushed Taejoon’s arm even farther back, causing him to yelp in agony.

He released Taejoon a few short breaths later, thinking he’d hesitate before moving in for another fistfight.

“Cocky bastard,” Taejoon said, whipping around abruptly. This time, Jinyoung didn’t think Taejoon would come for him immediately, so he barely had enough time to duck his head to the side as Taejoon’s fist punched at him, grazing the side of mouth.

Jinyoung wiped at his split lip, tasting blood.

“I bet he never told you this,” Taejoon began, sniggering at Jinyoung as he wiped the blood from his mouth. “But I was the very first person to defend him from those people who bullied him for being gay.”

Something painful shot through Jinyoung’s chest, much heavier than the blow he just received. What does it matter? He thought. You’ve already done the unforgivable.

“I was there for him,” Taejoon continued. “When no one else was.”

“You’ve gone overboard,” Jinyoung argued. “If you truly loved him, you’d respect his wish for you to leave him alone.”

“He isn’t thinking straight,” Taejoon insisted. “I need to help him see the light.”

Jinyoung shook his head, unable to fathom how Taejoon could hold on to such a dreary hope.
I pity you, Yoon Taejoon.

You know not of the things you could’ve already accomplished had you been able to let your feelings go.

“It doesn’t have to be this way you know,” Jinyoung told him. “It doesn’t have to be him.”

“You don’t understand, Bae Jinyoung,” Taejoon said, smiling sadly at him. “You don’t understand what it means to give a person your all, only for them to leave you for someone else entirely. If you went through the things I did, you’d know. You would never wish to let go of him either.”

Jinyoung laughed half-heartedly. “I understand perfectly.”

And I’ve let go.

I’ve let Park Jihoon go.

“No you don’t,” Taejoon said. “So I suppose I’ll just have to do things my way. Take Daehwi however I want to.”

Jinyoung bristled at his statement, his fists bunching at his sides. “Don’t you even dare,” he hissed. “Daehwi’s seventeen. He doesn’t deserve to be treated like an object.”

“Of course not,” Taejoon said, snickering. “I’ll take better care of him than you ever will.”

“This is madness,” Jinyoung replied, already past his patience threshold. “Can’t you see that?”

“The only thing I see whenever you kiss him the way I’ve always wanted to,” Taejoon said, casting a murderous glare at Jinyoung. “Is red. Your blood on my hands. Daehwi back in my arms where he truly belongs.”

“Stop it,” Jinyoung pleaded. “Just stop it already.”

“I may have failed to take his first kiss,” Taejoon whispered. “But there are other firsts left to take. And I will take them, even if it means I have to do it by force.”

At that point, something snapped within Jinyoung completely.

He finally reached his boiling point.

“You,” he hissed. “You’re fucking despicable.”

Taejoon lunged for Jinyoung, fists flying one after the other, hellbent on beating him into a bloody pulp. Jinyoung parried his blows, trying his best not to succumb under the strength of Taejoon’s muscles. In a rare moment of vulnerability, he hesitated and missed a punch, and it landed solidly against his shoulder, throwing him backwards.

Pain shot through him like a thousand poisoned arrows.

“What’s the matter, Jinyoung-ah?” Taejoon challenged. “Out of party tricks already?”

Hapkido is a defensive sport, Jinyoung chanted inwardly. Wait for the opponent to strike first.

He smiled, sure of his next move. “You wish.”

Taejoon lunged at him then, and Jinyoung waited for the right moment before he pushed at
Taejoon’s chest, pulling at his arm simultaneously and moving in to sweep Taejoon’s leg behind the knee. Taejoon fell to the ground off-balance, and Jinyoung cornered him with both hands, looming right above him with his knees on either side.

“Game over, Taejoon-ah,” he said. “So pick a god and pray.”

He only had time enough to watch as Taejoon closed his eyes before he rammed his fist downwards, hearing a sickening crunch as it collided with solid mass.

Taejoon reopened his eyes a few moments later. Jinyoung’s fist was at the side of his head, bloodied as it hit the cement.

“You’re crazy,” Taejoon repeated. “Fucking crazy.”

“Well,” Jinyoung said moving into a standing position. “I can’t say I disagree.”

He walked away from where Taejoon lay with his back to the ground, examining the knuckles he voluntarily scraped raw.

“After all,” he whispered to the air. “They don’t call me Deep Dark for nothing.”

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By the time Jinyoung returned to the Imugi Café, Daehwi was nowhere to be found.

Jinyoung had been trying to get a hold of him, but for some reason his mobile was left unattended.

“This is strange,” he muttered. “Where could he have gone off to?”

He walked towards the counter. “Jisung-hyung! Hyung, are you in there?”

Jisung’s head poked out from behind the kitchen door a few moments later.

“Did you want something, Jinyoung-ah? I’m rather busy at the moment.”

“Have you seen Daehwi anywhere?” he asked. “I’ve got to tell him they’re fresh out of Megaton Bars.”

Jisung strolled to Jinyoung’s side, shaking his head. “I haven’t seen him since he left. But I’m sure that if you—“

Jisung stopped there, only then able to take in Jinyoung’s bedraggled state. His hair was sticking out at odd angles, the fabric of his left shirt-sleeve ripped at the seams.

“What happened to you?” Jisung asked. “You look like you’ve been mauled by a tiger!”

Jinyoung turned sideways, trying to hide his blood-stained hand beneath his back. “I’m not sure about the mauling,” he said. “But I think I’ve dislocated my shoulder.”

“DISLOCATED YOUR—“ Jisung shrieked. “My child! We need to have your shoulder fixed at the clinic.”

“I need to find Daehwi first,” Jinyoung insisted.
At that very moment his phone vibrated in his pocket, and Jinyoung’s heart leapt in the hopes of finally getting a call from Daehwi. He was all but ready to ask him where he’d gone and run out the door at breakneck speed to wherever that might have been.

But the caller ID on display was unknown.

“How is it?” Jisung asked.

Jinyoung shrugged. “No idea.”

He picked up the call anyway. “Hello? Who is this?”

“Jinyoung-ah,” an unfamiliar voice spoke through the phone, chilling Jinyoung to the core.

This is what I imagine psychopaths must sound like.

“I hear you’re looking for Lee Daehwi.”

All at once, Jinyoung’s defenses crumbled, and he felt as if his legs might give in at any moment.

“Where…” Jinyoung began. “Where have you taken him?”

“He’s perfectly safe,” the voice assured him, but it provided Jinyoung not even the smallest trace of comfort. “Or at least he will be for as long as you cooperate.”

“Who are you?” Jinyoung demanded. “What do you want?”

A pause.

“Have we not met before?” The voice spoke up. “My apologies. The name’s Go Haechan. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

~JINHWI END~

Chapter End Notes

First things first: I'd like to apologize for the unprecedented delay in the release of this chapter, as I've been EXTREMELY busy over the past few days. I'm a graduating senior with a thesis to defend, you see, so life hasn't been particularly merciful to my schedule. It's been almost two weeks since the last chapter, so if you've gotten sick of waiting, I AM SORRY T^T

Moving on to the actual story, though. I'm not sure if you've noticed this, but Jinhwi's relationship has actually changed since Daehwi's chapter, as a product of a two-week timeskip in between. They've had time to get to know each other now, so their dynamics would naturally evolve into something different. When before they used to be a little awkward around each other, now that they're more comfortable in each other's presence, they've been more open to teasing, to cracking jokes at each other's expense, to having these little fights between them remedied only by these sweet little kisses. In a way, their current dynamics remind me of the relationship between real-life
Jinyoung and real-life Daehwi, who always seem to get into these little skirmishes that all the hyungs will have to mediate for xD

Also, surprise, suprise but Jinyoung knows Hapkido. Lol. I'm sure none of you could have been able to predict that (and if you have, that's mighty impressive), since I've purposely left him out of his situations where he might get involved in a fight (save for stepping in during Ong and Daniel's fake argument). But I've always thought it might be pretty cool if someone as chill and peace-loving as Jinyoung turned out to have this extremely badass side to him that no one was expecting. Not even me. I mean the idea literally came to me in the shower for no conceivable reason. Go figure.

And as for the Winkdeep stans out there reading this story (though I'm not sure why you'd want to read this if you shipped Winkdeep... o.O) I'm sorry if it seemed as though I was making Winkdeep out to be a bad thing ;-; I honest to goodness adore the bromance, so I don't really mean anything by writing Jihoon and Jinyoung's relationship this way. I really do love them both, but the story has to stay its course xD And just to keep up with this apology theme I've got going on in this Author Note, I'm sorry for ending with yet another cliffhanger involve Haechan. That guy is just so sinister, so for some reason I always feel the need to save his misdeeds for later chapters.

But I hope you liked this one nonetheless! I mean ya'll waited far too long for it, so I hope it won't disappoint (and if it does... as per usual I'm sorry D:)

See you guys next time!!! And if you've stuck around despite the mini-hiatus, thank you. I love you to the stars and back <3
Early mornings weren’t Seongwoo’s cup of tea.

Or at least they weren’t, before he started getting used to making Daniel his breakfast.

“I wonder why he never gets tired of these,” Seongwoo wondered to himself, carefully extracting two slices of piping hot bread from the toaster. “He has them for breakfast almost every other—OUCH!”

He retracted his hand immediately, burning himself as he picked at the toast with his fingers. “Dang, that hurts.”

He opened one of the drawers by the kitchen sink, rifling through its contents for a pair of tongs. “This is why I don’t like having to heat food while I’m half-asleep.”

And yet you do it anyway, he thought to himself. Because Daniel likes having toast for breakfast.

He walked over to the stove, inspecting the pan where a single egg was frying, and the pot where some bean sprout soup was simmering gradually to a gentle boil.

“Just a couple seconds more for the egg,” Seongwoo said to himself. “Since Daniel likes the yolk runny. And a couple minutes more for the soup. Though judging by the color of this, I’m guessing it needs a little more seasoning.”

He reached for the miniature jars sitting by the knife rack, sprinkling in some more chilli flakes and soy sauce. Daniel was a terrible cook, so over the weeks Seongwoo had come to assume the role of kitchen ahjumma, despite his profound disinterest in housework. His culinary skills were middling at best, but he’d grown to take pleasure in how much Daniel enjoyed almost every dish he could make, no matter how basic the recipe or how bland the taste.

Except the toast. Daniel was extremely picky when it came to his toast.

Once the egg had cooked to perfection, Seongwoo scooped it out of the pan with a spatula and settled it onto a plate next to a bowl of steamed rice, then proceeded to drain the soup out of the pot and onto a much larger bowl.

“Guess it’s time to wake him up,” Seongwoo said, satisfied with the outcome of his kitchen adventure. “Should’ve bought myself a new stick of lip balm.”

He made his way to where Daniel was sleeping soundly on his bed, as Daniel had evacuated his own and managed to turn it into a dumping site for used clothing. Seongwoo sat gingerly at Daniel’s bedside, watching for a short while how Daniel’s chest rose and fell as he slept. He reached out to stroke Daniel’s cheek tenderly, smiling to himself as he leaned in to press a soft kiss against the tip of Daniel’s nose.

“Wake up, sleepyhead,” he whispered. “Breakfast is served.”

“Mmm…” Daniel grumbled, rolling over to his other side, farther away from where Seongwoo was sitting. “Five more minutes…”
Seongwoo sighed to himself. “By five minutes, I’m sure you mean an hour-and-a-half, so it’s a no to that petition. Wake up now, or else the food will get cold.”

Daniel whined in response, grabbing at the blankets wrapped around his waist to pull them over and above his shoulders. “But I’m not hungry…”

Seongwoo’s left eye ticked in irritation. “And I didn’t haul my ass out of bed at six in the morning for this,” he said. “So do get up. Or else I’m tickling you until you beg for mercy.”

He waited a while for Daniel’s reply to his threat, and a few short moments passed by in silence, with only the sound of Daniel’s rhythmical breathing humming through the air.

“No, Peach…” Daniel grumbled after an eternity. “You can’t wee on the vice-principal’s sofa…”

“Unbelievable,” Seongwoo frowned, turning to the side to face the bedroom wall, where Peach was resting lazily atop its makeshift bed, licking heedlessly at the underside of its foot.

“Either you’ve committed a shameful deed at the vice-principal’s office,” Seongwoo addressed the cat bitterly. “Or Daniel’s actually rocked himself back to sleep.”

Peach mewed at him in response, which Seongwoo took to mean the cat was attempting to strike up an inter-species conversation with him.

Daniel straight up ignored your sorry ass lol, he heard Peach say in his head. Now deal with it.

“Well, this is infuriating,” Seongwoo huffed, returning his attention to Daniel. “But what of it, I’m not budging from your bedside until you get up and out of there for breakfast.”

He leaned in to land a kiss onto Daniel’s cheek, gradually making his way downwards as he trailed kisses by the side of Daniel’s mouth.


“Is that so?” Seongwoo said. “Then good, because that’s the point.”

His lips moved against the sensitive skin by Daniel’s neck, planting one tender kiss after another.

A soundless giggle escaped Daniel, as he turned himself over a second time to wrap both of his arms around Seongwoo’s neck. “Stop it,” he pleaded drowsily, eyes still half-closed. “I promise I’ll wake up already.”

Seongwoo smiled to himself, gradually returning Daniel’s warm embrace. He wrapped an arm around Daniel’s waist, pulling him in and resting his head against Daniel’s neck, breathing in the scent of citrus fruit.

“Can’t I have one more before I get up…” Daniel murmured, still groggy from sleep.

Savor the moment, Ong Seongwoo, his inner voice chided. Because Daniel’s charming, impulsive side makes itself known only for the briefest of moments every morning, and only if he’s gotten at least ten hours of sleep.

“Anything for you,” Seongwoo said, smiling contentedly to himself, planting another gentle kiss onto Daniel’s cheek. “Did you want one on the lips, too?”

Daniel laughed softly, the sound of it setting Seongwoo’s unguarded heart aflutter. “Kind of.”
Seongwoo pushed away from Daniel slightly, as if to move in for another kiss.

*Sorry, Dan,* he thought to himself. *But I wasn’t kidding about the food getting cold.*

“*Oh, Jisung-hyung!*” Seongwoo proclaimed animatedly. He sat himself as far up as he could manage given the weight of Daniel’s biceps, addressing the vacant space between the door and the living room. “What are you doing in here so early in the morning?”

Daniel abruptly shot up from his supine position, mortified by the prospect of Jisung walking in on their impromptu cuddling session.

“NOTHING HAPPENED, I PROMISE,” Daniel cried out, loud enough for the occupants in adjacent rooms to hear. “I SWEAR WE—“

He paused abruptly, perplexed by his failure to locate Jisung by the doorway. His head snapped to either side, squinting at nothing.

“Hyung?” Daniel called out. After receiving no response, he turned to Seongwoo, who flashed him a mischievous, knowing grin. “Wait a second…”

At that point, Seongwoo burst into fits of insurgent laughter, slapping at his thigh repeatedly. “How come you fall for it every single time?” he asked, watching as Daniel’s expression morphed from flat-out puzzlement into fierce outrage. “This is why I never, ever tire of pranking you.”


“Oh?” Seongwoo said, raising one dubious eyebrow at Daniel’s outburst. “I distinctly remember you whispering much the opposite into my ear last night.”

At this, Daniel blushed furiously from tip to toe. “I don’t recall any of that.”

Seongwoo flashed him a devilish grin. “Is that so?” he asked, leaning in towards Daniel, angling his head slightly to the side. “I’m sure I can help you remember.”

“I…” Daniel stammered, unsure of what to say. “I, uhm…”

“Hmm?” Seongwoo said, watching Daniel’s lips as they parted, as if to allow him entrance.

“I…” Daniel continued, swallowing nervously. “I’m… I’m hungry.”

“Pfft,” Seongwoo said, stifling his laughter. “Well, that reversal was quick.”

“I’m a growing boy with growing needs,” Daniel explained, patting his tummy. “I’m sure you’d understand.”

“I do,” Seongwoo agreed. “I understand that your stomach’s a vortex through which absurd quantities of food pass through at one time, so don’t you worry. I’ve made you breakfast, as per usual.”

“Is it toast?” Daniel inquired, scrambling out of bed.

“Wow, how could you have possibly found out?” Seongwoo inquired, dripping with sarcasm. “Not that I make you the exact same thing every Sunday, because otherwise you’d go absolute bonkers.”

Daniel strolled expectantly towards the dining table, Seongwoo following closely behind him.
“Is it charred at the edges?” Daniel added. “I like my toast that way.”

“Of course,” Seongwoo exclaimed, satisfied. “I’ve already mastered the art of setting the timer of that blasted toaster to just the right length, in order for me not to accidentally serve you ash on a plate. Not that you’ve never done the same for me once before.”

“I’ve never served you ash on a plate.”

“Oh? My apologies, because it sure did taste like it.”

Daniel grimaced at him. “You’re the worst.” He repeated, slurping at the contents of the soup bowl anyway. Seongwoo watched him as he did so, wiping almost instinctively at the soup as it dribbled down Daniel’s chin.

“Say what you want,” Seongwoo remarked. “But you seem to be enjoying yourself.”

Daniel’s eyes met his succinctly, giving Seongwoo the distinct impression of having been at war with himself for the past couple of minutes.

“Hey, Ongcheongie,” Daniel said then, startling Seongwoo with the use of his former alias as a mode of address. “I don’t think I’ve ever said this before, but… thank you.”

The unexpected show of gratitude startled Seongwoo even more. “What for?”

“For making me breakfast,” Daniel said simply. “It’s delicious.”

Seongwoo beamed at him, heart swelling with joy.

“You know,” he said, walking over to hug Daniel from behind. “I’ve been doing this almost a month now, but this is the first time I’ve ever heard you say thanks.”

“And you?” Daniel asked, turning about to face Seongwoo. “Aren’t you having breakfast?”

Seongwoo shook his head. “I’m afraid my meal of preference isn’t on the menu, today.”

Daniel’s eyes narrowed at him in suspicion. “Hey,” he said, a distinct sheen of roseate color dotting his cheeks. “You aren’t trying to get laid again, are you?”

“Like I said,” Seongwoo repeated, eyebrows wiggling playfully. “Not on the menu. It’s more of a weekly special, you know? Besides, I should probably be giving you some rest. The first time it happened, you waddled like a penguin the whole morning.”

Daniel blushed beet red, ashamed beyond belief.

“BECAUSE IT HURT, YOU IDIOT,” he explained, burying his face in both hands. “It actually really hurt.”

“Sorry about that,” Seongwoo said, sheepish.

If truth be told, he’d gotten carried away that first night, and had forgotten that Daniel had, until that point, never been in a relationship with another guy before. He bit at his lip, profuse with guilt, pushing the bowl of rice towards Daniel. “Here,” he said. “A peace offering.”

“Not enough,” Daniel said, picking at the rice with his chopsticks tentatively. “I’m paying you back for that, one of these days.”
Seongwoo laughed nervously, struggling to keep inappropriate thoughts at bay.

“Wow,” he teased. “Can’t wait.”

“Go away, Ong Seongwoo.” Daniel demanded.

“I’m sure you don’t mean that.”

“I don’t. But go away, you’re an idiot.”

“Somehow,” Seongwoo grumbled. “This ‘idiot’ catchphrase of yours is beginning to sound kind of romantic to my ears, which by the way is exceedingly depressing, so I’d appreciate it if you—”

Before he could say another word, however, Daniel grabbed him by the shirt with both hands, pulling him into a deep kiss. Daniel’s eager mouth clashed against his, the taste of strawberries from his lip gloss lingering at the tip of Seongwoo’s tongue even as he pulled hesitantly away.

“You know,” Daniel whispered. “You’re a lot sexier whenever you aren’t spouting nonsense with that mouth of yours.” He brushed the messy strands of Seongwoo’s fringe away from his eyes, the tips of his fingers sending electric pulses along Seongwoo’s body until he could feel something tingling at his core.

“I think,” Seongwoo said, inching even closer, both hands resting against the counter behind Daniel. “That’s whenever my mouth’s busy doing things other than talking.”

“Yeah,” Daniel agreed, gaze lowering to Seongwoo’s lips. “Probably.”

At that very moment the door flew open, slamming against the wall with such force that Daniel jumped at the sound of it, pushing Seongwoo away with enough muscle strength for him to trip over himself and crash out of balance against the kitchen barstools.

“Ouch…” Seongwoo said, rubbing at his lower back. “What the heck, Daniel!”

Daniel turned to Seongwoo, mouthing an apology.

“Hey, Daniel!” Jisung called out. “Why aren’t you—“

He paused for a moment, taking in the sight of both Seongwoo and Daniel, both tousle-haired, red-faced, one of them breathless and the other stricken entirely with guilt.

“Wow,” Daniel exclaimed, still attempting to collect himself. “So now you barge into the room?”

Jisung scowled, eyes flitting from Daniel to Seongwoo, and then back to where he started. “Well, excuse me for not reading it in my fortune cookie that I was about to interrupt your little getting-to-know-you-session.”

Seongwoo snickered naughtily at him. “Getting-to-know-you is a mild way of putting it.”

Jisung’s eyes rolled so far up their sockets that for a moment Seongwoo was convinced he could see himself think.

“Believe me,” Jisung said. “I know.”

“Were you in need of something?” Seongwoo inquired. “Or should Daniel and I pick up from where we left off? Though to be perfectly frank, I don’t mind an audience.”
“Eww,” Jisung frowned, sticking his tongue out in mock distaste. “No, thank you. I can list a thousand other activities much holier and better fit to a peaceful Sunday morning.”

“So what have you and Sungwoon-hyung been up to, lately?” Seongwoo pried, unconvinced.


“Okay, this is getting stupid,” Daniel interrupted, before the conversation could head into unseemly territory. “What’s the purpose of this visit, again? I don’t think I heard you the first time around.”

Jisung turned his attention to Daniel, giving him a quick once-over. “Don’t tell me you’ve been too busy romping about with Seongwoo to remember,” he said. “You have Presidential duties left to uphold, haven’t you? The mid-semestral council meeting is in twenty minutes.”

“OH FUCK ME,” Daniel exclaimed, having completely forgotten his second-most important bi-annual appointment.

“Would love to,” Seongwoo supplied. “But maybe later. What’s this meeting for?”

“The arrangements for the winter festival,” Daniel said, hurriedly stuffing the other slice of toast into his mouth, chewing and swallowing at a speed enough for Seongwoo to wonder if he, in fact, had an abnormally proportioned esophagus. “Or at least, it should be,” Daniel continued. “Unless I arrive at the council room late, in which case the vice-principal will for sure waste thirty minutes of our time on an extended lecture regarding the unwanted side-effects of recurrent tardiness.”


“I need to head out,” Daniel said then, stuffing the remaining half of his egg and two spoonfuls of rice into his mouth all at once. “I’ll be back for lunch.”

He darted into the bedroom, and within minutes had gotten himself changed into a fresh set of clothing. Seongwoo scanned his appearance, gesturing for Daniel to come over so he could straighten out his tie.

“Hey Ongcheongie,” Daniel said. “Don’t forget to feed Peach.”

“No worries,” Seongwoo replied. “Peach feasts on the carpet whenever he gets hungry, so rest assured I’m not letting him prance about the room on an empty stomach.”

“Thank you,” Daniel said, pressing a hummingbird-light kiss onto Seongwoo’s cheek. “I’ll see you later.”

Seongwoo watched as Daniel scampered out the door, wishing he’d either been responsible enough to run for Council or selfish enough to ask for Daniel to stay.

“So,” Jisung said, piercing through the awkward silence. “What’s it like getting acquainted with Daniel’s airheaded alter-ego?”

“Surprisingly difficult,” Seongwoo admitted, sighing heavily. “But not entirely unexpected. I saw it coming when I realized a couple of weeks ago that Daniel was about as messy in his room as Peach is in his litterbox.”

“Hang in there,” Jisung said, patting Seongwoo’s shoulder reassuringly. “The worst is yet to come. There’s more to Daniel left uncharted, after all.”
The corner of Seongwoo’s mouth turned upwards into the semblance of a melancholy smile.

“Hey, Jisung-hyung,” he began, resting his back pensively against the kitchen counter. “I’ve been meaning to ask you something, if that’s alright.”

“Is that so?” Jisung said. “Well then. Fire away.”

Seongwoo fidgeted awkwardly, unsure of where to begin.

Ever since he’d lain bare the truth to his heart-breaking past a couple of nights ago, he’d found himself uncertain of things he’d never been so sure of until then.

Before, he’d been convinced that his attraction to Daniel was but a side-effect of impulse, the offshoot of heartache and the aftermath of desolation.

*It’s because he staves away the loneliness, he’d think to himself. It’s because his company allows for the luxury of forgetfulness, as if I’ve never been in pain at all.*

It came to a point, however, that he’d gotten confused, a point at which Daniel had begun to occupy a space in his heart he’d left unlabelled.

And to think he’d spent weeks trying to convince himself that Daniel was little more than a nuisance, an inconvenience the vice-principal had thrown at him out of spite.

And once he’d come out with the truth, he’d thought that maybe, at long last, he’d remember: whose memory it was that he cherished, whose soul it was that sang to his, whose death it was that he’d mourned for half a lifetime.

*Kang Euigyeon, he’d think. It’s still him.*

But along with his honesty came other things: his greed, his envy, his lust.

For someone else entirely.

*Kang Euigyeon, he thought now. Is it still him?*

*Is it?*

It was if he’d been forced into a confrontation with the darkest parts of himself, helpless as they rose to the surface and into the light.

He’d begun wanting Daniel, as if he’d been suffocating for an eternity and Daniel was the oxygen he needed to breathe.

And he’d begun doubting himself. His loyalties, his desires, his very heart.

Once, he’d lain awake at night, with Daniel sleeping soundly in his arms, wondering if the guy he’d just spent the entire night making love to was the same guy he’d loved in secret for a decade.

And that was the worst part.

*Kang Euigyeon and Kang Daniel had, overtime, begun overlapping in his head into the exact same person, and even the tiniest of similarities between them riddled him with overwhelming guilt.*

*And at times, Seongwoo thought. Overwhelming anger. For perhaps being lied to and made to look like a fool.*
“You… you’ve known Daniel since he was little, right?” Seongwoo began, breaking the piercing silence as Jisung awaited his response. “Since elementary school, or so.”

Jisung nodded, unsure of where the conversation was headed. “You’re right. He’s a family friend.”

Seongwoo nodded. “Then certainly… you’ve known of what he was like as a child. Was he… was he any different back then?”

Jisung heaved in a deep sigh, fingers tapping against the cool marble of the countertop. “Very much so. As is the case for the rest of us.”

Seongwoo pressed on, unyielding. “But was he… especially different? In terms of physique, for example… or his confidence onstage.”

“Well, if you’d seen him then,” Jisung said. “You’d think of him as a separate entity. He and Daniel don’t seem much like two halves of a whole, to be perfectly honest.”

He stared wistfully at the ceiling fan, observing in silence as the spokes turned clockwise, on and on, as if to head for a destination they’d never reach.

“He was never particularly sure of himself,” Jisung explained. “But Daniel stopped at nothing to master his craft. And though he hid away from the rest of the world during practice, I was witness to his level of skill as a child. And I’ll tell you what, even then—and I say this with utmost certainty—Daniel’s abilities were at par with some of the most beloved, sought-after idols of the new generation.”

Seongwoo nodded, surprised by how easy it was to rest assured of such a thing.

Ten years ago, Seongwoo reminisced. Would I have believed that Euigyeon could make it this far? Would I have seen Daniel in him, and thought: this is the person you’re meant to become?

“He could’ve been anything,” Seongwoo whispered to himself. “Because more than anyone, he dared to dream.”

“Exactly,” Jisung concurred. “Daniel’s always been like that. Shooting for the highest star, doing the impossible. You can see it in his dancing, too. His desperation, and his unhinged potential… Watching him broke my skin into goose bumps, at times.”

“The dancing,” Seongwoo pressed on. “Was he drawn to a specific type?”

“B-boy,” Jisung replied, confirming Seongwoo’s suspicions. “He tells me that a friend of his taught him the basic movements, and from there he learnt the rest on his own.”

It’s a coincidence, Seongwoo thought to himself. It has to be.

Fate won’t play with my feelings this way.

Otherwise, he’d be much too cruel.

“His… his name…” Seongwoo began, before he could stop the words from leaving his mouth.

“His name?” Jisung repeated, a vague sense of agitation flickering briefly through his features. “What about it?”
At that moment, Jisung’s phone buzzed from within his pocket. He went to retrieve it with much haste, relieved by an excuse to cut the inquisition short. “Ah, it’s Sungwoon. I think I need to go ahead and find him.”

“Yes,” Seongwoo agreed bashfully, palming the back of his head. “Sorry about that. Never mind what I was saying. It’s nothing.”

Jisung cast him a wary look.

“Seongwoo-ya,” he said, pocketing his phone. “A word of advice, if I may. It’s alright for you to go snooping around... but some things in this world are best left alone.”

Seongwoo returned Jisung’s steadfast gaze, convinced that at least in that regard, he’d been right that something was amiss.

“It’s alright,” Seongwoo said. “I understand. No more questions from now on.”

This promise notwithstanding, however, he began to think: why haven’t I thought of this before?

For anyone native to this country, ‘Daniel’ hardly sounds like a name you’d have at birth.

“Lay it to rest,” Jisung said. “It’s for your own good.”

Seongwoo smiled to himself, nodding as Jisung spoke.

From where he stood, he watched as Jisung strolled towards the exit and closed the door behind him, leaving Seongwoo to bask in the company of silence.

“Since when have you become so proficient a liar, Ong Seongwoo?” he asked himself. “And since when have you cared about your ‘own good’, for that matter?”

He closed his eyes, cocooning himself within a blanket of stillness.

You never did, he thought. And to this day, you don’t.

***

These days, foot traffic at the Imugi was remarkably dense.

Even before he made it to the farthest corner of the outdoor plaza where the shop front was located, Seongwoo could already see the scores of people lining up by the entrance, waiting their turn for an empty table.

He glanced at his timepiece, which read 10:20 AM.

“That’s strange,” Seongwoo mused. “Business doesn’t usually hit its peak until lunch time.”

Once he entered into the vicinity, however, he came to find out exactly what the fuss was about.

From where he stood, he could see a crowd of over-excited freshmen gathered by the table nearest the door, where a group of boys were having their breakfast, waving time and again at their spectators through the clear glass windows.

He squinted at each of their faces.
“Kim Samuel, Ahn Hyungseob, Yoo Seonho, Lee Woojin, Lee Euiwoong, and Huang Justin,” he listed. “That explains it.”

He tiptoed stealthily towards the back entrance, lest he draw in a crowd himself.

Moments later, fingers tapped lightly at his shoulder.

“JESUS!” he exclaimed, startled.

“Close enough,” a familiar voice spoke up. “But not quite. It’s me, hyung.”

Seongwoo whipped his head around to come face-to-face with an impossibly lanky individual. “Hi, Kuanlin-ah. How’s the weather today?”

“What’s up with the lame question?” Kuanlin asked. “Did I scare you?”

“No really,” Seongwoo lied. “Were you looking for something?”

“I came looking for you, actually.”

“Right,” Seongwoo said, scanning the periphery. “Though I’d suggest heading elsewhere if you wanted to have a chat. I’m not interested in getting ambushed by a troop of rabid fangirls, at the moment.”

“Not even if they scream, ‘you’re so handsome!’ repeatedly in your ear?” Kuanlin suggested, grinning at him playfully.

“Tempting,” Seongwoo smiled back. “But no. Come on, let’s have lunch in the classroom.”

Once they managed to make their escape and found themselves a safe haven within the confines of Room 112, Kuanlin held up the paper bag he’d been holding, still grinning from ear to ear.

“Is that what I think it is?” Seongwoo asked, mouth watering as the aroma of seasoned chicken assailed his nostrils.

“Yup,” Kuanlin replied. “It’s Chinese takeout.”

They settled themselves into the front desks nearest the window, ripping excitedly at the food packages.

“So, what’s been on your mind, lately?” Seongwoo inquired, receiving the pair of chopsticks Kuanlin politely handed out to him. “And how can I help?”

“Have you seen the articles that went viral this morning?” Kuanlin asked, digging into a slice of chicken.

“I checked them out this morning,” Seongwoo asked. “It’s about ‘Winkdeep’ apparently. Wish I could’ve thought up the name, though I never really considered how they’d make a couple.”

“I wish I could’ve filmed one with Jihoon-hyung too…” Kuanlin admitted. “I want a couple name. It’s unfair that Jinyoung-hyung gets one first.”

Seongwoo chuckled at the innocence of his complaint. “You’ll get one. Soon enough.”

Kuanlin nodded, sighing dejectedly. “And we were even supposed to go out on a date…”
How is that supposed to work?” Seongwoo asked him as he ate. “You can’t possibly head out tomorrow. We’ve got an appointment at the studio for our first performance at the Idol Project.”

“I know,” Kuanlin said. “I’ve postponed it to Tuesday, but I’m afraid that would mean we’d have much less time to work with. And to be honest, I…” he trailed off sadly, and the look of utter sorrow on his face gave Seongwoo a persistent urge to pet him.

“I’ve been meaning to defer it to an even later date,” Kuanlin explained. “But I haven’t gathered the guts enough to tell Jihoon-hyung as much without chickening out beforehand. I think I’d really hate to disappoint him.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so unsure of yourself,” Seongwoo remarked. “Why keep him waiting?”

“To be honest, I…” Kuanlin began, casting a worried glance Seongwoo’s way before motioning for him to move in closer, enough for Kuanlin to whisper something private into his ears.

Gears clicked slowly into place as Seongwoo listened.

“Oh?” Seongwoo exclaimed, turning to Kuanlin after hearing his piece. “Is that so? Then you’re better off pushing through with that rain check.”

“You think so?” Kuanlin asked pensively. “You think it'll work?”

“Why not? I’m sure in the long run, he’ll be happier for it. Besides, if you’re going to push Jihoon’s patience limit to the threshold, might as well take as much time as you need to make sure everything’s perfect once the date is set.”

Kuanlin considered Seongwoo’s suggestion for a moment, before locking eyes with Seongwoo to reward his invaluable help with a puppy-dog smile. “Thanks, hyung. I think I’ll go ahead and tell him.”

Seongwoo gave in to his stubborn desire, pulling Kuanlin into a fatherly hug. “Is it too late for me to adopt you?”

Kuanlin laughed, pushing Seongwoo gently away before he reached into his backpack to fish out his phone. “I’ll ask Jihoon-hyung if he’s alright with having the date next weekend.”

Seongwoo nodded, biting zestfully into the chicken. “Sure. Tell me how it goes.”

Minutes later, his own phone vibrated from within the confines of his jacket pockets.

He groaned, unwilling to interrupt his precious mealtime. “This is why I resent my own popularity sometimes,” he grumbled. “I’ve hardly any time left for self-indulgence.”

He swiped at the handheld device, eyes widening as the contact ID flashed onscreen.

His eyes narrowed into slits as he read each syllable carefully.

Ji. Hoon. The. Pig.

“Huh,” Seongwoo exclaimed. “Well, this is unexpected.”

He clicked dubiously at the messenger icon.
JIHOON THE PIG

Seongwoo-hyung

Wassup, kid

I have a question

Let me guess.

It’s about the date

Yeah

WAIT WHAT

WHY YOU KNOW THAT

U STALKER

You wish someone this handsome would stalk you

But no

Kuanlin’s with me right now

I’d have known even if I didn’t want to

And I didn’t really want to

T^T

Kidding

Lol

Wait just a minute

... Have you been telling him to postpone our date to next week???

Bingo!

You’re welcome

...

HYUNG, NO

HOW COULD YOU

Because I care, Jihoon-ah

Trust me when I say that it’s better this way

And trust me when I say

That the next time we meet
I’m stabbing your eye out with a rusty fork for interfering

Hahahah

You’re adorable Jihoon-ah, but that’s no way to respect your elders

Hasn’t Kuanlin said the rest?

I believe there was a part two this saga

What rest

Wait he’s texting me shhh

Good for you

But I don’t really need an update

He’s sitting three inches away

Literally

I could kiss him if I wanted to

…???

If you dare

I’ll stab both your eyes out with a rusty fork

You have a spare rusty fork?

Wtf Park Jihoon

Didn’t know you were into antiques

Wait a minute

Hyung

HuuUNG

Yes, buddy

OH GOD

HYUUUNG!!

WHAT IS IT NOW

HE’S SUGGESTING AN OVERNIGHT TRIP

HE’S SUGGESTING AN OVERNIGHT TRIP

HE’S SUGGESTING AN OVERNIGHT TRIP

…Easy on the copy-paste there
I get it already
Like I said, though
You're welcome

I WASN'T READY
WHAT DO I DO

Uhm, say yes?

Okay
He said ‘I’ll look forward to it’
With a heart emoji

OMG I’M DECEASED

Wow
Rest in peace, buddy

HYUNG WHAT SHALL I WEAR

... 
Clothing, that’s for sure
Some nice underwear

(IMPORTANT: NO POLKADOTS)
And lots of deodorant, in case you get all sweaty

OKAY GOT IT
I’M SO EXCITED
SOMEONE HOLD ME

Ugh
You’re being embarrassing
I’m screenshotting this and sending it to Kuanlin

HYUNG, NO

Done

WTF
YOU IDIOT

[Received 10:55 A.M.]
“You know, Kuanlin-ah,” Seongwoo declared. “Jihoon reminds me of Daniel sometimes.”

“How so?” Kuanlin asked, curiosity alight in his eyes.

“Both of them think my mental faculties are deficient,” he began, counting with his fingers. “They punctuate excessively on KakaoTalk, and go hungry every fifteen minutes. And oh, they default to threats of physical violence once in a while, despite not meaning it. It’s kind of endearing.”

Kuanlin grimaced, unsure of why he’d be into that sort of thing. “Have I told you this, hyung?” he said. “You’re kind of strange. Sometimes I wonder why we’re friends.”

“But you love me, anyway?” Seongwoo supplied.

Kuanlin flashed him a gummy smile. “I’m your number one fan.”

Seongwoo laughed at the charming remark, ruffling Kuanlin’s hair affectionately.

If only I had a little brother like you, he thought. Instead of a wily, lunatic cousin out to wreak havoc wherever I go.

As if on cue, Seongwoo’s phone vibrated a second time, alerting him to new mail. This time it was from Jisung, asking for Seongwoo to give him a call as soon as possible.

Panic rose to Seongwoo’s throat. It’s not an emergency, is it?

“What’s up, hyung?” Seongwoo asked, wasting no time the moment his call came through.

“S-Seongwoo-ya…” Jisung began, his shaky voice reminding Seongwoo of a chicken with its head cut off.

“Hyung, are you alright?” he asked. “You sound a little perturbed.”

Seconds passed in eerie silence, before an inarticulate response filled the soundless void. “It’s… It’s Jinyoung, he…”

Seongwoo strained to hear Jisung’s voice over the phone as he spoke. “Jinyoung? What happened?”

“He… he injured his shoulder and is trying to talk me out of rushing him to the hospital.”

Seongwoo sat up from where he lounged comfortably at the desk, startling Kuanlin with his jerky movements.

“He… WHAT?” Seongwoo asked, incredulous. “Where are you? What happened?”

“We’re inside of the school ambulance at the moment,” Jisung explained, briefly regaining his composure. “None of the doctors on-duty had the skillset enough to set his shoulder straight, so we’re traveling to another hospital at this time.”

An injury,” Seongwoo repeated, dumbstruck and unsure of what to do. “Did he overdo it with the punching bag at the arcade?”

“I’ve no idea about an arcade,” Jisung said. “But he did get into a scuffle with Taejoon at some deserted back alley. And when he returned… he received a call, from a guy calling himself Go
Haechan. He and Jinyoung aren’t on the best of terms either, as it happens.”

At the sound of Haechan’s name, Seongwoo’s heart dropped instantaneously to his stomach, robbing him momentarily of his ability to think, speak, or breathe without crumbling into a powerless heap.

“What… what did he want?” he said after a long pause.

“I think… I think he’s asking for you, Seongwoo-ya. He asked for Jinyoung to persuade you into parleying with him. Otherwise, he…”

“Does he really think a plea bargain would work?” Seongwoo demanded. “If I had any sense—which I do, despite what others may think—I’d run through hell and high water if only to excuse myself from having to confront him under any given circumstance.”

“It should work,” Jisung said, a sense of foreboding present in his tone. “Because he’s holding Daehwi hostage until you meet him face-to-face.”

Seongwoo’s fragile heartstring snapped in half as soon as the words left Jisung’s lips.

Their darling, innocent Daehwi.

How could he possibly have gotten involved in any of this?

“That asshole,” Seongwoo fumed, gritting his teeth furiously.

“Seongwoo-hyung,” Kuanlin spoke up. “Are you alright? Has something happened?”

Seongwoo ignored Kuanlin’s query for the time being, not wanting to unsettle him before he could come up with a solution.

“Did Jinyoung take the bait?” he asked. “And what of Daehwi? Is he not responding?”

“Yeah,” Jisung confirmed. “Jinyoung took the bait, hook, line, and sinker. We couldn’t manage to contact Daehwi either, and Jinyoung’s gone ballistic for it. You need to help him, Seongwoo-ya.”

“Where is he?” Seongwoo asked, heading for the door. “Go Haechan. I need to be there before he does the unforgivable.”

“The empty basketball court,” Jisung said. “A couple of blocks away from the café. If he told the truth, that is. There was no way for us to find out before he hung up the phone.”

Seongwoo looked over his shoulder one last time at Kuanlin, silently informing him of a pressing emergency.

Kuanlin nodded in perfect understanding, gesturing for him to leave if he needed to make his way elsewhere and on the double.

Seongwoo smiled at him half-heartedly, mouthing a word of thanks.

“I’ll be there,” he told Jisung. “Tell everyone there’s no need to worry.”

“Are you sure about this, Seongwoo-ya?” Jisung asked, ambivalent to his decision. “He didn’t sound like the type of person we’d find easy to bargain with. A negotiation with those of his ilk might end up hurting you.”
“See if I care if he does end up hurting me,” Seongwoo muttered. “But if he dares even lay a finger on any of my friends…”

He pocketed the phone, rushing out the door as fast as his legs could carry him. “I’ll kill him. That’s all there is to it.”

***

The only perceivable silver-lining to the lamentable turn of events was that Haechan had in fact, been telling the truth with regards to his present location. He was inside of the court by the three-point line, dribbling leisurely as he awaited Seongwoo’s arrival.

The neutral expression on his face morphed into a sickening smile as soon as Seongwoo entered into his line of sight.

“I’m not in the mood for a customary greeting,” Seongwoo began, gathering as much courage as it took to look Haechan in the eye without faltering at the sight. “Now tell me where you’ve taken Daehwi so we can get this conversation over with. I’ve been in your presence a couple seconds too long.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” Haechan shrugged, throwing the ball over his shoulder. “This conversation’s only getting started.”

“I never should’ve agreed to this then, if you’re not going to tell me what I’ve come here to find out,” Seongwoo said. “But I know you’re simply withholding valuable information, because you’ve no desire to shell it out for free.”

“You’re sharper than I gave you credit for, Seongwoo-ya,” Haechan observed. “To tell you the truth, I’ve come here to negotiate.”

*Jisung was right,* Seongwoo said. *He’s holding Daehwi for ransom.*

*But of what sort?*

“I sure do hope you aren’t expecting money,” Seongwoo said, turning the pockets of his jeans inside out. “I’ve got nothing on me at the moment.”

“Not to worry,” Haechan said. “I’ve got something else in mind, much easier to procure than cash.”

He stepped leisurely towards Seongwoo, not breaking eye-contact even as Seongwoo’s insides churned at the repulsive sight of him.

“I’m sure,” Haechan said. “You already have what it is I’m asking for.”

“And what is that?” Seongwoo asked, caught between curiosity and wishing he never even had to find out.

“Kang Euigyeon,” Haechan said. “I need you to tell me where I can find him.”

Everything around Seongwoo collapsed into dust, along with the garbled remnants of his shattered composure.

“That… that isn’t possible,” Seongwoo whispered, looking hurriedly away. “Not possible at all.”
“And why is that?” Haechan asked, his gentle tone masking the depth of his growing impatience.

“Because he’s dead.” Seongwoo said, blurtng out the only things he could even think to say. “Because I killed him.”

Haechan laughed in disbelief at the absurdity of his claim.

“As easy as it is to believe you could do such a thing,” Haechan said. “I’m certain that at least on that front, you are terribly mistaken.”

“And why’s that?” Seongwoo asked, feeling the weight of Haechan’s gaze as it bore punctures through his desensitized body.

“I already spoke with Euigyeon’s mother,” Haechan said. “And forced the truth out of her before I left.”

Seongwoo shook his head numbly, unable to process the implications of Haechan’s assertion. “What… what have you done?”

“Nothing you didn’t already know I was capable of,” Haechan shrugged nonchalantly. “Blackmail. Deception. Threat.”

Haechan observed the pads of his fingers languidly, blowing at the dust embedded in his nails.

“I’ve come to find out that she misled you into believing her son was dead, thinking you wouldn’t bother to come looking for a corpse,” Haechan said. “I suppose she mistook your identity for mine.”

Seongwoo drew in a short breath, as the questions he’d been stockpiling throughout the years ran abruptly into their ever-evasive answers.

Why he never found a body.

Why Euigyeon’s neighbors refused to elaborate as they spoke of death.

Why the possibility of Daniel harboring a latent identity preyed upon him day in and day out.

“Are you telling me that I’ve been lied to,” Seongwoo began. “Because Euigyeon’s mother believed that I’d beat up her son?”

“Understandably so,” Haechan said, smirking evilly. “As vile as it tastes in my mouth to admit, you and I are related, after all. Some might even say we look alike.”

Seongwoo knit his brows together at the stupidity of the suggestion. “And what proof might you have that Euigyeon is alive? If his mother lied then, she could very well have lied now.”

“I have his mother’s honor,” Haechan said. “Or at least, I traded it in for her son’s safety once I’ve managed to track him.”

“Bullshit,” Seongwoo accused. “Someone as deprived of sincerity as you are… you’d break the promise to keep him safe the moment it proves an inconvenience.”

“Practicality,” Haechan said, unbothered. ‘It’s what makes a man.”

“Wrong,” Seongwoo countered. “When paid at the price of one’s integrity, practicality is what makes a coward.”
“I admire the boastful elocution, dear cousin,” Haechan spat out. “But I’m sure you’re in possession of the knowledge on Euigyeon’s location. And you’d find it in both of our best interests to waste as little time as possible in letting me know of where exactly that is.”

“What makes you think I know that?” Seongwoo demanded. “Haven’t I already told you? All these years I’ve thought he was dead. How could I possibly have kept him hidden that way?”

“His mother,” Haechan replied. “She tells me he goes to this school, and is in close contact with a certain Yoon Jisung. I know that person runs within your friendship circle; I saw him with you during the exams a couple weeks ago, which means Euigyeon himself should be close by. And you wouldn’t be blind enough not to recognize him, even as he stood you face-to-face. His physical appearance shouldn’t be all that different.”

This imbecile, Seongwoo thought. Is mistaken if Daniel is Euigyeon, and vice-versa.

*They’re nothing alike until you take a closer look.*

But how am I supposed to make absolute sure that they’re one and the same? Jisung refuses to tell me anything.

“I have a hunch,” Seongwoo assured him, biding his time to think up a way out of his predicament before things could go awry. “But what makes you think I’d tell you?”

“This is where Daehwi’s role comes into play,” Haechan said, revealing a truth Seongwoo knew right from the beginning. “I’ve come to offer you a trade. Daehwi’s life in exchange for Kang Euigyeon’s whereabouts.”

“Is this all that Daehwi’s life amounts to?” Seongwoo said. “Information you could certainly have gotten elsewhere, given the far-reaching extent of your personal network?”

“Wrong,” Haechan retorted. “Daehwi’s life means nothing to me, apart from leverage to coerce you into spilling the details on Kang Euigyeon’s identity.”

“And what has Jinyoung got to do with any of this? Why hurt him?” Seongwoo persisted. “Were you… were you behind Yoon Taejoon’s appearance at that jilted back alley?”

“I’ve got nothing to do with this Taejoon character,” Haechan said. “But Hyunwoo tells me that Bae Jinyoung has done him an inexcusable wrong. And because I care so very much for my precious little brother, I’ve decided to help him pay Jinyoung back for his transgressions. That way I hit two birds with one stone.”

Haechan smirked with satisfaction, tapping at the side of his head with his right index finger. “Practicality, remember?”

“I don’t follow,” Seongwoo said. “Jinyoung would never do such a thing.”

Haechan shook his head. “Hyunwoo insists that Jinyoung was the cause of his split with his girlfriend, spirited her away then disposed of her after drinking his fill. I understand perfectly how painful such an ordeal must be. You’ve put me through much the same thing, after all.”

So we’re back to this, Seongwoo thought. *It never ends.*

“Song Chaerin would’ve ruined you,” Seongwoo told him. “You were better off without her.”

“What makes you think you’ve got the right to make that call in my stead?” Haechan demanded,
brimming with rage as his voice rose a solid decibel higher. “Admit it, Ong Seongwoo. You were envious of my relationship with her, and that’s why you stole her away.”

“Let’s not bring her into this any longer,” Seongwoo pleaded, averting his gaze. “She’s out of our lives for good. Just… just tell me where Daehwi is already, and I’ll promise to stay out of your way for as long as I live.”

Haechan smiled at Seongwoo sadly, before his face contorted into a wicked grin.

“Do you know what a ‘tell’ is, Seongwoo-ya?” he asked. “My father taught me this as a child, back when he used to work with the National Intelligence. It’s a recurring reaction one has that occurs whenever he’s lying. Of course, you’d have to know a person well before you can figure out what that is.”

He stepped towards Seongwoo immobilized where he stood, ripping piece by piece at his unflinching veneer.

His fear of Haechan was a phoenix, and a thousand times over he’d watched it set itself on fire, ignite into flames and disappear amongst the rubble. And yet.

And yet.

From the ashes his immortal fear returned, unharmed, unfettered, and even more terrifying than when he’d last gotten rid of it.

_Your bravado, Ong Seongwoo_, he asked himself. _Where’s it run off to this time?

“Do you know what your ‘tell’ is, Seongwoo-ya?” Haechan taunted. “It’s that whenever you lie, you’re unable to look me in the eye.”

Haechan leaned in, close enough for Seongwoo to feel the warm gust of breath against his neck. “Just like this.”

Seongwoo’s hands fisted at his sides, a feeble attempt to steel himself against Haechan’s intimidation.

_He’s no threat, Ong Seongwoo_, his inner voice chided. _Don’t be afraid._

Seongwoo returned Haechan’s piercing gaze, feigning indifference. “Is this how you plan on making sure I won’t provide you a false lead?”

“Oh, there are other ways of going about that,” Haechan said, tapping at his partially-hidden earpiece. He sniggered, crossing both arms over his chest in a show of arrogance. “Here’s a friendly tip for you, Seongwoo-ya: at the other end of this line is my brother, Go Hyunwoo. And if you so much as attempt to contact the authorities, or tell your friends what I’ve been up to, I’ll give the final command and you’d be lucky to have Daehwi returned to you in a stable condition.”

As he spoke, Seongwoo watched unblinking, not letting a single detail pass him by.

His stance. His tone of voice.

Everything there was to find out.

“And by the way,” Haechan added. “If you’re thinking of using your physical prowess to disarm me, you’ll lose the only lead you have on Daehwi’s location, and by the time he returns Hyunwoo
will already have had his way with him.”

“You already know,” Seongwoo said, still watching Haechan’s every move. “I’m sure you already know who it is. If you could conduct research on the whereabouts of Euigyeon’s mother, then I’m sure you have the resources enough to locate Euigyeon himself.”

Haechan shook his head. “It’s not as simple as you might think. The name ‘Kang Euigyeon’”’s been wiped from the public database, so I’ve got no leads on such a person. The information on him ends with his return to Busan. It really as if he’s been dead all this time.”

“But why go through all of this trouble?” Seongwoo persisted, a plan now taking shape in his head. “If you’d asked nicely, I might’ve obliged.”

“Why?” Haechan repeated, already at his wit’s end. “Because you, Ong Seongwoo. You don’t deserve an easy way out. And by association, neither do your friends.”

*Everything you touch, Haechan seemed to tell him. Turns into an enemy of mine.*

*A target.*

*A casualty.*

*And I’m only just getting started.*

“You’re a monster,” Seongwoo spat out. “A scum of the earth.”

Haechan laughed, his arms falling to his sides. “And so are you.”

At the sound of his voice, something clicked inside of Seongwoo’s brain, the final piece of the puzzle finally snapping into place.

*That’s it, Seongwoo thought. That’s exactly the information I needed.*

“And what have I done exactly?” Seongwoo challenged, struggling to keep his expression neutral. “Apart from mistakenly placing my trust in you?”

“Monsters are pre-conditioned not to think of themselves as such, you know,” Haechan droned on. “Take for example that mighty dragon you revere so much at this school. Isn’t that how the old story goes? Once upon a time, a hungry dragon came to town, searching through cottages for little children to feed on. But once he’d eaten his fill, he heard mothers weeping for their children, and the townsfolk crying ‘Monster!’ as they ran every which way. And this mighty dragon, strong and ferocious as he was, feared for his own life and looked immediately behind him.”

“Shut up,” Seongwoo said. “I haven’t got the time for your pointless fairy tales.”

“Look around you Seongwoo-ya,” Haechan said then, sweeping both arms in an arc around him. “We aren’t living in a fictional world, and you can’t expect an omnipotent presence to write in a *deus ex machina* to save your hide. Or Lee Daehwi’s. Or Kang Euigyeon’s.”

He took one step closer, effectively breaking the barrier to Seongwoo’s personal bubble.

“This is reality, Seongwoo-ya. And the reality is, you have only two options to choose from: either you give me what it is that I’m asking for and have Daehwi returned to you unscathed, or you resist and compete in the Idol Project with ten members instead of eleven.”

“You’re forgetting the third possibility here,” Seongwoo retorted. “That I give in to you and get
double-crossed anyway. How am I to make sure that you’ll hold up your end of the bargain?”

“There isn’t any way for you to make sure,” Haechan shrugged. “That isn’t written in the stars for you, I’m afraid.”


Seongwoo closed his eyes for a small moment.

*What is he planning to do with the information on Euigyeon?* Seongwoo thought.

*Use it to hurt me?*

*Use it to hurt him?*

*Use it to force us into hurting each other?*

“Chances are,” Seongwoo whispered, distraught. “It’s all of the above.”

*And that’s exactly why I’m never telling him.*

*Not on my honor, not on my life.*

“I refuse,” Seongwoo said plainly. “This arbitration is over.”

“I’m giving you another chance,” Haechan said, visibly irate. “Otherwise, Daehwi’s done for. Remember Seongwoo-ya,” he said. “My brother has him and can hear everything. So don’t you dare even try and hurt me.”

Seongwoo waited for a moment to pass, and then another. A few seconds later, Haechan’s arms rose from their position at his sides, crossing over his chest.

Seongwoo stifled a victorious smile.

*Do you know what a ‘tell’ is, Seongwoo-ya?* Haechan’s words rang in his ears, clear as daylight.

Seongwoo let escape a soundless chuckle. *Well thanks to you, now I do.*

*And do you know what your ‘tell’ is, Go Haechan?*

*It’s when you place a barrier between yourself and I.*

*When you cross your arms over your chest, as if to keep me away.*

*Just like that.*

“He wasn’t like you, Seongwoo-ya,” Haechan said. “Unlike you, he never belonged. You don’t have to make me do this for the sake of some outcast.”

“He belonged with me,” Seongwoo countered. “And that was more than enough for the pain to be worth it.”

“So is that a ‘no’ to my request?” Haechan asked, stunned by Seongwoo’s open defiance.

“It’s not a ‘no’,!” Seongwoo said, grinning. “It’s a *You’re an idiot for thinking I’d ever say yes to begin with*.!”
“Then it seems you’ve made your choice,” Haechan said, unamused. “Your unrequited love for an illusion over the innocence of your dearest of friends.”

“You misunderstand me,” Seongwoo said, stepping towards Haechan himself.

“I’m not choosing either,” he clarified. “Because I choose both.”

Before Haechan could even put up another argument, Seongwoo had grabbed him by the collar, one shift in position away from a lethal stranglehold.

“You were bluffing,” Seongwoo said. “All this time. Daehwi isn’t with your brother, you’ve got no one at the other end of the line, and my friend is safe and sound somewhere else you aren’t telling me.”

Haechan’s left wrist closed around Seongwoo’s arms, pulling them away from his throat. “You really are smarter than I’ve thought.”

“So tell me where he is,” Seongwoo demanded, hands tightening around Haechan’s collar, eyes staring into his, unafraid. “Or else I’ll finish what I started at the balcony.”

Seongwoo waited for Haechan’s response, counting the seconds until his moment of surrender. It never came. Instead, Haechan’s mouth turned upwards into the semblance of a knowing smile.

“Daehwi might be safe,” Haechan whispered. “But if you move even an inch, then you sure as hell won’t be.”

At that moment, something sharp pressed at Seongwoo’s abdomen, and he didn’t even need to look down for him to know that Haechan had an army knife pressed against his stomach, ready to dig into his vulnerable flesh.

Panic threatened to overtake him all in one instant.

He won’t hesitate to injure me, Seongwoo thought. And I don’t need a ‘tell’ for me to be sure of that.

He loosened his grip on Haechan’s collar.

Think, Ong Seongwoo, he chided himself. When faced with a jester’s coin with heads on both faces, how are you to win if the only way to do that is for the toss to come up tails?

Gears turned in his brain, shafting one by one into place.

Slap the coin away, he thought. And strike a better deal.

“I can’t give away Euigyeon’s location,” Seongwoo insisted, praying for his strategy to work. “But there’s something else that I know you want… and that, I can certainly give you.”

“And what is it that I want?” Haechan asked. “You’ve already refused the one thing I came here to barter for.”

“Chaerin,” Seongwoo said, looking Haechan in the eye, staring into the cesspools of darkness and through to the pitch black inner depths of his soul. “If you want her back I can make it happen.”

Haechan’s arm fell once more to his side, the hand holding the knife moving away from where it pierced at Seongwoo’s side.
“I’ll find her again, and tell her,” Seongwoo continued. “That everything I said back then was a lie, and I was wrong for convincing her to leave. That you’re still waiting for her to return, and all these years you haven’t loved her any less.”

Seongwoo let go of Haechan completely.

“Everything,” Seongwoo assured him. “I’ll tell her everything, and she’ll listen. She always listens. You can have her back, Haechan... The only thing I want in return is for you to stay away from my friends. Hurt me as much as you’d like, but don’t ever touch them.”

Moments passed between them as they stared each other down, neither willing to be the first to yield.

“Your tell,” Haechan observed after a while. “Is not showing.”

“Of course not,” Seongwoo replied. “Because I’m telling the truth.”

Haechan smiled at him then, and this time it reached his eyes.

Somehow, that frightened Seongwoo more than anything else that ever could.

Moments later, Haechan had his phone by his ear, Daehwi’s captor at the other end of the line.

“Pull up the car next to the coffee shop,” he barked. “Ong Seongwoo has come to reclaim his prize.”

He put the phone down, staring forlornly at the shop across the street.

“The Red Camaro,” he said. “That’s where he is.”

Seongwoo moved to bolt out of the court, but Haechan’s voice stopped him mid-motion before he could reach the wire mesh fencing.

“I’m holding you to that promise, Ong Seongwoo,” Haechan said. “Otherwise, my promise to assure the safety of your friends is nulled and voided.”

Seongwoo heaved in a breath. “Count on it,” he said, turning to Haechan. “But don’t expect me to do you any more favors.”

With that, he ran to the other side of the street, heart pounding in his chest as Haechan’s luxury automobile came into view.

Seongwoo knocked impatiently at the windows as the car pulled over in front of him. “Open up!” he yelled. “Hey! Open up!”

An eternity later, the windows slid downwards, and Seongwoo bent himself over to peek into the car interior, eyes roving about in frantic search of Daehwi.

He froze as his eyes landed on someone familiar.

No,
Seongwoo thought. This can’t be happening.

The color drained from his face as he took in the sight of Kim Jaehwan, sitting pale-faced inside of the car and looking positively distraught. Daehwi was resting peacefully on his lap, safe, untouched, and fast asleep.
“Jaehwan-ah,” Seongwoo whispered. “What…what are you doing in here?”

Jaehwan turned to him, the corner of his lips turning upwards in the likeness of a sad, half-hearted smile.

“Hi there, Seongwoo-hyung,” he greeted blankly. “I’ve been expecting you.”

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“Yah, Kim Jaehwan,” Seongwoo said, backing him forcefully against the wall of the Imugi practice room after they managed to make their way back on foot. “Do you have any idea what it is you’ve just done?”

“I was just asked to keep Daehwi company,” Jaehwan said. “Humor him until you came, trick him into thinking nothing was amiss, not answer any calls I or Daehwi might get before he granted us permission to do so.”

“Hyung,” Daehwi began, still lost in the daze subsequent to his mid-morning slumber. “What are you on about, all of a sudden?”

“I’m sorry,” Jaehwan continued. “I had no choice. If I’d refused to do his bidding, he would’ve… he would’ve gotten me kicked out of the school. But I would never have agreed to anything, had I been asked to hurt Daehwi. I swear it. I swear it on my life.”

Jaehwan trembled before Seongwoo visibly as he wrapped both arms around his shoulders for comfort.

“Don’t hurt me,” Jaehwan pleaded. “Please don’t hurt me.”

Seongwoo’s heart broke immediately at the sight of him, followed by an upshot of white-hot fury.

None of this should’ve happened, Seongwoo thought. If only you’d done your part.

He grabbed forcefully at Jaehwan’s shirt, pulling him forwards.

“Seongwoo’ya, don’t—“ Daehwi began, horrified.

Seongwoo watched Jaehwan’s eyes as they squeezed shut, waiting for him to strike.

At that very instant, something wet cascaded down Seongwoo’s cheek, breaking him anew. He wrapped both arms around Jaehwan slowly, rife with repentance and flooded by regret.

“You,” Seongwoo said weakly. “You were right. This is all Haechan’s fault.”

Jaehwan let out an anguished sob, the cry-baby that he was resurfacing upon contact.

“I’m sorry,” Seongwoo said, patting him gently. “For letting a guy like him into our lives. You never… you never should’ve been forced into making that choice.”

He pulled Jaehwan away, settling both hands atop his shoulders in a gesture of comfort, cementing a bond between brothers stronger than discord and tougher than doubt.

“Jaehwan-ah,” he said. “I need you to tell me everything later on, so make sure you leave no detail out, no matter how trivial. It’s important that we get to the bottom of this before more of the
“unthinkable comes into play.”

“Why?” Jaehwan asked. “Has anything else happened while both of us were away?”

Seongwoo nodded, apologetic.

“We’re going to pay Jinyoung a visit at the hospital,” he said, as Daehwi’s jaw dropped to the floor, astonished. “And pray to all the gods that we arrive while he’s unconscious, because otherwise he’s going to roundhouse-kick us into the afterlife for what he believes Daehwi’s been put through.”

Jaehwan sniffled, shuddering at the thought. “Somehow, the idea of that scares me even more than Haechan does.”

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Jinyoung had not, in fact, been unconscious, but at least he’d been preoccupied by his insurance of Daehwi’s welfare, enough for him to pay the rest of them no heed.

“Daehwi-ya, are you alright?” Jinyoung asked, holding onto both of Daehwi’s hands as if for dear life. “I’m so sorry. I should never have left you alone.

He turned to Seongwoo, replete with gratitude. "And thank you hyung, for returning him safely. I've been worried sick without him.”

“Worry about yourself first, Jinyoung-ah,” Daehwi said. “Is your shoulder feeling better? I heard that Taejoon, he…”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jinyoung assured him. “I think I’ve scared Taejoon off for good. Or at least, I hope so.”

Daehwi pouted at him cutely, having forgotten that the rest of them, save for Daniel, were sitting in a semi-circle by Jinyoung’s bedside, unable to divert their attention from the ingratiating exchange unfolding before their very eyes.

“I never knew you were adept at martial arts,” Daehwi continued. “Awareness of that changes things, you know.”

“What difference would it have made?” Jinyoung asked in return.

Daehwi’s cheeks reddened as he smiled at Jinyoung coyly, making Seongwoo wish he could drill an Ong-shaped hole through the wall, so he wouldn’t have to sit through their torturous dialogue for even a moment longer.

*But then again, Seongwoo thought guiltily. Daniel and I have put these two through much the same things, so I should get used to them returning the favor.*

“I would’ve fallen in love with you just a tiny bit faster,” he heard Daehwi say. “So instead of two weeks, it would’ve taken me just one.”

Jinyoung blushed at the remark, his awareness of their onlookers making its untimely return.

“Well now that that’s over,” Seongwoo butt in, attempting to salvage both his dongsaengs from further embarrassment. “I believe we’ve got something to discuss.”

“I don’t understand,” Minhyun spoke up. “How none of our round-table discussions end up having anything even remotely to do with the Idol Project, when that’s the main reason we’ve come together in the first place.”

“Tell me about it,” Sungwoon agreed. “I can’t believe we’ve got another psycho on the loose.”

“What happened, Jaehwan-hyung?” Jihoon asked, concern evident in his tone. “I thought you were out to buy ice cream.”

“I was,” Jaehwan replied. “Though I suppose I should’ve taken the extended route, because I might’ve been able to prevent an encounter with this shady Haechan figure had I done so.”

“Doubt it,” Seongwoo said. “He’d have found a way. But what happened, exactly? And how come you never even put up a fight?”

“He came up to me at random,” Jaehwan explained. “Said he was a cousin of yours. I was perplexed at first, but I never thought to question the claim since you do kind of resemble each other when viewed from certain angles.”

Seongwoo’s eye twitched in irritation. “Except?”

Jaehwan gulped, fearful of Seongwoo’s wrath. “Except his pores are larger, his face oilier, and his nose kind of looks like it’s been stepped on.”

“Perfect,” Seongwoo said. “Carry on.”

“He just went ahead and ordered me around, in short,” Jaehwan continued. “He threatened my scholarship, said I’d lose it if I refused to cooperate. I was skeptic at first, but he had proof of his credentials, so I gave in. I did put up a fight, though… the extent of his influence is just far too frightening.”

“How does Haechan even have the power to threaten you with something like that?” Seongwoo asked. “Your scholarship has nothing to do with him.”

“It’s state-sanctioned, isn’t it, hyung?” Daehwi asked, turning to Jaehwan. “If Haechan happens to have powerful enough connections, he can tamper with your records as he pleases.”

“So he really does have the power,” Kuanlin said. “Or am I missing something here?”

“He doesn’t,” Seongwoo clarified. “But his father sure does. He’s the mayor of Seoul.”

“Great,” Jaehwan grunted, throwing both hands up into the air. “Now we know I really could’ve kicked the bucket and lost everything if I’d resisted him.”

“Somehow, all this feels suspiciously like a ploy to tear us apart by introducing animosity between us,” Minhyun said, approaching Haechan’s thought-process analytically. “Because if we’re already resentful of each other… how could we ever hope to debut on the same stage?”

Jaehwan agreed. “And ruining our dreams is tantamount to ruining us, if that’s what he’s after.”

A grave silence passed between them, an air of peril thick in the air.

“Are you alright?” Jisung asked then, motherly instincts kicking in as he refocused his attention on
Daehwi. “Daehwi-ya, your hands are shaking.”

“I’m not used to getting kidnapped,” Daehwi confessed, clamping both hands together. “Only statues stay perfectly still, given the circumstances.”

“Look on the bright side,” Jaehwan offered feebly, trying to lighten the dispiriting mood. “At least your kidnapper wouldn’t have sold you into human trafficking. The only thing I would’ve done was sing you another lullaby since you kept asking for it in your sleep.”

“Hyung,” Daehwi said, staring daggers at him. “You’d best hope this hand of mine doesn’t shake violently enough for it to slap you by accident.”

“Trust me, Jaehwan-hyung,” Woojin whispered. “If he does manage to slap you, the last thing it will have been is an accident.”

“On second thought,” Jaehwan whispered back. “I think he was asking me to sing him some Beyoncé.”


“Well then,” Minhyun said, pretending not to hear the brainless conversation Jaehwan and Woojin were having. “Now that we’ve established that we aren’t going to wrestle the living daylights out of each other for putting Daehwi through such a thing, do any of you have any bright ideas as to how we might deal with Haechan if he tries to mess with us again? Because he will, and I’m calling it this early.”

“If only we could look into Haechan’s family background…” Jinyoung muttered. “I’m sure we’d manage to find some damning evidence to rile him up, enough for him to know we aren’t to be trifled with.”

“The only sufficient form of punishment I can think of is having him locked up,” Seongwoo admitted. “If not in an asylum, then prison.”

“Sounds to me as if you want the authorities involved in this,” Sungwoon remarked. “And that sounds like a stupid idea.”

Seongwoo shrugged, entirely unconcerned. “If the idea wasn’t stupid, then the idea wasn’t mine.”

“As much as I’d love to peg Haechan a delinquent in the eyes of society,” Daehwi argued then. “We’re just kids, and we’ve got neither the time not the research to dig-up critical information on the matter.”

“And if we get ourselves involved in anything even mildly scandalous,” Minhyun added. “We might as well kiss our idol dreams goodbye. So nope, I’m not tainting my pristine reputation for this, and neither should the rest of you. Haechan isn’t worth it; there must be another way.”

“I think I might know of one,” Kuanlin piped in, turning heads as he spoke. “Though it requires help from someone you guys might not like, either.”

“I already know where this is going,” Jihoon mumbled. “And loathe as I am to admit, Kuanlin’s plan might be our saving grace.”

“Well,” Kuanlin said, looking to each of them in turns. “If none of us are willing to get our hands dirty, then we’ve no choice but to relegate the task to an outsider.”
“I hope you’ve got someone trustworthy in mind, at least?” Jinyoung asked, hopeful. “If we’re dealing with another thug here, I’m not getting myself hospitalized a second time. The food at this place is insipid, and tastes suspiciously like Daniel-hyung’s cooking.”

“Does it?” Seongwoo asked, genuinely concerned. “Then we should get you discharged before you fall sick of the flu.”

“And I trust this person with my life,” Kuanlin assured him. “Quite literally. But I don’t think you guys liked him very much, and first impressions do matter most of the time.”

“Are his consultations free-of-charge, at least?” Seongwoo inquired. “Because if they aren’t, you guys’ll have to wait until I win the lottery.”

“Not usually, no,” Kuanlin shook his head. “But I’m sure we can all agree that this isn’t a case the word ‘usually’ applies to.”

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Seongwoo found their bedroom empty once he returned already late into the night.

He’d been expecting Daniel, and this worried him as he’d been redirected to voicemail every time he attempted to establish contact with his roommate.

“Don’t tell me,” Seongwoo murmured to himself. “He isn’t in any sort of danger, is he?”

Seongwoo patted at himself frantically in an effort to locate his phone, whether he’d kept it in the pocket of his jeans or his jacket. Once he managed to find the device, he scrambled to unlock it, tapping nimbly onto the screen to dial Jisung’s number.

“Pick up,” he whispered, hands clamping up. “Pick up, hyung.”

“The number you have dialled is either unattended or out of coverage area. Please—“

Seongwoo dropped the call immediately, then attempted a redial. “Why is everyone shutting me out lately? This is getting bothersome.”

“Seongwoo?” a voice spoke up behind him, startling him enough for him to drop his phone, had his reflexes not been snappy enough. He looked over his shoulder, finding Daniel standing there in outdoor clothing, wondering what in the world he’d been up to.

Daniel cast him a troubled look. “Were you talking to someone? It sounds like you just—“

Daniel paused mid-sentence, gasping audibly as Seongwoo wrapped him in an ardent embrace.

“Oh thank god,” Seongwoo exclaimed. “I thought you’d gone missing.”

“Why…” Daniel began. “Why on earth would that happen? I was out, Seongwoo-ya. I had dinner with a friend of mine, and I texted you this, too.”

Seongwoo pushed away, looking into both of Daniel’s eyes, still searching them for any signs of distress.

I’m overreacting, he thought. And there really is no helping it.
“A friend?” he asked carefully.

“Nothing special though,” Daniel backtracked. “We weren’t out on a date, or anything. And he’s already engaged so—“

“Daniel,” Seongwoo interrupted. “There’s no need for an explanation. I’ve got no right to be mad at you, even if you have been dating around behind my back. We aren’t boyfriends, after all.”

“R-right,” Daniel stammered, turning shamefully away. “I wasn’t trying to… I just…”

“Just?” Seongwoo pressed.


A breathless laugh escaped Seongwoo.

“Yeah,” he said, leaning in to press a soft kiss against the side of Daniel’s mouth. “I missed you too.”

Daniel frowned, cheeks aflame as they were for most of his presence in Seongwoo’s company. “You missed.”

Seongwoo offered Daniel another kiss, this time full upon his soft, reddened lips. “Happy now?”

“I think I’ve gone crazy,” Daniel said, eyes squeezing forcibly shut. “What have you done to me?”

“And what have you been drinking?” Seongwoo asked, licking his lips. “You taste kind of funny.”

Daniel’s nose turned up, insulted. “Champagne,” he said. “My friend’s kind of fancy. And so was our dinner.”

“Well, I prefer the natural strawberry taste of you,” Seongwoo remarked. “Much, much sweeter that way.”

Daniel rolled his eyes in exasperation. “It’s a one-time thing, you Ongcheongie.”

At the sound of his former nickname on Daniel’s lips, Seongwoo’s riotous heart hammered noisily in his chest, a powerful reminder of Haechan’s earlier exposition.

All this time he’d thought Euigyeon dead.

At least on that front, Haechan had said to him. You are terribly mistaken.

Seongwoo looked into Daniel’s eyes, into the depths of them where his darkest, most costly secrets were hidden.

These eyes, Seongwoo thought. Haven’t I seen them before?

In days gone by.

Within memories from long, long ago.

Seongwoo’s hands fell to his sides, bereft of feeling. Why not me, Kang Daniel?

Who you are, and what your intentions might be?

He closed his eyes, pain blooming in his chest and his temple. Why ask me to fall in love with a
“Daniel,” Seongwoo whispered. “If you never liked me just say it. I don’t want your honey-sweet kisses if they’re poisoned with lies.”

He closed his eyes for a long moment, waiting for an answer he both yearned for and feared.

“But if your lips speak the truth,” he continued. “No matter how harsh, its release will be the sweetest thing I’ll ever have tasted.”

So tell me already, he thought, reaching out for the warmth of his lover, pain and longing shooting through him as the skin of Daniel’s fingers seared through his own. Tell me Kang Daniel, or Kang Euigyeon, or whatever it is that your name might have been.

Is it you?

The love of my life back from the dead?

“Yes,” Daniel whispered back, stunning both Seongwoo’s mind and heart into silence. “Whatever it is that you’re thinking of asking me, the answer is yes.”

Seongwoo reopened his eyes, the sight of Daniel blurring at the seams as tears clouded his unsteady vision.

You have no ‘tell’, Kang Daniel, he thought. And I shall never know until you find it in your heart to say what it is that I so long to hear.

“You must have a reason,” Seongwoo said, aware of how Daniel looked at him utterly bewildered, as if he’d been speaking either in riddles, or in a language he neither learned nor knew existed. “You must have a reason for keeping your secrets.”

And for ten years, I kept mine, Seongwoo reminded himself. What right have I to resent you for keeping yours?

“Are you mad at me, Ong Seongwoo?” Daniel asked him. “You’re looking kind of displeased, for some odd reason. Was it… was it because I didn’t arrive in time for dinner?”

Seongwoo shook his head.

“Do you think I’m a monster, Daniel-ah?” he asked out of blue. “Because of all those things I put Euigyeon through.”

A rush of panic and consternation passed through Daniel’s features for a brief, almost delusory moment.

After a long while, Daniel shook his head in return, taking hold of both of Seongwoo’s hands, leading him towards the bedroom.

“Sometimes,” Daniel began, sitting himself at the edge of Seongwoo’s bed, right next to his stack of pillows. “Even those with the best of intentions are made out to be monsters by men.”

He pulled at Seongwoo’s arms, who followed suit not long thereafter. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Remember how the old story goes?” Daniel asked. “Once upon a time, a friendly old dragon hunkered through the village, searching each cottage for children to play with, little adventurers to
keep him company, to ride upon his back as he soared amongst the stars. Soon enough, however, the townsfolk mistook his intentions for malice, thinking he’d come to raze their village to the ground. So they cried ‘Monster!’ and came at the dragon, one pitchfork after another, unaware of the malevolent presence lurking behind them as he hid himself soundly in the shadows."

Seongwoo smiled to himself then, understanding dawning on him completely. “So that’s how the story went. Now I know why Haechan’s version of the tale sounded iffy.”

“Haechan?” Daniel repeated, aghast. “You met him?”

“Long story,” Seongwoo said, lying down sluggishly on his bed, patting at his right arm for Daniel to know where he should rest his head.

"Anyway," Daniel continued. "Being a monster and being misunderstood are two very different things. And that’s why I wish you’d stop blaming yourself already. And as for Euigyeon... I’m sure he’s already long since forgiven you."

Seongwoo smiled, letting the weight of Daniel's words settle his heart into soundless tranquility.

“Remember how you asked me a while ago if I was mad at you?” Seongwoo asked him, once they’d been positioned comfortably.

Daniel nodded, biting his lip nervously. Seongwoo watched almost distractedly as he did so, wanting nothing more than to claim Daniel’s lips for another moment, and his body for the rest of the night.

“I love you too much for that,” he whispered. “Far too much.”

Daniel blinked at him, unsure of what he’d just heard. “Did… did you say something?”

“I said I love you,” Seongwoo repeated, much louder this time. “As lovers, as friends, I don’t know, but I love you.”

Daniel looked at him then, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“Ong Seongwoo,” he said. “You… you really are…”

“An idiot?” Seongwoo offered.

Daniel shook his head slowly, and for the thousandth time over, Seongwoo found himself falling head over heels in love.

“You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me in a long while,” he whispered. “And I… I think I’d really hate to lose you to anyone. Even to Kang Euigyeon.”

The sound of Seongwoo’s laughter filled the air, followed the next moment by Daniel’s as he joined in, the both of them lying still in each other’s arms, with not a care in the world for anyone else but each other.

“Stay with me,” Daniel whispered. “At least until morning.”

“I will,” Seongwoo assured him, pressing a loving kiss onto his forehead. “Until morning, until night… until you ask me to leave because you’ve tired of my company.”

*Until the end,* he thought. *Always.*
Daniel was sound asleep when Jung Wooseok finally picked up the phone.

“Ong Seongwoo,” Wooseok spoke up. “I’ve been expecting a call from you.”

“Or so I’ve heard,” Seongwoo said. “Kuanlin tells me he’s asked for correspondence between us as repayment for your earlier scuffle with Jihoon.”

“True enough,” Wooseok said. “Though I’d never agree to this insanity if not for the chance to regain the young master’s favour. And neither would I pick up the phone, because in case you haven’t noticed, it’s four in the goddamn morning.”

“Sorry about that,” Seongwoo said rather sheepishly. “But something’s come up, and it would kill me to have to wait until dawn.”

“Fair enough. Now spill.”

“What have you got on Go Junho?”

“The mayor of Seoul, you mean?” Wooseok asked. “Or the unlucky bastard misfortunate enough to share his name?”

“The mayor of Seoul,” Seongwoo confirmed. “And Go Haechan’s father. I just want the details. In terms of his transaction history, political alliances, anything that might prove he’s got a tainted record.”

To rid yourself of the weed, Seongwoo thought. You’ve got to pull at it from the very root.

From its very foundation of existence.

And that, to Go Haechan, is his corrupt, contriving father.

“At the moment?” Wooseok responded after a long moment. “I’ve got zilch. But nothing that can’t be remedied by a little more research through sub-legal networks.”

Seongwoo gulped nervously. “Sub-legal?”

“Yeah. In other words, permissible through loopholes around the law, but very much illegal otherwise.”

“Got it,” Seongwoo said. “Not like I’ve ever cared about breaking the law.”

“I sure do hope you didn’t mean that,” Wooseok said. “Because I am still a detective, and I’ve got the license to interrogate you as I please once all this fanfare is over and done with.”

“Thanks for the gentle reminder,” Seongwoo said. “Though I only said as much in order to keep myself from quaking in my bedroom slippers.”

“Alright then,” Wooseok said. “While I process that monumental request... Anyone else you’d love to see behind bars?”

“Not exactly,” Seongwoo added, despising himself for what he was about to say next. “But I do need info on someone else’s whereabouts.”
Seongwoo could almost hear Wooseok chuckling over the phone in excitement. “Interesting. And the name is?”

“The name,” Seongwoo said, turning the key to a lethal padlock before he had the chance to re-evaluate his decision. “Is Song Chaerin.”

“Got it. This a friend of yours?” Wooseok inquired. “Because if she is, I doubt that a request to have her professionally investigated is a particularly friendly gesture.”

“Are you kidding me?” Seongwoo said. “She and I are the farthest you can get from being friends.”

He closed his eyes, shuddering at the memory of how he and Chaerin locked lips before they parted ways for what he’d thought, at the time, was forever.

That girl, he thought to himself. Is no friend of mine.

“Because if you think that Go Haechan’s a psycho,” Seongwoo muttered. “Then just wait until you’ve met his ex-girlfriend.”

~ONGNIEL 5 END~
But I hope you liked this chapter, even if it's messy and only half of it really has to do with Ongniel being sweet together, which I'm sure is what most of you came for xD And for the lack of fluff, I’ll make up for it next chapter with the Panwink date, and Wanna One being extra as they choose the song they’ll be performing first (any guesses? Lol) And I hope you don't mind me inserting Ong’s underrated bromances (Onglin, Ongwink, Onghwi, Onghwan, etc.) because he is SUCH a good hyung to all of them <3 And I apologize because I know this took so long to write, though I really only started around four days ago because that’s when classes ended for me. I actually managed to successfully defend my thesis (YAY!) and only have one semester of college left before the ‘real world’ awaits. So since the holidays are upon us… more writing time for me!!! (Hopefully, unless I get super distracted by k-dramas and Wanna One variety shows lol).

And thank you for sticking around despite the wait! I really hope this chapter was worth it :) See you guys next time, and I appreciate every single one of you~

P.S. Regarding Ongniel's 'first time'... it happened in Daniel's last chapter haha I just didn't write it in, because this ain't no smut fic xD But yes. They've already done it. (once lol)
After spending most of his down time in Park Jihoon’s company, Kuanlin finally managed to convince himself that Jihoon’s grumbly, uproarious stomach was in fact alive and had a mind of its own.

Not only could it rumble loud enough for him to locate a hungry Jihoon from miles away, but it also had an uncanny, and rather unnerving ability to growl at him exactly at noon, as if to demand a proper refill after having been left empty one second too long.

“Can’t we go out there, just for a while?” Jihoon asked, peeping gingerly through the keyhole. “I doubt it’d hurt to snap a picture or two.”

“I can’t let you do that, hyung,” Kuanlin exclaimed, pulling Jihoon by the waist and away from the door. “Remember what happened when I gave in last time? A single picture turned into fifty, and I almost had to cart you out of there myself before either of us could get stampeded.”

“But I’m famished,” Jihoon whined. “And I could almost compose a full-length song with all these peculiar noises my tummy’s been making.”

“Didn’t you order double helpings of Jisung-hyung’s breakfast special, this morning?” Jinyoung asked. “The ‘Park Jihoon is a Pancake Monster’ one. Where’d all of that go?”

“Down the toilet,” Jihoon deadpanned. “I may have ordered one milk drink too many.”

“You have?” Jinyoung asked, lousily pretending as if he’d gotten surprised. “Well, that’s surprising. Would never have expected that at all.”

“Jihoon does love his food,” Daehwi added, not bothering to ride in with Jinyoung’s self-evident display of flat-out contempt. “More than anything.”

“Hey!” Jihoon retorted. “Now that just isn’t true.”

“Oh right,” Daehwi backtracked. “My bad. There is one thing you love more than food.”

“You’re about to say ‘free food’ aren’t you?” Jihoon huffed irately. “What else is there?”

“I was about to say Kuanlin,” Daehwi teased. “But I guess free food, works too.”

Jihoon blushed palpably at the mention of Kuanlin’s name, performing the world’s fastest about-face in the other direction. “What… what is that supposed to mean…”

“It means what it means,” Jinyoung said. “That you’re in love with our dearest maknae, and you’ve lost enough sleep in fretting over your first date, that you’ve gone and developed those dreadful under-eye bags that kind of make you look like the embodiment of an eternally pissed-off raccoon.”

“And that was the lengthiest run-on sentence I’ve ever heard,” Jihoon muttered under his breath. “Thanks, Jinyoung-ah. I love how you point out my flaws at random, for god knows what reason.”

Jinyoung simpered at him, utterly pleased with himself. “Well, we certainly aren’t best friends for
nothing."

As Kuanlin observed their easy banter, and the way Daehwi giggled along with their tongue-in-cheek antics, he couldn’t help but feel as if something had changed in their overall dynamic. The suffocating tension that accompanied every discussion on severed friendships, romantic exploits, and troubled times gone by, had begun to make way for an atmosphere of ease and familiarity, as if the walls they’d built around each other had fissured and dismantled into sand underfoot.

But a part of Kuanlin knew the euphoria would all but last forever, so he held staunchly onto each blissful moment and every precious memory, praying with all his might for their friendship to stay alive.

“Alright then,” Minhyun spoke up, delivering Kuanlin from his momentary head trip. “So we’ve established the, uhm… relevant fact that Jihoon can’t live without his hourly snack break, and now that it’s been almost an hour since we got here, he’s about to go through food-shortage withdrawals in seventeen minutes tops. But I digress. We’ve got to do something about that bloody performance song.”

“This was a lot harder than I thought,” Jaehwan pointed out. “How have we managed to come up with zero title track alternatives over a forty-three minute time span?”

“Who knows,” Sungwoon said, breathing in a sigh of despair. “I chalk it up to our unparalleled teamwork.”

“It’s because we haven’t eaten,” Jihoon insisted. “I’m almost sure of it.”

“Instead of suggesting songs right off the bat,” Daniel advised, his inner Council President kicking in temporarily. “Why not brainstorm on possible concepts first? It’s easier to narrow down a list of alternatives once we’ve settled once and for all upon a singular type of sound.”

He looked around the room, waiting for any one of them to step up with a recommendation. Kuanlin watched as Daniel’s eyes rested for a moment upon Ha Sungwoon, nudging him slightly to urge him on.

Sungwoon ignored Kuanlin’s ceaseless jabbing against his side, turning instead to the person sitting by his immediate line of sight. “Any bright ideas, Seongwoo-ya?”

Seongwoo pointed to himself, baffled by Sungwoon’s unforeseen call-out.

“I, uhm… well. A flower boy concept, maybe?” he suggested.

Kuanlin grimaced, unable to picture an innocent, boyish Seongwoo without wanting to throw the concept out the window.

“I don’t think either of us fit in with that,” Daniel retorted, reinforcing Kuanlin’s internal monologue. “You more than anyone.”

“Then a sexy concept?” Seongwoo proposed, taking Daniel’s concerns into heartfelt consideration. Daniel shook his head, pointing in Kuanlin, Jihoon, Jinyoung, Daehwi and Woojin’s general direction. “I’d be up for it, but these five are underage,” he explained. “And Jisung-hyung will kill me if I let this slip. You know how protective mother hen is of his babies.”

Creases appeared along Seongwoo’s forehead, and Kuanlin could tell from where he was seated that Seongwoo was starting to get a little agitated. “Then how about a fresh, summery concept?”
“Sure but… it’s almost winter in Korea,” Daniel reminded him. “Anything less… *seasonal*, perhaps?”


“YES!” Daehwi chimed in, brimming with excitement. “I like that idea.”

Daniel shook his head furiously to either side. “No, Daehwi-ya. I’m not ready to trade in the final shred of my respectability for an A-1 performance that’s *sure* to get us trending on every Korean news outlet out there.”

“And not necessarily for good reason,” Woojin shivered. “You up for a girl group concept, Kuanlin-ah?”

Kuanlin blinked at Woojin, dismally unprepared. “Were you, uh… asking to see my *aegyo*?”

“Nevermind,” Woojin said. “If it’s as embarrassing as Minhyun-hyung’s, then no. I’m supremely disinterested in volunteering to put myself through that variant of torture.”

“Anything else you might have up that sleeve?” Sungwoon asked, turning to Seongwoo for further help. “Sorry, my mind’s been emptied of anything that doesn’t remotely involve figuring out the exact coordinates of Jisung’s location. He should’ve arrived here ten minutes ago.”

“Bad boy concept.” Seongwoo forged on.

“Over-used,” Daniel said, shutting the suggestion down immediately. “Next.”

“Melodramatic concept.”

“Too early.”

“Playful concept.”

“Too safe.”

“Dance concept.”

“Too risky.”

“Billionaire hot daddy concept.”

“I…what?”

“Daniel-is-annoying-and-unhelpful concept.”

“What, why’s that?” Daniel exclaimed, utterly offended. “How is it my fault that your ideas are twice as lame as you are?”

“Did someone say ‘Twice’?” Daehwi interjected. “Because I’d love to perform a cover of——“

“Daehwi, darling,” Sungwoon interrupted, caressing the back of Daehwi’s head much too forceful for a gesture so affectionate. “You’re amazing, and I love you, truly, but the rest of us aren’t sassy enough to pull off such thing.”

“Yeah,” Woojin agreed. “And can you imagine these guys dancing to *Signal*?” he cocked his head towards Kuanlin, Jinyoung, and Minhyun, the agreed-upon holy trinity of masculine charm. “The
thought alone is enough for me to lose my appetite, and I am not about that life. Not until Jisung-hyung arrives here with food in tow.”

“That’s it,” Jihoon said, getting on his feet before any of them could scramble after him. “I want my food, and if that means I’d have to run out there and—“

At that precise moment, the door to the Imugi practice room burst open, the ten of them waiting with bated breaths for whoever it was that might’ve been making his way through that entrance.

Jisung’s head poked out from behind it as he shuffled hastily into the room, escorted by a much taller, lankier, and notably more baby-faced high-school student. Both of them settled heavy paper bags onto the floor, looking as if they’d managed to only just narrowly escape from a riot.

“I don’t understand,” Jisung mumbled to himself. “How can I keep this place up and running, if customers would rather pay for my autograph than my café cuisine?”

“Is that food?” Jihoon inquired, eyeing the contents of Jisung’s paper bag expectantly.

The scent of stir-fried pork and sautéed vegetables wafted lightly through the air, making even Kuanlin’s mouth water as it hungered for food.

“Wait a minute,” Minhyun spoke up, gaze drifting to the student Jisung had come with. The guy in question was crouched by the floor next to Kuanlin, extracting microwavable lunchboxes from the paper bag he’d brought in himself. Their eyes met for a brief moment, his face breaking into a hauntingly familiar smile.

Where have I seen this guy before? He thought for a moment.

Oh, yeah. I think I’ve seen him in the mirror.

“Is this your twin?” Jaehwan asked, perplexed. “Or is my vision trippy, for some odd reason? I think I’m seeing double.”

“What are you doing in here?” Minhyun demanded. “Seonho-ya, you can’t just walk in on other groups in the middle of practice!”

“We were in the middle of practice?” Woojin asked. “Funny, just a while ago we were in the middle of staring blankly into space as a form of recreation.”

“Sorry about that,” Seonho apologized. “But I’d been informed of Jisung-hyung’s need for a little assistance, since he’s much too skinny to lug around eleven sets of packed bokkeum before his arms tragically detach themselves from the rest of his torso.”

“Sounds painful,” Daehwi frowned. “But aren’t you the guy Kuanlin had his interview with?”

“Oh, it’s you!” Kuanlin exclaimed, having managed to recall his first meeting with Seonho thanks to Daehwi’s superior facial recognition capabilities. “That’s why you looked strangely familiar.”

Seonho’s face had been ridden with layers upon layers of makeup back then, so Kuanlin had to do a double-take before fully recognizing Seonho’s bare, unmade-up countenance.

“You remember me, huh?” Seonho beamed, offering Kuanlin a bro-fist and a shoulder bump. “I remember you! You’re that swaggy rapper friend of exotic overseas origins.”

Seonho threw himself into Kuanlin’s arms then, pulling him into a stifling hug. “How’ve you
Kuanlin’s hands floated in mid-air for an awkward moment, wondering whether or not to return the intimate gesture.

A sinister, Jihoon-shaped aura emanated powerfully from behind him, his hands falling to his sides in one swift, hypersonic motion. “Hi. I’ve been fine, Seonho-ya. Our team effort’s been stellar lately, and that’s why we’ve yet to make even the slightest bit of progress since we got here.”

“Aww, how come?” Seonho asked, releasing Kuanlin from his death hug. “You need help somewhere?”

“What, no,” Minhyun exclaimed, horrified. “You’re part of a rival group, so we can’t have you polluting our concept pool this early on.”

“Let’s hear him out, hyung,” Woojin suggested. “Why turn down voluntary information?”

“I think not,” Jihoon quipped. “Something tells me this guy’s repertoire warrants a host of ideas we’d rather not hear.”

“That’s not true,” Seonho argued, indignant. “You’re looking for a concept unique enough to captivate the audience, am I right? Then what about something never-before seen onstage, in the entirety of idol-search history?”

“There’s no such thing,” Jaehwan countered. “The record of this industry’s gotten pretty much every genre covered from start to finish.”

“I can think of one you might never have considered,” Seonho said, eyebrows wiggling at them playfully.

“And what is that?” Kuanlin asked him, genuinely eager to find out.

“Nursery rhymes,” Seonho declared. “In animal onesie outfits.”

“RED ALERT,” Daniel exclaimed, fighting to be heard through the collective groaning. “This guy’s even worse than you are, Hong Seongwoo.”

“Thanks,” Seongwoo replied. “I don’t mind being dethroned in that regard, to be honest.”

“If you think your idea’s so brilliant,” Woojin said. “Then perform a sample nursery rhyme for us so we know what sort of madness it is that you’re going for.”

“You might be surprised,” Seonho said, chest puffing out in a bold display of self-assurance. “At how stunningly breath-taking my performance will be for you.”

“Yeah sure,” Woojin said, skeptical to the very last bone. “I’m listening.”

Seonho fixed himself into a standing position, limbs outstretched. He sucked in a deep breath, and Kuanlin watched on in anticipation as Seonho’s sugar-sweet singing voice echoed throughout the practice room.

“Cluck cluck yellow chick,” Seonho began, dancing around with both hands against his waist, as if to emulate the clucking movements of Seonho-sized poultry. “Moo moo brown calf, bang bang bang bang hunter, quack quack quack quack white duck.”

Kuanlin’s mouth flew open, slack-jawed in awe.
“Ribbit ribbit green frog, pin pin pin pin lobster, prrrr water grass… dadadada shell!”

A wave of silence overtook the room, every single member of Seonho’s unsuspecting audience rendered speechless by his startling performance.

The thunderous sound of Jisung’s heavy applause broke through the awkward reticence, shaking Kuanlin out of his stupor.

“Wonderful, Seonho-ya!” he cheered. “Thank you for the modernized rendition of ppiyak ppiyak byeongari. Let’s never do that again, shall we? Now then, why don’t we all go ahead and unpack this bokkeum so we can finally have our mealtime together?”

“Ehem,” Jaehwan coughed, gesturing slightly towards Jihoon sitting quietly to the side, already stuffing his face with absurd helpings of pork belly and rice.

“YAH, PARK JIHOON!” Jisung screeched. “You can’t cheat like that and have your lunch before the rest of us!”

“I’m sorry,” Jihoon shrugged. “But you can’t have expected me to just sit around in the presence of such sweet-smelling meat. Besides, it’s worked to my favour in the end, since I was much too distracted by the tenderloin to pay any heed to that aegyo shitstorm.”

“Hyung,” Seonho called out, leaning in slightly towards Kuanlin to whisper rather indiscreetly into his ear. “I think he doesn’t like me very much. Why’s that?”

“Don’t worry,” Kuanlin said, watching and waiting his turn as Jisung distributed the lunchboxes around. “The brightness of Jihoon-hyung’s mood is directly proportional to the fullness of his stomach, so judging by the rate at which he tears through that pork… I wager he’ll return to his cheerier self in no time.”

“Is that so?” Seonho said, beaming at Kuanlin. “I thought it might’ve been because he’s envious of how chummy we’re being at the moment.”

“Well, aren’t you the intuitive one?” Jinyoung said, grinning proudly at Seonho. “I like you already, kid.”

He reached out to pat Seonho’s head, but Daehwi intercepted him midway, pulling at his arm to divert it’s movement towards his own mop of hair.

“No,” Daehwi said, pouting angrily. “I go first.”

Jinyoung broke into a pleasant smile, patting Daehwi’s head affectionately. “Guess you take after Jihoon-hyung’s jealous streak, too.”

“Here you go,” Woojin said, holding out the bokkeum Jisung had asked him to apportion to each of his dongsaengs. He turned to Seonho, giving him a quick once-over. “And you, kid, haven’t you eaten?”

“I have,” Seonho assured him. “And though I wish I could stay a while, I’ve got somewhere else to be in a few minutes.”

“Is it practice?” Jaehwan inquired. “Have you picked out a song?”

“We sure have!” Seonho grinned, flashing Jaehwan a thumbs-up in a gesture of affirmation. “I guess now, the only thing that’s left for us to do is to hash out the finer details and schedule a
consultation with NU’EST W.”

“You’re under them too, huh?” Minhyun said, a melancholy smile passing through his features. “Have fun with that, then.”

“I still wish you could’ve debuted with them, hyung,” Seonho said, sadly. “Though I’m sure you’ll find a new home in this group, too.”

“We’ve got a lot left to work on,” Minhyun replied. “Beginning with not wasting an hours’ worth of practice on useless chatter.”

“Don’t worry,” Seonho assured him. “I’m sure one of you will come across a stroke of genius soon enough. And when that happens…” Seonho trailed off, breaking slowly into an excited grin. “I guess I’ll just have to wait and see the magic happen once the show hits the road.”

“Where are you off to, next?” Kuanlin asked, digging earnestly into a slice of pork. “Am I allowed to pay you a visit?”

“Sure,” Seonho said. “Justin and Jungjung-hyung have been dying to meet you.” His gaze slid sideways to where Jihoon was seated, eyeing him warily. “Though I don’t suppose he’d be against the suggestion.”

Kuanlin smiled, wrapping an arm around Jihoon’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, he won’t mind. Aren’t I right, hyung?”

Jihoon nodded subconsciously, as he’d wiped his lunchbox clean of Jisung’s exquisite cooking and had wasted no time in moving on to dessert. Kuanlin stared in wordless fascination at Jihoon’s mouth as it bit restlessly into his chocolate bar, the sticky caramel thinning out like taffy as Jihoon pulled at the snack with his teeth. Some of it had gotten stuck by the side of his chin, and before Kuanlin could even take full control of his own body, it had already moved of its own shameless volition to lick away the chocolate dotting Jihoon’s face.

In record time, Jihoon’s face reddened into a vibrant, russet color, his motor functions failing him momentarily as he dropped the bar of chocolate in both hands. Kuanlin’s hand reflexively extended outwards, nabbing the snack by its wrapper before it could hit the dusty floor.

Jisung gaped at the pair of them, floored by the emboldened gesture.

“Where… where’d you learn that from?” he demanded, scouring the room for any signs of liability. His eyes landed upon Seongwoo, narrowing dangerously into slits. “This is your fault, isn’t it?”

“I’ve got nothing to do with any of this,” Seongwoo countered. “Though I could probably learn a thing or two from him, now that you’ve mentioned it.”

Kuanlin smiled, watching in amusement as they quibbled restlessly over minor details.

He looked to Jihoon, who was staring blankly at the piece of floor between his legs. Kuanlin reached out to stroke his cheek affectionately, turning Jihoon’s head slightly at the chin as he spoke.

“You won’t look at me, hyung,” Kuanlin observed. “Are you mad?”

Jihoon shook his head, reaching for the hand Kuanlin touched him with. He yanked at it lightly for it to rest upon his lap, interlacing their fingers in slow, deliberate motions until Kuanlin could
almost feel how Jihoon trembled as soft, feverish skin brushed tenderly against his own.

“I’ve no idea,” Jihoon whispered. “How much more of this I can handle.”

“That’s Jihoon’s way of saying he’s weak against your flirtatious advances,” Jinyoung whispered, leaning in slightly. “So take it easy, big guy. Or else he’ll burst at the seams and splatter all over you.”

“Why did that sound so sexual?” Seongwoo said, a hand clasping around his mouth.

Jinyoung glared at him, scandalized. “It was a metaphor, not an innuendo!”

“Don’t listen to him,” Daniel said, bonking Seongwoo lightly upside the head. “He thinks the upwards curvature of bananas are sexual.”

“Okay, we’re done here,” Jisung announced. “Seonho-ya, you’d better leave this place right this instant. We can’t have these guys tainting your soul when it’s as pure as driven snow.”

“Got it,” Seonho said, already blushing at the ears. “I’ll see you when I see you!”

He made haste for the door, shuffling towards the exit as fast as his limbs could carry him.

“Will he be okay, out there?” Jaehwan wondered. “Ah, well. Guess we’ll find out in a week’s time.”

“That Seonho guy,” Woojin spoke up. “was disgustingly cute. I want to adopt him and feed him sweets until he’s fat and happy.”

Jisung rolled his eyes. “Hate to break it to you, but I’m pretty sure babies can’t raise other babies.”

“Okay then,” Woojin said, retracting his statement. “I’ll wait two years, then.”

“I don’t get it,” Kuanlin remarked, his head tilting slightly to the side in perfect mimicry of Daehwi’s puppy-dog gesture. “You’re turning twenty in four months. Why wait two years?”

“I’m waiting,” Woojin shrugged. “For a stable career with health insurance benefits.”

Oh,” Kuanlin said, nodding in approval. “Responsible parenting. I like that.”

Jihoon groaned, burying his head in the palms of both hands. “You aren’t planning on entertaining Woojin’s useless drivel, are you?”

“Why not?” Kuanlin shrugged. “Woojin-hyung’s fun to be around. His humor’s grown on me, too.”

“His humor,” Jihoon argued. “Is broken beyond feasible repair.”

Woojin snorted. “And Jihoon’s humor is but a figment of the imagination.”

“Sometimes, I think,” Jihoon complained. “You were put in my life for the sole purpose of testing my patience.”

“Aww, is this the part where you say you like me, anyway?” Woojin asked, batting his eyelashes and shoving Jihoon to the side with his elbow, until Jihoon toppled off-kilter and into Kuanlin’s waiting arms. “I like you too, you dumbass.”
“Ugh,” Jihoon grunted, nose turning up in mock disgust as he struggled to regain his balance. “In your dreams, lover boy.”

At that precise instance, a lightbulb moment hit Kuanlin, sure as lightning. He turned to Jihoon still floundering about in his arms like a fish out of water, pushing him slightly away to help him back into his earlier position.

“That’s it,” he exclaimed. “That’s exactly it!”

“What’s ‘it’?” Daehwi asked, perplexed. “Have you managed to come up with something?”

“Yeah,” Kuanlin nodded eagerly. “I think I’ve found the perfect concept, thanks to Jihoon-hyung.”

He smothered Jihoon in as tight a hug as he could muster. “Thank you, hyung. You’re the absolute best.”

Jihoon tapped at his shoulder in frenzied motions, his beating heart pounding heavily against Kuanlin’s chest as he gasped for air.


Kuanlin released Jihoon then, apologetic. “Sorry, hyung. I got excited.”

“So you’ve figured it out, huh?” Seongwoo exclaimed, beaming at him. “You’re a genius, Kuanlin-ah!”

Daniel turned to Seongwoo, his expression anywhere between wanting to toss him out the back door and kissing him until he ran out of breath. “How can you say that, you Ongcheongie? We haven’t even heard the idea.”

Seongwoo shrugged animatedly. “You really think he could come up with anything worse than my lame-ass suggestions?”

Daniel stared at him for a solid ten seconds. “You’re a genius Kuanlin-ah!” he decided. “So, uhm… what’s the bright idea?”

“Just as Jihoon-hyung’s mentioned,” Kuanlin explained, beaming proudly. “A ‘lover boy’ concept.”

“I’m sorry, come again?” Minhyun asked. “I don’t think I heard you well enough. Did you just say ‘lover boy’?”

Kuanlin nodded. “It makes sense, doesn’t it? It’s about falling in love for the very first time, and not knowing what to do or how best to express yourself.”

“I get it,” Daehwi said, smiling cheerfully at Kuanlin as he spoke. “The fans are our first loves, aren’t they? That’s why the song is for them. It’s a way for us to communicate our feelings to the audience, where words fall short through the power of music.”

“Sounds like half the songs already out there,” Jaehwan remarked. “I’d hate for our first official group performance to end up a generic, forgettable bore.”

“Then perhaps it’d work to mix this concept in with something different,” Seongwoo offered. “A more rebellious image, perhaps? An angrier sound as opposed to a mellow one.”

“Will a school boy concept work?” Jinyoung added, raising an eager hand. “Since we are, you
know… school boys.”

“Wait a minute,” Jihoon said, his face lighting up with recognition. “I think I know where this is going.”

He unlocked his mobile device, flicking a thumb nimbly across the screen as he scrolled through his massive playlist.

He inserted the speaker jack into the analog socket, excitedly pressing play.

The chorus of an all-too-familiar song blared noisily through the room.

I’m getting nervous, I’m getting nervous
Who are you?
Are you that great?
Why do you keep teasing me?
Just stop now, hold up, hold up

Hold me tight before I kiss you
Before my heart lets you go
Say what you want
Say what you want
What is it that you really want?

“Yeah,” Kuanlin uttered. “I like it. The distinct, unruly sound.”

“I second that,” Daniel agreed. “It’s powerful, catchy… and it’s a hit by one of the most ubiquitous artists in the world. I’m sure a cover would garner lots of attention.”

“Funny how this song perfectly describes my situation,” Daehwi mused. “Our most of ours, now that I think about it.”

“I think we can all agree on this, then,” Jisung said. “We’re performing this song, so we should go over it a few times before seeking NU’EST W’s opinion.”

The ten of them nodded in unison, the first evident display of synergy since their arrival at the Imugi.

“Are all of us in love, though?” Jaehwan asked, counting them off with his fingers. “Jisung-hyung and Sungwoon-hyung have been together for a decade. Daehwi and Jinyoung are a buy-one-take-one deal these days. Daniel and Seongwoo-hyung bicker like an old married couple, and act like it’s the last day of their honeymoon every other night. Jihoon and Kuanlin are stupidly infatuated with each other, and are about to go on their first date in a week’s time. As for Minhyun and I… well, I’ve agreed to date his lonely ass if I can’t manage to snag a girlfriend.”

“Excuse me,” Minhyun retorted. “But I don’t recall having made such an agreement.”

“Oh, forgive me,” Jaehwan said, grinning at him snidely. “I’ve agreed to date Minhyun’s lonely, drunken ass.”

“Jeez,” Sungwoon exclaimed. “Tone down on the alcohol, for once.”

“That’s rich,” Minhyun retorted. “Coming from the ambassador of convenience store soju and Jisung-hyung’s homemade hangover soup.”
“Wait a minute,” Woojin spoke up, remiss in his cognizance of having been omitted from the equation entirely. “Where do I fit into all of this? Am I the only one in here not romantically involved with anyone else?”

“Not really…” Jihoon began shyly.

“Pretty much.” Seongwoo confirmed.

“Soon enough, I guess.” Jinyoung said, blushing cherry red.

“You can have Jaehwan for free.” Minhyun offered.

“Ugh, no thank you,” Woojin said. “I’m not gay, in case you’d forgotten that was a possibility.”

“Don’t worry, hyung,” Kuanlin comforted, patting Woojin’s back reassuringly. “Somebody out there loves you.”

Woojin cast him a sullen look. “You mean my mother?”

“I, uhm…” Kuanlin trailed off. “Yeah, sure. Mothers are nice.”

“You’re not dating in secret, are you?” Daehwi asked, sizing up the unfamiliar, crescent moon necklace adorning Woojin’s neck. “Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve ever noticed you wearing that particular accessory before. Who gave that to you?”

“Yeah,” Jinyoung agreed, leaning forwards to zero in on Woojin’s necklace. “Are those real diamonds studded around the pendant? That’s insane.”

“Where’d you get it from?” Jihoon inquired. “Because if you’ve been stealing from my piggy bank in secret…” Jihoon’s eyes narrowed at Woojin as he sliced a thumb haltingly across his neck.

Woojin moved slightly away from Jihoon, squinting at him distrustfully. “Chillax, you dumbo. I received this as a gift a couple of days ago.”

Jihoon blinked at him, puzzled. “Your birthday’s in November.”

“Congratulatory gift,” Woojin clarified. “For making it into the Idol Project. I received it from a fansite of mine.”

“You have fansites?” Jihoon asked. “You haven’t even made your debut!”

“And what of it?” Woojin shrugged. “Daniel-hyung’s had fansites since his eight-pack abs first saw the light of day.”

“Eight?!” Seongwoo exclaimed randomly. “I thought he had six! Have you been slacking off, Kang Daniel?”

“Ugh,” Daniel groaned. “I don’t know. I’ll let you do a recount later on, but that’s beside the point.”

“It’s nowhere near the point, actually,” Jinyoung observed. “Woojin-hyung, you aren’t just saying this to keep us from thinking you’re lonely, are you? There’s nothing wrong with being single, or spoiling yourself silly with overpriced jewelry, for that matter.”

“With whose money?” Woojin said. “Please. Jihoon knows I’m broke enough to eat cup ramen for dinner on a daily basis.”
“Well,” Daniel said. “You could be the chaebol heir to a multi-billion dollar company, for all we knew.”

“Okay, look,” Woojin said, extracting his phone from the depths of his pants pockets, thumbing hastily through his social media feed. “Here’s proof that I did receive it from her. Happy now?”

He handed his phone over to Jihoon as Daniel looked curiously over his shoulder.

“Ten thousand followers, huh?” Jihoon said. “With only footage of the auditions uploaded? That’s madness.”

“I’m pretty awesome, aren’t I?” Woojin said. “And so is this fansite’s master-nim. The camera she’s using must be pretty high-tech for the pictures to come out this crisp and detailed, despite me having been in motion the entire time.”

“Now I wish I had one, too,” Kuanlin said wistfully. “A fansite. Those are pretty cool.”

“I’m sure all of us do,” Daniel assured him. “Though I don’t suppose we’re allowed to receive packages from any of them, at this point. I did confer with the principal regarding this matter, and I recall he’s mentioned having asked the guards to intercept incoming mail for the time being.”

He gestured towards Woojin. “I wonder how yours managed to slip through the system.”

“She might be a student at this school,” Minhyun opined. “Or the principal’s daughter. That works too.”

“Oh god,” Seongwoo muttered under his breath. “I don’t think I like where that train of thought’s leading me.”


“It’s just… the security breaching, the pricey trinkets… sounds like a pattern I’ve gotten familiar with.”

“Should I be worried then?” Woojin asked, sadly. “I do like this necklace, though. The design is right up my alley.”

“Don’t worry,” Seongwoo assured him. “We’re dealing with minor speculation at this point. Besides, you’ve been wearing that necklace for days, and so far you’re intact and unharmed, so I’m likely entirely mistaken. Don’t let your guard down, though. If you receive anything else, tell me about it.”

“The gift came solo,” Woojin told him. “The only other thing it came with was a card in smudged ink, and the only thing that read was ‘Congratulations on making it in, and good luck on your Idol Project journey. Love and well wishes from Moonshine’.”

“Moonshine, huh?” Seongwoo repeated. “Doesn’t sound like an alias Chaerin would ever use. And the smudged ink? If she used a fountain pen, chances are she’s left-handed, which Chaerin isn’t if memory serves me right. But then again…”

“Who’s Chaerin?” Kuanlin asked. Over the weeks, he’d developed a certain vigilance against Seongwoo’s band of acquaintances, having caught on stories with regards to them, and the abnormal activity they’d been involved in through the years.

“She isn’t a friend of yours, is she?” he asked warily.
“Of course not,” Seongwoo exclaimed, utterly appalled. “I’d rather shit a brick than befriend a lunatic. Don’t worry, though… She’s hardly a concern at this point, at least until I’ve located her and managed to verify that her ginormous crush on me’s been transferred to Woojin for some astounding reason.”

Woojin shrugged nonchalantly. “Maybe she’s upped her standards.”

“Trust me,” Seongwoo said, tone heavily suffused with apprehension. “Once you find out how utterly unhinged a fan like Chaerin is, you’ll wish she never even ‘upper her standards’ in the first place.”

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For individuals so undeniably intimidating, the members of NU’EST W were surprisingly short. Even Kang Dongho, who reminded Kuanlin of a grizzly bear for unidentified reasons, was almost half a head shorter than he was.

If they had a member like Hwang Minhyun, Kuanlin thought. The height average would be a little different.

And then he remembered he was freakishly tall, so he deleted the notion from his memory before he could unwittingly blurt out the unspeakable.

“You’ve done well, Kuanlin-ah,” Baekho told him. “These lyrics you’ve written into J-hope’s rap are pretty good.”

“Thank you,” Kuanlin said. “All I need to work on now is the delivery.”

“And your dancing,” JR reminded him. “You lag behind the others in terms of pick-up, so you’ll need a couple extra hours of practice on the daily.”

“Got it,” Kuanlin said, sighing heavily. They’d been learning the choreography to ‘Boy In Luv’ the whole morning, and JR had taken the lead in helping them out as NU’EST W’s main dancer. More than once, he and Jaehwan had gotten called out for their failure to move in time with the beat, which had frustrated him as he’d begun working with Jihoon on the basics even before they arrived at the studio.

“It’s alright to feel lost,” Ren comforted him. “I’m like that too. But it would never hurt to work on triple overtime, or as much as is needed to master the song.”

“That way, your performance onstage will turn out more deliberate than it is mechanical,” Aron supplied. “Because you’re enjoying the movements and feeling the song, instead of working out the next step in your head as you go along. It does show, you know, and the audience won’t like it if they can sense your distraction.”

“Thank you, sunbaenim,” Kuanlin said. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

He took his seniors’ words to heart, jotting down a mental note of asking Jihoon to keep him company as he polished his footwork. Kuanlin was tired of feeling like dead-weight, so he’d inked in a silent pledge that he’d work twice as hard, in order to make-up for his skillset being half as useful.
“This conversation is making my spine crawl,” Minhyun spoke up, as he’d been in the room the entire time as the rest of them waited by the lobby for Kuanlin’s individual consultation to end. “I can hardly believe you’re the same people who complained non-stop about our trainee practice schedule.”

“We are professionals, aren’t we?” Ren exclaimed, elbowing Minhyun playfully. “Soon enough you’ll be one too, so you’d better work on those vocal techniques before you embarrass yourself.”

Minhyun whipped his head to either side of the room, scanning the area for any hidden cameras. “This isn’t airing live on some type of streaming service, is it?”

“No,” Baekho laughed. “But the rest of the Idol Project will be, so keep that in mind before dorm-Minhyun makes its television debut.”

“Duly noted,” Minhyun said. “Though dorm-Baekho and dorm-Ren are much funnier, and don’t even get me started on dorm-JR and dorm-Aron.”

“Was that an insult to your former leader, Minyun-ah?” JR asked, grinning at Minhyun. “I’ll let it slip since you’ve done well today, but I won’t be as forgiving at the panel.”

“Thanks for that,” Minhyun said, resting a hand lightly against JR’s shoulder. “I know we’ve been friends since we were little, but… I appreciate the impartiality. I really do.”

“Of course,” Aron smirked. “We’ve known you long enough to understand that you’d hate to win over an undue advantage.”

As Kuanlin observed NU’EST W’s mini-reunion with their former labelmate, he came to a startling realization.

Perhaps in due time, he’d stand in Minhyun shoes, at a crossroads between pursuing his dreams, and conceding to his limitations.

*In which direction shall my compass take me?*

Kuanlin heaved in a slow breath.

*Follow the North star*, his sister used to tell him. *For no matter the path you choose to take, all of them will converge at the same point to the place you were meant to return to.*

“And that,” Kuanlin whispered to himself. “That’s where the North star is, constant in an ever-changing world.”

“Were you saying something?” Minhyun asked, snapping him out his daydreams.

“Nothing,” Kuanlin shook his head. “I just… I’m ready to go if you are.”

“Maybe you should, then,” Ren said. “We’d hate to waste your time. The rest of them are waiting out there, too.”

***

Ten other people were waiting for him at the lobby. Nine were members of their group, the sole
exception a girl clad in luxurious clothing, perhaps the most impatient in awaiting his return.

Where have I seen this girl before? Kuanlin thought to himself, unwilling to walk towards the reception area before he could fully inspect the stranger’s appearance. She was dressed in what seemed like a Burberry trench-coat, hands warm in both pockets as she stood to the side. Her head moved back and forth in what appeared to be confusion, eyes roving around the studio lobby in search of something she knew not where to look for.

“Excuse me,” Kuanlin heard Jihoon say. He was sitting at the bench nearest where she stood, and had taken it upon himself to approach her and ask if she was in need of some aid. “Were you looking for someone?”

“I’m looking for Lai Kuanlin,” she spoke up, responding curtly in what seemed like heavily accented Korean that reminded Kuanlin of his own broken use of the language, prior to his solo flight to Korea.

Jihoon gaped at her in shock he could hardly even attempt to suppress. “Lai… Lai Kuanlin?”

“You know this girl?” Minhyun asked. “She looks expensive.”

“I’ve never met her,” Kuanlin muttered. “But I think I already know who she is.”

“He’s over there,” Sungwoon said, hearing Kuanlin’s footsteps from behind. Her gaze followed Sungwoon’s movements, eyes resting succintly on him before she broke out into a wide, almost ravishing smile.

She strode towards Kuanlin, hips swaying lightly to and fro as the heels of her devil-red Christian Louboutins clacked noisily against the hardwood floor.

“What a babe,” Seongwoo whistled, trailing off as Daniel shot him a murderous glare. “Not that I care, or anything.”

Kuanlin stood his ground, watching the girl make her way to his side as he silently plotted an elaborate escape involving a dash towards the nearest fire exit and an impromptu booking of the earliest flight to Taipei.

He could almost have done it if not for Jihoon, whose presence was a constant reminder of his greatest motivation in wishing to stay.

Before the girl could reach him, however, the underside of her stiletto heel slipped to the side, causing her to rock off-balance.

“Woah!” Woojin exclaimed, sprinting forwards to pull her back and into his arms before she could fall flat on her behind or break a bone. “Careful there. Those shoes you’re walking in are kind of dangerous.”

“S-sorry about that…” the girl whispered, steadying herself as she pushed away from Woojin, discernibly avoiding even the slightest eye-contact. She demurely tucked strands of perfectly coiffed hair behind her ear, revealing a set of pink diamond earrings.

“Don’t tell me…” Jihoon began. “You’re not…”

“I’m sorry,” the girl said. “But I just need to see…” her voice trailed away, eyes scanning warily through each of their faces. She paused slightly as they flitted past Woojin, cheeks reddening in perfect recollection of his valiant attempt at cushioning her fall. Before long however, her restless
eyes managed to find his very own, the same cheerful smile overrunning her earlier cast of unease. Kuanlin-ah!

She pushed through the rest of them, running right into Kuanlin’s arms before he could even let out a word of protest. “Kuanlin-ah… I’ve missed you.”

“I, uhm…” Kuanlin began, almost entirely at a loss for words as the scent of her intoxicating perfume pervaded his unwitting senses. “I don’t think we’ve ever met.”

“You’ve forgotten about me, already?” she asked, eyes blinking prettily at him. “We used to play around together when we were little.”

“Oh,” Kuanlin said, drawing a blank. The only playmates he could think of were an overweight Siamese cat, and the little boy from across the street who came over every weekend to play some basketball. “My memory’s a little fuzzy these days, so I…”

“Kuanlin-ah?” Jihoon asked, hesitant. “Who… who is she?”

Kuanlin cast him a rueful look, mouthing an apology for the scene he’d caused. The girl, however, was feeling thrice as upbeat, so she sauntered off to Jihoon, extending an eager hand outwards at him.

“Hi there,” she greeted. “I’m Zhang Yuejun. You’re a friend of Kuanlin’s aren’t you?”

Jihoon stared one moment too long at her flawlessly manicured hand, before he reached out to shake it in return. “Yeah,” he said, unsure of himself. “I’m uhh… a friend.”

“And you are?” Woojin asked. “I’d take you for his sister, but he’s no Zhang Kuanlin, and you’re no Lai Yuejun either.”

Yuejun was obstinate in her refusal to look him in the eye, so she fixed her gaze upon his lapel instead.

So she’s the type to dislike a guy, Kuanlin thought. If they happen to touch her without her permission? But why is she clinging so stiffly to my arm?

“We aren’t related,” Yuejun explained. “In fact… we’re getting married.”

Jinyoung and Daehwi drew sharp breaths, as Sungwoon, Jisung, Woojin and Minhyun’s hands flew to cover their mouths in perfect simultaneity.

Seongwoo and Daniel exchanged worried glances, and Jihoon could do little more than look away, hurt flashing in his eyes for the briefest of moments.

The look on his face stabbed through Kuanlin’s heart, and he wished for nothing more than a chance to kiss his doubts away.

“Kuanlin-ah,” Jaehwan whispered. “How’d you manage to snag a goddess?”

“I didn’t,” Kuanlin retaliated. “We met ten seconds ago!”

“So you’re that girl from the Yuèliàng group,” Seongwoo said. “I thought you were based in Taiwan. How come you’ve made your way to Korea, all of a sudden?”

Yuejun looked away from him, unable to meet his penetrating gaze. “I came here looking for Kuanlin. I haven’t gotten much of a chance to get to know him, and I’d like to find out more about
my future husband before the engagement is made official.”

“Oh god,” Jaehwan exclaimed, unsold to the idea. “And what of the idol dream? Are you giving up on that, Kuanlin-ah? You can’t settle down and start a family now!”

“We aren’t getting married anytime soon,” Kuanlin clarified, turning his attention to Yuejun still latched onto his arm, nails digging ever so lightly into the fabric of his t-shirt. “In fact, I think now might be the right time to make it clear that I’ve no intention of getting hitched, and certainly not to a girl like you.”

Yuejun focused her attention on him, her expression unclear. She’d arranged her face into the likeness of a painting he couldn’t quite figure out, an abstract composition only the artist herself could precisely interpret.

It made Kuanlin’s stomach churn, as if he’d like nothing more than to claw at her canvas and tear through her guise. “Why not?” she asked. “Is there anything wrong with a girl like me?”

Kuanlin considered this for a moment.

“I know nothing,” he thought. Nowhere near enough for me to tell the exact place at which your motives might lie.

“Not inherently, no,” Kuanlin admitted. “You might turn out as sweet a person as you look, but I’m not interested in marrying for power, and I hope for both of our sakes that neither are you.”

Yuejun nodded agreeably, looking as if she understood Kuanlin’s sentiments entirely.

“Can’t you give me a chance, at least?” she pleaded instead, catching Kuanlin off-guard. “Just one, that’s all I need. I understand that you aren’t ready, and neither of us have had a say in this to begin with. But I’d hate to disappoint my father, and I’m certain that neither do you. So if I have to give up on this arrangement… I’d like to do it until after I’ve tried, if not to fall in love, at the very least to understand why exactly it is that we’re so dreadfully mismatched.”

Kuanlin closed both eyes for a moment, frustration and self-doubt bubbling steadily through him.

“You’re right,” he thought. “I’d hate to disappoint my father.

Why? Because I love him, and I fear him. Because I’m expected to carry out his legacy.

Because I never fought back. And neither do you.

I’m both a son and a puppet, and you a daughter and a doll, the humble pawns in this battle for supremacy.

“We can’t just let them do as they please,” Kuanlin whispered. “Not anymore.”

Kuanlin’s eyes wandered across the room, waiting patiently for Jihoon’s eyes to find his.

As they did.

Always.

Jihoon nodded once, as if to tell him there was nothing to fear.

“To tell you the truth,” Kuanlin began, scraping together every tendril of courage he could muster, every ounce of mettle he’d nurtured through the years. “I’m already dating someone. And it won’t
matter if you tell the rest of them as much, as I’m sure they’re bound to find out one way or the other.”

A current of silence rippled through the room.

“Is that so?” Yuejun asked then, her eyes sparkling with an emotion Kuanlin could barely even aim to identify. “Who is she? Do I know her? Which conglomerate is she an heiress to?”

“Nothing,” Kuanlin said bluntly. “He doesn’t have much to his name, to be perfectly honest. But he does have my heart, and that’s all I truly care about.”

“Have I met him?” Yuejun pressed on, and Kuanlin was receptive of the fact that she was neither scandalized nor surprised that he’d let slip his curious disinterest in women. “Is he prettier than I am?”

“Well,” Kuanlin said, scratching the back of his neck distressfully. “In my opinion, he’s prettier than all of you combined.”


“Don’t tell me…” Yuejun began, her gaze resting heavily on Seongwoo. “It’s you, isn’t it?”

“Sorry, princess,” Seongwoo replied, snaking an arm around Daniel’s shoulder. “I appreciate the flattery implied in your assertion, but this one here is the guy I belong to.”

Kuanlin’s hands fisted at his sides as he steeled himself, disentangling himself from Yuejun’s handclasp. He walked slowly over to Jihoon’s side, resting an arm over Jihoon’s shoulder in perfect mimicry of Seongwoo’s earlier gesture.

“Yuejun,” Kuanlin said. “This is Park Jihoon.”

Yuejun’s eyes darted between them in rapid motions, unable to process the information she’d just then been fed. “This scrawny little guy’s your boyfriend?”

“Scrawny?” Jihoon repeated, skipping over the word ‘boyfriend’ entirely. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Sungwoon-ah,” Jisung whispered. “I think she’s gotten you and Jihoon mixed up.”

“I’d tell you to shut up,” Sungwoon whispered back. “But I don’t like this one bit, either.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Yuejun said. “The only thing this means is that the competition isn’t as fierce as I’d imagined.”

“Well, this one’s got spunk,” Jaehwan observed. “How are you supposed to go out on a date now if little-miss-foxy over here’s just lingering about you?”

“Jaehwan-aaaah,” Minhyun groaned. “Why’d you have to say that out loud?!?”

“A date, huh?” Yuejun said. “If you’re having one, I’d like to go too.”

“What? No!” Jihoon exclaimed, appalled by the idea. “That defeats the purpose of a date! We aren’t supposed to walk around with company, and I’d rather not have the date at all than have you breathing down my neck as it happens.”
And there isn’t a rat’s chance in hell for you to trick Kuanlin into letting you stick around before he tosses you out the car window,” Woojin said. “It’s never gonna happen.”

“I guess,” Yuejun said. “We’ll just have to wait and see about that.”

“I can’t believe this is actually happening,” Jihoon said. “Not only is this prima donna here along for the ride … but so is this stinking chaperone of yours, who, by the way, just parked his convertible beside the entrance with the roof folded inwards!”

“Don’t worry,” Wooseok assured him. “If anyone dares vandalize that sports car, I’ve installed security devices into the dashboard for easy retrieval of their personal data records.”

“I’m sorry, hyung,” Kuanlin sighed, taking Jihoon’s hand in his to offer him even the barest measure of comfort. “You know how Wooseok-hyung is—whether or not I kept my mouth shut, he’d have found us out either way. And he’d never let me leave the city unguarded.”

Jihoon frowned, his lower lip jutting outwards cutely. Kuanlin wondered if such an expression was a force of habit, or a deliberate attempt at melting his insides into butter.

“So are you telling me,” Jihoon asked. “That I’ll never get to go on private dates with you?”

Kuanlin stilled at the inquiry.

I’m sorry, hyung, he thought. But a date with the son of an illustrious businessman is paid at the price of one’s space and one’s privacy.

“Not necessarily,” Wooseok supplied. “If by chance I get fired, it could happen.”

“Well now, that’s an idea,” Jihoon grumbled.

“Or if I die.” Wooseok added.

“Ugh,” Jihoon grimaced. “Well now, that’s morbid.”

“Where are we, anyway?” Kuanlin asked, scouring the area. “I don’t think I’ve ever been here before.”

“Seoul Land,” Wooseok said. “It’s a theme park, in case the roller coasters and ferris wheels weren’t clueing you in.”

“Is it someplace we might be able to lose these two?” Jihoon asked, gesturing towards Wooseok trailing behind them, and Yuejun looking around in ardent fascination. She looked more petite now than when they’d first met, since she’d swapped out her designer heels for a pair of more comfortable, and even steeper-priced designer sneakers.

“It isn’t very wise to be plotting these things in my presence, is it?” Wooseok asked. “And even if you did conspire to abandon me, I’m sure you know the effort is of no real use in the greater swing of things.”

Jihoon shot Wooseok a guarded look, inching even closer to Kuanlin’s side until the small tufts of
his hair brushed lightly against Kuanlin’s cheek.

“Does this guy have a tracking chip installed in your dermis, or something?” Jihoon whispered. “His surveillance skills are giving me the creeps.”

“We aren’t in a science-fiction movie, hyung,” Kuanlin replied, laughing at the absurdity of his suggestion. He removed his hand from Jihoon’s gently to pull him in by the waist instead.

“It’s alright,” Kuanlin whispered, watching in amusement as Jihoon blushed at the ears, a familiar, reddish tinge radiating outwards to fill in his cheeks. “Wooseok hyung’a nice guy. You’ll get used to him in the long run.”

“Kuan…Kuanlin-ah,” Jihoon said, pointing towards a cotton candy stall distractedly. “Let’s just… let’s head over there first.”

Kuanlin chuckled softly, thinking he could never hope to compete against Jihoon’s eternal love of food.

“Kuanlin-ie,” Yuejun intercepted. “Let’s go and play basketball over there.”

Yuejun yanked at Kuanlin’s arm forcefully, dragging Kuanlin away as Jihoon screamed at her in protest.

Kuanlin tried his level best to pull away, but Yuejun’s muscle strength was unusually tough for her delicate frame, and Kuanlin could hardly disengage himself from her vice-grip before she handed over change to the personnel manning the basketball arcade.

“You try it,” Yuejun said, offering Jihoon a ball. “Whoever scores the most points gets to pick the first ride.”

“I think you might’ve challenged the wrong person,” Jihoon said. “I’m pretty good at these things, I’ll have you know.”

Yuejun shrugged, awaiting the go signal. Once the balls had been set into place, she and Jihoon began shooting them one after another through the hoops, arms moving in semi-circular, almost mechanical motions.

Both contenders had yet to miss, and Kuanlin could do little more than look on in stupefaction as every single ball shot clean through the ring.

“Wow,” he murmured to himself. “Is this an arcade game or the junior league championships?”

He fixed his gaze on Jihoon, marvelling at how someone’s view from the back could be so unfairly attractive. Jihoon’s hair was swaying lightly in the wind, feet tipping at the toes as he made for a shot, shirt hiking upwards for the briefest of instances.

Kuanlin blushed at the sight, unable to tear his gaze away from Jihoon as he made one successful attempt after another. Yuejun, quite surprisingly, was holding up well-enough on her own, though her left arm was perceptibly getting tired as she slackened in movement. What alarmed Kuanlin, however, was not the display of physical prowess, but rather the burgeoning crowd of adoring spectators both of them had managed to attract. Some of them were whispering about in circles, the others furtively taking pictures of them with tablets, mobile phones, digital cameras.

And even though he’d been standing stoically to the side the entire time, some of these devices were pointed directly at him.
“I wonder if they’re here because they know about the Idol Project,” Kuanlin wondered to himself. “If so… the impact of that program is crazy. The first round has yet to start.”

“He’s even more good-looking from up close,” Kuanlin overheard. He cast a sideways glance at a group of girls clustered around one another, giggling as they snapped one photo of Jihoon after another.

“Is he out on a date with Kuanlin?” he heard one of them whisper. “Oh my god, you have to take more pictures!”

“And who’s the girl with them? Is she in a relationship with either one of them?”

“What, no! Is this a dating scandal?”

“Quick, quick, you have to capture this on camera.”

“Post it online before anyone else does!”

*This isn’t good,* Kuanlin thought to himself. *At this rate…*

He stalked over to Jihoon’s side, waiting impatiently for him to shoot the last few balls through the hoop.

“Jihoon-ah,” Kuanlin whispered. “We have to get out of here.”

He stood himself inches behind Jihoon, extending a hand around his waist. He spread his fingers outward to grip the very last ball, before bending both knees slightly downwards to pop it clean through the hoop with one arm.

“That’s it!” Yuejun exclaimed, startling the both of them. She made a gesture at Wooseok, cocking her head slightly in Kuanlin and Jihoon’s general direction. “Take care of them, Wooseok-ah.”

Wooseok flinched for an instant as Yuejun dropped her formalities, before regaining his composure and striding over to Kuanlin’s side. He swept an arm over the crowd to clear a path for both of them, acting as if he’d been assigned their bodyguard for a day instead of being Kuanlin’s personal escort.

“Sorry, everyone,” he announced. “As per the manager’s orders, we’ve got to take our leave for now.”

Kuanlin and Jihoon exchanged nervous glances, before Kuanlin settled an arm against Jihoon’s back to urge him into the clearing. He waved cheerily at the crowd, flashing the girls he’d eavesdropped upon a dazzling, hundred-megawatt smile.

“Bye-bye,” he said. “I hope you’ll be there for our next performance.”

The group of them drew in sharp breaths, sighing as one.

“Way to go Kuanlin-ah,” Jihoon whispered. “You’ve personally recruited brand new members into your fanclub.”

“Don’t thank me,” Kuanlin responded, casting a beholden smile Yuejun’s way. She returned his glance in passing, smiling surreptitiously to herself.

“Show’s over folks,” she exclaimed. “Nothing else to see here.”
Jihoon won their mini-tournament 126 to 122, but instead of picking a ride, he bolted straight for the indoor café.

“Let’s sit together, Kuanlin-ah,” Yuejun offered. She kept herself from latching onto Kuanlin’s arm this time, which baffled him as he didn’t think Yuejun cared in the least if they’d gotten caught engaging in physical contact.

“Why the aversion to skinship, all of a sudden?” Kuanlin asked, pulling a chair out for Yuejun to sit on. He may not have liked that Yuejun trespassed on their date, but he had been brought up a gentleman and knew that proper manners were always in order.

“Thank you,” Yuejun said, smiling at him sweetly.

At this point, Kuanlin felt something light tugging at the sleeve of his shirt. He looked over his shoulder, peering out at Jihoon fidgeting shyly behind him.

“What is it?” Kuanlin asked. “Did you want to sit beside me, too?”

Jihoon nodded, unable to look him in the eye. “It must’ve been tiring for you. I just… I wanted you to have the couch.”

Kuanlin’s heart leapt out of his chest and soared into the clouds, taken entirely by his staggering affection.

“That isn’t fair,” he said. “If anything, you should be feeling tired. I’ve never seen you exert that much effort into an activity so strenuous.”

“Kuanlin-aaah,” Yuejun whined, patting the seat next to her. “You stay here.”

“Why are you so persistent?” Jihoon demanded. “Whose date are we on, anyway?”

“I’m doing you a favour,” Yuejun retorted. “If you sit across from Kuanlin, you get to stare at him as much as you’d like.”

“But I—“

“Kuanlin-aaaaah.”

“That’s it,” Wooseok butt in. He pulled out the other chair, dragging Jihoon by the wrist towards it. “The both of you sit next to each other. I’ll take the couch beside the young master.”

Both Yuejun and Jihoon drew in a breath of protest, but Wooseok’s ferocious glower their way effectively shut the both of them up. He called for a waiter, ordering Mango Nutella bingsu for all of them.

“We’re lucky you aren’t dressed in lavish clothing, this time around,” Wooseok exclaimed, referring to Yuejun’s halter-top, jacket, and boyfriend jeans combo. She’d foregone the luxurious garb, opting instead for a casual ensemble.

“I do have common sense, you know,” she retorted. “Besides, I’d attract way too much attention if
I dressed as I normally would.”

“How’d you know what I’d been up to, anyway?” Kuanlin asked. “When I attempted to bypass that crowd.”

“I know how to read the atmosphere,” she said. “And if people didn’t think I was your manager, they’d assume we were dating as we look nothing like.”

“Thanks,” Kuanlin offered, reaching over the table to place a hand over Jihoon’s. “If you hadn’t been there to help, Jihoon’s reputation might’ve been ruined. We can’t have that since his fame’s just skyrocketed.”

“You’re quite shameless, aren’t you?” Yuejun exclaimed, staring pointedly at both of their hands still clasped together. “It’s worse than telling me I don’t stand a chance.”

Kuanlin peered into both of her eyes for a moment, searching for the pain that should’ve been there, but wasn’t.

What am I to you, really? Kuanlin thought. What exactly do you want?

The arrival of their bingsu distracted Kuanlin from his rattled stream of thought.


Kuanlin spooned the garnish out of the bowl, creamy Nutella ice cream and wafer-thin disks of tempered chocolate. He shoved it eagerly into his mouth, savoring the explosion of flavor at the tip of his tongue. “It is delicious. Well… the toppings, at least.”

“Say ‘ahh’, Kuanlin-ah,” Yuejun said, reaching across the table to offer Kuanlin a spoonful of bingsu.

“Aaaah,” Jihoon said, intercepting the spoon midway. Yuejun gaped at him in shock, watching helplessly as Jihoon gobbled up her shaved ice instead.

“That wasn’t for you!” she burst out.

“Sorry,” Jihoon shrugged, smirking at her fiendishly. “I can’t distinguish between the food that is mine, and the food that isn’t.”

Kuanlin smiled fondly at him, thinking he’d never tire of Jihoon’s crazy shenanigans.

“I want a taste of your bingsu too, hyung,” Kuanlin said. “Feed me one, too.”

Jihoon blushed furiously at the suggestion, eyes trembling skittishly. “But… the flavor of mine is just like yours. What’s the point?”

“Haven’t you heard?” Kuanlin said. “Dessert is much sweeter when offered by a loved one.”

Jihoon’s pinkish-red blush crept all the way down to his neck. “Loved one…”

He stared fixedly at the floor, sliding his bowl of dessert across the table. “Here, Kuanlin-ah. You… you can have it.”

Kuanlin let loose a heartfelt laugh, eyes crinkling at the corners and his gums on full display.

“I can’t have this, hyung,” he said. “My appetite is hardly as sizable as yours.”
He pointed towards Jihoon’s spoon, both of his lips jutting outwards. “Just one spoonful. Pretty please?”

“Thank me for this at least,” Jihoon complained. “This volunteerism on my part never happens. And certainly not when it comes to my food.”

Jihoon repositioned the bowl by the side of his table, digging his spoon into the ice to scoop out a mouthful of dessert. He extended an arm towards Kuanlin, feeding him the treat.

“Thank you, hyung,” Kuanlin said, letting the ice melt slowly in his mouth, the taste of milk and almonds steeping through his tastebuds. “I appreciate the gesture.”

Jihoon sighed in defeat, a small smile tugging the corners of his lips.

“You remind me,” he grumbled. “Of a Shiba Inu. The fat ones.”

“Oh?” Kuanlin exclaimed. “I think I might’ve heard that line somewhere before.”

The sound of their laughter permeated the air, and Kuanlin didn’t think he’d ever been that happy.

“Do we even exist?” Yuejun sighed. “It’s as if they’re on a date, and the both of us don’t matter.”

“They are on a date,” Wooseok said. “And we do matter.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose, eyes squeezing shut in frustration.

“I matter at least,” he repeated. “Because apart from getting you places, I also happen to be paying for the food.”

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“Don’t tell me… you’ve never been on the KTX before?” Jihoon asked, watching as Yuejun took in the unfamiliarity of her surroundings. “Or any other train for that matter.”

“I’ve seen *Train to Busan*, and that movie gave me nightmares for a week. So do forgive me for hoping to avoid these things, if that means my survival from a zombie apocalypse.”

“I don’t like this,” Jihoon observed, fingers tapping at the armrest of his seat. “She reminds me far too much of Park Woojin.”

Yuejun blushed, looking almost offended. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Jihoon kept his mouth shut, acting as if he’d never spoken to begin with.

“Besides,” Yuejun added. “I’m not used to public transport. Why can’t we have taken to the road instead? We didn’t have to leave the BMW at that parking space overnight.”

“Not an option,” Wooseok argued. “This train runs through the shortest route to Jinju, and is the only hope we have of getting there before all the fanfare is well underway.”

“Fanfare?” Jihoon repeated. “What exactly do you mean by that?”
Kuanlin shot Wooseok a nervous glance, head shaking almost imperceptibly.

Don’t tell him, he thought. Not just yet.

“Don’t mind me,” Wooseok said then, pulling his turtleneck upwards and over his mouth, muffling the sound of his voice. “Just wake me up once the train ride’s over.”

“If this guy had a dollar for every secret he’s kept from us,” Jihoon grumbled, resting his head against Kuanlin’s shoulder. “He’d be even richer than you are.”

Kuanlin smiled, hands moving to cover Jihoon’s. Upon contact, Jihoon rotated his wrist, palms facing upwards. His fingers worked themselves in between Kuanlin’s, hyper-activating his sensation of touch as jolts of electricity shot rapidly through him. Kuanlin held Jihoon’s hand and squeezed it tight, the pleasant warmth of Jihoon’s skin soothing his worn-out soul.

“I have my secrets too,” Kuanlin whispered. “Though I won’t mind half as much if you managed to find them out.”

Jihoon’s only response was his steady breathing, and Kuanlin knew without looking that he’d finally been overtaken by sleep.

Kuanlin leaned backwards against the headrest, catching Yuejun’s eye as he went.

“You don’t mind this do you?” he asked. “You didn’t even challenge Jihoon-hyung for a seat.”

“You don’t mind,” Yuejun deadpanned. “Just for the time being.”

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The sun had set in the east when they arrived in Jinju, four-and-a-half hours later.

Wooseok had taken the liberties of renting out a car, much to Yuejun’s relief and Jihoon’s disappointment, since he’d been meaning to traverse through the scenic route on foot.

“Can’t let you do that,” Wooseok reminded him. “As I’ve mentioned, we’re tight on schedule.”

“I don’t understand,” Jihoon whined. “Why are you in such a hurry?”

“You’ll find out,” Kuanlin assured him, afraid he’d gone overboard in deciding their itinerary without telling Jihoon where exactly they were headed.

Don’t you remember? He thought. You wished to see this place so very long ago.

They sat in the car in silence, eyes peeled to the view from the window.

Before long, tiny specks of light dotted their field of vision, small ripples of water beneath glittering in the faraway horizon.

“Are those…” Jihoon began. “Are those lanterns floating through the river?”

Kuanlin nodded, heart hammering in his chest at a million miles per hour.
“Yeah,” he said. “It’s the last day of this year’s Namgang Lantern Festival.”

Jihoon gaped at him in awe. “Is this what we came here for?”

Kuanlin flashed him an overwrought smile. “I just… I thought you might like it.”

“Wow,” Yuejun exclaimed. “We came all the way here for this?”

“Too much?” Kuanlin asked sheepishly. “I thought it’d make things just a bit more special.”

The car came to a stop by the Namgang River, as Wooseok manoeuvred his way to the farthest end of the road.

“Are you for real?” Jihoon asked rhetorically. “This is the best thing ever!”

He undid his seatbelt and dashed out of the car, almost running into traffic before Kuanlin held him back by the arm.

“Easy there,” he said. “The lanterns aren’t going anywhere.”

“Sorry,” Jihoon said. “It’s just… I’ve wanted to see this since I was little, and had no idea it came around this time of year.”

“I know,” Kuanlin whispered. “I already know.”

He pointed towards the archway where a thousand glowing lanterns hung, lights flickering in and out as they shone in radiance through the murky twilight.

“Let’s head through there first.”

The both of them made their way to the entrance, Wooseok trailing them from close behind.

“Wooseok-hyung,” he called out. “I’d like to ask for a favor.”

“Let me guess,” Wooseok said. “Distract Yuejun for a while, as the pair of you traipse around into the unknown?”

Kuanlin smiled, nodding gently.

“It’s a well-lit unknown,” he replied. “You don’t have to worry about either of us.”

“You do know I’m against this, right?” Wooseok said. “I’ve come here to persuade you into moving back to Taipei.”

“I know that,” Kuanlin said. “But you know what else, Wooseok-hyung? You comply with orders you’d rather not accomplish, as long as they’ve been given by my father. So more than anyone, I know… you aren’t against this at all.”

Wooseok sighed in defeat, eyes to the sky. “So am I the spy, or are you?”

“Neither,” Kuanlin said. “I’m just asking. Not as your employer’s son, but as your friend. Because that’s all you’ve ever been to me.”

Wooseok smiled, the rarest of occurrences from a guy so aloof. “There’s no winning against you, young master.”
Kuanlin laughed, playfully offering him a finger-heart. “Thanks, hyung. You’re the absolute best!”

He took Jihoon by the hand, guiding him through the maze of tourists. “Let’s go?”

Jihoon squeezed his hand gently, nodding once. “Let’s go.”

Once they were through to the archway, both of them could do little else than marvel wordlessly at the sheer beauty of the sights before them.

“I think I’m about to cry,” Jihoon whispered. “I’ve never seen anything so beautiful.”

“I have,” Kuanlin whispered, looking over at Jihoon and falling hopelessly in love with him the hundredth time over.

“How’d you think of this place?” Jihoon asked. “It’s as if you knew from the start that I’d been raring to go.”

“I did,” Kuanlin admitted. “Your mother told me.”


“Remember how I met her at the Imugi a couple of days ago?” Kuanlin said. “Somehow, our conversation arrived at the topic of your childhood… and she’d mentioned how much you kept nagging her when you were a kid, about taking you to see all the floating lights at Jinju’s Namgang River.”

“Is that why you’ve been postponing this date?” Jihoon asked, only then figuring out the reason behind Kuanlin’s uncharacteristic hesitant behavior. "So that it could happen during the festival?"

“Right,” Kuanlin affirmed. “And that’s why it had to be an overnight trip, since the province where Jinju sits is miles away from Seoul.”

“Kuanlin-ah…” Jihoon began, looking almost teary-eyed. “I can’t… I can’t believe you’ve prepared this far in advance.”

“It’s our first date, after all,” Kuanlin said, unwilling to let go of Jihoon’s hands even as bystanders ogled curiously at them. “I had to make sure we’d do something unforgettable.”

They finally reached the exit to the archway, where some of the organizers were milling about, selling paper lanterns to interested pedestrians.

“We’ll have two please,” Kuanlin said, extracting two ten-thousand won notes from his wallet.

“These are for the lighting ceremony,” the vendor explained, handing them both the lanterns they’d purchased. “And don’t forget to make a wish before you send them away.”

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“Do you know where this custom originates from?” Jihoon asked after they’d settled themselves by the riverbank, the lighting ceremony already in full swing.

“The soldiers carried secret messages over to allies from across the river, didn’t they?” Kuanlin
replied, having recently brushed up on his notes of the war. “It began as a form of communication, before ordinary citizens carried the practice over into a means by which they could wish for more blessings to come.”

“Exactly,” Jihoon said, walking over to the edge of the river to perch his lantern above the clear waters, watching in silence as it drifted away. “As a kid, I thought I’d be able to see my father again if I made a wish. He works overseas, so I never get the chance to pay him a visit.”

“I get it,” Kuanlin said, grateful for the chance to learn more about Jihoon’s past. “I’m sure he’s proud of how far you’ve come.”

“Yeah,” Jihoon said. “That’s why I have to make it, Kuanlin-ah. I have to debut no matter what. For my mother, and for him.”

Jihoon looked at him then, eyes as bright as the gleaming lanterns sailing gently across the Namgang River.

“For you too,” Jihoon whispered. “For both of us. It’s the only way we can convince both your parents to let you stay.”

Kuanlin smiled at Jihoon then, the weight of his words heavy in his chest as he let them sink gradually in.

And in that moment as they stared so deeply into each other’s eyes, Kuanlin finally knew he’d found it.

His North star, his guiding light, the one home he’d been meant to return to… right there in Park Jihoon’s eyes.

They were the brightest he’d ever seen them, as if those eyes could tell you stories both of spring blossom and of winter snow, beautiful to either extreme.

And Park Jihoon was, as it stood, the only person he could last to be with, the only reminder he needed of how sweet the air had tasted before he’d forgotten altogether how to breathe.

He stood himself up, over to Jihoon’s side, crouching by the waters to offer it his paper lantern.

“I wish,” he said. “For a successful performance. For my hyungs to be happy wherever they are.”

Jihoon helped him to his feet, not letting go of both hands. They simply held each other, by the quiet of the river, the only people in the world besides the spirit of the waters listening intently to their every wish and prayer.

“I wish for your happiness,” Kuanlin continued. “Because in so doing, I wish for mine, too. I wish for your laughter, your joy, your every dream come true. For your worries to wash away, and with them every single trace of sadness.”

He pulled Jihoon in gently, into an open embrace, breathing in his scent as Jihoon’s fingers made their way slowly around his waist.

“And I wish for a miracle,” he whispered, almost into Jihoon’s ear. “That there may never come a time for goodbyes. That life won’t tear us apart, the way it brought us together, all of a sudden, all at once, and all too soon for me say that I loved you.”

Because this pain in my chest, this thumping in my heart, these butterflies alive in my stomach…
Are they not a part of that feeling called ‘love’?

“You know,” Jihoon began, hands fist ing in his shirt and afraid to let go. “I think I feel in excess whenever I’m with you.”

Kuanlin wrapped both hands around Jihoon’s waist, lips brushing lightly against his forehead. “What do you mean?”

“I mean… your presence,” Jihoon said, burying his face in Kuanlin’s chest. “It’s an amplifier. As if I’m seeing the world in Technicolor. When you make me happy, I don’t just smile. I radiate. When you anger me, I don’t just shout. I smolder. And when you sadden me, I don’t just cry. I overflow.”

He looked up once more, lips trembling and eyes wet with tears.

“So when you leave me, Kuanlin-ah,” he whispered. “I won’t just crack. I’ll shatter.”

Kuanlin wiped at Jihoon’s tears with the pads of his thumb.

“Don’t do that to me,” Jihoon pleaded. “Don’t do that to any of us.”

“I won’t,” Kuanlin replied, pulling Jihoon even closer as if their bodies could meld into one. “Not as long as we have even the smallest of chances at making it.”

He sighed heavily, struggling to keep the uncertainty at bay.

“We will, won’t we?” he asked. “We’ll make it. Just like we promised.”

“But even if we don’t,” Jihoon said, pushing away from him slightly. “You have to promise me it won’t end there, either. That dream of yours… you can’t let it die away after failure. It has to be a stepping-stone into something else, perhaps even something much better.”

“You want me to continue on rapping, even if we don’t debut together.” Kuanlin said, more a statement than an inquiry.

“I do,” Jihoon confirmed. “I’d hate for you to waste your potential, when you’ve got so much of it just waiting to be realized.”

Kuanlin smiled, secure in the knowledge that no matter what, Park Jihoon believed in him and in the beauty of his dreams.

And that alone was more than enough.

“I will,” Kuanlin said. “Of course I will. But you have to know… it’ll never be the same. Because no matter how cheerful the song, I’ll only feel an emptying sort of sadness if I have to perform it onstage without you.”

He leaned in towards Jihoon, head resting by the crook of his neck. “But if we both make it, I want a kiss by the way.”

Jihoon’s hands fall automatically away.

“You want a… what?” Jihoon asked, eyes widening into saucers.

“A kiss,” Kuanlin repeated, loud enough for passersby to hear. “Full on the lips.”
Jihoon gaped at him for a long moment, and Kuanlin knew by heart that even in the dark, Jihoon’s cheeks had blossomed into vivid color.

“Won’t that be your first?” Jihoon asked, breaking the heavy silence. “Are you… are you sure you want me to?”

“Of course,” Kuanlin said. “Even on those lanterns, I wished for it, too.”

Jihoon looked away from him, staring almost longingly at the space between them. “Does it… does it have to be right after we make it?”

Kuanlin’s heart dropped to his stomach, certain he’d been much too assertive.

“Alright then,” Kuanlin said. “I get it. If you aren’t ready, I’ll give you more time.”

“Pabo-ya,” Jihoon whispered, softly enough for Kuanlin to miss it. “That’s not what I meant at all.”

And then, all at once, Jihoon wrapped both hands around his neck, tiptoeing slightly to close the gap between them.

Soft lips pressed against his, fingertips searing through his flesh.

His very first kiss, on his very first date.

And all at once, it dawned on him, that this person in his arms was the miracle he’d asked for, this boy made of magic, of music and of light.

Park Jihoon, his very first love.

He broke the kiss, lips moving from Jihoon’s mouth to his cheek, all the way down to his neck and his shoulder.

“S-say something,” Jihoon stammered, eyes closing in a state of reverie. “Anything at all.”

Kuanlin smiled to himself, the distant sound of fireworks rumbling in the faraway horizon.


I love you, Park Jihoon.

In my heart there is only you.

***

After the festivities, Wooseok drove them to the hotel.

Jihoon had already fallen asleep on Kuanlin’s lap, so the moment they arrived, Kuanlin led him to the elevators and into the hotel suite, tucking him safely into bed before returning to the lobby where Yuejun was waiting.

He’d asked for a few minutes of her time, wishing to clear things up between them before she flew
herself back to Taipei.

Yuejun was sitting at the al fresco diner, sipping contentedly at a cup of ginger tea. Kuanlin sat himself across from her, shaking a polite head at the server waiting to take his order.

“I don’t suppose,” Yuejun spoke up, switching naturally to Mandarin. “You’re about to get down on one knee and offer me a thirty-five carat ring in exchange for my hand in marriage.”

“Is that what this looks like?” Kuanlin said, letting slip his mother tongue. “I deeply apologize for having built the wrong atmosphere, if such be the case.”

“Don’t you worry,” Yuejun said. “I’ve expected no such thing.”

“If you must know,” Kuanlin began. “I agreed upon your attendance to this outing having mentally prepared myself for the worst. And by the worst, I mean enduring hatred for you, your kin, and the unjust system by which I’ve been forced so unduly into pre-arranged wedlock.”

“And?” Yuejun prodded. “Have I managed to better your opinion of me, by any chance?”

“More than you know,” Kuanlin admitted. “Somehow… I think Jihoon’s made a new friend. And in many ways, so have I.”

“Good to know,” Yuejun smiled. “I’d hate to be the recipient of lifelong contempt, after all.”

“And that’s why,” Kuanlin said. “I think you deserve to know the truth.”

Kuanlin’s hands balled into fists on both knees, knuckles whitening painfully under pressure.

“And the truth is…” he began. “I can’t marry you, Zhang Yuejun. I just can’t.”

Yuejun’s expression remained neutral, as if she’d known his answer all along. “And why not? I lack for nothing, Kuanlin-ah. Anyone would be lucky to have me as their bride.”

“I know that,” Kuanlin replied. “Believe me, I do. You’re brilliant, athletic, kind… and quite frankly the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. I’d be a fool to let a girl like you go.”

“You’re a fool, Lai Kuanlin,” she whispered, gently swirling around her cup of tea. “I’ve known that from the very beginning.”

“I love him, Yuejun-ah,” he said, not missing a single beat. “And I’d be an even bigger fool to delude myself into thinking I’d be able to live a day without him by my side. And you and I… we go way back, whereas Jihoon and I have known each other for a month. It isn’t nearly enough.”

Yuejun nodded. “But?”

“But I’ve found a lifetime’s worth of happiness in him, no matter how short a time I’ve spent in his company. I come alive whenever he’s near, I see every dream of mine realized in his eyes. His soul sings to mine, and his presence in my life is that lightning in a bottle I can’t ever bear to let go.”

“You love him that much, huh?” Yuejun said. “And you don’t think you’re delusional just because he’s your first?”

“I acknowledge the possibility,” Kuanlin confessed. “And to be honest, I spent quite a while wondering if I’d been right to lay it all out on the line for him, when there is so much more to his story I have yet to find out. And I feared it, too. Knowing that I could be wrong, no matter how
“But without fear,” Yuejun whispered. “There is no courage. And you were brave enough to overcome the doubt.”

“I was,” Kuanlin agreed. “And something tells me that’s what true love is all about.”

“You’re right,” she said. “But if you asked me… I don’t think you’re wrong for liking him. I may have had only a day’s worth of experiences to draw judgment from, but it’s more than enough for me to know that he deserves a guy like you.”

She set the tea against the table, letting it rest as she blew off steam.

“And should there exist a person I’d be happy to lose you to,” Yuejun said. “Park Jihoon is the only one there is.”

Kuanlin smiled, delighted by her seal of approval.

“Thank you,” he said. “For understanding. You’re a blessing in disguise, Yuejun-ah. I hope you know that.”

“I do,” Yuejun said, tapping a finger against the handle of her porcelain cup. “Though before I go… I have something else to tell you.”

Kuanlin blinked, taken utterly aback. “What is it?”

“I’d like to apologize myself,” she said. “For having misled you into thinking I had even the slightest intent of marrying into your family, even though the notion’s been drilled into my head since we were little.”

“Wait…” Kuanlin backtracked. “You were against the marriage, the entire time?”

“Of course,” Yuejun said, as if her motives were evident right from the get-go. “The very idea of a strategic alliance disgusts me, more so as our preferences have been pushed to the sidelines.”

“Then… then why gate-crash our date, at all?” Kuanlin demanded. “You even flew all the way to Korea!”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong,” Yuejun said. “I have my reasons, none of which have anything to do with you.”

She tugged at the silver necklace hidden beneath the folds of her lapel, a familiar crescent-moon pendant glinting suggestively at him.

“The only thing I needed was to find out more about Jihoon,” Yuejun explained. “Determine for myself if he was worth your time at all. A spur-of-the-moment decision made on my part, to be honest, as I’d hate to leave my childhood friend in the hands of someone so irredeemably nasty.”

“Childhood friend,” Kuanlin repeated. “The only friend I can remember was the little boy from across the street who—”

Kuanlin stilled, recalling Yuejun’s superior ball-handling skills at the arcade.

“Wait a second,” Kuanlin. “You’re the little boy?”

“Bingo,” Yuejun giggled. “I’ve changed, haven’t I? Not that I mind having been misgendered for
ten long years.”

Yuejun picked up her cup of tea, and only then did Kuanlin take note of her dominant hand. It was the same hand she’d used to play basketball, to scoop out her dessert, to slot her train ticket through the reading machine.

“You’re left-handed?” Kuanlin asked. “Just like…”

Moonshine, huh? He remembered Seongwoo saying. Doesn’t sound like an alias Chaerin would ever use. And the smudged ink? If she used a fountain pen, chances are she’s left-handed, which Chaerin isn’t if memory serves me right.

“I get it now,” Kuanlin said, Yuejun’s hidden motives slipping out into the open. “You aren’t giving up this alliance for free, are you? You’ve come to ask me for something else, in exchange for letting go.”

“It’s only fair,” Yuejun shrugged. “You did put me through a lot of shame, after all. Though it’s true. Your heart belongs to someone else, does it not? Just for the record, Lai Kuanlin. So does mine.”

It makes sense now, Kuanlin thought. It all makes sense. But of all people…

“And this guy you like,” Kuanlin prodded. “He’s a friend of mine, isn’t he? You gave him a matching necklace, sent it in with a hand-written letter, and used my bodyguard to breach through the school system and deliver the gift straight to his post-box.”

Yuejun smiled, clapping enthusiastically.

“Bravo!” she exclaimed. “What else have you managed to figure out?”

“I think I know what it is that you want,” Kuanlin said, venturing a guess. “Though my head aches just thinking of how my supposed fiancée’s flown all the way to Korea, to pursue a career in fansite photography.”

“It’s a full-blown job,” she shrugged. “And much more rewarding than you could ever imagine.”

She set both elbows on the table, resting her head against the palms of both hands. “He’s just so dreamy… his rapping, his dancing, everything about him is absolute perfection. And his face… he’s so handsome, it’s totally unfair.”

“Fine then,” Kuanlin said, unwilling to sit there as Yuejun fantasized over his closest of friends. “If you help me convince my dad to forget this marriage, let me live my life as I please… I’ll do it.”

“You will?” Yuejun asked, rife with excitement and anticipation. “Promise me you will. I need to hear you say it.”

“I promise,” he said, a man of his word. “I promise, Yuejun-ah. I’ll introduce you to Park Woojin.”

~PANWINK 6 END~

Chapter End Notes
Happy holidays, everyone! I hope you’ve been having fun, as I myself have had a blast since the last (and arguably, the most brutal) semester came to a close. I realize I’ve been AWOL for the longest time, even though I have so much free time on my hands. The thing is, I’ve forgotten how important a season Christmas is in Filipino culture, so I’ve been everywhere attending Christmas parties, post-celebrations, family reunions… the whole shebang, pretty much. And that’s why (apart from my writer’s block, which I’ve managed to overcome, thank the stars) I haven’t had enough time to write and update the story. But here I am now, I hope you like it!

Anyway, this chapter was long, but that’s because I had to fit in everything there was left for Panwink to deal with before the Idol Project officially starts. I had fun writing this, though! Of course I did. Panwink is my ultimate, after all~ And regarding that song they chose… ‘Boy In Luv’ by BTS is an all-time favorite of mine, so I had to have them cover that. Besides… I’ve always wondered how the Justice League (sans Hyunbin) would cover the song, so I guess now I get to feed my own curiosities, by writing in the scenario myself xD

And as for Yuejun… did you guys like her? Shout out to my friend Yuejun, by the way, or YunalalieMoon on AFF, for lending me her beautiful name~ I know you aren’t Woojin-biased, but it had to happen xD I don’t know if any of you saw that plot-twist coming, but maybe if you knew what the word ‘moon’ was in the Chinese, it would’ve tipped you off. (Hint: It's Yuéliàng). And fun fact! Real-life Woojin has a fansite named Moonstruck lol. And for any Chinese readers out there, I literally have no idea how to speak Mandarin, so FORGIVE MY ASS for any translation inaccuracies. I literally asked my friend from Hokkien for the cheesiest pick-up lines she could remember on the fly. So there you go!

Anyway, I hope you liked this chapter! See you when I see you, and thank you so very much for sticking around :)

18th October, 2013. 7:35 AM.

If someone asked me what exactly it is I despise about weekdays, I’d tell them the answer is simple. Everything.

Because weekdays mean having to spend the entire day at school, and even just the thought of that makes me wish I could hibernate until the end of the semester.

Instead, I’m standing guardedly inside of a moving train, already headed for Shinhwa Academy. Earphones in place, I watch the view of the cityscapes pass me by and wonder why a sight so charming and picturesque can barely even offer me the slightest consolation.

Then again, the express route is hardly the easiest, or most pleasant mode of transport. I myself am not a fan of the commute, given the massive throng of civilians jostling each other as the train zips onward, carryalls and knapsacks bumping forcibly against me.

The railcar grinds to a halt, and I stumble gracelessly forwards.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, but the person I’ve knocked into pays me no heed. I suppose I’m lucky, as unwanted attention would break me into a sweat.

You have arrived at Seoul Station, a voice announces over the intercom. Please be careful of your steps as you exit.

I alight onto the platform, the familiar layout of Korea’s grandest transportation hub in view. Before I can find my bearings, however, a figure clad in worn-out denim rushes past, bucking me hurriedly out of the way. I lose my footing, scarcely able to regain my center of balance before I fall altogether to my feet.

It’s as if I’m invisible, I think. Made entirely of air.

Moving past everyone, presence unnoticed, taken thoroughly for granted.

I heave in a sigh, walking dejectedly towards the turnstile and through the brimming exit, where I zigzag my way past a mob of pedestrians.

Everywhere I go I see tired eyes, droopy shoulders, impassive steps and vacant expressions.

As if compelled by duress to drag on, marching not to work but to the nearest execution block.

That’s right, I think. That’s right, Lee Daehwi.

You aren’t alone in your desire not to go where it is you are headed.

Before long, the hulking gates of Shinhwa come gradually into view, five-storey buildings clumped together, looming over me as if to swallow me whole.
I stare at my feet as I walk.

I rush through the gates and avoid eye-contact, be it on purpose or unfortunate happenstance. I keep my face hidden beneath side-swept bangs, eyes darting nervously, head hung in shame, praying to all the gods that today I go unnoticed. I brisk-walk past an unruly crowd, feet treading noiselessly in steady, robotic movements.

*Almost there,* I think. *One left turn and a staircase away.*

“Oh, look who it is,” a scornful voice remarks. “Our little idol wannabe.”

I freeze mid-walk, hands moving to the straps of my backpack.

“Shhh,” another voice speaks up, rife with distaste and mockery. “Don’t say that too loud, or else it might hear you.”

Raucous laughter sweeps through the air, pain shooting through me one spiteful word at a time.

I regain muscle movement in my legs, walking mousily away. My feet quicken in pace, and I find that I’ve stopped caring where it is they take me.

*Anywhere,* I think. *Anywhere but here.*

The footfalls behind me draw nearer. I feel as if I’m sinking into dirt, quicksand pulling me in at the ankles.

“Hey, Lee Daehwi,” another voice calls out, and I jump backwards in surprise as a hulking figure obscures my field of vision. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“C-class…” I stammer. “I… I have Homeroom today.”

“Don’t we all?” he argues. “Not like I asked because I cared.”

I back away, and then immediately regret it. I step accidentally onto expensive leather shoes.

“You’ll pay for that.”

A heavy set of hands shoves me forwards. I lurch and am brought to my knees, asphalt scraping the delicate flesh of my fingers.

I bite back the pain, eyes brimming with tears.

“You crying now?”

“N-no,” I stutter. “I’m… I’m sorry for dirtying your shoes.”

“You should be,” I hear. “These are worth more than your life, you gay-ass piece of shit.”

I unsling my backpack, hugging it to myself.

What comes next?

*Will they steal away my lunchbox? Demand for me to give up my weekly allowance? Embarrass me in public? Or perhaps…*

They surround me, hands outstretched, palms facing upwards.
Perhaps all three.

I unzip my backpack in a hurry, rifling through the contents for my sandwich bag and wallet. My hands shake visibly as I turn them over, like a criminal caught engaging in theft.

“You’re well-behaved today,” one of them says. “Looks like you’ve finally learnt your lesson.”

“Any other man would put up resistance,” the other observes. “You even a man, Lee Daehwi?”

“Stop that,” the last of them scolds. The ridicule is plain in his tone, ripping clean through my brittle composure. “Can’t you see this little girl is frightened?”

My chin is tilted forcefully upwards, and from the sidelines, I notice other students already looking our way.

Strange faces stare at me, filled with contempt.

I see disgust, I see outrage.

_There he goes again, Lee Daehwi. Getting himself bullied. The good-for-nothing weakling won’t even fight back._

And then I see pity. I see sympathy, and regret.

I see cowardice.

_Won’t you help me?_ I think weakly. _Please help me._

My fingers dig into the pavement, cement tearing into my skin. My wallet is thrown at my chest, emptied of cash, and I hear laughter, tongues clicking, footsteps headed past.

My assailants are walking away, no one else left to take responsibility for what I’ve been put through the hundredth time over.

And then, without another word, I wobble to my feet and run for my life.

I barely make it past a hundred steps before fingers close tight against my wrist, and I am pulled into a rigid embrace.

“It’s alright,” an unfamiliar voice whispers. “You’ll be alright.”

Fingers weave through my hair, my head buried against the folds of someone else’s uniform.

“Cry,” he says. “As much as you’d like.”

So I do. I break, and rupture, collapse into arms I’ve never known, weep until I’ve lost all strength.

“Help me,” I whisper.

And then, for the very first time, I hear it.

An answer.

“I’ll help you,” he says. “Of course I will.”
The thing about ‘Boy In Luv’ Daehwi had mistakenly forgotten to consider was that it required a degree of machismo he didn’t necessarily have or could effectively recreate.

Given his performance track record, comprised for the most part of summer hits, ballads, and girl group dance hits, the gruff, and almost turbulent vibe of the song they’d chosen was suited neither to his vocal range nor his public character.

_I might’ve been too ambitious_, he thought, partially scrunching up the lyrics sheet into a crumpled mess in his fist. _In thinking I could pull this one off, when I can barely even grasp the scanty lines I’ve been given._

A couple nights prior, they’d arranged the line distribution for the song with NU’EST W. After much deliberation, he’d been relegated to singing one line in the bridge, and harmonizing with Sungwoon as his backing vocal for when he attempts to hit the high note before the final chorus.

In other words, he had to shine some other way, even though his confidence had taken a nose-dive and his morale had thrown itself into the nearest recycle bin.

In other _other_ words, he was in danger of wrecking their performance, and saying he ‘struggled’ at the rehearsal studios would have been a great, and most laughable mistake.

‘Struggle’ was hardly the right word. He labored, bent over backwards, shed a tear once or twice off-camera. And having been a top-tier student as far as anyone was concerned, him lagging in pick-up and slackening in pace was an embarrassing, unwelcome development.

“More power on that shoulder movement, Daehwi,” JR scolded. “And instead of smiling, glare at the camera. The anger in this song has to look authentic.”

“Yes, I’m sorry,” Daehwi replied, ashamed to have been called out a third time. “I’ll do better, I promise.”

Worst of all, perhaps, was the fact that a full segment of their practice session was on constant record in front of the camera, for documentation on public broadcast. School Idol Project: Produce 101 was set to make its television debut, and the only thing Daehwi had thus far to show off was an unhealthy taste for self-deprecating humor.

“It’s a talent,” he’d said in an interview, when asked of the excuse for his shoddy performance. “I’ve worked on it for years.”

He face-palmed himself violently upon sudden remembrance.

_You have the best timing in screwing things over, Lee Daehwi_, he chided himself. _Now what?_

“Let’s take it from the top!” JR announced. “And this time do it right.”

They practiced the choreography for a couple minutes more, Daehwi singing and dancing as he went with the fiercest glower he could possibly muster.

“That’s it,” JR encouraged. “That’s how it’s done. And Jinyoung, switch places with Kuanlin for that last count. You move around way too much in formation.”
The song blared on incessantly as they rehearsed, until it half-mutated into grating noise in Daehwi’s ear.

He danced in tune with the beat to the best of his abilities, keeping both expression and graceful movement in mind.

*If you can’t sing as well as they do,* he thought. *Then at least give Bangtan’s dancing the justice it deserves.*

“That’s all for now,” JR exclaimed. “I’ll give you guys a break, an hour at most. Use it wisely! Self-deliberation is key in all this.”

“Yes, sir!” They rang out in chorus. Even Minhyun chimed in as they spoke, JR gracing him with fond glances and affectionate smiles. Jaehwan’s scowl hardly escaped Daehwi as they interacted, looking all the while as if he’d stepped into a squishy pile of muck.

“You’re overdoing it with that stare,” JR critiqued, noticing the expression of gloom Jaehwan threw his way. “We’re here to look intimidating, not constipated.”

Laughter rang across the room, and Jaehwan cast a mortified look at each one of them, cameras panning steadily towards him in perfect synchronization.

He shuffled out of the room into the adjacent studio, the only sanctuary of liberation from SBC channel’s imposing equipment. The rest of them filed out silently behind him.

After they moved into the room where they’d left their backpacks and their snacks, the eleven of them broke out into smaller groups to eat, head to the bathroom, or conduct self-cam missions elsewhere.

Jinyoung and Jihoon, the break-out stars of the program, were sitting by the door of the room. They were filming themselves as instructed by the video producer, and only then did it occur to Daehwi that Jinyoung had, in fact, spent more time with Jihoon that morning than with the rest of Group One combined.

Such a thought left Daehwi’s heart stinging, and yet the level-headed, more sensible side to him insisted that Jinyoung himself had no choice in the matter.

*He’s doing it for the camera,* Daehwi thought. *And even if he’s not, the both of them are friends.*

*Nothing more, and nothing less.*

Meanwhile, Jaehwan, Minhyun, Jisung, and Sungwoon were out to buy lunch, whereas Woojin busied himself with emptying Jihoon’s bag of sweets (which, Daehwi suspected, he’d done without Jihoon’s permission).

Daehwi, Seongwoo, and Daniel sat themselves in a tightknit circle, sharing a bag of banana chips between them.

“You alright, Daehwi-ya?” Seongwoo asked. “You look as if the world’s about to end in a few days.”

“Is it,” Daehwi sighed nonchalantly. “Great.”

Seongwoo shot him a look of concern.
“By great I hope you meant oh hell no,” Seongwoo remarked. “If the world has to end, then it should give me time enough at least to spend a couple more nights with Daniel. There are positions we have yet to try, you know. Lots of them.”

Daehwi grimaced at him, index fingers moving upwards to safeguard his ears.

“No, I don’t know,” he exclaimed. “Neither did I have to.”

“You…” Daniel began, cheeks reddening in utmost disgrace. He leaned in slightly towards Seongwoo to whisper discreetly into his ear, even though it failed rather miserably as Daehwi overheard the X-rated conversation. “You mean to tell me there’s even more? How many of them are there? And on a scale of 1 to I’m-not-doing-this, how painful are they?”

“Curious?” Seongwoo teased, eyebrows wiggling playfully. “So this twelfth one goes a little like —”

Daniel’s hands flew to muffle Seongwoo’s voice, nervous laughter escaping him as he turned down the volume.

“Seongwoo, babe,” he exclaimed. “You’re amazing, and I think you’re beautiful, but there’s a time and a place for everything.”

“A time and a place, huh,” Seongwoo repeated, flashing him a look of contemplative mischief. “Wanna sneak into someplace private then, so we can have this lovely time you speak of between us?”

Daehwi gagged at the risqué suggestion. “If by that you mean sexy time,” he muttered. “Then by all means. But don’t count me in, I’m outta here.” He rose to his feet before Jisung could take stock of the exchange, and file that restraint order he’d been threatening for days.

*How could you, Ong Seongwoo,* he could almost hear Jisung screeching in his ear. *These are my babies!*

“He’s kidding, Daehwi-ya,” Daniel said, hurriedly grabbing Daehwi by the wrist. “You’re free to stay. We aren’t going anywhere.”

Daehwi returned to where he’d been seated, flashing Daniel the aegyo-charged pout he’d always been fond of. “You mean it?”

“Sure,” Daniel chuckled, pulling Daehwi into a brotherly hug. “Sorry about that.”

“Your boyfriend is scary, hyung,” Daehwi whined. “How come you tolerate him, just like that?”

“He’s fiendishly good-looking,” Daniel explained. “Can’t exactly resist. Besides, he’s really good at, uhm… what he does best.”

Daniel blushed, angling his body away from Seongwoo to conceal his flustered expression, effectively hugging poor Daehwi even tighter to chest.

*Can’t breathe,* Daehwi thought. *Why’s this guy so unessentially muscular, anyway?*

“You know what’s really scary?” Seongwoo interjected. “A certain Bae Jinyoung staring daggers our way. Don’t know about either of you, but I’m supremely disinterested in acquainting myself with the pad of Jinyoung’s foot if he charges us top-speed and greets our faces with a full-blitz flying-kick.”
Daehwi turned to Jinyoung, whose murderous gaze softened palpably upon the barest eye-contact between them.


“I get it now,” Daniel concluded, pushing Daehwi gently away. “He’s gotten jealous.”

“I don’t think he’s the jealous type,” Daehwi asserted. “And I’ve been corrected for getting jealous, once. How could he lecture me with a straight face on, if he can’t even practice what he’s preaching himself?”

“You know what they say,” Seongwoo shrugged. “The guiltiest of men are the first to point their fingers.”

Daehwi considered this for a small moment.

“Besides,” Seongwoo added. “It might be fun to rile him up for once, all things considered. Argue otherwise if you’d like, but he’s straight-edged by default and that can get boring.”

“I don’t like the sound of this,” Daniel began, eyes wavering in observance of Seongwoo’s naughty expression. “Look, he’s already put on that face he wears whenever he’s scheming the ground-breakingly stupid.”

“What’s all this about getting Jinyoung-hyung jealous?” Kuanlin spoke up, as he’d apparently wiretapped the discussion from behind them.

“Perfect timing, Kuanlin-ah,” Seongwoo exclaimed. “Scoot over this way, I’ve got something to tell you.”

For an awkward moment, Kuanlin and Seongwoo engaged themselves in a stare-down of heightened proportions, caught exclusively in wordless debate. Sure enough, Kuanlin folded eventually, plodding over to Seongwoo’s side unhurriedly. Seongwoo flashed him a triumphant grin, snaking an arm around his neck by the collar to whisper secretively into his ear.

“Hyung, that’s…” Kuanlin began, trailing off the further he listened. “If I do that, I can guarantee you Jinyoung-hyung’s busting out his torch and his pitchfork.”

“That’s half the fun, isn’t it?” Seongwoo assured him, nudging his side by the elbow.

“Besides,” he added. “Daehwi stands firm on his assertion that Jinyoung isn’t of the sort to care. Why not prove it, then? Can’t have Jihoon over there hogging the attention now, can we?”

Kuanlin stared at his fingers, twiddling his thumbs rather skittishly together. “Now that you’ve mentioned it, I… I do wish they weren’t always together.”

“Mhmm,” Seongwoo murmured. “And remember, they have a couple name, and you don’t.”

Kuanlin’s ears perked up, caught hand and foot by Seongwoo’s painful reminder.

“Now that,” Kuanlin agreed. “Is entirely unacceptable.”

“Right,” Seongwoo exclaimed, humouring his dongsaeng unflaggingly. “So now that we’ve established—“

“Daehwi-ya!” Kuanlin interrupted. “Let’s go get some practice.” He staggered to his feet, pulling Daehwi along by the arm.
“W-wait a minute,” Daehwi protested. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to just—”

Before he could put the rest of his sentence into words, Kuanlin’s hands slid to his waist and to the back of his knees, sweeping him clean off his feet.

“Kuanlin-ah!” Daehwi exclaimed, circling both arms around Kuanlin’s neck. “Put… put me down, please.”

At that very instance, Daehwi’s eyes landed upon Jinyoung, who’d already gone slack-jawed in awe.

“What… what are you…” Jinyoung stammered, voice replete with displeasure as Kuanlin sashayed across the room, carrying Daehwi bridal-style in both arms. Jihoon relieved him of the video camera, sure he’d drop it and set them back a couple million won should his appendages go numb temporarily.

A burst of satisfaction ran through Daehwi at the sight of Jinyoung’s palpable envy. He chastised himself for it nonetheless, overcome with shame and guilt.

“If you promise to help me practice,” Kuanlin bargained. “I’ll do it.”

“I get it,” Daehwi acceded, a vibrant hue of pink suffusing both cheeks with a healthy, rosy glow.

Kuanlin offered him a gummy smile, the sight of it warming Daehwi’s heart with adoration.

“I’ll forgive you for that,” Jihoon declared. “If you tell Woojin I’m paying him back for ransacking my backpack and looting my food.”

“I didn’t do it,” Woojin argued lamely, crumbs from Jihoon’s mallow pie dotting his chin like overgrown stubble.

“Woojin-hyung,” Kuanlin called out, settling Daehwi onto the ground. “Jihoon-hyung’s paying you back for cleaning out his dessert stash.”

Woojin blinked at him, popping chocolate-stained fingers into his mouth. “So… does this mean I get more food?”

“You thief!” Jihoon shrieked, scrambling to his feet to chase Woojin out the room. “You traitorous, pot-bellied thief!”

They sprinted out the corridor one after the other, the sound of Woojin’s protest echoing from across the hallway.

“I have abs!” Daehwi heard him say. “And you should thank me for that. You’re on a strict non-dairy diet!”

Seongwoo let slip an entertained laugh, pleased entirely by Woojin’s side-splitting antics.

“Those two need a couple name,” he observed. “I christen them 2Park.” He brought the bag of chips to his lips, emptying the crumbs into his cavernous mouth.

“Don’t I get one?” Kuanlin sulked. “I feel cheated.”

“Your time will come,” Seongwoo assured him. “We save the best for last, after all.”

Daniel sighed defeatedly, sure at the onset of the pointlessness to Seongwoo’s childish tomfoolery.
“We’re sorry, Jinyoung-ah,” Daniel spoke up. “Don’t get mad or jealous. Seongwoo’s at fault here for being irresponsible.”

“I’m not jealous,” Jinyoung countered, louder than was necessary. Daehwi studied his churlish expression, and how his fists trembled by way of self-restraint.

“What are they up to?” Daehwi whispered to himself. “Now even Daniel-hyung’s gotten caught up in Seongwoo-hyung’s juvenile antics.”

“Forgive them,” Kuanlin chuckled. “They think as one, these days.”

“Right. But… why’ve you carried me all the way over here?”

Both of them were standing by the wall parallel to the mirror, huddled in a corner away from everyone else.

“We need space,” Kuanlin explained. “The ‘Boy In Luv’ choreography does involve a lot of movement, if you recall.”

He pinched both of Daehwi’s cheeks affectionately. Daehwi cast a sideways glance Jinyoung’s way, half-expecting to see him still seething in rage. Instead, he was sitting rather peacefully by Jihoon’s side, eyes closed and palms resting at the knees.

Daehwi spent a solid five seconds on figuring out if he’d been doing yoga, communing with spirits, or perhaps even attempting to attain nirvana.

“It’s inner peace restoration,” Kuanlin suggested. “A brilliant idea. I’d hate to be on the receiving end of a martial artist’s unchecked temper, after all.”

He retrieved the sheet of paper he’d pocketed within the folds of his sweater, neat scribbles dotting its margins in abundance.

“And I’m not sure if I should be saying this…” Kuanlin added. “But I kind of noticed how lost you’ve been looking as of late.”

Daehwi peered into his eyes, conscious of how they regarded him with concern.

As if you’re hiding, they seemed to say. Holding frustration at bay beneath a guise of understanding.

“Ah,” Daehwi exclaimed. “So you’ve noticed.”

“I do that too,” Kuanlin explained. “Takes one to know one.”

Daehwi tilted his head slightly to the side. “Do what?”

“Play charades. Pretend as if nothing’s wrong. Attempt to shoulder the burden alone, despite the help available.”

Daehwi knotted his fingers together. “Pretense comes a lot easier than having to admit I’m severely lacking.”

Not with this much at stake, he thought.

Not if admitting to the barest shortcoming is succumbing to the oppressor shoving my weakness down my throat.
“Hyung,” Kuanlin said, addressing him in a way he’d never once done before. “Did you ever stop to think that you’re wrong in leaving your sense of self to the likes of other people?”

Daehwi blinked, unsure of what to say.

“My sense of self… From other people?”

Kuanlin nodded, smiling heartily at him. “If you listen less to what others have to say and more to the standards you’ve set for yourself, it starts becoming much less difficult for you to do the things that matter. And by that, I mean the things you really want to do, as opposed to whatever it is your peers have come to expect of you.”

Kuanlin reached out towards him, combing through his hair with gentle strokes of his fingers.

“That’s how you’ve managed to overcome them, right?” he continued. “Those people who’ve given you torment. That’s why you’ve decided to apply for this school. For you to shine, excel, be in your element for once. For you to prove all the skeptics wrong.”

For a moment, Daehwi wondered if he’d unwittingly leaked the shameful details on his youth, and if so if he’d done it under the influence of alcohol.

“You… you know of them?” Daehwi asked, incredulous. “Those bullies I encountered in middle school?”

“Not really,” Kuanlin admitted. “Though I might’ve heard of them from Jinyoung-hyung.”

Daehwi’s eyes widened into full-on saucers. “How come he knows about them? I’ve never even…”

Kuanlin shrugged, flashing him an impish grin. “Beats me. Think of the things you might've said to him that one time you'd gotten drunk.”

He stood himself up, walking over to his backpack to swipe it from the cubby hole. He reached into its depths, retrieving a handful of snacks he’d prepared.

“Here you go,” he said, handing over a box of Daehwi’s favorite cookie sticks. “I know you like these best since they remind you of home.”

Daehwi accepted Kuanlin’s thoughtful offering, smiling ‘till his cheeks hurt at the kindness in his gesture.

*If only, Kuanlin-ah, he thought. If only I’d met you sooner.*

“Thank you,” Daehwi said. “I have been a little down in the dumps, now that you’ve mentioned it. This song’s proven more problematic than I’ve first been expecting, but having you around really does lighten the load.”

“Careful, now,” Kuanlin warned. “If Jinyoung-hyung heard you, he’d misunderstand.”

“He won’t mind,” Daehwi responded. “And both of us are roommates, he knows you and I do lots of skinship.”

“Then why do I feel like a dartboard, with someone out there fixated on the bullseye?” Kuanlin shot a split-second glance at Jinyoung, who turned away instantly after getting caught staring.

“Cute,” Daehwi giggled. “He’s looking this way.”
“Quite obviously so,” Kuanlin agreed, side-eyeing Daehwi provocatively. “You seem happy.”

Daehwi blushed, perturbed by the fact that even the barest, least discernible of details could scarcely even escape Kuanlin’s hawk-eyed notice.

“Shh,” he whispered. “Keep it under wraps while I savor the moment.”

“Should we practice, then?” Kuanlin suggested. “The rest of them are on break, so…”

“We can toggle with the music ourselves,” Daehwi supplied. “Sounds like a plan.”

He and Kuanlin made their way to the Bluetooth speakers they’d set up, hitting reset in order to connect their own devices.

“I heard you’re working on the rap after Woojin’s,” Daehwi exclaimed. “Need any help with the arrangement? I can offer my expertise, if you’d like.”

Kuanlin grinned at him delightedly, unfurling the page he’d scribbled onto.

“So for this part I was thinking…” he began.

Both of them launched into an extensive discussion regarding Kuanlin’s revised lyrics. Having been the most experienced amongst them in terms of composition and songwriting, Kuanlin had chosen Daehwi as a mentor of sorts in helping him prepare for his solo breakdown. They practiced his lines a couple of times in succession, and only then did Daehwi notice how vastly improved Kuanlin’s enunciation had become.

Despite this, however, rapping entirely in Korean was a feat Kuanlin had yet to get used to, so they decided to play it a bit safer this time around and have him rap the first line in English.

“Perfect,” Daehwi remarked, after what might’ve been the twentieth do-over. “You’re good to go, Kuanlin-ah.”

“Thanks, hyung,” Kuanlin exclaimed. “You’re the best.”

He hugged Daehwi to himself, Daehwi giggling in the warmth of his embrace.

Seconds later, something bonked against the top of Kuanlin’s skull, jerking them away from each other.

“Ouch,” Kuanlin exclaimed, rubbing the back of his head to soothe the short-lived biting sensation. “Jinyoung-hyung, that hurt!”

“Sorry,” Jinyoung exclaimed, wearing the least apologetic expression known to man. “I forgot to call out your name.”

Daehwi squatted by the area Jinyoung’s toy had crash-landed, probing the miniature contraption between his fingers.

“Is this a fidget cube?” he wondered out loud. “It’s the gift I gave Kuanlin for his birthday.”

“I’m returning it,” Jinyoung exclaimed. “I’m less fidgety now than I am utterly beleaguered.”

“Big words,” Kuanlin remarked. “I think it means ‘jealous’.”

“No,” Daehwi pouted. “It means, ‘I’m callous and immature and it’s wrong for me to hit other
He cast Jinyoung a surly look, clucking in disappointment.

Jinyoung turned away, hurt and confusion passing briefly through his features.

“I’m sorry,” he frowned. “I should never have done that.”

“It’s alright,” Kuanlin replied. “I’ll be more careful around your boyfriend next time.”


“Break’s over!” Jisung announced, cutting their discourse short.

A shame, Daehwi thought. *I rather liked the embarrassed expression.*

Jisung called them over to gather round in circles, for them to discuss the transitions and rework the choreography. Daehwi sauntered over to his water bottle, rereading Kuanlin’s notes as he walked. After having taken a meager sip, he trudged absent-mindedly past everyone, lost entirely in thought.

Moments later he collided head-on with solid mass, the scent of Bae Jinyoung’s signature perfume assailing his senses. He looked up in surprise, and discovered that Jinyoung had, in fact, planted himself in the space between Kuanlin and the path he was traversing to get there.

“So where are you going?” Jinyoung asked, eyebrows scrunching attractively together.

“So over to Kuanlin,” Daehwi replied, struggling not to lower his gaze from Jinyoung’s eyes to his lips. “I have questions to ask. Lots of them.”

Jinyoung sighed, inching casually forwards. “Can’t I answer them, instead?”

Daehwi released the breath he’d been holding.

*Why am I like this?* Daehwi thought. *I can’t even think straight when he’s near.*

“If you can perform Kuanlin’s rap break,” Daehwi spoke up. “Then sure, I guess.”

“Ugh,” Jinyoung groaned. “I can’t rap to save my life.”

Daehwi stole a glance at him, hampered by his stubborn curiosity.

“Jinyoung-ah,” he began. “You aren’t jealous of him, are you?”

Jinyoung froze, gaze falling to the floor. He scratched the back of his neck agitatedly, and Daehwi wondered how even a gesture so mundane could be so unbearably attractive.

“Jealous…” Jinyoung began. “Why… why would I be?” He inserted both hands into his pockets, shrugging almost offhandedly. “There isn’t any reason for that.”

Daehwi pursed both lips together, a struggle to downplay the rapid surge of disappointment.

“Ok,” Daehwi said. “Well, I guess you’re right.”

“Are we complete?” Jisung asked, scanning through their faces. “If so, we need to—“

He paused mid-sentence, eyeing the gaping hole in their oblique formation.

Daehwi turned away, unsure of how to respond. He shuffled sideways, unable to calibrate Jinyoung’s current stream of thought.

*Have I angered him?* He thought. *Or was I right the entire time?*

Jisung groaned, already impatient. “Look here, kids. If you’re in the middle of a lover’s quarrel, then I suggest you—“

At that precise moment, Jinyoung yanked at Daehwi’s arm, pulling him forwards, into his arms, and into a full, and shameless kiss.

Daehwi’s eyes widened into saucers, or maybe into plates. He had no idea, because the only things he could think of were Jinyoung’s lips, the way he tasted, and how desperately he’d been missing the both of them.

Jisung breathed in audibly as Jinyoung pulled away. “You… Did you just…”

“You were saying?” Jinyoung challenged. “No problems here.”

The rest of them broke into thunderous applause, Seongwoo looking for all his worth like the proudest father in the world.

“Smooth, Jinyoung-ah,” he exclaimed, beaming with pride. “You’ve got more spirit than I gave you credit for.”

“Now channel your mental state into the song,” Minhyun suggested, still grinning himself. “Impress Jisung before he’s stark raving mad.”

“Got it,” Jinyoung and Daehwi said in unison. “Impress Jisung-hyung it is.”

Jisung sighed in defeat, the makings of a smile tugging his lips at the corners.

“Give me no less than your best, you hear me?” he said. “We’re back to practice, boys.”

***

Practice ended at precisely 7:35 P.M.

They’d rehearsed through the song more times than Daehwi could be bothered to count, and before they knew it, the sun had set in the west, all of them drained almost entirely of energy.

Daehwi had gone on bathroom break before departing for home. He washed the grime away at the sink, alarmed by how murky the waters had gone as they cascaded in rivulets down the planes of his face. Afterwards, he changed out of his sweat-drenched clothes and into a fresh set of jeans and a T-shirt, combing lightly through unkempt hair with the tips of his fingers.

Jinyoung was waiting by the door for him to leave, so he flung the straps of his bag over his shoulder, scuttling hurriedly out of the bathroom.
If he’d been any less careful, he would’ve bumped into Yoon Taejoon. Literally.

Taejoon was standing by the door to his cubicle, taken aback by Daehwi’s presence.

He’s startled, Daehwi thought. Guess he wasn’t expecting me.

Daehwi side-stepped out of the way, snapshots of their previous encounter flashing through memory.

I wonder if his nuts are working, Daehwi pondered at random. And I wonder if he’ll ask for compensation.

Just as he was about to reach for the door, Taejoon’s right arm crossed over his shoulder, keeping him from sliding through the exit.

Daehwi’s heart hammered in his chest, eyes darting to and fro in search of an alternative.

“Daehwi-ya,” Taejoon spoke up. “We need to talk.”

“We’ve got nothing to talk about,” Daehwi argued, feeling distinctly as if he’d suffocate if Taejoon lingered a second more in his presence. “Now if you’ll excuse me—”

“Please,” Taejoon implored. “It’ll take but a minute.”

The strain in his voice caught Daehwi off-guard, as it spoke volumes of a weakness he’d long thought Taejoon utterly devoid of.

He turned his head sideways, addressing the space between Taejoon and the door. “What do you want?”

“Time,” Taejoon replied. “For us to talk things through. Perhaps tomorrow, if you’d like. After final rehearsals are over.”

Daehwi could hardly even grasp what he was hearing.

Talk? He thought. Since when have you preferred negotiation to blunt physical restraint?

“I’m listening,” he said anyway. “You say a talk. What for? If you think words are better suited to persuasion, then I’m afraid you’ve misjudged the situation. I’m not leaving Jinyoung for you.”

He expected recoil, perhaps even for Taejoon to raise a hand against him.

Daehwi’s guileless, bitter words, however, were met only with the emptiness of silence.

“I’m sorry,” Daehwi whispered, body still facing the door. “I can’t even bear to look at you.”

“Then don’t,” Taejoon said. “You don’t have to. Tomorrow, however… I’ll wish for things to change.”

“Why…” he faltered. “Why do this now?”

“I want closure. And for you to understand.”

“And after that? Are you leaving me alone?”
“If that’s what you want, then fine by me.”

Daehwi’s hands fisted at his sides, and it was all he could do keep himself under control.

You should have said this, Daehwi thought. Before you threatened to take me by force.

Despite everything, however, more than resentment and more than regret, Daehwi’s heart yearned for the one thing he’d long since resolved to let go.

Reconciliation.

Forgiveness.

For them to return to the very beginning, before Taejoon devolved into the shadow of the person—the friend—he’d been just a month ago.

“If you can promise to give me space,” Daehwi whispered. “Then fine by me. Have it your way.”

He made for the exit before his plight could sink in, before the weight of his own words could shut him down and leave him defenseless. Instead, the door swung open of its own accord, Jinyoung greeting him as he stood in the doorway.

He’d been wondering what had taken Daehwi so long.

“Daehwi-ya, aren’t you done yet?” he asked. “I’ve been waiting for—“

His eyes found Taejoon then, and instantly his countenance morphed into displeasure.

“You again?” he demanded. “Haven’t I made it clear that I’ve lost tolerance for all of your doltish party tricks?”

He moved into Daehwi’s space, but instead of letting him charge past, Daehwi held fast to his wrist and his forearm, giving him a gentle shake of the head.


“D-Daehwi-ya…” Jinyoung began, heated gaze mellowing distinctly.

“It’s alright,” Daehwi assuaged. “This time around… he did nothing wrong.”

His fingers sought Jinyoung’s for warmth, as if to anchor to them for support.

“We should leave,” he whispered, striding promptly towards the open door. “The others are waiting for us at the lobby.”

He gave Jinyoung’s arm a sharp tug, wrenching it almost out of its socket. He staggered through the exit and broke into a jog, in no mood for meandering about where Taejoon still lingered in ballpark proximity.

Once they arrived at the lobby, they found the rest of Group One on standby. For reasons unknown, however, the vestibule of Pledis Studio felt less of an arrival area than a bolted enclosure, and the longer Daehwi idled about, the more he felt like a jailbird held prisoner.

The journey home felt much the same way.

Daehwi’s hands had gone clammy by the time they arrived, though he never would’ve noticed had
Jinyoung refused to let them go.

“I’m sorry, Jinyoung-ah,” Daehwi began. “I never meant to frighten you.”

Jinyoung gave him a curt nod, eyes beset with worry. Daehwi reached for his shirtsleeve then, tugging gingerly at the folds.

“I had no idea,” he explained. “No inkling at all. If I’d known he was in the same building, then I never would’ve—“

“Are you hurt?” Jinyoung interrupted. “Tell me, Daehwi-ya. Where did he touch you?”

Daehwi’s mouth fell open, unsure of his next move. He’d run his spiel through beforehand, laying the groundwork for the best possible excuse.

*I never thought I’d run into him.*

*I’ve already talked him into leaving, but it’s come to no avail.*

*If he’s changed for the better, can’t I agree to a confrontation?*

*It’s my fault, Jinyoung-ah. I should’ve kept my mouth sewn shut.*

Jinyoung’s concern, as it happened, was a variable he didn’t think to prepare for.

“Jinyoung-ah,” Daehwi began. “You’re… you’re not angry?”

“Rather than that, I’m worried,” Jinyoung admitted. “If only you knew, Daehwi-ya. Of the things he said he’d do to you when last I encountered him.”

Daehwi bit his lip, floored by Jinyoung’s vindication when it came to Taejoon’s discrepant behaviour.

“I get it,” Daehwi replied. “It must have been hard for you to hear.” He strode across the room, crossing the distance between his station and Jinyoung’s frigid stance by the door.

“Was it that bad?”

“More than you’d think,” Jinyoung whispered, both arms encircling Daehwi’s waist as if to hold him fastidiously in place. “He was an asshat, Daehwi-ya. I could’ve molded his face into the shape of my fist.”

Daehwi giggled, intrigued by his unusual choice of wording.

“Will you tell me?” he asked. “What he’s said to you?”

Jinyoung averted his gaze, reluctant to proceed.

“What if I tell you,” he began. “And it proves unbearable? I can’t put you through that, and then absolve myself of blame.”

His fingers slid to Daehwi’s lower back, pressing their bodies even closer together. “I can’t hurt you any further without hurting myself.”

“I’ll get through it,” Daehwi urged. “Please. Jinyoung-ah. Trust me on this one.”
He rested a cheek upon Jinyoung’s chest, listening in to the rhythmic pounding of his heart.

“I can’t remember the rest,” Jinyoung whispered. “But he did say, once… if I’d taken your first kiss, other firsts were up for grabs. And I knew… exactly what he meant by that. It repulsed me, and I hated him for it.”

Moisture pooled in Daehwi’s eyes and clouded his vision. At times like these he’d wipe them away, pretend they never happened, but for the first time in his life, Daehwi cared not for crying. He embraced his tears and let them come to him, let them freefall down his cheek. He let them linger, then disappear into Jinyoung’s cotton shirt, and then, one at a time, he let their many sorrows go.

_I no longer know him_, Daehwi thought. _He’s no longer the person I once run to and befriended._

“Was that when you snapped?” he forged on.

“That word,” Jinyoung whispered. “Isn’t nearly enough to describe how I felt in that moment. Somehow… I felt betrayed.”

“Why is that?”

“Your heart,” Jinyoung said. “I understand what’s in there. As if your feelings are mine, too. All of them.”

“Of course,” Daehwi smiled sadly. “My heart does belong to you, after all.”


“Stop,” Daehwi interrupted. “Not now. If I hear another apology escape those lips, I’m going to kiss them until they’re swollen.”

Jinyoung let loose a rumble, low in his throat, until Daehwi came to realize it meant he’d taken the warning seriously.

“I’ll take the kiss,” he whispered then. “Anytime.”

Daehwi tilted his chin upwards, peering into Jinyoung’s eyes.

_Say you’re sorry_, he thought. _Give me the excuse I’ve already been hoping for._

In response to his silent plea, Jinyoung’s fingers slipped away. They slid to his neck, grazed the skin by his cheek, pulled him even closer until they breathed as one.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “For being so goddamn selfish.”

Daehwi let slip a giggle, pleased beyond rational thought.

“I’d never dream,” he whispered back. “Of holding that against you.”

With that, soft, berry-flavored lips crashed hungrily into his, and the last thing he remembered was Jinyoung’s hand locking the door behind them, before he was slung across one shoulder and swept right off his feet.

***
If Daehwi could jot down a list of places he’d expect to visit in the future, an expensive seafood restaurant would never have been one of them.

And most certainly, not for the very life of him, would Daehwi expect to be at said restaurant, with Yoon Taejoon sitting across from him, offering valiantly to pay for everything.

“I don’t understand,” Daehwi faltered. “This is Sapphire Bay. What are we doing in here?”

“Eating,” Taejoon replied, tearing through the steak with his cutlery. “I suppose you’d be aware of what restaurants are built for.”

“Never knew that,” Daehwi remarked, hoping for his sarcasm to show through. “How’d you manage to score a reservation?”

“Remember Go Hyunwoo?” Taejoon said. “This place is part of a chain of restaurants his family owns.”

“Ugh,” Daehwi said, grimacing upon hearing the name of the person he’d known as Go Haechan’s brother. “I thought his father was a politician.”

“And a business mogul. Dabbles in just about everything. But that’s hardly the point.”

Daehwi’s plate of hanwoo beef arrived moments later, and try as he might to resist, the aroma of the tender meat was more than enough for him to lose his senses.

He lifted his knife and fork, determined to scarf down the full-course meal before he had an excuse to get up from the table.

“You’re enjoying,” Taejoon observed. “That’s a relief.”

“You said you’d leave,” Daehwi countered. “After you’ve said your piece.”

“You’re right,” Taejoon nodded. “I did say that.”

“And? What have you to say for yourself?”

For a small moment Taejoon stared at him in silence, watching him eat his fill. Daehwi, in turn, shifted awkwardly in his seat, unused to protracted attention.

“My piece,” Taejoon began. “Is that I loved you.”

Daehwi’s heart stilled, frozen in solid ice.

“Since that day at the infirmary,” he continued. “From then on to this moment. I’ve loved you.”

***

18th October, 2013. 8:25 A.M.

“I’m late for Homeroom,” I groan. “Again.”

“Why is that your primary concern?” The boy in front of me asks. “We’re at the infirmary, Lee
Daehwi. Both your hands and knees have been scraped raw, and you’ve already bled through your shirtsleeves twice.”

He’s sitting across from me, dressing my wounds, after having cleaned, disinfected, and treated them with antiseptic. I watch his fingers expertly working through the gauze, unsure of why and how he’s learnt to do that.

“I volunteer at this place from time to time,” he says, and I wonder if I’ve been thinking out loud. “In exchange for hot meals, and lots of useful medicinal knowledge.”

“Is it your dream to become a doctor?” I inquire. “If so, your future seems rather promising.”

“Far from it,” he admits. “I’ve always dreamt of becoming an idol.”

I gape at him in shock, and he speaks as though I should have seen it coming. “Why is that surprising?”

I smile at him, pleased, and he stares at me in wonder.

“Have I offended you?” I asked him. “I never meant to. I just… I thought I was the only one.”

He grins at me blithely, jolly laughter escaping him as he shakes his head thrice. “Of course not. I know they call you an ‘idol wannabe’… but I myself am one, too. It just so happens that they pick on you because you’re runty and never fight back.”

“Did… did you just say runty?”

“Runty,” he repeats, settling both hands against my lap after having cleanly secured the dressing. “Pocket-sized. Doll-like. Puny.”

I stifle a grimace, sticking one lip out instead. “Well, I suppose I’ve already heard worse.”

“Here,” he says, pushing his cellphone towards me. “Input your digits into this thing. If they come for you again, I’ll run over and protect you.”

I accept the device with hesitant fingers, half-convinced I’ve been lied to conned. “Why, all of the sudden? I’ve never met you and I don’t know your name.”

“It’s Taejoon,” he says, smiling in a way I’ve never been smiled at before. “Yoon Taejoon.”

“I’m Daehwi,” I tell him, belatedly recalling he’s already spoken my name. “But you’ve already known that, haven’t you?”

He nods, gaze coasting downwards to the floor. “I’m not a stalker of yours, I promise.”

“Then what are you?”

His eyes return to mine, and in them I see sincerity, where before I’ve beheld only the blankest of slates.

“A friend,” he suggests. “If that’s what you’d like.”

“A friend,” I whisper with bated breath. “I don’t… I don’t have any of those. Not really.”

“Me neither,” he admits. “Unless the nurses and the doctors here count.”
I giggle, and he watches me carefully, wondering what in the world he’s thinking.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I ask, and beneath the marvel in his eyes I see my reflection. As if I’ve gone into the looking glass, and am perceiving my own vestige of sadness.

“Do I make you uncomfortable?” he asks. “If so, then I’d like to apologize.”

“No need,” I say, returning his phone after I’ve given him my number. “Here you go. And thanks for the treatment.”

“Will I see you again?” he asks. “Tomorrow? Or the day after that?”

I smile, and reach out to rumple his very neatly-styled head of hair. “Maybe so. I’m one call away, after all.”

He smiles back, hugging the phone to his chest.

“Got it,” he exclaims. “Then I’ll dial your number every single day.”

I nod once more, beyond happy I’ve met someone like him. I think of how it hard it must’ve been, for him to drag me all the way to the infirmary, but I remember how diligent he’d been about everything. From comforting me, to holding me close, to making sure I’ve been properly administered.

“Are these bandages occlusive?” I ask him. “I think I’ve forgotten to bring my umbrella.”

“They aren’t,” he said. “You can’t get them wet. And certainly not with contaminated water.”

“You mean the rain? Then if it does pour, I’ll wait ‘till it’s over before I head home.”

“Good idea,” he agrees. “If you’re bored I can provide you some company.”

I look to him then, still unsure of why a person like me, small and insignificant in the eyes of many, has managed to pique his mysterious interest.

“One last question,” I say. “Before I head to class. How come you know my name?”

He clasps both hands together, looks at me with ardor.

I wonder if I’ll ever get to see anyone else look at me the same way he does. With fervor in his eyes, as if he can promise me the moon and the stars.

“You saved me,” he whispers. “With that voice of yours. I guess with it, you could say… I’ve fallen quite deeply in love.”

***

Daehwi had to admit it.

When Taejoon first mentioned he’d fallen in love, that day they first met, it never occurred even as afterthought for him to take the confession seriously.
We were children, at the time.

Innocent, inexperienced, jaded.

How could I possibly have known?

“Love at first sight, huh,” Daehwi mused. “I’d tell you it’s make-believe, but then again I’ve experienced it myself.”

“I should never have suggested that you apply for this school,” Taejoon said. “That way… you would never have met him, Bae Jinyoung. In a way it’s my fault things have gone in this sequence.”

“You were different then,” Daehwi said. “You weren’t unkind, or aggressive. You knew when to persevere, and when to hold yourself back. You never breached into my space, or made me feel uncomfortable. You understood, with no need for words. My only real friend at the time.”

Taejoon set down his utensils, clasping both hands together at the table. Daehwi could see the splotches of red where he’d applied heavy pressure, as if to regain his sense of touch in places gone numb from the pain.

“All those things they said about you,” Taejoon said. “I didn’t care. Weak, spineless, gay… it didn’t matter. If you saw those flaws as fatal, then I did too. And only because despite them, I’d have killed to make you mine.”

“Taejoon-ah, that—“

“All I wanted,” Taejoon continued. “All I’ve ever wanted was for you to love me. Because in this life, I have only you.”

There you go again, Daehwi thought. Speaking in riddles.

In codes undecipherable, as if to keep me from cracking you open.

“And what of your family?” Daehwi pressed. “Aren’t they with you?”

Even as friends, Taejoon refused to mention his life at home, and a part of Daehwi knew his background was filled to the brim with secrets.

“I’ve said it before,” Taejoon sighed. “I really can’t tell you that.”

Taejoon looked at him, apologetic, as if to say, maybe one day. Far, far down the road.

“You say you love me,” Daehwi said then, still struggling to puzzle him out. “Then why go that far? You threatened to rape me, Taejoon-ah. How can you expect me to forgive you for that?”

“I was out of my mind,” Taejoon said, gaze pinned to the floor and looking utterly ashamed. “I was desperate. I still am. I still want you.”

“But I…” Daehwi began. “I thought you wanted closure!”

“I do. I do want closure. But not until I’ve said my final plea.”


“Persisting,” Taejoon replied. “Is a thousand times easier than having to give up. Do you wish for
me to tell you why?”

Daehwi met him with silence, no words enough to express every feeling.

“You’re the strongest person I’ve never met,” Taejoon said. “And so the weak can never hope to love you.”

He reached across the table, holding both of Daehwi’s hands in his.

“And giving up, Lee Daehwi,” Taejoon said. “Is the weakest thing I could’ve possibly done.”

Tears, Daehwi thought. *Why do they come to me so very easily?*  

It never used to be this way.

Even in middle school, when I was bullied every day.

Even when I needed you there to keep me safe.

“There’s a certain strength in letting go,” Daehwi whispered, pulling both hands gently away. “If you’d done that peacefully, I would never have blamed you. You would never have hurt me, and we could have been friends.”

“Would you have given up on him?” Taejoon asked. “On Bae Jinyoung. Would you have given up, if he had begged you to?”

No, Daehwi thought immediately. *The very idea would never cross my mind.*

“Now do you see where I’m coming from?” Taejoon whispered back. “And I admit. My methods have been misguided, thus far. And I’ve been ostracized for the things I’ve done, too.”

Daehwi cast him an impassioned glare, only then recalling Taejoon’s devious schemes.

“Friends I once thought I had still give me hell for the promotion exams. To this very day. Because I plagiarized your music.”

“You deserved that,” Daehwi barked contemptuously. “You’ve no idea how hard I worked on that song.”

“I’m sorry,” Taejoon apologized. “I should never have done that.”

“It’s too late. The damage has been dealt. I won’t ask you to apologize for what you’ve already paid for.”

“Then give me a chance,” Taejoon pleaded. “Just one more. If tomorrow, our group does well… if we receive a score higher than yours… give me a chance, Daehwi-ya. One more chance is all I need.”

“Do you love me, Taejoon-ah?” Daehwi asked. “Have your feelings remained the same?”

“Of course,” Taejoon nodded, not missing even a beat. “They never changed.”

“But you have,” Daehwi whispered. “Painfully so. And from that, there is no turning back.”

Daehwi shook his head once, decision final. “And I barely even know you. Not anymore. I’ve lost faith, and certitude, my ability to rely on you, and you alone. And I can’t ever tell… when I’ll ever
Daehwi looked into his eyes, stared into his soul, even then finding the strongest of barricades he had no hope of splintering through.

Something about him was different, as if he lived and breathed secrets Daehwi would never be allowed to find out. And he thought, yes he does love me. Maybe so.

But is there a point in leading him on?

Not when we’re this different.

Not as long as I am day, and he is night.

One longing to kiss the other, and yet destined for eternity never to meet.

“I’m sorry,” Daehwi whispered. “I can’t do that. I can’t give you any more chances.”

“You already know. Saying it out loud would hurt all the more.”

“Even then,” Taejoon said. “Just say it.”

Daehwi’s eyes forced close, cheeks streaked with tears. He thought a dam had broken within him, threatening to spill right over.

“When I met Jinyoung,” Daehwi began. “That very first night. I’d just gotten a confession from a long standing friend of mine, and he’d done what I could never having imagined he’d been capable of. And it scared me, made me feel unsafe. So the very first chance I’d gotten, I ran. Away from him and everyone else.”

Taejoon heaved in a breath, already sure of what he’d say next.

“And that friend of mine, Taejoon-ah,” Daehwi said. “That friend of mine was you.”

“I knew that,” Taejoon whispered, his pain-filled voice breaking Daehwi’s heart.

“I spent the afternoon at the library, after that. Right by the shelves tacked to the back wall. I thought I’d lost you, then, and I thought I’d die before I could face you. Because you’d forced a kiss upon me, and I’d hated it. I hated you. And I never once thought such a thing could happen. So before I knew it, there I was. Squatting by the shelves, eyes bloodshot and exhausted, until finally I cried myself to sleep.”

The memory of that night hurt him still, but where hatred and spite had been, there bloomed a brand new hope Daehwi thought had long since been robbed of its blossoms.

“The librarian found me there after doing the rounds,” he forged on. “She woke me up, and sent me away. So I made for the door, and walked through the corridors, listless in torpor and lost in thought. Until I heard it. The sound of his music. And it saved me, Taejoon-ah. It brought me back to life.”

Taejoon nodded, and Daehwi took it for understanding.

“You saved me, too. I suppose you’ve simply paid my feelings forwards.”
“I thought I’d dreamt it, at first,” Daehwi admitted. “So I crept by the door to peek into the room. I saw his face, that of an angel, the way his fingers danced by the keys of the piano. And from then it began. A love from which there is no saving, at a place from where there is no return.”

“What is it,” Taejoon asked. “That you like about him?”

“Do you ever look at someone,” Daehwi asked. “And think, wow I love them. And then you ask yourself why, because your feelings confuse you, terrify you, and yet try as you might, the answer won’t come. Because the reasons… they’re beyond explanation. They’re beyond words, or rational thought, speak of an emotion far greater than any language can ever hope to describe.”

Daehwi smiled, every memory he’d shared with Jinyoung rising to the surface. He felt his tears in torrents, and yet he made no move to rub them away.

“That’s how much I love him,” Daehwi said. “Indescribably. Irredeemably. For every reason there is, and no reason at all. Just because. And sometimes, I hate that. I think it’s unfair. But overtime, I’ve learnt to cope. I’ve learnt to profess my love for him, to express one by one the smaller reasons for why exactly it is that I do. So I say, I think you’re beautiful. I like your smile. Your hands are warm and are meant for holding. And in that way, he understands, even without knowing… that I love him. And he knows just as well that it’s the love of the sort you can never, ever hope to put into words.”

Taejoon was hurt, and Daehwi could tell, but he persisted in asking anyway. “Why love him then, and not me? What can he offer you, that I won’t?”

“For as long as I’ve known you, you’ve offered me the stars,” Daehwi replied. “Everything that glitters and shines like gold. You’ve made hefty promises, and not once did I doubt or think you’d never keep them.”

“Is that so wrong?”

“But did you know this, Taejoon-ah?” Daehwi whispered. “You and I are stars— we’re made of much the same things as they are. And so I never wanted them, because I have them already within me.”

Taejoon laughed almost bitterly. “And Jinyoung?”

“Jinyoung-ah was different, because he offered me the moon. And in many ways he was, just as bright, and just as beautiful, even the side of him he’d kept dark and hidden. And just as the moon needs a star to shine its light, he let me help him, and then kept me safe, and for once in my life I felt so very, very important.”

Daehwi retrieved his messenger bag from the seat next to him, slinging it over his shoulder.

“And that,” Daehwi said. “Is why I love him. So much more than to the moon and back.”

Taejoon released the breath he’d been holding, eyes glazing over.

“Don’t you cry,” Daehwi warned. “Or else I’ll feel even worse than I do now.”

Taejoon let slip a soundless laugh, half between amusement and dejection.

“So if I’d been just a little more honest with you,” he said. “If I’d shown you the more vulnerable side to me… if I didn’t try this hard to impress you… would things have been different?”
“I guess now,” Daehwi responded. “We’ll never know.”

Taejoon took a sip of his champagne, and only then did Daehwi remember he’d already been old enough to drink.

“I was much too afraid to tell you,” Taejoon confessed. “Of all the things I’ve been through. Maybe if you’d known… you’d have understood just a tiny bit more.”

“You never let me in,” Daehwi agreed. “Even though you’ve seen the worst of me plenty of times.”

“If you knew,” Taejoon said. “You’d look at me differently. Pity me, even. I could never have let that happen. I’d hate for you to see me so weak.”

Daehwi shook his head in disbelief.

“Those wounds of yours… Don’t keep them to yourself anymore.”

“Easier said than done. The wounds I’ve suffered may have healed overtime, but the scars they’ve left behind are just as ugly as when first I sustained them.”

“Nonsense,” Daehwi insisted. “They aren’t ugly. Or hideous. Or disgusting. Or anything you should be remotely embarrassed of.”

“What are they, then?”

“A tally,” he said. “Of all the things you’ve gone through in life.”

The memory of their first meeting at the infirmary returned to him, of how Taejoon helped him heal, and many times over how he’d nursed him back to health.

*Those scars of mine were yours to care for.*

*I was more than willing to do the same for you.*

“Scars are proof of the battles you’ve fought,” Daehwi said. “The difficulties you’ve survived through. A reminder of who it is you’ve endured them for.”

He removed the napkin sitting by his lap, standing himself up from the table.

“So wear them with pride, Taejoon-ah,” Daehwi suggested. “For the more of them you have, the stronger you become.”

“If you say such things,” Taejoon said. “It’d be harder for me to let go.”

“You do know,” Daehwi reminded him. “That I haven’t entirely forgiven you, right? For everything you’ve put me through.”

“Yeah,” Taejoon nodded. “I already knew that. Can’t exactly complain. But I do promise to set things aright, this time. If you need space, then so be it.”

“Why the change of heart?” Daehwi asked, suspicious. “When last you confronted me… I was frightened. You bruised my arm. And I almost permanently disabled your testicles.”

“I have my reasons,” Taejoon said. “Most of them much graver than you’d think. But I am sorry. I admit I wasn’t thinking straight. And knowing you and Bae Jinyoung were dating… it lit a match
within me and set me ablaze.”

Daehwi nodded, an indication that he’d been listening.

*At least you’re honest enough to say so.*

*As for the rest of them…*

“Still not sharing?”

Taejoon settled his wineglass back onto the table. “Give me time. I’ll tell you later on.”


He tore at the Velcro of his bag, fishing his wallet from its depths. He slapped a couple of bills onto Taejoon’s side of the table. “Here’s my share of the meal, by the way.”

Taejoon grinned, pushing his money away. “I don’t need it.”

“There you go again,” Daehwi said. “Putting up a front. You can’t expect me to sit around and let you pay for all this. A meal at this place costs a month’s worth of desserts at the Imugi.”

“I have discounts,” Taejoon explained. “Employee discounts. I wait tables at this restaurant.”

“You… WHAT?” Daehwi blinked, mouth falling open.

“Don’t be looking so surprised. I have my own bills to pay.”

“Bills? How come you have them? We’re students.”

“Hospital bills,” Taejoon clarified. “Not as easy to pay for as you’d think.”

“Hospital…” Daehwi repeated… “Are you… are you sick? You’re not terminally ill, are you?”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Taejoon said, waving him away. “I’ll tell you later on. But if you aren’t letting me pay for dinner, then at least let me hail you a taxi.”

Taejoon wiped at his mouth with the table napkin, standing and walking over to where Daehwi stood.

“Like I’ve said,” Daehwi repeated. “Suit yourself. I’m leaving.”

After paying for dinner, they stepped out of the restaurant and onto the street, examining the road for empty vehicles.

“Aren’t you leaving yet?” Daehwi asked. “It’s getting late.”

“I have a shift,” Taejoon explained. “And the tips have been rather sizable. It’s the *Idol Project* effect.”

That very moment, a taxi parked right in front of them, and Daehwi moved in to replace its passenger, almost bumping right into him before he noticed it was Bae Jinyoung.

Jinyoung spared him a single glance, but as soon as he and Taejoon locked eyes, all hell broke loose by the foyer.

Jinyoung sprinted towards him, taking him by the collar, with no mind for how ridiculous their
difference in size might’ve been.

“Don’t even start,” Taejoon warned, tugging at Jinyoung’s fists by his throat. “Even just looking at your face already pisses me the hell off.”

“Jinyoung-ah, don’t,” Daehwi pleaded, pulling him away by the waist. “There’s nothing for you to get angry about.”

“But didn’t he…” Jinyoung began. “Your eyes. Haven’t you been crying?”

“I’m crying,” Daehwi clarified. “Not because of him, but because of you.”

“Yeah, okay, but he… wait. What did I ever do?”

“For now,” Daehwi said. “We should get going.”

He waited a moment for Jinyoung’s hands to set Taejoon free, and for him to calm down a bit more.

“Goodbye, Taejoon-ah,” Daehwi said, gesturing to the taxi still wondering if he’d been interested paying for a ride. “I’ll see you around tomorrow.”

“Taejoon… Taejoon-ah?” Jinyoung repeated. “You guys have been cozying up to each other behind my back? Is that what this is?”

“I don’t get you, Lee Daehwi,” Taejoon remarked, scowling at Jinyoung fiercely. “Loving a judo freak like him… I really don’t get you.”

“It’s hapkido,” Jinyoung clarified. “Get your facts straight, at least.”

Taejoon shrugged. “Same difference.”

“Yeah, we should go,” Jinyoung agreed. “I can’t lose my shit in public spaces.”

“Yeah, you get lost,” Taejoon said. “I still happen to think you’re a scum of the earth, but Daehwi says he likes you, so I’ll let this slip.”

He strode towards Jinyoung, giving him the evil eye. “And you take care of him. Because the moment he gets hurt… is the moment he’s mine for the taking.”

“Funny,” Jinyoung laughed. “When you’ve hurt him much more than you’d think.”

“We both have,” Taejoon argued. “And yet here you stand. The clear winner.”

“It might be a different story tomorrow,” Jinyoung shrugged. “At the Idol Project. I’ll do my best, so you should too.”

“Goes without saying. The best revenge is success, after all. I’ll look forward to putting both of you to shame.”

“Likewise,” Jinyoung said. “Goodbye, Yoon Taejoon. And may the best man win.”

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Back at the Imugi, Daehwi ordered Jinyoung a cup of Quince Tea, thinking him in need of blood pressure regulation.

“You’re kind of cute when you’re jealous,” Daehwi remarked, causing Jinyoung to effectively choke on his tea. “You make it remarkably obvious.”

“I wasn’t jealous,” Jinyoung exclaimed. “I was just… a little confused, that’s all.”

“Confused, huh? Yesterday, you threw a fidget cube at Kuanlin’s head for no reason.”

“I wasn’t jealous,” Jinyoung insisted. “I was curious as to the sort of clonking sound the cube would make against his cranium.”

“You kissed me in front of everyone.” Daehwi continued.

“Daniel-hyung kisses Peach front of everyone,” Jinyoung argued. “And that cat slobbers, when you don’t.”

“Then why follow me out to Sapphire Bay?”

“I was craving Shrimp Fried Rice.”

“You’re allergic to shrimp, Jinyoung-ah.”

“Well, I… Wait. How’d you know that?”

“Besides,” Daehwi added. “Fried rice is hardly a staple in fine-dining. And even if you’d mentioned caviar to make the excuse more believable, I’d never peg you for the type to frequent a joint so disgustingly extravagant.”

“Fine,” Jinyoung sighed, throwing both hands up in surrender. “I overheard your conversation with Taejoon by the phone last night, and I was much too embarrassed to ask if I could tag along. I hardly have any rights to butt in when it comes to your personal business, but Taejoon… he and I aren’t on the same page. Or the same wavelength to begin with. And I was taken with worry, so I did the unreasonable.”

He sipped distractedly at his tea, fingers rubbing at the cup for warmth.

“Besides,” Jinyoung added. “From afar, it looked suspiciously like a date. It got my blood boiling. I never imagined you’d dine at a place so romantic without it having been me to take you there myself.”

Daehwi blinked at him, more pleased then he’d imagined such a thought would’ve made him.

“You’ve thought of taking me out to a fancy restaurant?”

Jinyoung blushed beet red, and Daehwi thought he could get used to that look. “I… Was that what it sounded like?”

“Nevermind,” Daehwi sighed. “Let’s not delve into that any longer. I’m already uselessly getting my hopes up, as it is.”

“Daehwi-ya,” Jinyoung began, leaning in slightly towards him. “You should never have agreed to this. I’ve warned you, haven’t I? Of how dangerous a guy like Taejoon is. He could very well have eaten you alive. Or asked for your hand in marriage, depending on the situation.”
“The only thing I agreed to was a talk,” Daehwi clarified. “To finally get the both of us some closure. He told me we were going someplace more serene, since he didn’t want to stir the media up into a frenzy. I had no idea he had Sapphire Bay in mind.”

“But why give in?” Jinyoung asked. “Are you... are you giving him a chance?”

“I wanted it,” Daehwi said. “Closure. An end to it all. For him to know, conclusively this time, that I’d never be able to return his feelings. And he was civil about it too, though he did ask for me to give him a chance if their group does better than we do tomorrow.”

Jinyoung gaped at him, caught entirely off-guard. “And?”

“I refused,” Daehwi said plainly. “Because it’s impossible, win or lose. For me to look at him the way he wants me to. Not when you’re standing in the way.”

“You make it sound as if I’m an obstacle,” Jinyoung sighed.

“You are,” Daehwi agreed. “One I’m still actively attempting to overcome.”

Jinyoung cast him a sullen look, in it entombed the sort of guilt Daehwi was fast getting exhausted by. “Daehwi, I—“

“Stop,” Daehwi interjected. “You’re about to say you’re sorry, aren’t you? For making me wait.”

I’ll wait ‘till skyfall, if I have to, Daehwi thought. Because I love you, Bae Jinyoung.

You already know that.

And painful as it is, you’ve always been worth it.

“I’m at a loss, here,” Jinyoung said. “Because I... I really am that, you know. Sorry. And following you in there was the bitter cherry on top.”

“You could’ve been spotted on your way out,” Daehwi said. “It’s easier for people to recognize you, these days. Risking it was thoughtless.”

“You’re right,” Jinyoung conceded. “I get it. I’ve been immature.”

He ruffled his hair in agitation, a gesture Daehwi always found extraordinarily captivating. “And to be honest I... I don’t understand why I’ve done this, either. Why I’ve pushed my boundaries and gone this far.”

He chugged down the rest of his tea, and Daehwi watched in almost ardent fascination his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down as he swallowed.

I’m starting to notice all these things, Daehwi thought. I’m in way too deep, and it hurts.

“It’s unlike me,” Jinyoung confessed, relieving Daehwi of his bleak stream of thought. “Very much so. Getting jealous, suspicious, protective... I tend to keep things like that to myself for as long as I’m able. But something about seeing you with a guy like him just rubs me the wrong way. And these days I’ve been provoked one instance too many.”

“Sorry about that,” Daehwi apologized. “You’re right. Maybe I should’ve given you a heads up. I just... I wasn’t sure of how to bring up the topic of what may seem like a dinner date, given how last time you met Taejoon, you almost sent him flying into kingdom come.”
“I could’ve done much worse,” Jinyoung admitted. “Those things he said about you… even if he did seem like a charmer today, it could very well have been a disguise. He’s lied to you before, if you remember.”

“I do,” Daehwi said. “And the idea did occur to me, once. And yet… here I am. And nothing’s happened.”

“You sure?” Jinyoung said, cross-examining him as he spoke. “He didn’t hurt you?”

“Barely even lifted a finger,” Daehwi assured him. “I think Taejoon, he… he’s finally come to his senses.”

Jinyoung, however, still wasn’t buying it. “I’d hate to be a cynic, but… a turnaround this abrupt is quite unbelievable.”

Daehwi nodded. “I agree. I don’t know what exactly it is that might’ve triggered him… but I did see a hint of sincerity in him. I don’t think I’ve ever seen any semblance of the Taejoon I once knew, until he promised to give me space from now on.”

“He said that?” Jinyoung exclaimed. “What’s up with him? Did he fall sick, or anything of the sort?”

“Come to think of it,” Daehwi mused. “He did mention having to go to the hospital.”

“Hospital?” Jinyoung exclaimed. ”That wouldn’t be my fault, would it? I never meant to injure him. Not permanently, at least.”

“One of these days we might come to find out,” Daehwi said. “For now… I’m just happy you and I are back together. Physically, at least.”

Jinyoung smiled at him, offering a hand. Daehwi took it with no signs of hesitance, pressing the back of Jinyoung’s hand to his lips. They strolled out of the café together, unmindful of the attention they were getting.

For a long while they simply walked through the campus in silence, content in each other’s presence.

Minutes later, they reached the hedge of the Outdoor Plaza, where the cobblestone path to Stella Peak began. The residence halls sat atop the small hill, right next to the Yeouiju Observatory where Daehwi spent most of his idle time.

“I know we don’t always see eye to eye,” Jinyoung said then. “But to be honest, I don’t think I’ve ever been as scared in my entire life than I was when I saw you with him.”

Jinyoung stopped in his tracks, performing an about-face in Daehwi’s direction.

“It all came crashing back to me,” he whispered, pushing strands of Daehwi’s hair behind his ears. “Everything I’ve put you through. How many times you’ve had to say the words I’ve never had the spine enough to say back in return.”

He extended both arms outwards, gesturing for Daehwi to step into his arms.

“And it suffocated me,” Jinyoung added, removing the woollen scarf he’d been wearing to slip it over Daehwi’s shoulders. “Thinking that I finally pushed you over the edge. That you’d come to realize this game of chase was over, and someone else was waiting in the wings for you to give up
on everything we’ve shared altogether.”

He tugged gently at the scarf, pulling Daehwi even closer. He rested his head against Daehwi’s, until it felt to him like they’d occupied the same space on earth.

“I misunderstood,” Jinyoung said. “And I didn't known if he'd threatened you, or if you came to him willingly, and neither did it matter at the time. I was just desperate to correct my mistakes. To have you back where I thought you belonged.”

Daehwi looked into his eyes, inches in distance, one small movement away from kissing him. “And where is that?”

“Where else?” Jinyoung whispered. “Where else, when I can’t even bear to see you look at others, with the smile I always thought was reserved just for me? When I’ve gone mad in thinking you’d leave, such that I’d tail you, follow you around, do the very things I once despised in people I’d thought so imprudently loyal. I can’t even tell you when it started. Me wanting you, instead of him. Every waking moment consumed by thoughts of you, instead of his. Every dream of mine a confession, those three words as you say them, over and over again. And every nightmare of you leaving. The way I thought you would tonight.”

Jinyoung’s words as he spoke them sank into Daehwi’s skin, each and every syllable a prayer.

*Please, Daehwi thought. Don’t take him away.*

“And when I came to, there I was,” Jinyoung said. “Twice the fool and half the man, deeply in love with you.”

He leaned into Daehwi’s space, embracing him as tight as was possible, until Daehwi could no longer breathe.

In his mind, however, the only things he could think of were the last four words Jinyoung had spoken.

*Am I in a dream?*

“I said I’d do it, right?” Jinyoung whispered. “Fall in love with you. And I have. Much, much sooner than you’d think.”

They pierced at Daehwi’s heart, those words. They set it aflutter, gave it wings, let it sing its song in heartbeats.

That very lightness of being was a feeling he’d experienced only once before, when he and Jinyoung first met.

It reminded him of the way he fell in love, as fast as the wind and as sure as the sun.

Of the way Jinyoung’s music spoke to him, as if in a language shared privately between them.

Of the way Jinyoung’s soul sang a symphony he’d gladly spend an eternity listening to, piece by piece and note for note, until he could strum the lasting music with the strings of his bursting heart.

*As if to say, you’re made of fire, Lee Daehwi. And I’d let you ravage me a thousand times over.*

“I’d have come for you, you know,” Jinyoung admitted. “If he’d hurt you. Doesn’t matter where he’s taken you. The only thing I care about is keeping you safe.”
Daehwi pulled slightly away, peering into both of his eyes. “Even if I’m oceans away?”

Jinyoung smiled, and Daehwi wished the hundredth time over for the sight of his smile to last a lifetime in memory.

“Those oceans of yours,” Jinyoung whispered. “Can only wish they were half as wide as my love for you is deep.”

He leaned in as Daehwi tiptoed forwards, pressing their lips together.

*I miss this, Daehwi thought. The scent of your skin and the taste of your mouth.*

“I read it in a book once,” Jinyoung said after pulling away. “That the Eskimos have fifty words for ‘snow’, and the English have a hundred words for ‘goodness’. I can only wish for a million ways to say I love you, but that’s all there is. I love you.”

At the sound of the words he’d been waiting to hear, the feelings Daehwi kept hidden and bottled up within him triggered an avalanche that coursed through his being.

“I love you,” Jinyoung repeated. “More than words, I love you. More than the stars above, I love you. And more than all our yesterdays, I love you.”

He kissed the top of Daehwi’s head, and Daehwi could no longer tell if the warmth searing through his flesh came from his scarf, or from his lips, or from his presence altogether.


Daehwi’s heart burst into floods of emotion, and leaning into Jinyoung’s embrace was all he could do not to buckle entirely.

*I’m so happy, Jinyoung-ah,* he thought, eyes brimming with tears.

This time, he was glad they came.

“I never thought it possible,” he whispered. “For a person to cry not out of sadness, but out of joy.”

Jinyoung laughed and held him close, sharing in his warmth and his happiness.

“Daehwi-ya,” Jinyoung said. “You still… you still love me, right? I’m not getting rejected a second time?”

“Of course not,” Daehwi assured him. “I was made for loving you, Jinyoung-ah. And these lips of mine were made for saying so.”

“Romantic,” Jinyoung remarked, grinning playfully at him. “Where’d you learn *that* from?”

They’d arrived at the door to Daehwi’s room, where Jinyoung typically dropped him off before heading to bed.

“I read it from a book once,” Daehwi teased. “Or perhaps I’m a romantic at heart.”

“Was that all they’re made for?” Jinyoung asked then. “Your lips. For saying that you love me.”

Daehwi flashed Jinyoung an impish grin, slotting his key into the hole, and almost sedately turning the knob to their bedroom.
“I guess not,” he smiled, turning up the switch. “You coming in? Kuanlin isn’t home yet.”

“Why?” Jinyoung teased. “You have some activity in mind?”

Daehwi yanked at his arm, inviting him in. “Of course,” he said. “The night is young yet, Bae Jinyoung. And since we’ve made it official… I think I’d like it if you kept me some company.”

***

18th October, 2013. 5:56 P.M.

Rainy seasons in Korea hardly classify as my favorites.

The heavy downpour lasts for hours on end, and I dislike having to spend more time in school than is entirely necessary. Furthermore, my umbrella’s gotten stolen, and I’ve long since given up on attempting to pinpoint the singular culprit.

*It could well have been any of them, I think. Those kids who pick on others half their size.*

I steal a glance at my wristwatch, sure I have to return home before dark. I’ve yet to stop by the market to pick up some groceries, and the shops by our apartment closed precisely at seven.

“Should I run through the rain?” I whisper to myself. “The station’s one stoplight away.”

*Then again, I recall. Taejoon did tell me not to soak my dressing through.*

I tilt my chin upwards, staring dolefully at the clouds. They hang low and grey in the sky, as if to shed their tears until midnight and morning.

“I’m doomed,” I grunt to myself. “I have to find a way to cross the road, somehow.”

My gaze drops wistfully to my feet, water dampening my socks and sloshing by the pavement.

And then, all at once, the water by my feet still succinctly in movement, as if something else above them is keeping the droplets from splashing to the floor. I look up a second time, finding a neon yellow umbrella shielding me briefly from the volleys of rain.

“Here you go,” a small voice speaks up. I turn to the source, where a boy about my size and height and wearing a different school uniform is cheerily holding up the vibrant-colored umbrella. “My friend has a larger one, so the both of us can share. You can keep mine, if you’d like.”

Jinyoung-ah!” Another voice calls out from afar. “Hurry up! The bus has arrived!”

“Coming, Jihoon-hyung!” he yells back. He turns to me, waving a hand in goodbye. “I’m leaving, so you should too. And make sure not to leave that at home.”

“Wait—” I begin, but he barely even hears me, as he’s hoisted his backpack over his shoulder and is sprinting to the bus stop in the rain.

“Thank you,” I call out feebly, smiling to myself in secret. “For helping me out. If by chance in the future I meet you, I’ll remember to tell you I’m grateful.”
“Are you alright?” Jinyoung asked, eyeing Daehwi with heavy concern. “You look almost ready to throw up your dinner.”

The eleven of them were standing nervously backstage, jittery, sweating bullets, eagerly awaiting their turn.

As Group One, they were first to perform.

It might’ve been to their advantage, as their performance was the benchmark, but that didn’t stop Daehwi from thinking it best to run out the back door.

“I’m scared witless, Jinyoung-ah,” he admitted. “I’m not botching this, am I?”

“You’ll do wonders, Daehwi-ya,” Jinyoung said in reassurance. “I believe in you, and so does the audience.”

Moments later, they were ushered to the entrance, one leap away from the stage. Cheers of support rang out in the distance, fans chanting out their names one by one.

“Gather ’round, everyone!” Jisung called out. They huddled in a circle, their hands extended outwards, one on top of the other.

“We’ve already named ourselves,” Jisung said. “So keep it always in mind. Our greeting, our gestures, our goal for the night. To sing our hearts out, and set the bar high. Until every second of this performance is all they can remember.”

They nodded as one, determined—more than ever—to put on one hell of a show.

Jinyoung reached out to Daehwi, squeezed his hand once, and that by itself was all it took for Daehwi’s confidence to return.

_As long as I’m with you_, he thought.

_We are to shine onstage like no other._

As soon as they stepped out, and the blinding lights hit them, cheers erupted all-throughout and resounded in his ear.

_It’s this feeling_, Daehwi thought. _This very feeling. The reason why I’ve dreamt of the stage for so long._

_And this stage, this very moment._

_The first chance we get._

_Our group, Wanna One is to set it on fire._

“One, two, three!” Jisung called out.

Daehwi smiled at the audience, bursting heart on his sleeve.
And then, all at once, eleven voices rang out in unison.

“All I Wanna Do! Wanna One! Annyeonghaseyo, Wanna One innida!”

***

**Daniel:**

I want to be your oppa
I’m so hungry for your love

**Seongwoo:**

I want to be your oppa
I’ll have you, just watch

**Jihoon:**

Why are you shaking up my heart?
Why are you shaking up my heart?
Why are you shaking up my heart?
Shaking up, shaking up

**Daniel (Jisung):**

(Dad), just how exactly
Did dad ask (Mom) out?
Should I write you a (letter)?
(What is this?) I become like dust in front of you

**Woojin:**

You make me so angry and mad for no reason
I’m serious but you make me into a loser
who picks fights with you
Why do I care so much about you?
You’re making a big boy act like a little kid
But I’ll turn things around
From just knowing each other
to becoming lovers

**Kuanlin:**

If you need me I will still be
One last good man in your heart
ABCDEFGH Hakuna Matata

**Daniel:**

Your profile picture is the same
but why do I keep checking it?
Kuanlin:
But don’t misunderstand,
I’m not an easy guy

Minhyun:
I’m getting nervous, I’m getting nervous
Who are you?
Are you that great?
Why do you keep teasing me?
Just stop now, hold up, hold up

Sungwoon:
Hold me tight before I kiss you
Before my heart lets you go
Say what you want
Say what you want
What is it that you really want?

Jaehwan:
Hold me tight before I kiss you
Before my heart lets you go
Say what you want
Say what you want
What is it that you really want?

Jinyoung:
I want to be your oppa
Why don’t you know my heart for you?

Daehwi:
Even if you ignore me
Even if you act cold, I can’t push you out of my mind

Jinyoung:
I want to be your oppa
I will be your man, just watch

Sungwoon/Daehwi:
So that my heart can touch yours
I will run to you right now

Sungwoon/Jaehwan:
Hold me tight before I kiss you
Before my heart lets you go

Jisung:
The Boy In Luv stage was a massive hit.

They weren’t allowed to check their phones, but word traveled fast, and should sources prove reliable, the search term ‘Wanna One’ was trending in South Korea.

And so was ‘Jinhwi’ apparently. Daehwi, however, hadn’t the foggiest idea what that meant.

“That bridge was sensational,” Jaehwan remarked, patting Jinyoung’s back and rubbing Daehwi’s shoulder. “You guys are a match made in heaven.”

“Was it overkill, though?” Jisung exclaimed. “Told you guys we should’ve toned down on the abs.”

“I don’t think they’re complaining,” Jaehwan retorted, assuredly waving Jisung’s worry away. “Daniel even flashed them his right nipple, that one time in the chorus. What more could they possibly ask for?”

“Next topic,” Jinyoung suggested. “Or better yet, we return to the waiting room.”

He took hold of Daehwi’s wrist, guiding him out the exit. By the door to the waiting room, however, a beautiful stranger was standing in the way.

Daehwi rubbed at both of his eyes, half-convinced he’d only seen an apparition.

The stranger in question moved not an inch from her station.

“You seeing what I’m seeing?” Daehwi whispered.

“If you’re seeing Aphrodite’s reincarnation,” Jinyoung responded. “Then yes. I am seeing what you’re seeing.”

They walked hand in hands towards the door.

“Are you looking for someone?” Daehwi spoke up. The girl, a half-inch taller, angled her pretty head his way. She regarded him with sea-green eyes, her crescent-shaped lips turning up at the corners.
“I’m looking for Kang Daniel,” she said. “Have either of you seen him, perhaps?”

“We have,” Jinyoung said. “We’ll, uhm… tell him you’ve dropped by offer to him congratulations.”

“Thank you,” she said, smiling sweetly at them. “Much appreciated.”

“Can we get a name, please?” Daehwi asked, sure Daniel had never once mentioned keeping in touch with a woman so ethereally beautiful.

“Ahh,” the woman exclaimed, eyes twinkling in what may have been mischief. “I’m his number one fan, of course!”

She reached out to shake Daehwi’s hand, the American formal greeting.

“The name,” she said. “Is Song Chaerin. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

~JINHWI 6 END~

Chapter End Notes

Hi there! How’ve you been? I haven’t updated this story in a while, and most of that has to do with my unfortunate health. If truth be told, I was bedridden for a week, and I’ve only just fully recovered maybe a night or two prior to this one. I’d say it’s a shame, since I haven’t been well enough to write, but I did actually enjoy myself as I’ve been catching up on dramas in the meantime! I’m currently hooked on ‘I’m Not A Robot’ (I’ll never understand why it’s rating this low), and I also marathoned ‘My Father Is Strange’, and which I will highly recommend to anyone.

Also, you may have noticed that I’ve decided not to write ‘Boy In Luv’ the way I normally do. In previous chapters, I write the performance in detail, but I’ve decided not to carry that format over to this song. I’d really like my readers to imagine the sequence by themselves, so apart from the line distribution (which I’ve painstakingly worked my way through) I’ve decided not to provide any sort of detail on the visuals or choreography. I’m sure you know how the ‘Boy In Luv’ choreography works (and if you don’t, I suggest watching the PD101 stages for this song, preferably Group 2 as I’ve enjoyed that one better.)

I don’t have much more to say, so I’ll just give you a bit of trivia: Sapphire Bay does not actually exist, but the Namgang Lantern Festival in the previous chapter is for real! And yes, it does occur in October :3 Also, even though Daehwi and Jinyoung have met in the past, neither of them remember it ever happening. You can bet, however, that the neon umbrella’s making a comeback later on xD ALSO! Have you noticed how the chapter titles as of late are related to Produce 101 performances by the boys?

For example:

Beneath The Winking Lights – Jihoon’s wink in Nayana

A Deep, Deep Dark – Jinyoung’s ‘Deep Dark’ Evaluation Performance
Strawberry Sweet Lips, Champage Sweet Liar – Seongwoo’s performance of ‘That’s What I Like’

No Courage Without Fear – Kuanlin’s Rap of Mino’s ‘Fear’

The Boys Are In Love – Daehwi’s Performance of ‘Boy In Luv’ with the Avengers

?? – Daniel next chapter!

Nobody needs to know this, tbh. It’s just a fun fact since I enjoy inventing titles xD
And Chaerin’s made her appearance! I guess we’ll see what she has up her sleeve (I modeled her looks, by the way, after ulzzang Park Sora. If you’re wondering about Yuejun, think IOI’s Pinky instead!) But that’s it for now! I’ll see you in Ongniel 6~

P.S. I’m cutting this fanfic short to just one more round of chapters (but don’t cha worry! As you can already tell, I’m coming to a compromise with the overwhelming length xD)
Daniel might no longer have been into women, but surely he’d remember having met someone as dazzlingly beautiful as the woman now standing before him, snow white skin and sea green eyes temporarily arresting his ability to think.

She was a vision in black, dressed to the nines in elaborate clothing. Her mid-length dress was painstakingly embroidered in delicate, over-sized blossoms, cinched at the waist to accentuate her shapely figure. She stood a few inches taller than Daniel himself, contributing to her imposing countenance. Upon closer inspection, this could only have been attributed to her brand-name stilettos, sharp enough at the heels to kill, themselves inclined at an impossibly discomfiting angle. Over her shoulders she draped a blanket of fur, and Daniel had to wonder how many rabbits were tortured and skinned for their hides in order to tailor and stitch her overcoat together.

Strictly speaking, her remarkable appearance could very well have turned every single head within a fifteen-mile radius.

“Have we met before?” Daniel inquired, mindful of jaundice-filled eyes watching his every move, as if to search through his soul for any signs of recognition. “I’m certain we haven’t, but my friends insist you’ve come looking for me.”

“Your friends were right,” she replied, flashing him a syrupy, almost sickening smile. “I’ve waited far too long for the chance to meet you.”

She stepped forwards with both hands outstretched, pulling Daniel into a stifling hug. Gasps from startled onlookers echoed around the room, transfixed as Daniel’s mystery visitor promptly stole the breath right out of him.


“My bad,” she giggled, pushing herself away. “Sorry about that.” Daniel hadn’t the slightest idea what the expression on her face might’ve meant, but it was the farthest anyone could’ve possibly gotten from looking genuinely apologetic.

_Do I know her from school, perhaps?_ Daniel thought to himself. _That can’t be. I didn’t have any friends before I enrolled into Mireu._

“Your name,” Daniel began, combing his fringe back stiffly. “May I have that, at least?”

“It’s Chaerin,” she replied, disarming him effectively. “I’m a fan of yours.”

Daniel felt his blood run cold upon mention of the name, a disturbing, unwanted chill crawling flat-out through his spine.

_She’s arrived, he thought. And she’s come looking for me._

“Song… Song Chaerin?” Daniel asked warily, afraid to hear his darkest of suspicions confirmed. “Am I right?”
“So you’ve heard of me,” Chaerin smiled, serpentine eyes regarding him coolly. “How come?”

Chaerin’s lenses, alluring as they were, reminded him distinctly of curious monstrosities. He felt as if an ancient basilisk had slithered his way, and was about to petrify him right where he stood.

“How come?”

Daniel swallowed nervously, spooked beyond compare.

*What could she possibly want from me?*

“Seongwoo might’ve mentioned you,” he carefully admitted. “In passing. I do have notable memory with regards to these things.”

“Oh,” she exclaimed, pleased by the notion entirely. “I guess my ex-boyfriend’s missed me more than I’d previously wagered.”

Daniel’s jaw slackened and caused his mouth to fall open, stunned by the unwelcome epiphany.

“Ex... ex-boyfriend?”

“Haven’t you heard?” Chaerin asked, oblivious to bystanders milling about to listen in secret to their piquant conversation. “He and I dated for quite a while—I was his first, and he likewise was mine. We lasted a good year or so in a relationship after that, until I’d decided it was high-time we split before we devolved into chaotic toxicity.”

I don’t understand,” Daniel muttered. “I was under the impression that you’d dated his cousin.”

“Cousin,” Chaerin whispered, proud smile dropping from her guise altogether. “I don’t remember him having a cousin.”

Daniel’s brows knit together, utterly confused. He braved eye-contact with her for the barest of moments, her vacant stare unnerving him and chilling him to the bone.

*What’s her deal?* Daniel thought. *Why the denial of Haechan’s existence? Does she suffer from bouts of selective amnesia, or is she doing this to bait me on purpose?*

*And if so... What for?*

“You don’t remember Go Haechan?” he asked, prying laboriously into her mystifying thoughts.

“I’m afraid the name doesn’t quite ring a bell for me,” Chaerin replied, shaking her head in innocent, almost angelic bliss. “I’ve only ever been in love with Ong Seongwoo, after all.”

Daniel searched her features for any signs of disarmament, any such indication of unease out of guilt for dishonesty.

“This doesn’t compute,” Daniel mumbled, shifting weight awkwardly from one foot to the other. “I could’ve sworn he—“

“Hey Daniel!” Seongwoo called out from behind him, unaware of the dire circumstances at hand. “I heard from the others you’d cozied up to some chick, and I think it’s unfair that—“

Seongwoo stopped in his tracks, only then coming to identify Daniel’s unforeseen guest.

“Speak of the devil,” Chaerin smiled, flipping locks of hair over her shoulder. “Something wicked this way comes.”
Daniel watched in fraught anticipation as Seongwoo stalked over towards the both of them, expression blank and inscrutable.

_Tell me, _Daniel whispered to himself. _Tell me she’s not telling the truth._

“So you’ve arrived, huh?” Seongwoo said, taking a stance by Daniel’s side. His left arm extended outwards, pushing Daniel gently backwards as if to make a barricade of himself between the both of them. “Though I admit, I’d never have known you’d go so far as to escape justice by packing your bags and moving out of the country.”

“Look,” Chaerin began, her tone betraying a certain exhaustion Daniel couldn’t quite verify the potency of. “I understand you despise me still for breaking up with you, but we’re much better off contending elsewhere. The others are watching, and some of them have cameras, recording devices... Those things are likely to incriminate you for sordid behaviour, are they not?”

Seongwoo winced, as if he’d been blackmailed in the past with footage captured behind his back.

“Then stop it with the nonsense, already,” he appealed. “And don’t you dare even return where I can see you.”

“Don’t be so full yourself, Ong Seongwoo,” she warned, reaching out to glide a varnished finger downwards across the fabric of his vest. “This time around I didn’t come here for you.”

“Excuse me?” Seongwoo demanded, swatting her angrily away.

Daniel pulled at the folds of his undershirt, unsure of how best to proceed from there.

“Calm down, Seongwoo-ya,” Daniel whispered. “She claims she’s a fan of mine. Just don’t ask me why.”

Seongwoo turned to him, incredulous.

_Really? _He mouthed.

Daniel nodded curtly, aware of how Chaerin could make sense of the exchange.

“Figures,” Seongwoo huffed. “I should’ve known, Song Chaerin. You do have an awful taste for making advances towards the very people who won’t ever give a damn about you. Why settle for scraps when the finest hunk of meat is up for grabs, am I right?”

Daniel sighed in exhaustion, sure Seongwoo’s spirited demeanour pitted against Chaerin’s unruffled composure made for a bitter confrontation he’d rather not witness.

“It’s cute how spiteful you remain over the past,” Chaerin noted, smirking at Seongwoo triumphantly. “When I’ve almost forgotten we’d ever been a thing. Why not let bygones be bygones, Seongwoo-ya? Your grouchy whining makes you look pathetic.”

_Oh no, _Daniel thought, already panicking inwardly. _Face him down as much as you’d like, but please don’t push his buttons._

Daniel’s arm moved impulsively forwards, tugging frantically at Seongwoo’s wrist.

“I don’t believe this,” Seongwoo exclaimed, miffed by Chaerin’s startling audacity. “Did you just —”

“Besides,” Chaerin interrupted, frightening Daniel all the more. “I’m not here just for the fun of it.
I’ve returned to Mireu for work, and that in itself is beyond your control.”

“Work?” Seongwoo cried out, taken entirely aback. “You mean to tell me you’ve been hired?”

“I guess it’s slipped the vice principal’s mind to inform you,” Chaerin shrugged. “I’ve been offered a job at the Mireu Artist Agency. I work here now, a celebrity stylist. And that, by the way, is an umbrella term for just about everyone about to make their way onstage.”

“Including,” she added, flashing them a lopsided smile. “The both of you. Unless of course, you’d rather show up butt-naked in public.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” Seongwoo exclaimed. “As if I’d let you anywhere near my defenseless body ever again.”

“Def—defenseless body?” Daniel stammered. “What… what is that supposed to mean?”

“If you think I’d let go of this opportunity,” Chaerin smiled, eyes glinting with threatening mischief. “Then I’m afraid you’ve gone right off the hook.”

She stepped contemptuously forwards and into Seongwoo’s space, until the floral appliques sewn to her bosom tickled the fabric of Seongwoo’s rumpled uniform.

“Remember, Seongwoo-ya,” she whispered, draping an arm casually over his shoulder. “You and I have business left to take care of. This time, however… I’ve taken it upon myself to make things official.”

A torrent of jealousy came over Daniel, angered by the proximity between them.

*Stop that,* he thought. *Don’t touch him.*

“We should go,” Daniel urged, tugging at Seongwoo’s arm with enough force to rock him off-balance until he fell back into Daniel’s waiting arms. “I don’t… I don’t think I like where this is going anymore.”

He pushed Seongwoo away by the small of his back, steadying him.

“Besides,” he added. “The others are watching. I’d hate for a misunderstanding to occur at a moment this crucial.”

“Yeah,” Seongwoo agreed, blushing for reasons Daniel couldn’t fathom. “Congratulations, Song Chaerin. Your timing’s impeccable, as per usual.”

“I missed you too,” Chaerin teased, blowing him a kiss. “But I’m Daniel’s fan now. You’d better have stepped up your game if you wanted me back.”

“Step up yours if you think I still care,” Seongwoo argued. “Let’s get going, Daniel-ah. That’s fifteen minutes of my life I’m never getting back, and I’d rather get myself disqualified from the Idol Project than waste even a couple seconds more on this garbage.”

He took Daniel by the hand, leading him away, leaving Chaerin in the dust behind them.

As soon as they were out of earshot, by the farthest corner of the backstage area, Seongwoo let go of Daniel’s hand out of embarrassment for how violently his own was shaking.

“This is madness,” he whispered to himself. “Why now, of all times? Why does it have to be when I’ve finally inched a step closer to my dream?”
“Are you alright?” Daniel asked, still unable to figure out why Seongwoo’s eyes filled with such terror in Chaerin’s presence. He inferred that Seongwoo’s unplanned declaration of Chaerin having attacked him while incapacitated might have had something to do with his spooked reaction, though Daniel decided that, in the meantime, he’d like to leave the gut-wrenching thought alone.

“This is Jung Wooseok’s fault,” Seongwoo complained, agitatedly running his fingers through his hair, messing up its elaborate styling. “He should’ve warned me of her return.”

“You asked for Wooseok to track her?” Daniel inquired, unsure why the notion still confounded him when it was very much a Seongwoo thing to do. “I thought she was hounding you herself.”

“I paid for Daehwi’s release with information on Chaerin’s whereabouts,” Seongwoo explained. “And her eventual return to Go Haechan. Did I forget to mention that? Whoops, my bad.”

“Don’t you dare ‘whoops, my bad’ me!” Daniel bellowed. “I should’ve known of all this ages ago! Is this why you’ve been so skittish as of late? Because you’re expecting her to turn up at our door at any moment?”

“Look,” Seongwoo began, hands in the air in voluntary surrender. “I understand that her arrival is ultimately my fault, as I’m sure Wooseok pulled his own strings for her to show up this way, but I never would’ve imagined she’d ask for you first. And believe me, I had every intention of protecting you and keeping you away, but her radar just—”

“Wait a minute,” Daniel interjected, appalled by the situation at hand. “If you wanted her to return so you could hand her over to Haechan like a sack of potatoes, then why demand for her to leave? Why tell her to scram? I could’ve sworn you—”

Daniel halted mid-sentence, gears and pinions in his brain rotating.

His mouth dropped as everything fell long overdue into place.

“Took you a while to figure things out,” Seongwoo remarked. “Though I suppose it’s easy to forget I’m an A-class student in another Track, given my devotion to this fancy competition.”

“Your world-class acting skills are undoubtedly frightening,” Daniel observed. “Might be wise to reconsider everything I’ve heard from you, thus far.”

“I had to pretend, you know,” Seongwoo explained. “It’s a nifty little trick I like to call ‘reverse psychology’. Demand for her to leave, and expect for her to do precisely the opposite. Chaerin’s predictable that way. She does whatever it is that I tell her not to.”

Seongwoo’s eyes darted to and fro at that point, scanning the vicinity for signs of clandestine movement, security cameras pointed their way, any such indication of an invisible audience watching them in total silence from afar. Once certain the coast was clear, he led Daniel by the hand towards an empty room, far-removed from everyone else.

“Seongwoo-ya,” Daniel began. “What are you—“

All at once, Seongwoo’s plush lips pressed fervently against his, wresting Daniel of his ability to think, speak, or breathe even just for a moment.

Nothing on earth made sense any longer, and neither did he care for as long as Seongwoo’s mouth moved expertly against his, drowning him one kiss after another.

Months ago, Daniel would’ve hated this. Back against the wall, pinned firmly into place, olfactory
senses honing in on the evocative scent of Seongwoo’s musky perfume.

More than anything he would’ve hated Ong Seongwoo, whose dire exertion of dominance provoked him, irked him to no end, forced him anyway into grudging submission.

These days, he could never have enough.

And for that, he hated himself.

Seongwoo’s mouth moved from his lips to his chin, grazing sensitive skin as little shivers of pleasure coursed through his body.

“Seongwoo-ya,” Daniel whispered, his lover’s mouth trailing downwards to kiss the base of his neck. “Seongwoo-ya, that…”

“Hmm?” Seongwoo whispered back. “What is it?”

“N-nothing,” Daniel stammered, dazed by the delightful sensation of Seongwoo’s mouth against his skin, the rest of their limbs still entangled together.

“I just…” he began. “That…”

Seongwoo’s hands fumbled with the top-most button of his undershirt, coming undone with swift motions of slender, skillful fingers.

“That what?” he asked.

“Ahh,” Daniel blushed, guiltily aroused as Seongwoo nipped at the skin by his collarbone. “That… that feels kind of nice.”

“Is that what you’ve been meaning to say?” Seongwoo chuckled, pushing slightly away. “I can’t tell. You’re giving me that bedroom-eyes look again, and honestly, it’s driving me insane.”

He smiled, wiping at the lip gloss smeared by the side of Daniel’s lower lip.

*I’m no match for that smile,* Daniel thought. *I just can’t get enough of it.*

“These kisses too,” he sighed. “I can’t seem to get enough of them, either.”

Both his arms snaked around Seongwoo’s neck, pulling him in even closer.

“More, please,” he begged. “Just one more.”

The kiss was different this time around, feverish yet chaste, gentle pecks against his lips swollen red.

Daniel rather liked these types of kisses, rare as they may have been where Ong Seongwoo was concerned.

He moved in for yet another, head tilting slightly at an angle.

Half a beat later, he felt a curious vibration in his nether regions, cheeks flushing scarlet as Seongwoo’s gaze laid to rest upon his crotch.

“What… what was that?” Seongwoo asked.
“Phone,” Daniel clarified, fishing the wafer-thin Android device out of the depths of his outermost pocket. “I think I might’ve just received someone’s text.”

“Your service provider has signal in places like these?” Seongwoo asked. “Well, that sucks.”

Moments later, his phone buzzed frenetically, this time alerting him to an incoming call.

“Who is it?” Seongwoo inquired, attempting to read from the device upside-down.

“No idea,” Daniel shrugged. “These digits weren’t saved to my Phonebook.”

“Is that so?” Seongwoo replied. “Could be dangerous enough to warrant our precaution, then. Give it here, Daniel-ah. I’ll take it.”

Daniel swiped at the call icon, pressing the phone to Seongwoo’s left ear.

“Hi there,” he said. “Daniel has you on speaker, so please don’t yap into my eardrum, whoever the hell you are. Unless you’re pushing some variant of spam, in which case I suggest that you put the phone down. I am not—I repeat not—interested in your collateral loans whatsoever.”

“You were better off with the loans,” Wooseok’s husky voice growled over the phone. “But I take it you’ve met Song Chaerin? Though I must admit, your blazing temper is a feat of nature. That reunion went downhill in no time.”

“Jung Wooseok? Wait, I’m sorry, but how come you know that?” Seongwoo demanded. “Have you been stalking me?”

“Not exactly,” Wooseok replied. “I have ways, though I’d be a fool to divulge on the details. That aside, I’ve watched the last couple minutes unfold from behind you.”

“Behind me?” Seongwoo repeated. “And by that, you mean…?”

“I suggest,” Wooseok said. “You take my word for it. Literally.”

Dexterous movement by the doorway caught Daniel’s attention, subtle enough for him to miss had he been facing even the barest inch further in the opposite direction. His restless gaze moved towards the entrance to the abandoned dressing room they’d taken shelter in, eyes locking instantly with Jung Wooseok’s.

“OH FUCK ME,” Daniel exclaimed. “What have you been doing over there? That scared me, you dumbass!”

“Full disclosure,” Wooseok remarked, hands in both pockets as he pranced towards the both of them, utterly pleased with himself. “But my boyfriend’s in Seoul, and I don’t think he’d like it should I take you up on that offer. And far be it from me to stop him from stomping you flat. Yuto does know aikido, after all.”

“He doesn’t mean it,” Seongwoo clarified, pissed that he had to explain what should’ve already been glaringly obvious. “Or at the very least, he shouldn’t. Otherwise I’m necking him.”

“Your penchant for violence is a turn-off,” Daniel huffed. He detached himself from the wall, ducking below Seongwoo’s still outstretched right arm. His eyes swiveled Wooseok’s way, grimacing disgruntledly at him. “Just tell us where you’ve gone in hiding, next time.”

“Then there’d be no point to hiding, would there?” Wooseok replied, offhandedly enough to
aggravate him even further. “Besides, a spy’s not a spy without his secrets, and in case you’ve forgotten I am one by profession.”

“Let’s just get to the point,” Seongwoo sighed. “What have you come here for? If it’s to apologize for not updating me on Chaerin’s whereabouts, then I apologize, but keep it to yourself. I’ve already told our maknae you’re an untrustworthy, double-dealing felon, so I’m afraid your ‘Operation: Drag Kuanlin’s Ass Back to Taipei’ is temporarily on-hold until he forgives you.”

“Let me explain,” Wooseok began, evidently on the brink of losing his cool. “It isn’t that I’ve neglected my duties. The thing is, my database runs solely within the geographic limits of the country we live in, so I can’t exactly dig up reliable intel outside the borders of South Korean soil. And Chaerin, as I’m sure you know, has lived in Los Angeles for the past couple years. You did facilitate the cause for that, after all.”

“But why is she in Seoul right now, of all times?” Daniel demanded. “Her timing is much too inauspicious for it to be a product of simple coincidence.”

“Now that,” Wooseok admitted. “Would be my fault. I did research on her background, found out soon enough she was an aspirant of styling renown. So I pulled a few strings here and there, used my connections in the digital stratosphere to have her recommended for a spot in Mireu’s ranks. I’m sure that way, you can keep a closer watch.”

“You reap what you sow, I guess,” Seongwoo asked. “I should never have agreed to this in the first place.”

He led Daniel by the wrist towards the door, eyeing Wooseok distrustfully as he went. “I still think you’re a twit for walking in on us making out.”

“You’re better off frisking about elsewhere,” Wooseok smiled. “The layer of dust in here is thick enough to trigger an allergy, and Daniel sneezing in your face would have ruined the mood.”

“My mood is ruined either way,” Seongwoo shrugged. “And making it into Round Two is the only remedy. Come on, Daniel-ah. We have results to celebrate over.”

***

The lights were blinding onstage and Daniel could hardly make out a thing, and yet Chaerin’s presence front and center in the audience still failed to escape his vigilant notice.

All the contestants, a hundred and one strong, were cramped together and scattered onstage, huddled in groups across the elevated platform. They waited with bated breaths for the cameras to roll, and for the emcee’s voice to fill the void, declaring once and for all the victorious contenders who were to return in two weeks’ time for yet another explosive performance.

_I want to make it in_, Daniel thought. _No, I have to._

He felt Seongwoo squeeze his clammy hand once, a silent gesture of affection and reassurance. Daniel promptly squeezed his back, grateful for his bolstering presence.

“We’ll make it in, don’t worry,” Seongwoo whispered from behind him. “We’ve worn ourselves out with practice far too much for us not to.”

Daniel flashed him a heartened smile, nodding once to put his own mind to rest, and twice for Seongwoo to know he understood.
Seongwoo’s other hand was gently massaging Kuanlin’s back, whose own hands were quivering out of sheer unease. Daniel’s heart softened at the warmth in his gesture, aware of how persistently their youngest had worked, not stopping for rest until he mastered the choreography. He may have had the least experienced in dance amongst them, but this was easily offset by his determination in learning. But Daniel knew—should they fail to make the cut tonight—Kuanlin would beat himself up and take the blame for everything.

_I can’t let that happen_, he thought. _The road can’t end now, when we’ve just gotten started._

Moments later, Super Junior’s Leeteuk made his way onstage, having been appointed the emcee for the night. He waved a hand enthusiastically at the crowd, who responded back with cheers of their own.

_The time has come, everyone,_” he spoke into the mic. _For us to announce the line-up of groups who have successfully made it into Round Two of the Idol School Project: Produce 101._

Daniel’s volatile heart jumped excitedly in his chest, its rhythmic beating rising rapidly to a violent crescendo.

_Sixteen different acts performed for us tonight,_” Leeteuk forged on. _Each with their own unique spin to a classic hit. Which of these groups managed to capture the hearts of the viewing public? And who fell short of the audience’ expectations? Who will prevail and move on to the next leg of this competition, keeping the dream of a debut alive?_”

“I think I’m about to piss my pants,” Daniel heard Jaehwan blurt out from afar. He stifled a chuckle, the others around him snickering at the absurdity to Jaehwan’s out-of-the-blue and unnecessarily noisy remark.

“Did we make it?” Daniel sighed to himself. “I can’t stand being kept in the dark.”

Leeteuk’s singsong voice blared across the concert hall, stunning Daniel into silence. _Ladies and gentlemen, it’s time for us to find out._

From behind, Daniel observed as Leeteuk swapped out the cue card with the results in-hand, inadvertently prolonging his agony.

_The first group of eight through to the next round, _” Leeteuk began. _With a total of 67,737 combined votes from the live audience and the online voting polls, and four out five possible votes from our esteemed panel of judges…”_

Daniel’s hand swiped through the air in search of Seongwoo’s, sure he’d collapse without a fulcrum to lean on.

_This is it_, he thought. _Any moment now._

_Congratulations Just Be Joyful!”_ Leeteuk roared into the microphone. Thunderous applause rumbled throughout the venue, in unified celebration of JBJ’s triumph. Daniel’s heart dropped from his chest and onto the floor, a surge of jubilation coursing through him in brief deliverance from his invariable jitters. The next few minutes were spent in heartfelt congratulations of their friends, Daniel still shaking in involuntary tremors.

_Onto the next group, everyone!”_ Leeteuk announced, shattering Daniel’s self-composure a second time over.

“I think I’m about to throw up my dinner,” he whispered. “Funny, when I haven’t had the chance to
eat all morning and night.”

The nauseating process recast itself five times more in succession, until they were left with only the highest-scoring rankings up for grabs.

“Two of them left,” Daniel muttered. “The odds are stacked against us, aren’t they?”

“What’s new?” Seoongwoo whispered back. “Don’t you worry, though. I’m almost certain your glorious abs have hard-carried us all the way through to the top.”

“This is hardly the time for joking around,” Daniel scolded. “I’m uneasy enough as it is without your stifling expectations.”

“The second to the last group making it into the semi-final,” Leeteuk began, interrupting Seongwoo’s would-be response. “Garnered a total of 101,233 votes from the public, setting the record for the highest cumulative tally of votes, higher still than the group in first place. They, however, received only four out of five possible votes from the judges, failing to impress EXO’s Zhang Yixing.”

Daniel swallowed, having been keen on impressing EXO’s Lay more than anyone else forming the panel of judges. He was a die-hard fan of EXO, and would have his heart broken into splinters should his favorite member deem Wanna One unworthy.

“Forget that, Kang Daniel,” he told himself. “Not placing at all is more horrendous than that.”

“And the runner-up for tonight’s performance…” Leeteuk’s voice rang out.

Daniel squeezed his eyes shut, afraid of both hearing and not hearing their group name called out.

_I want to make it_, he thought. _As long as we make it._

_I want a chance. I want to debut._

And I want to be with him for years to come. With all of them.

“Congratulations,” Leeteuk declared, his voice a siren in Daniel’s head, loud and clear. “To our boys in love, Wanna One!”

Everything split into chaos after that.

The rest of Wanna One huddled around him in a tight-knit circle, euphoric screams and shouts of joy tearing right through his fragile eardrums. Gangly arms stretched out every which way, an intricate tangle of limbs caging him right in, rooting him firmly to the spot where he stood.

Ear-splitting cheers erupted from the audience, shaking him, unnerving him, leaving him utterly breathless. He was dizzy, thrown off-balance, and much too astonished for words, so he simply stood there amidst the ruckus, taking the massive upheaval in.

It was by goddamn far the best feeling in the world.

“We made it,” Seongwoo exclaimed, forcing his way past everyone. He took both of Daniel’s hands in his, tugging at them slightly to pull Daniel in. The snug embrace seemed to last them a lifetime. “We made it through, Niel,” Seongwoo whispered, tickling the back of his ear. “We actually made it.”

“And finally in first place,” Leeteuk’s voice sharply cut through the hubbub. “With a grand total
of 94, 859 votes and a clean sweep of the judges’ votes, congratulations to our very own maknae group, B.O.I!”

For what may have been the thousandth time ever, the audience broke out into deafening applause.

“Living up to their name as the Best of Idols,” Leeteuk continued. “Today’s winners—Zhu Zhengting, Ahn Hyungseob, Kim Samuel, Yoo Seonho, Huang Justin, Lee Woojin, Yoon Taejoon and Go Hyunwoo—thoroughly impressed the judges and viewers alike with a smooth rendition of Shinee’s ‘Juliette’, showcasing both their fresh, youthful image as a group, as well as their charismatic charms as individuals.”

The moment Leeteuk’s spiel ground once more to a halt, Daniel felt a pair of reedy arms encircling his waist from behind, taking him entirely by surprise.

“Congratulations, Daniel-hyung,” a small voice spoke up, cracking in places as if to stifle a cry.

“If it isn’t our little ppiyak ppiyak byeongari,” Daniel exclaimed. “Congrats on that win, Seonhoya. Our Shinee-sunbaenims would have been very proud of you.”

He turned himself around to embrace Seonho full-on, wrapping both hands around his slender waist in return.

This feels kind of strange, Daniel mused at random. Seongwoo’s figure isn’t quite this skinny. In fact, he’s rather muscular, and ripped underneath his shirt so I—

“Ehem,” Seongwoo coughed, interrupting Daniel’s sinful thought process. “Don’t know about either of you guys, but I’m sure this embrace doesn’t have to last quite this long.”

Daniel blushed, pushing Seonho almost forcefully away. “Sorry about that.”

“Have you seen Kuanlin-hyung?” Seonho asked, unfazed. “I need to give him a hug, too.”

“Right over there,” Seongwoo replied, pointing over his shoulder. “Though I highly suggest you skip out on that hug. If you don’t want a wild Jihoon coming for you, that is.”

“Not to worry,” Seonho exclaimed, skipping over to where Kuanlin stood. “I’ll give Jihoon-hyung a nice little hug, too.”

“Good luck with that,” Seongwoo sighed. “Come back here alive, kid.”

“You think he’ll be fine?” Daniel asked, out of concern for his safety. Jihoon was harmless where most other people were concerned, but where Seonho was concerned he went absolute bonkers.

“You don’t think he’s harbouring a crush on our giant maknae, is he?” Daniel whispered. “Yoo Seonho.”

“Beats me,” Seongwoo shrugged. “Remember Jihoon whining about Kuanlin’s phone ringing in the middle of the night? Seonho’s been persistent in asking if they can finally hang out.”

“Why are they together at twelve in the morning?” Daniel demanded. “You don’t think they’re…”

“Calm thyself,” Seongwoo interrupted. “They aren’t like that. They stayed up playing NBA 2K18 on Kuanlin’s Playstation 4, and Jihoon refused rest until he finally won.”

“Is that so?” Daniel remarked. “They pulled an all-nighter, then.”
“Legend has it they haven’t slept in two weeks.”

Daniel stifled a laugh, whacking playfully at Seongwoo’s right arm.

“Don’t say things like that. Otherwise, I’ll—“

“Congratulations,” a voice spoke up from behind. “You did well today. You too, Seongwoo-hyung.”

Daniel’s head whipped sideways in utter surprise, realizing Yoon Taejoon had addressed them, before walking sedately away.

“Now that was a shocker,” Seongwoo remarked. “Are we at the onset of the apocalypse, or did I hallucinate Taejoon’s uncharacteristic politeness to the both us, just then?”

“I can’t tell,” Daniel shrugged. “I myself have never seen him that placid before.”

Both of them moved inwards, into the sea of people. They offered sincere congratulations to everyone in their path including those who didn’t make it, out of recognition for their hard, earnest work. As they went, their heads turned every which way, in frantic search of Lee Daehwi and an explanation for Taejoon’s erratic behaviour.

In the end, Daehwi found them first.

“There you are!” Daehwi exclaimed, sauntering excitedly towards them. “I’ve been looking all over for the both you.”

“So have we,” Daniel admitted. “We have questions. Lots of them.”

“Questions?” Daehwi repeated, head tilting in signature fashion. “What about?”

“Not tryna ruin the mood by mentioning Taejoon at random,” Seongwoo whispered. “But has he been acting kind of… strange, as of late?”

Daehwi’s eyes blinked in rapid-fire motions, unable to internalize what it in particular he was getting at. “And by strange, you mean…?”

“I mean he doesn’t stare us down as if he’s about to choke us to death in our sleep.”

“Ah,” Daehwi exclaimed, in perfect recognition of their sensible concern. “You noticed that, too?”

“He offered us congratulations for making it in,” Daniel supplied. “I’d assume he’d do as much in order to rub in the fact that his group’s in first place. But the way he said it… surprisingly didn’t make me want to strangle him or wallop him unconscious.”

Daehwi considered this for a long moment, eyes forlorn and cast to the floor.

“Don’t let him know I’ve clued you guys in,” Daehwi whispered. “But I happen to think he’s gotten ill.”

“Ill!” Daniel and Seongwoo chimed in chorus, loud enough for both of Daehwi’s hands to fly reflexively upwards to muffle their voices.

“Don’t you dare tell anyone else,” he warned. “But Taejoon’s mentioned having to revisit the hospital.”
“Revisit?” Daniel asked. “Does he not have family in confinement at the moment? I don’t wager he’d have permission to perform on stage like that, if he’s ailing enough to require periodic visits to the hospital.”

“Beats me,” Daehwi sighed. “He’s never taken it upon himself to inform me of his hardships. Besides, he gives his pride way more importance than his health, so I don’t think he’d ever give us the chance to find him out.”

Daniel and Seongwoo exchanged worried glances, unsure of what to make of the situation. Daniel had to admit he liked neither Taejoon’s obsession over Daehwi, nor his insolent, pompous attitude, but that didn’t mean he’d wish Taejoon any harm.

“I think you guys should talk,” he suggested. “You don’t have to be there for him if it makes you uncomfortable, but I’m sure you’re the only person he’d even begin to warm up to.”

“Don’t you keep this to yourself, though,” Seongwoo warned. “Jinyoung’s your boyfriend, now, so I’m sure he’d be appreciative of any efforts to send him word of what you’re up to. You know how he is… the only thing he cares about these days is making sure you’re standing out of harm’s way.”

“I understand,” Daehwi nodded, smiling at both of them in turn. “Thank you Daniel-hyung, Seongwoo-hyung. I’ll be sure to keep that in mind.”

Seongwoo reached out to ruffle his tidy mop of hair, the same time as Daniel reaching over to pat him affectionately on the shoulder.

“Don’t expect me to intervene on your behalf, though,” Seongwoo remarked. “I’m much too afraid of getting involved now that you’ve filled me in on the details of your fight with Yoon Taejoon. Nowadays, I can’t even tell you off without fearing for my ballsack, or tell Jinyoung off without fearing for my arm. I like them attached to the rest of my body, thank you very much.”

“And as much as we’d like to help you figure out your worries,” Daniel sighed. “We have our own mound of hardships to plow through, most unfortunately.”

Daehwi nodded, the makings of concern etched onto his features.

“You’ve met Chaerin?” he guessed. “I knew it, Jinyoung and I should never have betrayed Daniel-hyung’s location.”

Seongwoo shook his head, as if to let Daehwi know he didn’t have to take the blame. “It wouldn’t have been that hard for her to find him either way. Given how swimmingly Daniel stands out from the crowd, Chaerin’s ‘you’re sexy and I want you’ radar would’ve effortlessly noticed his presence.”

“Daehwi-ya!” Jinyoung called out from behind them then, punctuating their ominous exchange. “Where’ve you been? I’ve been looking all over for you!”

“I need to leave,” Daehwi said. “Jinyoung’s asking for me, and I’d hate to keep him waiting.”

“You go ahead,” Seongwoo replied, waving him off with a flick of his wrist. “And good luck. The both of us will stay and look on for the others.”

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“The both of us will stay and look on for the others, you say?” Daniel whispered, sighing against
Seongwoo’s lips pressed to his neck. “We’re in a bathroom stall, you absolute fiend.”

“Did I say that?” Seongwoo asked, hands moving in lazy, exploratory movements along the length of Daniel’s upper body. “Forgive me, I don’t remember.”

The festivities were over the night, and everyone from that point on was instructed to make his way back home. And thus, after having greeted his classmates and some of his fans, Daniel had expressed his intention of returning to their bedroom along with the rest of the student body.

Ong Seongwoo, however, had other plans for the both of them.

Daniel might’ve been suspicious of where Seongwoo was headed, but he decided not to overthink things this time around, and simply let himself get dragged peacefully along.

And Daniel might’ve complained about making out in the dark, but he returned Seongwoo’s kisses either way, eager for a chance to placate his own longing.

“We didn’t have to do this in here, though,” he remarked. “This cubicle’s stuffy. Not exactly the place for romantic exploits.”

“You’d be surprised,” Seongwoo said simply. “Besides, did you really think I’d last long enough for the both of us to reach the bedroom before I finally gave in to my desires? Doesn’t help that Wooseok interrupted us in action a while back… Guess you can say we’re here to finish what we’ve already started.”

Daniel giggled, pinching at Seongwoo’s cheeks to push him away. “You, my friend, have zero self-control.”

Seongwoo winked at him in return, unperturbed by his accusations. “And you’re looking good in that shirt, have I mentioned that?”

“More than is necessary.”

Daniel unfastened himself from the wall, leading Seongwoo by the hand out the door. “Keep yourself in control a bit more. I have something important to tell you.”

Seongwoo, taken aback by Daniel’s serious tone, simply stared into his eyes as if to search them for his own reflection. Daniel led him out the door, expecting a headstrong remark or two, but Seongwoo—unlike himself—simply kept silent the whole way through.

Does he know? Daniel thought. Of what I’m about to tell him?

And if so… why the quiet? Is he not enraged? Resentful? Hurt?

Anything. Because the easier it turns out for him to accept my apology, the harder it will become for me to forgive myself.

For how long I’ve let the pretense last, for leaving him to drown in guilt he never deserved. I have to atone for all this… somehow.

They walked hand in hand towards Stella Peak, taking the long way round so as to avoid the cameramen still milling about. Once they arrived at the lobby at the foot of the dormitories, Seongwoo’s feet accelerated in pace, moving past him and up the stairs.

Somehow, it felt to Daniel like a solemn procession towards a place of heavy burden, a place from
which he sought escape until this very moment.

_You didn’t tell him_, he remembered. _Because you thought he’d never love you._

_You were afraid of losing against yourself, against Kang Euigyeon, against the love of Seongwoo’s life whose death he still believes in, mourns, and thinks is his entirely his fault._

_Why prolong his agony that way?_

_Because you were selfish, and lacked the courage. Because you feared losing him for even a moment, when he still thinks he’s lost Euigyeon forever. How is that not unfair?_

As soon as they stepped into the entrance to the living room, Seongwoo tugged at the folds of his sleeve, an indication of his desire to ask him right then and there what was happening.

“Hey, Daniel—“ he began.


_That isn’t mine. Not anymore._

Before he could gather the courage enough to speak up, Seongwoo wordlessly crossed the yawning distance between them, draping both arms around him.

Time and again he’d been in Seongwoo’s embrace, and yet this was the very first time he’d held Daniel this way. With both arms around his neck instead of his waist, a gesture not of intimacy but of desperation, not to say _I want you_, but to say _I need your help._

_Not to mend your heart, but to break it._

_And it does. One painful shard after another._

“I get it,” Seongwoo whispered. “I get it already. But please… before you say anything else, I’d like it if you could hear me out first.”

Daniel’s hands fisted at his sides, his final struggle against the tears he fought so hard to keep at bay.

They moved towards Seongwoo’s waist, gathering the fabric of his shirt in folds.

For a long moment they stood there, shrouded in silence, hearts beating and fissuring as one.

After a while Daniel pushed him away, wiping at the moisture by the sides of his eyes. This smudged out the ink on his lid, but Daniel stopped in caring for appearances long ago. He simply walked over to Seongwoo’s bed, sitting by the edge next to the stack of pillows. He patted the area of the comforter beside him, gesturing for Seongwoo to accompany him there.

“You had something to say?” he asked, after Seongwoo seated himself by Daniel’s side, inches away yet miles apart.

“About the whole ‘friends with some amazing benefits’ ordeal…” Seongwoo began.

Daniel blinked in astonishment, having thought their downbeat confrontation was headed elsewhere.

“What about it?” he asked, speaking into the thunderous silence.
Seongwoo extended one hand out towards him, palm facing upwards. Daniel took it in his own reflexively, as if the affectionate response had become second nature. “I think I’d like to make amends to that.”

Daniel blushed, taken aback by his forthright confession.

Is he... he can't be.

Why at this very moment?

Don’t ask this of me now, he thought to himself. How am I to commit before I’ve even come clean?

“Well then,” he declared instead. “Tell me everything, I’m all ears.”

Seongwoo offered him a heartfelt smile then, the kind that made his eyes sparkle and gleam in brilliance, a beam of starlight trapped entirely in flesh.

It was the smile Daniel cherished, and thought of each day, the smile he fought for and peppered with kisses.

And if I tell you everything, he thought. Will that smile disappear forever?

“Remember how Daehwi slipped once, and said I was your boyfriend?” Seongwoo began.


“I expected a correction, if truth be told,” Seongwoo admitted. “For you to say he’d gotten our relationship wrong, for you to burst into fits of animated denial… for you to blush, perhaps, since you’re kind of good at that.”

Daniel blushed as if on cue, miffed that Seongwoo’s outbursts had strangely impactful side-effects on him. “Yeah. Continue.”

The pad of Seongwoo’s thumb caressed the side of his palm, and Daniel watched in perfect stillness as he sought inwardly for the right words to say, hypnotized by the way he licked his lips out of tensioned stimulation.

“You let the comment bypass your notice,” Seongwoo continued. “On purpose, by accident… I could never have known for certain. But whatever it might’ve been, the atypical tolerance for the label didn’t bypass me.”

Daniel nodded, biting his lip apprehensively. “And what exactly does that tell you?”

“That you might’ve already changed your mind.”

Daniel swallowed, heart palpitating in deafening rhythm. “Is this your way of telling me that you know I like you back? And that I’m serious about liking you back?” he asked. “Because I’m sure I’ve made that obvious since the day I first let those lips of yours kiss me.”

“Not exactly,” Seongwoo shook his head. “Guess again.”

“Then...” Daniel conjectured. “Are you rubbing in the fact that you’ve managed to win me over?”

“Wrong,” he exclaimed, holding both arms up in cross formation. “One last try.”

“Have you changed your mind, then?” Daniel asked nervously. “Are you... are you subtly easing
into the ‘be my friend forever’ zone? *Without* the amazing benefits?"

“Nope,” Seongwoo smiled. “This is me officially asking you out.”

Daniel’s vision tilted askew, as if the world had gone off-course in rotation. His mouth flew open, eyes the size of basins, heart carving its way out of his ribcage.

“Ex…excuse me?”

“Be my boyfriend, Kang Daniel,” Seongwoo whispered. “That would make me happier than anyone else in this world.”

Daniel stared into his eyes, unable to string together his words into phrases, coherent enough to make sense of as statements.

The only word he remembered was: *boyfriend*.

A word he never did think of preparing for, at least in the foreseeable future.

He simply stared into Seongwoo’s eyes, lenses as pale as the sea at the dawning of night. They reminded him of gales chasing rainclouds and waves whipping at the shore, a vast expanse of darkness he’d so readily jump into.

*How can you say this, now of all times?*

*And how do I say no, now that I’m in love with you?*

“You dummy,” Daniel said, stifling a whimper at the base of his chest. Seongwoo pulled him into both arms then, letting Daniel hide his tearful face against the fabric of his denim jacket.

“I’m still a dummy?” Seongwoo asked softly, running a hand gently through Daniel’s hair. “You won’t go out with me?”

“Like I’ve said,” Daniel continued. “You dummy. As if I’d ever say no to that offer.”

***

Min Joorim’s startled expression upon finding Daniel at her doorstep was priceless.

She was dressed in all of an oversized tank and a pair of worn-out sweatpants, the straps of her bra peeking over her shoulder. Her disheveled hair was sticking upwards in every possible direction, as if she’d gone through static or was zapped by lightning.

“Good evening,” Daniel greeted. “I’m here to ask for a favour.”

Min Joorim was Seongwoo’s promotional exam partner (and more notably, perhaps, his clingiest ex-girlfriend), whose sister’s best friend’s boyfriend was Daniel’s classmate in Geography. As one can imagine, Daniel had gone through painstaking measures to find out her address in order to pay her a visit.

“I must admit,” she responded, eyes scanning through his figure thoroughly, as if to see right through his shirt. “I never did imagine I’d live long enough to find the all-mighty Kang Daniel at my doorstep, asking me so sincerely for help.”
Daniel blew at his fringe wearily, himself embarrassed that he’d gone as far as to seek her out even though she lived, extraordinarily enough, far outside of campus.

“Tell me about it,” he said. “But you know what they say… desperate times call for desperate measures, and I’m as desperate for advice as just about anyone can get.”

“Funny how this particular scenario played out much differently in my head,” she mused. “With me inviting you in for a drink or two, instead of an unprecedented visit late into the night, while I’m shamefully underdressed and woefully unprepared.”

“So will you help me out, or not?” Daniel deadpanned, reluctant to waste any more of his time on pointless chatter far too likely to lead to Joorim’s meaningless flirtation.

“Lucky for you,” she replied. “I’m willing to listen. So talk.”

Daniel leaned against the doorframe, avoiding eye-contact at all costs in order to preserve even the tiniest shred of dignity.

“I need to know,” he began. “What sort of date it is that Seongwoo customarily takes his girlfriends out on.”

Joorim peered at him observantly, washing the atmosphere in discomfiting silence.

“The rumours were true, huh?” she said, a triumphant grin making its way onto face. “That both of you are into each other. Why ask me, though? He and I dated for all of one month before he decided he’d tired of my kissing techniques.”

That’s the lousiest reason there is for a breakup,” Daniel scoffed. “Was he that shallow? I thought he’d have had some depth to him, at least.”

“The only thing deep about Ong Seongwoo,” she smiled. “Is how far down he can plunge himself into your love hole. Though I’m sure by this point, you’ve come to find this out yourself.”

Daniel blushed, ignoring the outright breach into his privacy.

How does that even make sense? He thought. When Seongwoo’s proven time and again that more to him exists than what rests on the surface.

“A lot has changed, huh,” Daniel whispered to himself. “I think I know why.”

“You say something?”

“Either way,” Daniel said, eager to change the subject. “Those rumours circling about of his… indecisive past behaviour. I’m afraid that, too, is for the most part factual.”

“Is that so?” Joorim replied, smirking fiendishly at him. “Then he didn’t last that much longer with anyone else, if you’re telling me the truth.”

“That’s the only reason I’ve come to you,” Daniel explained. “You’ve lasted the longest in a relationship with him, so I’m sure once or twice he’s asked you out on a date.”

“True enough,” she said. “Fine, then. I’ll tell you everything there is to remember.”

“Thank you. I suppose I owe you one, for now. I’ll make it up to you one day, if you’d like.”

“Agree to date me, then. After you guys break up.”
“Sure,” Daniel shrugged, surprised by his own lack of hesitation. “But I’ll have you know, it’s never gonna happen.”

“Don’t count your chickens before they’re hatched,” she warned, quoting an age-old idiom. “But if you’d really like to know… Seongwoo’s a bore as far as dates are concerned.”

“Bore?”

“He’s not that creative, you see,” she explained. “So if I were you, expect no more than the basics from him. Dinner at a fancy restaurant, an ice-cream cone on your way to the movies, and before the night ends, front-row tickets to the most pointless, soul-sucking movie ever made in cinematic history.”

“Pointless… you say…” Daniel repeated, himself at a loss for words.

“A snoozefest,” she confirmed. “Right from the countdown, straight through to the credits. Which, by the way, he’s more than inclined to doze off to himself.”

“I… I see.”

_Doesn’t sound like something he’d do, to be honest._

“Maybe he didn’t even like you all that much,” Daniel murmured. “Sounds more like a ploy to get you to break-up with him yourself.”

“Don’t be so cocky,” she cautioned. “I’m sure the same is in store for you.”

Daniel’s gaze slid downwards, unable to tell her things were much different now.

“How shall I dress then? Would it be wrong for me to appear in casual clothing?”

“It’s a crime,” she confirmed. “I did that once, dressed in all of a tank-top and shorts while sipping on wine and cutting through ribeye. Seongwoo couldn’t even bear to look at me the whole night through.”

“I’m, uhh… I’m sorry that had to happen.”

“So if I were you,” she said, patting him gingerly on the back. “I’d show up in a polo shirt and slacks, leather brogues and silver necklace, the most expensive dress suit there is in your closet. As if you’re headed to a stakeholder meeting.”

“You sure about this?” Daniel asked. “Should I wear a stronger perfume, then?”

“Fruity undertones,” she assured. “Works wonders on him. Funnily enough, the sort of thing works like some makeshift aphrodisiac.”

“Aphro…” Daniel began, this time unable to complete his train of thought. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“What else would it mean?” she asked rhetorically. “And how else would you expect the night to end, then? With a kiss on a cheek and a wave goodbye?”

Daniel’s cheeks flushed a ruddy scarlet, vivid imaginings of their would-be night-out flashing briefly through his mind.

“Take my word for it,” she said, winking at him knowingly. “Citrusy scents are the way to go.”
“Got it,” Daniel responded, swallowing nervously in remembrance of the peachy aroma to his Calvin Klein perfume. “Thanks for the tip. I’ll see myself out now.”

***

“Fancy restaurant my ass,” Jisung exclaimed. “We’re at a run-down car rental facility!”

The day of their first official date was upon them, and Daniel, true to Joorim’s word, dressed himself in a neutral semi-formal ensemble, black suit, white undershirt, the exemplar of style from head to toe.

“You sure we’re at the right place?” he asked.

“Unless my GPS is faulty, today of all days,” Jisung replied. “Yeah. Pretty much.”

“That’s strange,” Daniel muttered, checking the address Seongwoo had sent him the night prior. “I didn’t even bother to check the exact establishments existing in this area. I was sure he’d take me out to dinner.”

“At someplace fancy enough to require whatever it is you’ve insisted upon wearing today?” Jisung asked. “Seongwoo’s debit card might have an eight-digit balance, but I’m more than sure he’d hate to be that predictable.”

“This wasn’t my idea,” Daniel defended himself. “I asked around and likely got the wrong advice.”

“You should’ve known better,” Jisung said, clucking his tongue in disappointment. “Seongwoo’s never been in a relationship this serious, so I’m sure he’d go the extra mile to find out more about the things you’d like. If you wanted stable advice on where he’d take you, then the only person you should’ve asked was yourself.”

Daniel considered this for a long moment, finding copious amounts of wisdom in Jisung’s rationale. He sighed heavily, cursing at the fact that he never dated actively before Seongwoo came along.

“Oh, there he is!” Jisung exclaimed, watching a cab pull up at the parking space beside them. “You go out there and have fun, alright? Tell me how it goes later on.”

“I don’t look that weird, do I?” Daniel asked, running both fingers through his slicked-back hair.

“Dressed in rags,” Jisung assured. “I’d still think you a walking sculpture of the gods.”

“Thanks, hyung,” Daniel laughed. “Sure does make me feel a little better.”

Daniel stepped warily out of the car, smoothing out the wrinkles of his silken suit. He wiped at the beads of sweat forming at his brow, unsure of why he was perspiring despite the glacial weather.

He marched over to where Seongwoo stood, with a take-out cup of piping hot tea in hand, in place of the standard bouquet of roses.

“Hey there,” Seongwoo greeted. “You haven’t been waiting too long, have you?”

“Not in particular.” Daniel shook his head.

Seongwoo handed over the beverage, smiling at him warmheartedly. “Peach Blossom Tea for you.
I know this one’s your favorite, so I swung by the local Tea House to grab one.”

Daniel received the gift appreciatively, reaching out to pinch Seongwoo’s right cheek. “Thanks, Seongwoo-ya. That was thoughtful of you.”

“No problem,” Seongwoo replied, inserting both hands into the pockets of his jeans. Only then did Daniel realize how bizarrely incongruous their outfits were, as Seongwoo dressed himself in skinny-fit pants, winter boots and four layers of clothing: undergarments, a cotton shirt, a denim jacket, and an insulated overcoat.

“Nice look you’ve got going there,” Seongwoo remarked, giving him a thorough once-over. “I’m digging the exposed forehead.”

“Thanks,” Daniel said, sweeping his head shyly to the side. “Though I, uhm… was under the impression we’d be someplace different.”

“I can tell,” Seongwoo laughed, chuckling slightly at the sight of him. “Though I hope you weren’t expecting me to fly you abroad? You aren’t exactly dressed for Korean weather.”

“Right,” Daniel stammered. “I was expecting an indoor setting.”

“Fancy restaurant? Was that it?”

“I’m sorry,” Daniel said. “The thought of showing up underdressed kind of frightened me, since I didn’t want you thinking I’ve been sloppy in choosing. But I admit… it slipped my mind that things could work in reverse. I didn’t even think of factoring in the cold.”

Daniel rubbed at the both of his arms, a vain attempt at shielding himself from the chilly temperature of the mid-afternoon air.

“I should’ve played it safe,” he sighed. “Rather than gone all-out for the sake of impressing you.”

“You don’t have to be so sorry about that,” Seongwoo assured him. He stepped forwards, relieving himself of his coat. “I can tell how much thought you’ve put into this, and that alone is enough to make me happy.”

He slung the coat over Daniel’s shoulders, helping him ease into the inlaid garb.

“You’ve lost sleep over this, haven’t you?”

“An hour or two, I suppose.”

“And you went out of your way to consult an old flame of mine?”

“How did you…”

“I know you,” Seongwoo said. “Front to back, inside and out.”

Daniel sighed in defeat, unable to provide a suitable counter-argument. “So maybe I did. Though in hindsight, that wasn’t the brightest idea.”

“Either way,” Seongwoo remarked. “You’re dressed this way for me. Looking fantastic in that get-up, to boot.”

Daniel smiled, scratching at the back of his head sheepishly. “Thanks, I guess.”
Seongwoo offered Daniel his arm, beaming at him delightedly. “Shall we?”

Daniel interlaced his arm with Seongwoo’s, the heat radiating from his body sending warmth coursing through Daniel better than even the thickest layer of fleece might’ve done.

“Let’s head inside,” he agreed.

“Yeah,” Seongwoo nodded, desirously eyeing the jacket he’d let Daniel borrow. “I’m freezing my ass off out here in the cold.”

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The car-rental facility was empty of patrons, save for two scruffy bearded men in threadbare clothing, both of whom looked more like mechanics than paying customers.

The interior walls were coated with several layers of grime, and the place itself smelled inscrutably of garlic.

“Is this…” Daniel whispered. “What… what is this?”

“My favorite place in town,” Seongwoo replied. “Don’t you worry. We’re in good hands.”

They approached the dilapidated counter, paint peeling off and skewed at an angle. A man in his 60’s was manning the register, reading the morning papers with both feet on top of the table.

His sock featured a gaping hole where his big toe poked awkwardly through.

“Good afternoon, ahjusshi,” Seongwoo greeted. “I’m back to take the Cadillac out for a spin.”

Daniel’s eyes widened, thinking it impossible that so luxurious a vehicle would’ve been parked within a shack this unkempt.

“There you are!” The old man exclaimed, eyes alight with joy and recognition. “Where’ve you been? Minmin and I have missed you.”

Minmin…? Daniel thought. Who’s that?

Moments later, he led them towards the tumble-down garage, where a grand total of two vehicles were parked: a bright yellow Volkswagen Beetle, and a glossy red Cadillac from what may well have been the 1950’s.

“Holy smokes,” Daniel exclaimed. “These things are the real deal.”

“Of course they are,” Seongwoo replied, beaming at both of them with pride. “These things are also mine.”

“Excuse me?”

“Ahjusshi,” Seongwoo called out, ignoring Daniel’s upheaval momentarily. “You’ve kept these in great shape all this time. I’m sure Dad would’ve loved to see them, too.”

“It’s been too long since last they saw the light of day,” The old man remarked. “Far too long. Had your father been alive, he’d have paid me weekly visits.”
“Sorry about that,” Seongwoo apologized. “But I’ll take the Cadillac. When I return, I’ll hop onto Kyungie instead.”

“You go on ahead,” The old man exclaimed, waving them hurriedly away. “Here are the keys. I’ll keep the garage open until you leave.”

“Thank you,” Seongwoo exclaimed, taking Daniel by the hand to lead him towards the markedly well-maintained vehicle.

“Aren’t you paying for this?” Daniel asked. “Renting these out must cost you a fortune.”

“Money is of no consequence where my babies are concerned,” Seongwoo replied. “Isn’t that right, Minmin-ah?” he stroked the hood of the car affectionately, pulling at the handles leading into the passenger seat.

“After you,” he said, arcing his right hand in elaborate, sweeping gestures.

Daniel sat himself gingerly inside the car, leaning carefully back against the plush leather seats. Seongwoo ducked and reached in across from him, close enough for Daniel to inhale the musky scent of his lavish perfume. Seongwoo buckled up Daniel’s seatbelt, making sure to keep him snug the whole drive through.

“Where are we going?” Daniel asked, still unsure of the plan.

“Places,” Seongwoo replied. “That’s all you need to know.”

***

“You’re telling me this is your car?” Daniel exclaimed. “Is that why you didn’t have to pay for this?”

“It’s a hand-me-down,” Seongwoo explained. “I’m not the original owner.”

“A hand-me-down,” Daniel repeated. “I receive tattered jeans and moth-eaten shirts as hand-me-downs. Not luxurious vintage cars with barely any scratches, reupholstered interior, and an engine that’s brand-spanking new.”

Then again, Daniel reminded himself. Complications aside, Ong Seongwoo is the chaebol heir to a multimillion-dollar entertainment agency. Why should any of this be the least bit surprising?

“You’re thinking of my net-worth, aren’t you?” Seongwoo surmised. “Wondering how rich I have to be to own such things?”

“Kinda sucks how you see right through me,” Daniel muttered. “That aside… who gave this to you?”

For a while Seongwoo kept his silence, eyes on the road and one hand on the wheel. He stared far out into the infinite horizon, as if he’d gotten lost in all his yesteryears spent driving by the same winding road, inside the same time-worn Cadillac, the same immortal sun setting gloriously in the east.

“Minmin and Kyungie were gifts I received from my father,” Seongwoo spoke through the silence. “He wrote of them in his will before his passing.”

“Oh,” Daniel whispered, unsure of the appropriate response. “I’m so sorry, I… I didn’t mean to…”
“It’s alright,” Seongwoo smiled, gently reaching outwards to enmesh their fingers together, all ten of them frigid and numb from the cold. “I have only the fondest memories of him. Ong Kyungmin, the best father I could have possibly asked for, the very same person who gave me the wondrous gift of music.”

“Was he an idol, too?” Daniel probed. “How come I’ve never heard of him?”

“He never made his debut,” Seongwoo explained. “He met my mother early, had me out wedlock… And dad loved mom. Far too much. Even if she hadn’t been with child at the time, he would never have left her to fend for the both of us alone.”

“Did your grandfather not like him?” Daniel asked. “Because she’d gotten your mother pregnant before they were married?”

“More than that,” Seongwoo replied. “He came from humble origins, both of his parents farmers from the Gyeongsang province, with only meagre plots of land to their name. The Ongs were practically unheard of, and granddad utterly despised the idea of his kin taking up so obscure an identity.”

“And how… how did your father…”

How did he come to pass?

“Car accident,” Seongwoo said gravely. “He’d gotten a call from his former agency, claiming an offer to have him debut belatedly. He wasted no time in making his way there, leaving behind only the promise of return. He might’ve sacrificed his dream once, in order to raise a son… but his love for music was a fire he kept burning from within, a love that, as fate would so brutally have it, led him ultimately to an early death. He ran headfirst into a speeding truck, half-past midnight at Highway 13. Killed him instantaneously.”

Daniel turned away, physical pain igniting in his chest. “I’m so sorry. I never should’ve asked.”

“Dad collected old cars as a hobby,” Seongwoo carried on anyway. “Restored ones, with years’ worth of mileage to their names. They were his prizest possessions, and thus he left them to me, Minmin and Kyungie included.”

“You have more of these?” Daniel inquired.

“Three more,” he said. “A least.”

Daniel let the outrageous thought sink in for a moment.

“He’ll be happy to know you’ve kept them away from disrepair,” Daniel decided upon saying. “That you treasure them, just as much as he did.”

“You’re my greatest treasure now,” Seongwoo whispered, ruffling his hair affectionately. “I hope you remember that.”

Daniel smiled, relishing in the soothing sensation of Seongwoo’s touch.

For a moment they drove on in silence, neither a word nor a breath passing between them.

“We should probably turn this one on,” Daniel suggested after a while, reaching for the dashboard with his free right hand. “Much too quiet without the stereo blaring.”
He turned up the volume to its maximal setting, Bruno Mars’ ‘That’s What I Like’ roaring abruptly through the speakers.

“I like this song,” Seongwoo exclaimed, dancing in place to the beat. “Reminds me of our very first practice session.”

“Right,” Daniel reminisced. “You did sing me this one, at the time. I admit, I may have downplayed my first impression on your vocals back then… but for a student out of practice, your capabilities were rather astounding.”

“And that, my friends,” Seongwoo narrated. “Was when the all-powerful God Daniel first fell in love with me.”

“You wish,” Daniel contended. “I’m not that easy.”

“Not even when I’m this good-looking?” Seongwoo teased.

“The visuals help,” Daniel conceded. “Though if your personality were just a tad more agreeable…”

“You would’ve jumped me in no time?”

“I would’ve given you a nickname other than ‘idiot’.”

“It’s grown on me,” Seongwoo admitted. “Disturbingly enough.”

“You own up to it far too often,” Daniel remarked. “Sometimes I do wish you weren’t half this idiotic.”

“What have I done now?” Seongwoo complained. “Other than mock you inwardly for sporting flimsy clothing in the middle of winter?”

“You said you admired the effort!”

“I do, babe,” he laughed. “Doesn’t change the fact that you’re looking kind of funny, though. I’d half expect you to declare a cash purchase of the next skyscraper we drive past down the road, or for you to appear onscreen starring in the latest James Bond action flick.”

“Seongwoo-ya,” Daniel warned, eye twitching in irritation. “I love you, but if you weren’t sitting right there and steering the wheel, I wouldn’t even hesitate to throw you out the door.”

“Wait a minute,” Seongwoo exclaimed. “Repeat that last bit for me.”

“I’d throw you out the door if—“

“Not that part! The one that came right before it.”

“Oh, uhm…” Daniel stuttered, massaging his nape awkwardly. “I… I love you?”

Seongwoo smiled, eyes crinkling charmingly at the corners. “One more time, please.”

Daniel smiled back, turning away to conceal the ruddiness of his fair-skinned cheeks. “I love you.”

“One more.”

“I said I love you.”
“Just one more and—“

“SAY IT BACK FIRST, YOU IDIOT!”

“Okay, okay,” Seongwoo laughed, pulling Daniel in to kiss the back of his hand, pillowy, soft lips sending tingles through Daniel’s nerves, his brain dangerously close to short-circuiting. “I love you too.”

Daniel bit his lip, smiling ‘till his cheeks and jaw hurt. “That sounded more romantic in my head.”

They drove on a few hundred meters more before Seongwoo frenziedly stepped on the brakes, their vehicle skidding to a precipitous halt.

“SHIT,” Daniel cursed, centripetal force throwing him violently forwards. “What the hell was that?”


Daniel peered through his window, an austere three storey-building in view. “Where are we?”

“This?” Seongwoo remarked, himself peering at the inobtrusive edifice, grinning proudly from ear to ear. “This is where it all began.”

***

The view from the rooftop was perfect. The building, Daniel came to find out, was a century-old establishment with a panoramic view of the city, as it sat at the edge of the cliff right in the middle of the bustling highway. From where he stood, the sunset sky and the sea bled perfectly into each other, in rosy gradients of salmon pink, bathing the landscape in a warm, russet glow. The air was scented with the aroma of flowers, lavenders and daisies, blossoms and rain, calming Daniel from deep within.

“What is this place?” Daniel whispered. “The view is stunning.”

“You like this sort of thing?” Seongwoo asked. “Places high-up, and overlooking the city?”

“Yeah,” Daniel eagerly replied. “Even as a kid, I’d make my way up the Busan Tower and—“

Daniel stopped himself then, sure he’d gotten carried away and forgotten that he’d promised Seongwoo once before that they’d spend his eleventh birthday at the very same place.

Your name was Euigyeon then, Daniel thought. And you haven’t been able to tell him that just yet.

Even though he waited so patiently for your return.

“Sit,” Seongwoo offered, pulling up the chair facing the view. He guided Daniel by the small of his back, almost as if he’d ignored the accidental outburst completely. “I reserved the venue beforehand, so the dinner’s been laid at the table.”

They sat facing each other, taking in the azure glow of the sun, as if to draw strength from its glistening radiance.

“This is where my parents first met,” Seongwoo explained. “And the place where dad asked for mom’s hand in marriage. Since my mother was pregnant at the time… I guess you could say I was
right there with them.”

“That’s beautiful,” Daniel whispered dreamily. “And quite frankly, the most romantic proposal I’ve ever heard of in my life.”

Seongwoo looked into both of his eyes, searching them for meaning beyond the apparent depth of his words. “Don’t worry,” he spoke up. “Your time will come later on in the future.”

Daniel chuckled, reaching over the table to pinch at his cheeks.

“Pabo-ya,” he exclaimed. “We can’t get married. I’m a guy, and so are you.”

“Since when has that ever stopped me?” Seongwoo shrugged, grabbing a hold of Daniel’s hands outstretched hands. “I’ll do whatever the hell I like.”

“Then is it alright for me to do the same?” Daniel probed, biting at his lip worriedly. “I have questions to ask.”

“Let me guess,” Seongwoo sighed, letting Daniel’s hands fall to the table. He reached for his cutlery, tearing gingerly into the meat on his plate. “Song Chaerin?”

Daniel nodded, slicing his own wedge of pork into bite-sized pieces. “How exactly did you first come to meet her?”

Seongwoo bit into his food, nibbling at the rind earnestly. For a moment he seemed lost in thought.

“Chaerin and I…” he began. “We go way back. Farther back than even Haechan and I do.”

“So you’re telling me,” Daniel conjectured. “That you’ve known her since the both of you were fetuses?”

“She kicked in her mother’s womb, and I heard that through mom’s amniotic fluid, so I kicked back in return, and the rest, as they say, is history.”

“Gross,” Daniel exclaimed, tongue sticking out in disgust. “Though I’m sure that isn’t scientifically possible by any extent of the—“

“I was obviously kidding.”

“Right,” Daniel whispered cheekily, embarrassed by his own naïveté. “Carry on.”

“Before Haechan moved into our home,” he continued. “I’d known Chaerin as the flower shop dealer’s only daughter. She lived across the street from us, and dad and I used to stop by every weekend to buy my mother a bouquet of blue roses.”

“Was she nasty, even then?” Daniel asked. “As Haechan was.”

“Not quite. To be perfectly frank, I rather liked her as a person, at least where first impressions were concerned. She was there to keep me company, sing me songs, take an endless stream of blurry pictures of us with the refurbished Leica she’d received from her mother.”

“When did Haechan happen, then?”

“They met through me,” Seongwoo admitted. “Worst decision I could possibly have made at the
time. In my defense, though… I would never have seen the chaos happening, even if it shimmied right in front of my face. All I thought I’d done at the time was introduce a sweet, peace-loving girl to my insolent, war-freak cousin, in an attempt to pacify him albeit temporarily.”

“You had no idea she’d turn out that way,” Daniel said. “Makes things even worse.” He gnawed at his food, taken by his own lofty appetite. Seongwoo smiled at him affectionately, wiping at the remnants of sauce by the side of his mouth.

“I’m not sure if she’d always been psychotic and simply managed to keep it from me,” Seongwoo mentioned. “Or if she and Haechan were frightfully compatible, in that they brought out the worst of the worst in each other.”

That seems likely, Daniel thought. Put that way, one can say they’re meant to be.

“Did she change after they’d gotten to know each other?” he asked.

“Not visibly, no,” Seongwoo shook his head. “Not immediately. And that’s why it never occurred to me that I might’ve made the wrong move in telling Chaerin everything there was to know about Go Haechan’s family. His father’s political allegiances, their exorbitant wealth, Haechan’s likely future as the heir to the family business. And Chaerin… deprived as she’d been of love and attention from both of her parents, who were much too busy amassing their own fortunes elsewhere, might’ve thrived instead on the idea that Haechan’s pedigree and wealth could be her own.”

“So she liked his money,” Daniel guessed. “And come to think of it, she might’ve also liked your fame.”

“I was nineteen at the time,” Seongwoo said. “And after having made my comeback from the depths of isolation, I decided it was time I move forward with my schooling. But I was a changed man, no longer interested in leeching off of my family inheritance. So I auditioned for Star Model Management, and after having been accepted I built a lofty portfolio, and a year later I found some degree of popularity as a rising star in the modelling industry.”

“She must’ve liked the idea of becoming your girlfriend, then,” Daniel inferred. “Since you’d become a sort of hot topic amongst her peers.”

“She did brag about the fact that she’d known me since we were little,” Seongwoo agreed. “But at the time she and Haechan were dating, and out of fear for the wrath of my growing fanbase, I decided it best not to touch her within a ten-foot pole, or remain in her vicinity within a five-mile radius.”

“It must’ve been hard on you,” Daniel remarked. “Having to deal with your privacy getting infringed upon.”

“Dispatch was at my heels, too,” Seongwoo said. “They’d already hounded me once before regarding the finer details of my privileged background, so a dating scandal… it would’ve been a field day amongst the gossip journalists.”

“Then why does Chaerin insist on having dated and broken up with you? On top of everything, she denies Haechan’s existence.”

“She’s an impulsive liar,” Seongwoo clarified. “Part of the reason why I’m half-convinced she’s a narcissistic, hurtful psychopath. As for her behaviour where Haechan is concerned… she did find his loyalty rather cumbersome, so she might’ve been trying to cut off her ties with him altogether.
And Haechan talked of marriage before they broke up… and that made her uncomfortable. Asset-abundant as he may be, Chaerin hates the idea of settling down more than anything. She thinks it an affront to her freedom.”

‘A convincing liar, that girl,” Daniel said. “I almost believed in her and doubted in you.”

“She does have a way with words,” Seongwoo agreed. “Her persuasion skills are of the hook. Doesn’t help that she does look like an A-list celebrity.”

“Was her face always that perfect?” Daniel asked, recalling how jaw-droppingly exquisite she’d looked the moment he’d first laid his eyes on her. “It’s doll-like, almost. As if she’s made entirely of porcelain.”

“Of course not,” Seongwoo scoffed. “And don’t even get me started on how much money Haechan’s spent on Chaerin’s plastic surgery.”

“Figures,” Daniel exclaimed. “Everything about her is fake.”

“She was persistent, too,” Seongwoo added, sipping at his glass of wine. “And once or twice, behind Haechan’s back… she’d suggest for the both of us to enter into a covert relationship.”

Daniel’s hand paused in mid-air, his food a half-journey away from his open mouth. “She wanted to cheat on Haechan with you?”

“I never agreed to it,” Seongwoo explained. “Of course not. Haechan already hated my guts, and given how deeply in love he’d been with Chaerin at the time… he would’ve wasted no time in beating me senseless had I agreed to entertain her streak of infidelity.”

“Her streak?”

“Word does spread,” Seongwoo said. “She slept around with a couple other friends of mine from the agency, for god knows what reason. Funnily enough Haechan never found her out, though I suspect he’d never have believed it anyway, should anyone have come forward and claimed Chaerin had been rollicking around with them in turns. I never tried to assert as much either, as he would’ve taken her side no matter what.”

“He was blindly loyal to her, huh?” Daniel remarked. “Still is, I suppose.”

“She treated him right,” Seongwoo said. “Out of fear of losing her chance to partake in Haechan’s fortunes, out of fear of him doubting her whole-hearted love for him. Whatever the case, she’d done nothing out of love. And yet in the end… she threw him away, just because I told her to. But I did that less for her sake, than for his. Chaerin was eating away at his sanity, and I could tell without him even knowing. And as much as I hated him… the thought of him being with someone so irredeemably messed up was far more terrifying and far more disgusting.”

Daniel nodded, seeing eye-to-eye with Seongwoo’s rationale. “Was that the worst part?”

“The worst part,” Seongwoo began. “Was that at the height of my modelling career, Chaerin began exhibiting signs of sasaeng behaviour.”

Daniel swallowed, unsure if he wanted to hear the rest. “What has she done, Seongwoo-ya?”

“A crime,” Seongwoo said. “One she should’ve been incarcerated for had I not been frightened enough of Haechan to fold.”
“Tell me,” he whispered. “Tell me everything.”

Seongwoo set his utensils down, giving himself time to gather both his thoughts and composure.

“A few days after Chaerin asked me if I’d be willing to cheat on Haechan with her,” Seongwoo began. “I paid a visit to her apartment complex unannounced, as I felt a tremendous need to confront her, perhaps even set her outlook straight. The place was password protected, and as far as she could tell I had no idea what the passcode was. Chaerin, however… was alarmingly oblivious to her own predictability. She sent me messages every day, came to take pictures of me at the studio… how else shall I put it? She was obsessed, and that to me was clear as daylight. So on that day when I first paid her a visit, I took one look at the lock, keyed in the digits to my birthdate, and then just like that I promptly let myself in.”

“And what did you find in there?” Daniel asked.

“They were everywhere, those pictures of me inside of her bedroom,” he recalled. “Tacked against the surface of every wall, not even the tiniest block of space left empty. Sewn onto the cushions, ironed onto the sheets… To the think a sanctuary filled with my likeness would feel distinctly like the vestige of hell.”

Daniel’s mouth flew open in horror. “Unbelievable.”

“And then, laid out in neat rows on top of her dresser,” he continued. “Various knick-knacks gone missing from my room, the same one I’d mistakenly let her enter an untold number of instances before. Pins, bracelets, trinkets and toys… some of them stolen way back when both of us were children.”

That’s… that’s insane.”

“But the single most frightening part…” Seongwoo whispered. “Was the view from the window.”

“Oh no,” Daniel exclaimed. “It can’t have been… no…”

“It was a lookout setup of sorts,” he explained. “Binoculars propped onto a massive tripod, enabling her to spy on the view from where she stood, right into my bedroom window.”

“She lived across from you,” Daniel whispered. “I remember now.”

“And she found me out,” Seongwoo added, brows knitting together as if to remember something profoundly upsetting. “Knocked me out cold. I heard neither the creaking of the door nor her footsteps from behind me, had no time to grasp the situation before she plunged a syringe into my shoulder and that way forced her sedatives into my blood stream.”

“She drugged you?” Daniel exclaimed. “That bitch forced you into sleep… and then what? Did she… did she rape you?”

“I don’t… I don’t know,” he whispered. “I was unconscious the whole way through.”

Daniel set his fork down, appetite lost altogether.

“How did you get rid of her then?” he asked, a headache forming at the base of his temple. “I can’t… I can’t even imagine how terrifying that must’ve been.”

“A day had come and gone when I came to,” he said. “And as you can expect, I woke up to blackmail. She kept a voice recording of the instance preceding my black-out, made it sound as if
our roles had been reversed. She was saying all these things… asking me to stop, begging me to leave… and for me, I kept on saying her name. Over, and over, and over again. Speech slurred, spouting nonsense, as if I’d gotten drunk and tried having my way with her.”

That’s crazy, Daniel thought, hand moving subconsciously upwards to rest over his mouth. Song Chaerin is an actual psychopath.

“If she… if she surrendered the falsified evidence to Haechan,” Daniel inferred. “Who knows what he might’ve done to you? He might’ve beaten you to death and thrown your corpse into a ditch.”

“You’re right,” Seongwoo nodded gravely. “And that’s why I didn’t report her to the authorities at first. I couldn’t. My ballsack would shrivel up at the thought of Haechan demanding my head on a silver platter. I found a way past everything, though… through acting.”

“Acting?” Daniel repeated, peering at him hopefully.

“I had footage of the contents of her room,” Seongwoo elaborated. “So I bluffed and pretended as if the file was backed up to a secondary device. And thankfully enough, she took the bait eventually. She was afraid of evidence she had no access to, and thus could never delete… and that was that. We were at a deadlock, neither of us willing to concede, so instead of forging on we settled reluctantly for a truce. An armistice of sorts. She’d stay away from me, and in return I’d let her be, pretend as if she wasn’t guilty of stalking me or of invading my privacy. Months later, though… I’d come to my senses. I surrendered the footage to the police, but before they could conduct an investigation, she’d already packed up all her belongings and moved her entire life all the way to Los Angeles. This, I confirmed fairly recently.”

Daniel nodded, half out of understanding, and half out of shock.

“Was that when she broke up with Haechan?” he asked. “Was that part of the deal between you guys?”

Seongwoo nodded. “Both of them still think I wanted them broken up because I loved her.”

“I don’t… I don’t want to hear any more of this story,” Daniel admitted. “Otherwise I might just throw up.”

Daniel stood up from his seat at the table, brisk-walking over to the ledge. His hands clasped around the metal railing, as if to anchor to it for support.

It’s too much, he thought. Far too much to take in all at once.

“You alright?” Seongwoo asked. He was standing behind Daniel, inches away, eyes tired and beset with worry.

And upon seeing those eyes of his, drained almost of life, Daniel’s final tether to his worries snapped decisively from within him.

Tell him, his inner voice chided. Now, or nevermore.

“Seongwoo-ya,” Daniel whispered. “I have a confession to make.”

“I do too,” Seongwoo whispered back. “And this time around… I’d like it if I could go first.”

Daniel heaved in a sigh, disappointed that his timing was pre-empted once more.
“I’ve mentioned him before, haven’t I?” Seongwoo said then. “Kang Euigyeon.”

Daniel’s heart froze at the mention of his name.

“Of how much I’d loved him,” Seongwoo continued. “And how empty I’d felt the moment I heard of his passing.”

Daniel turned slightly away from him, caught between wanting to know more and wanting Seongwoo to stop in his tracks altogether.

**How much more of this can I possibly take?**

“There’s this phenomenon called *déjà vu,*” Seongwoo began, oblivious to his pained expression. “Where your experience in the here and now feels distinctly like something else you’ve undergone in the past, even though you can’t exactly grasp when that might’ve happened apart from the vaguest sense of remembrance.”

Daniel’s eyes found his once more, probing them for meaning.

*I can’t tell where all this is going.*

“But falling in love with Kang Euigyeon was much the opposite,” he carried on. “It felt like I was seeing him for the very first time, even though we’d known each other for months on end. Because all of a sudden, in my eyes… he was no longer the little boy I’d befriended out of desperation for company. Instead, he was an angel in my eyes, both my best friend and a stranger I’d never once known. And immediately, I was overrun with an overwhelming desire to safeguard his heart, protect his smile, ease away his pains and wipe away his worries.”

Seongwoo took one silent step forward, into Daniel’s space, until the heat radiating in waves from his body tickled the skin at his collarbone.

“And that’s why when he died… the part of me that knew how to love simply died along with him. As if I’d sewn my heart shut, or turned the lock to its entryway before tossing the key. And no matter how hard other people might’ve knocked, this broken heart of mine indignantly refused to open up.”

Seongwoo leaned in, pressing his forehead against Daniel’s. His eyes closed, still trembling in distress.

“If only,” he whispered. “If only I’d been brave enough to keep half my promises.”

Daniel’s hands moved to Seongwoo’s waist, pulling him gently in.

**Why is it that you’re looking so sad?** Daniel thought. **Is all of this my fault?**

“And I tried, harder than you’d think,” Seongwoo continued, his words fogging up at every exhalation. “To let him go, move on… and live again, for once. Even though I wished to die every time I remembered how wretched I’d been for betraying him.”

His hands wrapped around Daniel’s neck, embracing him a second time in that way he never used to.

“I succeeded, somehow,” Seongwoo said. “Or at least, I could trick myself into thinking I did. I sought activity in order to distract myself: signing modelling contracts, auditioning for minor acting gigs, rediscovering my passion for music. I dated around, gate-crashed at parties, fell in with
the wrong crowd once or twice. And no matter how tarnished my reputation might’ve gotten, I didn’t care enough to dispel any rumours. Because I was sick, and tired, utterly unwilling to care for anything, or anyone at that point. And because I’d turned a blind eye to those around me, acted on impulse and did whatever the hell my heart desired in the moment… I almost convinced myself that I’d managed to forget.”

“And did you?” Daniel whispered, resting his weary head against the crook of Seongwoo’s neck.

The thing about forgetting,” Seongwoo said. “Is that it takes both heart and mind to accomplish. And that never happened for me, not even for once. Because my heart, traitor that it was, stubbornly refused to let Kang Euigyeon go. And it spoke to me, even as my mind rationalized against remembrance… If you forget, Ong Seongwoo, then you will have lost him a second time over. And I didn’t want that, so I remembered. I still do.”

“Seongwoo, I—“ Daniel began, eager to say his piece.

He has to know before I break his heart, Daniel thought. Permanently.

“I might’ve begrudged you for it, now that I think about it,” Seongwoo interrupted anyway. “For complicating things. For being so utterly right for me that it’s driven me crazy. Even though I’d decided upon loving Euigyeon, and only Euigyeon for the rest of my life… the way I like to believe that he loved only me for the rest of his. And yet… I couldn’t help it. The attraction was much too heavy to contain, it felt as if I’d suffocate if I persisted in denial.”

At this point he tore himself away from Daniel, at a distance enough to regard his full countenance properly.

“But the worst part? It’s that you’re a liar,” Seongwoo said. “You still are. And all this time I’ve been the willing victim.”

Daniel stilled, unable to breathe. Fear struck at his nerve like a chord, as if he’d gone looking for a bed of roses and instead stumbled upon a bramble of thorns.

“I don’t… I don’t understand,” Daniel stammered. “What exactly do you mean by that?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Seongwoo smirked, devilish as can be. “Aren’t I right, Kang Euigyeon?”

Daniel found himself at a loss for words. His eyes darted nervously away from Seongwoo, a blatant manifestation of his shame in the matter.

He knows, Daniel thought, his mind awash in jumbled hysteria. I meant to tell him, but he’s beaten me to it.

Because he knows. He already knows.

“I know you,” Seongwoo whispered, reading almost into his darkest of thoughts. “All of you. And I have you memorized, right in here.”

His left hand took Daniel’s, placing it right over the area of his chest where his heart beat in unchanging rhythm.

“I noticed it, too,” he added. “How much the stories of Euigyeon seemed to affect you. And I’d never seen you that emotional before, so I assumed you must’ve gone through much the same things.”
Daniel’s eyes forced closed, moisture pooling at the ducts uncontrollably.

“And since then I’ve had my suspicions,” Seongwoo forged on, his words striking Daniel, dealing blows at a merciless pace. “And more and more I saw the sides to your personality overlapping almost eerily with his. Your unhealthy love for banana milk, for example. Your passion for learning b-boy. How useless you are at math, the Super Junior songs crowding your playlist, how you go on overtime after every practice session, even though you’re coated in sweat and exhausted to the point of collapse. And then… your faces. They morphed into the exact same person.”

“Have I…” Daniel spoke up. “Have I really given myself away that easily?”

Seongwoo tilted Daniel’s chin upwards with his right index finger, forcing eye-contact between them.

“It dawned on me,” Seongwoo whispered. “How all this time, I’ve lacked proof of his death. Your death. I simply took your mother’s word for it, read into her tears and her sadness, forgetting to look into the lines in between, where hatred and contempt might have been brewing within her. And just recently, I found out that she’d mistaken me for Haechan when I first came knocking at your door. She thought I’d been responsible for beating you half to death. And I understood… that a mother’s love, in moments most frightening, transcends both righteousness and rational thought. If only to keep their beloved child safe, everything is offered in worthy sacrifice. Everything.”

“She lied to you,” Daniel whispered, hands trembling in tumult by his sides. “About her son’s own death. And I knew that right from the very beginning. Why aren’t you mad at me, then? Why aren’t you demanding an explanation? Asking for me to get down on both knees, so that I beg you repeatedly for forgiveness?”

Seongwoo’s hands closed against his, keeping the tremors at bay.

“It’s only proper,” Daniel added. “You’ve lived this way for years, thinking yourself responsible for a death that never happened.”

“I’d get mad,” Seongwoo agreed, rubbing at his skin for warmth, as if to stoke the coals over an open fire. “You’re right. If I had no reason to be happy I’d go crazy. I’d knock over chairs and flip over tables, scream until I’ve damaged my vocal chords.”

Seongwoo brought Daniel’s hands to his lips, kissing them one by one.

“But I have every reason,” he said. “To thank my lucky stars for keeping you safe. For helping us make our way back to each other, no matter how small the chances.”

In that very moment, Kang Daniel broke.

Body and soul, he broke. Heart and mind, he broke.

Into shards, into splinters, until his legs gave way from underneath him.

Seongwoo gathered him into both his arms then, sharing in his burden until the both of them bled out together.

“I wanted to make sure you’d love me,” Daniel admitted, speech impeded by the tears cascading down his cheek. “Not for the person I once had been, but for the person I’d managed to become. And I was afraid… I was afraid I’d be unable to make that happen if only you’d known the truth.”

Seongwoo nodded, holding him tight, as if he’d known that all along, too.
“Listen well, because I’ll say it just this once,” Seongwoo whispered. “I love you. Kang Daniel, Kang Euigyeon, whoever you are and whatever your real name may be. I love you. And not because I need you, or think you’re beautiful, or are leagues above the person I’ve first come to expect. I just love you, and you’re right. I’m an idiot for not knowing why, and for being who I am, not even nearly enough to deserve you. But falling in love was never part of the plan… you know that. But now I guess I’ve come to realize that I could never have planned for this. For you to come into my life, to shake up my world, to fit everything so perfectly into place, as if things have been this way all along.”

He kissed Daniel’s forehead, wiping away his tears with the pads of both thumbs.

“So smile for me, Daniel,” he said. “Because I loved you then, and I love you now. I really, truly, completely do.”

Daniel smiled through his tears, no longer caring for anything, or anyone else. And it no longer mattered that he spent weeks agonizing over the moment of truth, wondering how best to cope with the possibility of Seongwoo leaving him forever. He’d left no space in himself for regret, his being filled entirely with bliss from the crown of his head to the tips of his fingers.

“It didn’t sound that romantic in my head,” Daniel gave in. “I wonder why that is.”

Seongwoo smiled, filling the chilly sunset air with the wondrous trill of his laughter. “Do I get a kiss for that?”

Daniel leaned in, planting a chaste kiss by the side of his chin, then a deeper one full onto his lips.

“Better,” he said. “You get two.”

***

“I appreciate the effort,” Daniel began. “But you really didn’t have to.”

After dinner at sunset, they’d driven across a desolate road by a verdant plateau, carpeted with lush fields of wheat and blades of grass streaked brilliantly in dew. Before making their way up the hill, Seongwoo had the Cadillac parked by an unusual hut, where the freshest of blooms were on full display by the window. Seongwoo purchased the grandest bouquet, paying no heed to the smaller, more compact selections.

“Lilies and carnations, are they?” Daniel asked. “Interesting combination.”

“Hate to break it to you, sweetheart,” Seongwoo chuckled. “But these aren’t for you.”

Daniel blushed, embarrassed by his own thoughtless assumption. “Then why…”

For a moment he considered the possibility of having been shafted to the side, replaced by someone whose appreciation for a grandiose gesture of affection was analogous to his appreciation of fat tabby cats.

He dismissed the idea ten seconds later, recalling Seongwoo’s earlier confession.

“So I really do have a boyfriend now… and I am one, too,” Daniel muttered to himself. His hands moved to his cheeks, blushing giddily at the thought. “Ong Seongwoo’s boyfriend…”
“You say something?” Seongwoo called out. “I thought I heard you speak my name.”

“Nothing,” he exclaimed, jogging towards Seongwoo, who’d already begun making his way up the hill. “Nothing at all.”

After trekking through the rocky terrain, he and Seongwoo arrived at the apex of the upland plains, which, to Daniel’s surprise, was a tranquil graveyard where upwards of thirty people had been laid to rest.

“Seong…Seongwoo-ya,” Daniel began, watching Seongwoo make his way towards the northernmost gravestone. “Is… is this…”

“Hi dad,” Seongwoo greeted. “I’m finally back.”

He knelt in front of the memorial, wiping at the cobwebs dirtying his father’s final resting place.

“You’ve missed me, haven’t you?” he asked. “I’ve missed you too, far more than you know, and I regret having only the time enough in my day to pay you these sporadic, infrequent visits. Here, these are for you.”

He offered his father the bouquet, before extracting each flower by the stem one by one in order to lay them out neatly at the foot of his tombstone.

“You understand… right?” he continued. “Since you watch over me, from way up there amongst the angels. So I’m sure you must know… this time around, I brought along a friend.”

He waved Daniel over, still smiling at him affectionately. Daniel made his way towards the grave, feet treading silently over the untrimmed grass. He stood there a while in reticence, awash in the quiet of solemnity.

“Annyeonghaseyo, abeoji,” Daniel greeted. “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

He knelt by the foot of Ong Kyungmin’s grave, bowing once with his face almost pressed to the soil in order to pay Seongwoo’s late father his due respects.

“He says I take after you, dad,” Seongwoo whispered, kneeling in austerity beside him. “After your kindness, your heart, your insatiable love for music. I know I can’t ever compare, but it’s a comfort, nevertheless. To know that a part of you lives on within me, and with your memory I’ve touched the hearts of others.”

He stood himself up, hauling Daniel upwards along.

“I wish you could’ve met him,” he forged on, slinging an arm across Daniel’s shoulder. “I wish you could’ve seen him face-to-face. He’s beautiful, dad. He has everything you’d ever wanted in a son.”

“Seongwoo-ya…” Daniel began, tugging lightly at the fabric of his shirt.

“And I love him,” Seongwoo continued. “So very much. And it’s funny, because I… I remember how we first met. How we first became friends, over the music you first taught me how to love.”

Daniel turned away, unable to prevent mournful tears from escaping him.

“And that’s why I like to think of him as a gift,” Seongwoo whispered. “One that you’ve given me. Because if you hadn’t been there to teach me, how to sing and how to dance, I would never have
been able to do much the same for him. And later on in life… we might never have met. Once more as strangers, twice more as friends. My very first love, and likewise my very last.”

He smiled, pulling Daniel in by the shoulder, kissing him gently by the cheek and once more unto his quivering lip.

“Thank you,” Seongwoo said. “He’s more than I could ever have asked for.”

Seongwoo turned to him then, cocking his head towards his father’s burial place.

*Tell him*, he urged without words. *Everything there is for you to say.*

“Abeoji,” Daniel whispered. “I’d like to thank you, too. For bringing your son into the world. For loving him in spite of his weaknesses, for passing onto him your dedication to the stage, for raising him the way you have, that he’s become as brave, and as strong, and as loving as you were. And I… I’ll take care of him, I promise. I’ll make him happy. More than anyone else.”

A singular tear rolled down Daniel’s cheek, hitting the grass in coalescence with the rain, as if his sorrows were in tune with the heavens.

He tilted his chin upwards, flurries of vibrant, celestial movement filling his muddied vision.


All around them, pinpoints of light streaked across the night sky, as if an omnipotent presence had knocked a jar of stars over by accident, spilling them across the empty skies.

“I’d make a wish,” Seongwoo mused. “But mine just came true.”

Daniel looked to him, features aglow in the pale autumn moonlight. “Have you ever seen a meteor shower before?”

“Once,” Seongwoo responded. “With my dad. He used to say they were messages sent from above, that once in a lifetime, those who’d gone ahead of us would make their presence known in mysterious ways. For us to know that they’re still there, watching. And that’s when the heavens open up, and paint the sky with stars.”

“He’s trying to tell you something important, then,” Daniel whispered. “Any idea what that might be about?”

“I do,” Seongwoo whispered back, pulling Daniel into a sturdy embrace. “It’s his way of letting us know that he’s listening. That he’s heard us, and that he knows. That he approves of you, Daniel. And that through these stars… he gives us his blessing.”

***

Daniel missed Seongwoo’s touch more than anything.

It was painful, and exhausting, the way by which their bodies made sense of their love. And Daniel no longer had any idea, where they were and how they got there. Against Seongwoo’s kisses he tried to remember. And yet, his mind refused to process thought beyond what Seongwoo’s fingers felt like on his naked skin, hot in temperature and slick with moisture, their breaths fogging in the misty night air.
“Seongwoo-ya,” he whispered. “I think I’m going crazy.”

And he did, eyes half-closed, fingers that weren’t his sliding downwards and touching him, everywhere, until all of his clothes pooled at his feet and he no longer knew where his body ended and Ong Seongwoo’s began.

And then, he was laid down like an open map, Seongwoo’s mouth tracing kisses unto places he longed to explore, until Daniel’s legs split apart out of habit, shaking, in need, begging shamelessly for more.

“Daniel,” he heard a voice whisper.

“I love you,” he whispered back.

And that was when he pulled Seongwoo in.

And welcomed him home.

And Seongwoo worshipped him with a hunger even the deepest of kisses could never satisfy, loved him with a certain thirst that had both of his hands roving Daniel’s body, knotting themselves in his hair, touching him in all the right places, until helplessly, Daniel slid into mindlessness, and the only thing he could feel was Seongwoo’s body pressed against his, moving as one with his, lips and tongue tasting of the sweetest honey.

As if Seongwoo’s body had the gift of reading, and Daniel was his favorite book.

And Seongwoo’s favorite page… was that sensitive spot inside of him.

So he read. Fluently. Vividly. Not a single word left untouched, tasting of the poetry Daniel could only wish he could write.

Until the ending came, and went, and Daniel cried out in pleasure because of how utterly beautiful the climax had been.

And then Seongwoo read again, right from the very beginning. Again, and again, and again.

*Distance,* Daniel thought. *Is more than just this space between us.*

*It’s the emptiness I feel whenever you aren’t around, the hollow in my heart I carve out each time, to make new space for every moment of joy you fill me with.*

“I don’t want any more of that,” Daniel whispered, tears falling down his cheek. “I don’t want any of that, ever again.”

His hands fist ed in the sheets, Seongwoo’s hands closing against his.

Holding him. Not letting go.


Daniel wrapped both hands around his chest, nails digging into the skin at the small of Seongwoo’s back, bracing himself for the only sort of pain he wished to welcome.

Again.

And again.
And again.

As long as I have you, Daniel thought. I need nothing else.

Because you and I like this, we’re more than enough.

Daniel kissed him, the hundredth time over. And Seongwoo, gentle and earnest, kissed him fervently back, easing in slowly to fill the distance between them.

And for the rest of the night there was none.

~ONGNIEL 6 END~

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note:

I don’t have much to say about this chapter (apart from the fact that I thoroughly enjoyed writing it) so instead, I think I’ll address something my readers might’ve become quite curious about:

Why has it taken me this long to update?

First of all, I’m graduating from college in May (Woohoo!) and to prepare for that, I’ve thrown my résumé out to the skies and have been going through one company interview after another (I’m a Management major, and multinational corporations are sticklers for the perfect credentials, so building mine up takes lots of hard work. So I guess you can say I’ve been busy with real-life issues as of late).

The second reason is perhaps the most unfortunate, and it’s that I’ve simply found it progressively harder to write, and most of that has to do with the fact that I’ve become an even harsher critic of my own writing. I’m a perfectionist when it comes to my work, and will never publish any chapters half-assed, so it takes more time for me to think I’ve come up with something satisfactory. This habit needs to change, I admit… but until then please assume that my upload schedule’s remaining the same.

And finally… I’m actually busy working on a brand new story! It’s a college AU with fantastical elements, so once I’m done with this story I’ll move on to that. I’ve decided not to add as much pressure on myself in working on that one, so I hope I can manage to complete it before the year ends (because to be honest, I think I’ll stop writing after Wanna One disbands, because it’ll break my heart to do things otherwise).

And to those of you who’ve waited ever-so patiently for my update, I’m sorry it’s taken me this long. And from the bottom of my heart, thank you for coming back. Thank you for keeping yourself updated. Thank you for supported my very first work, the only one I’ve been passionate about to see through to completion. Here’s to more stories for everyone in the future! Until then… see you in chapter 19!

P.S. I’M FINALLY ON TWITTER! If you have an account, follow me @lilicadearest so I know you’ve seen this and then I’ll follow you back! I had my account confirmed
literally ten seconds ago so I have zero followers at the moment (lol) but I’d love to get to know you guys better beyond my writing and our love for Wanna One. I am multi-fandom after all (I’m also a Carat/ARMY/NCTizen/Monbebe/ONCE, and casually listen to songs by lots of other artists! So do reach out to me, because I’d love to be your friend~

P.P.S. This doesn’t classify as smut, does it? Because it’s not. It’s really not lol
I interrupt this segment to bring to my readers an advertisement: this story has reached the final round of chapters, and as such I’ve written a brand new story you may (or may not) be interested in: It's entitled 'In Love With A Legacy', and is a darker, angrier, and bolder story than this one. If you're into torturing yourself with heartbreak and plot twists at every turn, click right here for the link! Otherwise just ignore me ;-; But that's it for this shameless promo! Onto Chapter 19~

Loathe as Jihoon was to admit it, but Zhang Yuejun was—without a doubt—a beauty.

She had almond-shaped eyes, rich in toffee nut color, delicately underscored by lush, sweeping lashes. Her hair was tucked rather messily into a bun, thin strands falling out of their hairpins and onto the sides of her face, enriching the atmosphere of effortless grace. Her nails were varnished salmon pink, lips tinged with red, fair skin pale and as smooth as porcelain. Barely-there makeup was dusted lightly onto her cheekbones, giving her complexion a flawless, dewy finish.

Had Jihoon not been in love with Kuanlin, he would’ve asked for her digits straightaway.

“And you’re here, because…” he began. They were seated across from each other at the Little Byeongari, curious patrons milling indiscreetly about them. “I don’t recall having set an appointment.”

“I find there no need for that,” she exclaimed, waving his concerns away. “I’m here to ask of you a minor favour.”

“We best friends now, or what?” Jihoon mumbled. “I don’t shell out my services for free.”

Yuejun propped both elbows atop the still-empty table, eyes blinking at him in rapid-fire motions.

“Have a go at the menu,” she offered. “My treat.”

Jihoon swallowed nervously, his interest piqued by the tempting proposal.

“Is the dessert section off-limits?” he ventured.

“Of course not,” Yuejun shook her head. “Go ahead and order every single item on the menu, if you’d like. I won’t mind.”

Jihoon’s left hand shot up into the air, calling the attention of the waiter by the door, who nearly jumped right out of his skin.

“Anything you’d like, sir?” he approached, pen and paper in-hand.

“I’d like Set 2, please,” he said. “And I’ll have the teokbokki with a little extra spice.”

“Kuanlin tells me you’re weak against spices,” Yuejun said, observing the waiter depart with a
baffled expression. “Have I misinterpreted the information?”

“You haven’t,” Jihoon shrugged. “I am, however, in dire need of the perfect diversion. Away from whatever it is you have to request of me, just in case it messes with my head.”

“You’re his roommate, aren’t you?” Yuejun inquired, cutting directly to the chase.

“His?” Jihoon repeated. “Park… Park Woojin’s?”

“Yeah,” she nodded, gaze soaring upwards, caught in a dream-like trance. “Park Woojin’s.”

“I don’t like that expression,” Jihoon grimaced. “You aren’t a secret admirer of his, are you?”

“An admirer, yes. Though I hardly think it necessary to keep such thing a secret.”

“I… I’m not sure how best to respond to this,” Jihoon admitted, rattled by the startling discovery. “I hadn’t envisaged this scenario taking place within a lifetime. Or two. Or a hundred.”

“Kuanlin tells me you know him best,” she pried. “Is this information correct?”

“Should I be proud of that? Besides… I was under the impression he was dating in secret. You… you wouldn’t happen to have been his lover the entire time, would you? He’s worn this necklace for a week now, and I still happen to think it’s from his girlfriend.”

Otherwise, my flagrant display of jealousy over your engagement to Kuanlin will have regressed into a shameful disappointment.

“Does it… does it come in the shape of a crescent?” Yuejun inquired, fidgeting awkwardly in her seat, weight shifting from one leg to the other.

“A croissant?” Jihoon echoed imprecisely. He tapped lightly at his stomach, the mouth-watering aroma of freshly-baked bread wafting through the air and permeating through his senses.

“Yeah, that sounds about right.” He shrugged.

“It is from me!” Yuejun squealed in delight. “Ahh… He remembered.”

The waiter returned to their table, this time around with a basket-full of bread.

“Complimentary focaccia bread,” he announced. “The olive oil and parmesan are sitting in the condiment rack.”

Jihoon tore through the bread, ravenous in hunger before the waiter could step even a foot away from them.

“Of course Woojin remembers,” Jihoon exclaimed, in between bites of crumbly focaccia. “He kisses that pendant goodnight before tucking it under his pillow. A measure of good luck, he claims. Now a part of me thinks he’s forgotten you’re a fansite master, not his fairy godmother.”

“Can he get any more perfect?” Yuejun sighed.

Jihoon stuck his tongue out in mock disgust. “Uhh, yes. He can.”

“Do you think… I might have a chance with him?” she asked. “I may not be his type to begin with.”
“Trust me,” Jihoon snorted. “You’re everyone’s type.”

“Even yours?”

“Ugh. Don’t remind me.”

Yuejun giggled, reaching over the table to pinch his marshmallow cheek. “You’re kind of cute, Jihoon-ah. Can’t blame Kuanlin for having fallen into your aegyo trap.”

“I don’t have aegyo,” Jihoon insisted. “I’m abandoning the concept from this point onwards.”

He nodded to himself in reassurance, resolute in his desire to foster a manlier image.

As of late, his peers were accustomed to spurning him because of their ‘softie’ perception on his character, even though Jihoon was, as a matter of fact, stronger in physique than half the class combined.

*It’s high time I remind them, Jihoon thought. Of why precisely they’d have it wrong to mess with me.*

*And on top of that, it’s time I let Kuanlin know.*

*That I’m more than capable of protecting him, too.*

*Because now, I’m…*

“…his boyfriend?” Yuejun spoke up, spanning the barrier into his thoughts.

His surprise broke Jihoon out into hiccups.

“W-what?” he stammered. “Whose… whose boyfriend?”

“I’d asked if you’ve made it official,” Yuejun reiterated. “Your relationship with my fiancé, that is.”

“That fiancé thing,” Jihoon grimaced. “Still breaks me into hives. Stop calling him that, already.”

“Alright, I get it,” Yuejun laughed. “Besides, I—“

Yuejun cut her exclamation short, transfixed by the figure sashaying past the door, his fingers running coolly through windswept hair.

“There goes Park Woojin,” Jihoon grumbled. “And his dumbass capitalism walk.”

Woojin spotted them by the wall moments later, gliding their way with a syrupy smile plastered onto his face.

“Hello there, princess,” he greeted.

Jihoon blinked, floored by the nickname. “Which one of us are you addressing, exactly?”

“Oh?” Woojin exclaimed. “You’re here too, Jihoon-ah? Sorry, didn’t see you there. Your shirt’s blending in with the sofa.”

Jihoon scanned the table for any sort of knick-knack to chuck at Woojin’s forehead. His fingers found the bread, tossing it instinctively through the air before Woojin clamped it skilfully and
gobbled it whole.

“Thanks, Chihoon-ie,” he exclaimed, eyebrows wiggling at his roommate sportively. “I wash famished.”

Yuejun claps both hands together, charmed by Woojin’s demonstration of high-caliber reflexes.

Woojin flashed her a triumphant grin, petting the crown of her head with affection.

“You’re looking good in that dress,” he winked. “The paisley print’s interesting. I love it.”

“I love you too,” Yuejun whispered, sensible thought deserting her at Woojin’s touch.

“Ehh?” Wooji blinked. “Did I hear that correctly, or have I forgotten to clean out my ear canal with a cotton swab?”

“Both,” Jihoon exclaimed. “You’ve already met her, but… ahh, further introductions are aptly in order. Woojin-ah, meet Zhang Yuejun. She operates under the alias Moonshine.”

“Pretty name,” Woojin shrugged nonchalantly. “Reminds me of—“

Woojin froze on the spot, stunned by his cognizance of Yuejun’s identity.

“MOONSHINE?” he gaped at her, half-munched flakes of bread threatening spill-over before Jihoon reached out in alarm to force his mouth closed.

“The one and only,” Yuejun beamed at him proudly. “I’m… I’m a fan of yours. Very much so.”

Woojin nodded robotically, still in a daze.

“Holy smokes,” he whispered. “You weren’t supposed to be this attractive.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose, as if to blockade his nasal passage before it bled uncontrollably.

Jihoon scowled at the both of them in turns.

“Hey Woojin-ah,” he said, elbowing his roommate lightly. “This is the part where you prostrate yourself before the gods of fortune, appealing for the luck to pass onto your children. Not everyone gets to marry a goddess, you know.”

“Stop it,” Woojin retorted, socking him mildly in return. “I have yet to figure out child support. Not that I, uhh… have thought of getting married before, or anything.”

He and Yuejun blushed in perfect concurrence, heads turning slightly away from each other.

It was Jihoon’s turn to gape.

“I don’t believe this,” he muttered. “I’ve had more progress in brokering a marriage between the both of you this morning, than I have on the English essay I’ve been working on for weeks.”

“Ahh,” Woojin exclaimed. “How’s that coming along?”

“Great,” Jihoon sighed in defeat. “I now have a title for the paper. I’m onto the next step, swimmingly enough.”

“Writing the actual paper?” Yuejun inquired.
“No. Figuring out whether to use Arial or Times New Roman.”

“*Palatino Linotype*, my friend.” Woojin suggested, seating himself next to Jihoon. “The professionalism of the typeface detracts effortlessly from the actual content. Tried and tested.”

“This is why I love you, sometimes,” Jihoon grinned.

“Love you more, babe,” Woojin teased, pressing a stealthy kiss onto his cheek.

Jihoon recoiled at the sensation, wiping at the moisture by his lip in alarm. “Hey! That was uncalled for!”

“Cherish it,” Woojin shrugged. “I ain’t giving out any more of those, at least in the foreseeable future. Aren’t I right, princess?”

He flashed Yuejun another charming wink.

“Ahh,” Yuejun blushed. “I wanted one too.”

“This escalated much too hastily for my tastes,” Jihoon observed. “Though I should’ve known things would turn out this way. You do make advances towards anyone and anything with a beating heart, after all.”

Moments later, their light quibble was interrupted by the arrival of Jihoon’s food, a bowl of extra-spicy *tteokbokki*, a plate of *samgyeopsal*, five kinds of *banchan*, and two helpings of steaming hot rice.

“Wrong,” Woojin whispered, eyeing Jihoon’s food. “I’m making advances towards your breakfast, too. Nothing you can do to stop me.”

“Shoving you onto the floor won’t stop you?” Jihoon asked, threatened by Woojin’s motion towards the wooden chopstick container. “Yuejun paid for this. Ask for permission.”

“No need,” Yuejun replied in haste. “Woojin-ie can have everything he likes.”

“And that includes you,” Woojin winked a third time over.

“Have at it then,” Jihoon sighed. “I’d rather eat my fill than get between the both of you.”

“You ordered a set for two, all by your lonesome?” Woojin demanded then. “Yuejun-ah, you help yourself too.” He handed Yuejun a set of chopsticks, and Jihoon, from where he sat, could see in his mind’s eye the sparks flying from where they touched skin-to-skin.

“But wait,” Woojin narrated. “There’s more.”

The waiter returned a third time, this moment around with a massive cantaloupe, sliced neatly in half, the flesh partially scooped out to make way for shaved ice and a dizzying array of sugary toppings. To Jihoon’s left he set a pitcher of lemonade on the table.

“Kuanlin should’ve been here to see this,” Woojin clucked. “His fat *Shiba* stuffing itself silly with food.”

“Don’t,” Jihoon warned. “He thinks I’m on a diet, still endeavouring to chisel out the abs he likes, far too much for his own good.”

“Speaking of your abs-enthusiast,” Woojin ventured, turning his attention to Yuejun, who was
already picking at the melon balls on Jihoon’s monster-sized bingsu. “Aren’t you supposed to be engaged to him? Kuanlin, I mean.”

“It hasn’t been made official,” Yuejun reassured him. “The arrangements for the… consolidation between Tàiyáng and Yuèliàng are still in the works, as of this moment. This notwithstanding—unless we make our move—Kuanlin’s father will, in due time, push irrevocably for a grandiose announcement. A press conference is the likeliest suspect, but all things considered… with Tàiyáng’s influence over Taipei’s business landscape, mixed in with Yuèliàng’s far-reaching system of connections with journalists, our engagement will have made it onto major news headlines before either of us can say a word of protest.”

Woojin and Jihoon alike nodded in grave understanding, the exigency of their situation having eluded them until Yuejun’s breakdown of their current footing.

“We have to act, then,” Woojin said. “And we have to act now.”

“How are we to do that?” Jihoon asked, already in snappish, high-strung bundles at the mere thought of having to thwart an affair so momentous.

He stuffed bountiful servings of rice into his mouth, a paltry attempt at stress-eating the pressure away.

His phone, meanwhile, buzzed noisily against the table, alerting him to an incoming notice from an anonymous caller.

“Begin with taking that call, perhaps?” Yuejun suggested, voice hushing forbiddingly into a baleful whisper.

“How come?” Jihoon asked. “You recognize these digits?”

“Of course I do,” she nodded. “I’ve had the very same number sequence engrained into me, the past couple months alone. Take it, Jihoon-ah. He won’t approve of you wasting his time.”

Jihoon gulped down his rice, swiping lightly at the phone screen. He held it against his ear, unsure of what to expect.

A silvery voice spoke over the phone, taking Jihoon entirely by surprise. Both his timbre and accent were vaguely familiar, reminding him distinctly of Kuanlin’s manner of speech.

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“How come?”

“Is this Park Jihoon speaking?”

“Yes, that would be me… sir.”

“Excellent. The name’s Lai Ter Chien.”

Jihoon stilled in deathly quiet, caught in breathless respite.

“I arrived in Seoul this morning, for a shareholder meeting with foreign investors. I do have time left in the day before the assembly is underway, and as such, I’d like to set an appointment before it commences this evening.”

All of Jihoon’s knowledge on sentence construction flew promptly out the window, head spinning lightheadedly in woozy circles of bewilderment.
“App...appointment,” he echoed blankly. “You’d like… to set an appointment. Sir?”

“Yes,” the voice spoke, growing veritably in discontent owing to the listlessness of Jihoon’s response. “It has come to my attention, Park Jihoon, that you’ve been in close contact with my son since his enrollment at... Mireu, was it? Hence, the invitation. I’d like to know more about you. The crowd Kuanlin walks amongst, after all, is of prime importance to the company as a whole.”

Jihoon’s hand descended the table onto Woojin’s lap, searching out his hand for the stability of comfort. Woojin rested a palm against his, eyeing him with genuine concern.

This is it, he thought.

The moment of truth.

If I meet with him, what am I to expect?

He’s a wealthy tycoon, with hefts of knowledge on diplomacy and arbitration up his sleeve.

How am I to negotiate with a businessman, who knows exactly what he wants, and how exactly to procure it?

“Two can play at his game, Jihoon-ah,” Yuejun reminded him. “Or five. You have the both of us, and Kuanlin on your side.”

Cogs turned apace in Jihoon’s brain, a do-or-die plan formulating roughly in his stream of consciousness.

“I understand, sir;” he responded. “I’ll make time for the meeting today.”

“Brilliant, Park Jihoon,” Kuanlin’s father exclaimed. “I await our encounter, then. Pray you won’t disappoint.”

***

“You alright, hyung?” Kuanlin inquired, having strolled with Jihoon towards the Outdoor Plaza during their practice break, after yet another fruitless discussion on their non-existent song. They were sitting by the flowerbeds, casually sunbathing before the skies were awash in the shadows of eventide.

He extended an arm over Jihoon’s shoulder, pulling him in to land a kiss upon his cheek. “Hyung. What’s up with the long face? You look as if you’re regretting every single life-decision you’ve made all at once.”

“So maybe I am,” Jihoon replied blankly. “Maybe I am regretting having let myself fall in love with you.”

“We aren’t already back to this, are we?” Kuanlin sighed forlornly. “Something must’ve triggered this… so spill, hyung. Otherwise, I’m kissing you until you’re out of breath.”

Jihoon shifted weights, turning at an angle towards Kuanlin in order to rest more comfortably against him. “Hmm. I’d rather take the kiss.”
Kuanlin let loose a chuckle, the soft trill of blissful laughter awakening the butterflies in Jihoon’s stomach. “Out here in the open?”

“Why not?” he murmured, absently tracing a finger across the curve of Kuanlin’s jawline. “Your father’s about to annihilate me a couple hours from now, anyway. I’d like to live my life to the fullest, before that happens.”

“I’m sorry,” Kuanlin said. “But did you say my father?”

“He asked for me a while ago,” Jihoon confessed. “He’s flown all the way to Seoul from Taipei.”

“He’s in Seoul?” Kuanlin burst out, jolting abruptly to attention, swivelling towards Jihoon until his face was near enough for them to kiss.

“I, uhh… yeah,” Jihoon said, eyeing Kuanlin’s mouth distractedly. “If I… remember. Correctly.”

“What for?”

“Stock-broker reunion, something or other.”

“Shareholder meeting?” Kuanlin clarified. “And then he wants to meet you? After these incompetent, power-hungry investors succeed mightily in setting his temper ablaze?”

“Mercifully enough, no,” Jihoon shook his head. “He wants me out of the way beforehand. I won’t expect things to turn out in my favour, though.”

“What are you expecting, then?” Kuanlin frowned, slender fingers brushing away the strands of hair falling gently onto Jihoon’s face.

“Maybe,” Jihoon whispered. “For him to tell me to get lost before karma hits and I choke on a brick.”

Kuanlin’s pleasant laugh made a reappearance, igniting flickers of untamed yearning within him.

“He isn’t like that,” Kuanlin whispered, gaze falling momentarily from Jihoon’s eyes to his lips.

Jihoon swallowed, eyes surveying the breadth of the Outdoor Plaza.

It was vacant, save for the both of them.

If I kiss him now, Jihoon thought. Other people won’t know. Right?

Cameras don’t exist out here in the open, either.

Unless we’re being monitored from afar.

Drones? Do these people dare?

He bit his lip, unaware of Kuanlin’s full attention resting upon him.

To hell with it.

Maybe if I take him by surprise, then—

Jihoon’s thought process was cut precipitously short.

Kuanlin took him by the waist, pressing pillowy-soft lips against Jihoon’s own.
And then, he was lost.

His mind floated adrift amongst the stars, trapped in boundless euphoria at the pleasant sensation of Kuanlin’s fingers traversing the length of his back, and Kuanlin’s mouth moving tenderly against his, begging for entrance.

Mindlessly, both hands made their way around Kuanlin’s neck, pulling him even closer, wanting more of his taste.

“Hyung—” Kuanlin began, parting with him for air.


Kuanlin’s lips crashed into his a second time over, his overwhelming scent enough to send Jihoon's thought process into dizzying spirals of blissful disorientation. Kuanlin kissed him a third time, until Jihoon let slip a sigh of content, before releasing his mouth gently, trailing kisses along his jaw, and then his neck, all the way down to the skin exposed by his collarbone.

Jihoon smiled in unmitigated pleasure, devoid of rational thought.

And then it dawned on him in all of three strikes.

Strike one: They were making out.

Strike two: They were making out in public.

Strike three: The flowerpot behind Kuanlin was levitating.

LEVITATING?

“K-Kuanlin-ahh…” Jihoon began, pushing him gently away.

“Anything wrong?” Kuanlin asked, the lip tint smeared messily along the lines of his mouth embarrassing Jihoon even further.

“You’re a phenomenal kisser, and I’d hate to ruin the moment, but… what in tarnation is that?”

He pointed a querulous finger at the flowerpot, which, much to his dismay, was still floating as if possessed in mid-air.

“I don’t recall having inhaled any hallucinogens this morning,” Jihoon whispered. “Please don’t tell me I’m the only one seeing that. Or… has your kiss driven me insane? Is that what this is?”

“My kisses are hallucinogen-free, thank you very much,” Kuanlin replied. “Don’t worry, hyung. I see it, too.”

“Approach it, then.” Jihoon challenged. “G-go on.”

“Why am I the sacrificial lamb?” Kuanlin demanded.

“Why not? If this concludes in a jump-scare, I swear I’ll—“

“FOUND YOU!” The flowerpot howled.

Thankfully enough for the both of them, neither boy was in particular, a scaredy-cat. Thus, instead of breaking into an eardrum-busting scream-fest and latching onto each other for dear life ala-
Seongwoo and Daniel, they simply clamped their mouths shut and remained statue-still.

Gawking in silence at the little girl standing before them, a flowerpot propped atop her pint-sized head.

“Wait a minute,” Jihoon exclaimed. “Who—whose child are you?!”

“Mama’s child,” she exclaimed. “And papa’s, too.”

Jihoon and Kuanlin exchanged puzzled glances, unsure of what to make of the situation.

She was small enough to hide in the flowerbeds, and was herself wearing a grass-coloured jumper, which certainly aided her in sublime assimilation into the overgrown shrubbery.

Kuanlin made the first move, sliding across the bench towards her.

“Hey there, little girl,” he greeted. “Are you lost?”

“Danbi isn’t lost,” she replied, settling the flowerpot by her feet in order to point a stubby finger at Jihoon and Kuanlin in turns. “But you were, a while ago. You too. Mister Bunnykins and Chicken Little.”

Jihoon gaped at her, scouring through his memory bank for stock-knowledge on how best to deal with children.

He gave up five seconds later.

“You don’t happen to speak toddler, do you?” Jihoon whispered.

“I’m pretty sure she’s at least in kindergarten,” Kuanlin whispered back. He turned his attention to the little girl, who, as if by magic, now had toddler paraphernalia wrapped protectively in either arm. “Your name is Danbi. Am I right?”

“Right!” Danbi exclaimed. “Danbi is Danbi, and chicken is little. Nice to meet you, Chicken Little! How are you today?”

“I’m confused, thank you,” Kuanlin replied, scratching his head. “Nice to meet you too, Danbi-ya.”

Danbi held up the plushie she was holding, a baby chick that likely had seen better days, its colour having dulled to a yellowish-grey. “Look, Chicken Little! This is you. You are chicken. I like you best when fried in cubes.”

“Fried in cubes?” Kuanlin repeated, Danbi’s outburst having gotten lost in translation.

“I think she’s craving chicken nuggets,” Jihoon whispered. “What now?”

“Well, at least now we know I’m the chick,” Kuanlin muttered. “And you’re the bunny.”

“Right,” Jihoon agreed. “Then again… how exactly are these nuggets of wisdom supposed to be of help?”

“Stop it with the nuggets, hyung,” Kuanlin whispered in alarm. “The innocent musings of a five-year old aren’t meant to be this frightening.”

“Danbi is seven this year,” Danbi objected, waving her stuffed bunny around in violent protest.
“Six in other countries. Not sure why. Danbi hates math almost as much as she loves chicken.”

“Jihoon relates to Danbi on a spiritual level,” Jihoon nodded, making an embarrassing venture into baby-talk. “But how come you’ve made your way here? Are you lost, Danbi-ya? Shall Chick-oppa and Bunny-oppa help you find your way home?”

“It’s dangerous out here,” Kuanlin added. “The grass may break your delicate skin into rashes.”

“If you let us help you,” Jihoon offered. “We can stop by for ice cream too. And uhh… chicken nuggets.”

Danbi’s mouth widened into a doughnut-shaped hole. “Mister Bunnykins eats ice cream? What if your front teeth fall off?”

“Mister Bunnykins eats everything,” Jihoon assured. “Except for uhm, children, if that was of any concern. As for my front teeth… they’ll remain in place, thanks for asking.”

Danbi nodded, more enthusiastically than necessary for having been assured that Jihoon was, in fact, not sporting dentures.

“If we eat ice cream,” she exclaimed. “Will Magu Otter and Jin Snake be there too?”

“Great,” Jihoon sighed. “Another riddle for us to decipher. What is this, Aesop’s Fables?”

Kuanlin’s hand flew over Jihoon’s mouth, snapping it forcibly shut.

“They’ll be there,” he smiled. “If you tell us what they look like… they’ll appear just for you.”

“Or if you see them in the streets,” Jihoon added, gently removing Kuanlin’s hand from his mouth, holding it in his instead. “Feel free to call out to them, too.”

Danbi hugged both plushies to herself, gaze falling timidly to the grassy pavement.

“What if Jin Snake eats Danbi?” her stern, no-nonsense tone funnier to Jihoon than it should’ve been. “My oppa says he’s mean and likes to steal things.”

“Your oppa?” Kuanlin and Jihoon exclaimed in unison.

Jihoon offered Danbi his left hand, winking subtly at Kuanlin before cocking his head to the side.

_We have to find him._

_Whoever he may be._

“Does your oppa study at this school?” Kuanlin inquired.

“That’s Danbi’s secret,” she pouted. “If oppa finds out that Danbi’s escaped from the clinic… he’ll cry again. Danbi is tired of seeing oppa cry.”

Jihoon studied her expression for a moment, the sorrow in her eyes utterly breaking his heart.

_The melancholy, the pain within them, he thought. Are thoroughly displaced._

_A child her age should have the stars in her eyes, alight with hope, and a little bit of mischief._

_And yet… why?_
“Say, Danbi-ya,” he began. “If we stumble upon Magu Otter and Jin Snake… will you, by any chance, lead us to your oppa afterwards? If we bring his animal farm friends along, oppa may no longer cry.”

“Hyung,” Kuanlin whispered. “Otters and snakes don’t belong in animal farms.”

“Stop it,” Jihoon whispered back. “You’re ruining her childhood.”

“Magu Otter first!” Danbi exclaimed. “Magu Otter is oppa’s favorite.”

“Is that so?” Jihoon asked, beaming at her warm-heartedly.

*She’s kinda cute*, Jihoon thought. *Makes me wish I had a sister.*

“He tells Danbi sometimes,” Danbi smiled happily. “That if Danbi meets Magu Otter one day, she should tell Magu Otter how much oppa loves him.”

Jihoon blinked at her, unable to make sense of the situation.

_Danbi’s oppa… is in love with Magu Otter?_

“What is that supposed to mean?” Jihoon asked. “Is oppa in love with—“

“MAGU OTTER!” Danbi interrupted. “Danbi found you!”

Danbi sped past Jihoon, chanting Magu Otter’s name one skip at a time.

Jihoon carefully observed her frolicsome movements, fascinated by her persistence upon wielding both plushies as if to parade them around as soldiers would their imposing armament.

And then, she fastened herself onto Lee Daehwi’s leg, who burst into howls of shock and terror.

“Geez,” Jihoon exclaimed, shielding both ears from Daehwi’s banshee wailing. “Calm down, Daehwi-ya. Danbi won’t bite. Or at least… I think not.”

“Did you…” Daehwi began, having regained enough of his feeble composure. “Did you guys *reproduce* while both of us were away?”

“That’s cute,” Jinyoung noted, kneeling by the sidewalk to level himself with Danbi’s stature, which couldn’t possibly have been any more than three-and-a-half feet tall. “Hi there, kid. What’s your name?”

Danbi’s lower lip trembled fearfully in response, taking cover in the folds of Daehwi’s overhung parka.

“We found her in the bushes,” Jihoon sighed. “Disguised as an Easter daisy pot. And rather *convincingly* so, might I add.”

“So you’re Magu-otter,” Kuanlin exclaimed, resting a hand against Daehwi’s shoulder, the other still entwined with Jihoon’s. “Sorry, Daehwi-ya. We have no idea what to make of her either.”

“You must be Jin Snake, then?” Jihoon sniggered, flashing Jinyoung a lopsided smile. “Interesting choice of predator.”

*Jin Snake?”* Jinyoung echoed, eyeing Danbi from beneath the layers of Daehwi’s parka, underneath which she’d burrowed her existence into. “What is *that* supposed to mean? And why
“Am I mysteriously offended?”

“Danbi-ya,” Jihoon cooed. “Why are you hiding?”

“Come out from under there, Danbi-ya,” Daehwi coaxed, tugging lightly at Danbi’s plush toy. “Don’t you worry. Jinyoung, err—Jin Snake and I are your friends.”

“Danbi is scared, Magu Otter,” she sobbed. “What if Jin Snake eats Danbi? Danbi tastes good, too. Oppa says it’s because she’s chubby and has fluffy puff-pastry cheeks.”


“Don’t worry,” Jihoon assured her, himself in urgent need of a snack. “Jin Snake is on a strict no-Danbi diet. These days, he eats only, uhh… grass.”

“Am I a cow?” Jinyoung demanded. “I thought I was a snake! But why a snake? A cow would’ve been much less offensive.”

“Bad, Jinyoung-ah,” Daehwi scolded. “What have snakes ever done to you? Most of them sleep around all day. They’re harmless.”

“She’s afraid of me, though,” Jinyoung pointed out. “I wonder why.”

Jinyoung’s remark lit a torch within Jihoon, his enlightenment where Danbi’s origins were concerned, a telltale sign of her brother’s once-baffling identity.

“Magu Otter, Magu Otter!” Danbi whispered, tugging at Daehwi’s undershirt, which, for reasons inexplicable, she’d somehow managed to get a firm hold upon. “Lend Danbi your ear, Magu Otter. Danbi has something to tell you.”

Daehwi and Jinyoung exchanged mystified looks, before he turned to Jihoon for approval. Jihoon flashed him Jaehwan’s signature ‘okay’ gesture, stepping forwards discreetly in order to spy upon their quaint conversation. Kuanlin followed suit soon thereafter, his hand in Jihoon’s having been pulled unwittingly into the secretive exchange.

“Go home with Danbi, Magu Otter,” Danbi half-whispered. “It’ll make oppa very happy.”

“Oppa?” Daehwi whispered back, voice escalating in pitch. “Does oppa like otters?”

“Not otters,” Danbi shook her head. “If they’re not Magu Otter… oppa won’t like them, either.”

This revelation clued Jihoon in, now certain of his sneaking suspicion.

This little girl is Yoon Danbi.

Yoon Taeyoon’s seven year-old sister.

“Kuanlin-ah,” he whispered. “I think… I think I know whose sister this is.”

“I do too,” Kuanlin nodded. “Magu Otter and Jin Snake… the operative pieces to this jigsaw puzzle.”

“Care to explain?” Jinyoung inquired. “I’m at a loss here.”

Kuanlin jerked Jinyoung forwards by the arm, pulling him into their circle of secrets,
“I’ll save the explanations for later,” Jihoon whispered. “For now… you tell us where Yoon Taejoon is.”

“Yoon Taejoon?” Jinyoung screeched in hushed tones. “Why him of all people?”

“Because,” Kuanlin explained. “At the moment, his sister’s missing from the clinic. And if he finds out, he’ll go utterly berserk.”

***

The practice room, in spite of the contemplative air effectuated by their idle streak on song composition, was no less uproarious than the outdoors upon Yoon Danbi’s unprecedented arrival.

“Pinch me,” Seongwoo spoke up. “I think… I might be dreaming.”

“I’d do that,” Daniel replied. “But if you’re seeing what I’m seeing, then hold that thought for a just a moment before I slap you awake.”

“Wait just a moment here,” Sungwoon demanded, eyeing Kuanlin and Jihoon distrustfully. “Did either of you make a pit-stop at the orphanage? Adopted a daughter, or two? Or has the ghost of a five-year old been haunting you, lately?”

“Not unless you’ve developed a third-eye,” Jihoon shrugged. “Danbi is very much alive. Henceforth the reason she’s much harder to get rid of. Prayer circles won’t work. And neither will those piercing stares.”

“Mister Bunnykins,” Danbi exclaimed, tugging at the hem of Jihoon’s shirt. “Who are they?”

Jihoon fiddled with his thumbs, on pins and needles as to how best he might proceed from there.

“These are, uhm…”

He espied Danbi’s worn-out stuffed animal, tinkering antishly with bizarre ideas.

“The other residents of oppa’s animal farm,” Jihoon decided. “We’re here to make friends.”

“There are more?” Danbi exclaimed, jumping about hyper-actively. “Mister Bunnykins’ friends! How do you do?”

“She’s cute,” Woojin spoke up. His presence, until then, Jihoon had barely even noticed, a testament to Danbi’s ability to somehow divert his attention away from the rest of society.

“Should we… introduce ourselves, then?” Jisung remarked. “Though I suppose the ‘All I Wanna Do’ greeting will serve only to startle the poor thing away.”

“Go with the animal farm greeting,” Jaehwan suggested. “Where is Seonho when you need him the most?”

“Alright then,” Jihoon exclaimed, clapping a hand against the small of Danbi’s back, gesturing for her to stand at attention. “Listen well, Danbi-ya. These are the residents of Wanna One farm. Ong Otter, Niel Otter, Jisung Otter, Woojin Snake—“

“Stop it, hyung,” Kuanlin reprimanded. “If you group us into a singular Otter family, Danbi might
find that much too confusing.”

“Name them yourself, Danbi-ya,” Daehwi offered. “It works that way, you see. Once you call them by name, they transform immediately.”

“Really?” Danbi exclaimed, eyes glinting with excitement. “Let’s see…”

The next few minutes were spent in excruciating play-along with Danbi’s jokester shenanigans, who—graciously enough—was content to have listened to their mimicry of animal sounds. He’d half-expected her to ask of them an impromptu storybook roleplay, which, for all intents and purposes, Jihoon would’ve run anyway screaming from before they hit Chapter 1.

Funnily enough, he’d spent the last minute hopping to and fro around the room, as if bewitched by the spirit of Bugs Bunny himself.

“Alright then,” Jihoon announced, after their animal farm tour had come to a close. “We have Kang Puppy, Ong Seal, Hwang Fox, Woon Bear, Jae Whale, Yoon Cat, and Angry Bird over there. Now that that’s settled—“


Danbi ran into Woojin’s arms, pressing a sloppy kiss onto his cheek. “Danbi wuffs you, Park Sparrow. Let’s get married and have sparrow babies.”

“Married… huh,” Woojin began, sweating in bullets upon Danbi’s emboldened proposal. “And sparrow… b-babies… uhm… but then Yuejun… and I…”

“How are babies made, Park Sparrow?” Danbi asked. “Do we hold hands? Do I kiss you? Oppa says it’s works like magic.”

“MOVING ON,” Jihoon declared, before the exchange could leap through the bounds of child-friendliness. He was also, shameful as though it was to admit, somehow miffed that Danbi would choose Angry Bird, of all people, to repopulate the sparrow species with. “Sucks that Yuejun isn’t here. She and Danbi may very well get along.”

“We’d better work on our next song for the Idol Project,” Jinyoung spoke up. “And then we figure out how to return Danbi over here to Yoon Taejoon.”

“You know who oppa is?” Danbi asked, hugging herself even closer to Woojin, resting on both knees in the space between his legs. “Danbi wants to spend more time with Magu Otter and Park Sparrow, though… ahh, as Danbi thought. Jin Snake is scary.”

“She takes after her brother,” Jinyoung muttered. “But she’s cute, and that sucks, because it means I’ve been dealt a trump card I can’t possibly win over.”

“Over here, Jinyoung-ah,” Daehwi said, motioning to Jinyoung with a come-hither gesture. “Leave Danbi be with Woojin, for now. You have to help me write the lyrics for our new song.”

A couple of days ago, the organizers of the Idol Project announced their second mission: a self-written and self-composed song, which they were expected to present to reputable producers in the industry, in order for them to make suitable rearrangements.

They’d spent the past couple of days revising and re-revising their entry, trashing one rough idea after another. Time was ticking, and the perfect source of inspiration had yet to strike.
Having Danbi around to distract them from their duties helped little, though Jihoon had to admit she was the ray of sunshine they needed to enliven the gloomy atmosphere.

In order to distract Danbi, in return, they let her toggle with Jihoon phone, and now she was walking around in circles attempting to make a full-length documentary of their fruitless afternoon.

Most of the footage she’d gotten had likely been of their easy banter, as well as Kuanlin’s cover rap of Machine Gun Kelly, which—in spite of the fact that Danbi had wiped his storage space clean—Jihoon had absolutely no intention of deleting.

He made a mental note to himself to paste the footage of Kuanlin’s rap into a private, password-protected folder later on.

The practice session itself, however, remained fruitless until four o’clock, five hours since they’d gathered together.

“I can’t believe we’ve been sitting here for almost an hour without making a single iota of progress,” Jisung sighed. “We’ve been staring with our mouths open at the ceiling. My saliva’s dried in my throat, yet we still haven’t come up with a ground-breaking concept. And here I was thinking a self-written song was a blessing from the heavens, given Daehwi’s streak of musical genius.”

“Forgive me,” Daehwi sighed. “But writing for all of us, it seems, is a couple notches above writing for myself.”

“No pressure,” Jisung exclaimed. “I haven’t been of much help, either.”

“We still need to have this approved by Assbrass and Kiggen,” Sungwoon added. “And that part is airing, god bless our souls. If we disappoint them on national television… it’s over for us. We need to arrive on set prepared.”

“What is Woon Bear complaining about?” Danbi inquired. “Is he hungry? Does he want to poop?”

“Both, actually,” Sungwoon admitted. “Hey, kid. You have any ideas?”

Jihoon spared Sungwoon a cursory glance, thinking the idea of Danbi helping them out laughable at best, and disastrous at the worst.

*Should the stars align that way, we’d be up there onstage, performing an updated rendition of ‘ppiyak ppiyak byeongari’.*

Jihoon shuddered at the thought.

“You’re asking a kid for help in writing a song?” he asked.

“Danbi knows!” she exclaimed, raising both hands in excitement. “Danbi knows. She sees oppa writing songs for Magu Otter every day.”

Jihoon blinked, unable to process her statement briskly enough.

He turned to Kuanlin, who shrugged a shoulder at him in response.

“Taejoon writes songs for Daehwi?” he mouthed.

“What are they about?” Jinyoung inquired, heavy-set eyes awash with what Jihoon could only assume was an intractable twinge of pain.
“Danbi cheats sometimes,” Danbi declared, and it was the proudest Jihoon had ever heard anyone articulate their history of fraudulent behaviour. “She peeks into oppa’s notebook while he’s sleeping.”

She propped herself onto her knees, resting a hand against Woojin’s chest for support.

“This is how many of them he’s written,” she said, holding both hands up as high as was possible. She let the other fall to her side one heartbeat later. “And this is how many of them Danbi has read.”

“Good job, little girl,” Kuanlin chuckled. “Wooseok-hyung would’ve taken pride in your undercover skills, had he known of all this.”

“Most of his songs,” Danbi explained. “Are about protecting Magu Otter from danger. From Jin Snake, he said once before. And… oh! Making Magu Otter happy, even if thinking of him makes oppa sad.”

Daehwi and Jinyoung stiffened at the notion, and Jihoon had no idea how best to react to Danbi’s faultless outburst.

She’s just a child, he thought. And more than likely, she looks up to her brother.

If only she knew… of what Yoon Taejoon’s done.

“It’s Danbi’s only wish,” she smiled. “To make oppa’s dreams come true. So that he won’t have to keep on writing about Magu Otter, anymore. Because he cries whenever he does that. And Danbi cries along with him.”

This broke Jihoon’s heart, unable to fathom how so young a child could bottle within her intentions so noble.

She isn’t even doing this for her own sake, anymore, Jihoon thought.

And why not? Aren’t children supposed to worry about themselves, and themselves only?

“I’m sorry, Danbi-ya,” Daehwi whispered. “For making Taejoon-oppa cry.”

He swiftly brushed aside a tear, as if to keep Danbi from finding out she’d made Magu Otter even sadder. “Is there any way for me to make it up to you?”

Danbi blinked at him, turning to Woojin for support.

“It’s alright,” Woojin said, pinching her cheek affectionately. “Magu Otter is magical that way. He makes wishes come true. Unless your wish is, uhm… getting married and having babies. That’s a bit—”

“I DON’T WANNA!” Danbi declared. “Danbi wants something else now.”

Woojin gaped at her in utter shock, as Jihoon burst into fits of knee-slapping laughter.

“That hurt, Danbi-ya,” Woojin frowned. “The turnaround was practically a U-turn.”

“What is that you want?” Daehwi asked, smiling at her tenderly.

“Sing Danbi a song,” she said, clapping both hands together in pent-up exhilaration. “Taejoon-oppa says you have the voice of an angel.”
A short-lived pang of anguish flitted through Jinyoung’s stoic expression, passing into nothing moments later, as if Jihoon’s eyes were playing tricks on him.

“Eh?” Daehwi exclaimed. “Right…right this moment?”

Danbi bobbed her head up and down in vigorous motions. “Yes! A song Danbi’s never heard before.”

And then, that very moment, it hit Jihoon smack in the face.

The perfect source of inspiration.

Yoon Danbi herself.

“I…” he began. “I think I have an idea. And I think it might just work.”

“You do?” the rest of them uttered in perfect chorus.

“Wait a minute,” Jaehwan interrupted. “Seongwoo and Daniel aren’t here. They left a couple minutes ago, not sure why. Should we wait for them, before we proceed?”

“Let them be,” Jisung said, waving Jaehwan’s concern away. “I’ll bet a day’s worth of earnings at the Imugi that both of them are in the bathroom right now, doing, uhm… things.”

He leaned into Jaehwan’s space, shielding his mouth with hand a before he whispered, “Quite possibly each other.”

“Got it,” Jaehwan said, pushing Jisung away. “Keep that under wraps. We have the embodiment of purity in our midst.”

“Go ahead then, Mister Bunnykins,” Woojin urged. “What’s the bright idea?”

“It’s uhm… a softer concept,” he began. “Still falls under the hip-hop umbrella, but… it won’t be the in-your-face type of sound this time. In other words… something pleasing enough for Danbi to enjoy.”

“Ah,” Daehwi exclaimed. “I get it. If Danbi wants to hear a song she’s never heard before… then we’d have to make one ourselves.”

Jihoon nodded, grinning from ear to ear. “Exactly. I have an idea taking shape in my head, at least where the lyrics are concerned. As for the arrangement and composition… I’ll leave that in your capable hands, Daehwi-ya.”

Daehwi nodded, almost as animatedly as Danbi might’ve done it. “Gotcha.”

“It’s your lucky day, Danbi-ya,” Kuanlin remarked. “Not only will Magu Otter sing you a song, but the rest of us at the animal farm, will too.”

“YAY!” Danbi exclaimed, hugging Woojin around the neck to the point of near-asphyxiation. “A SONG FOR DANBI!”

“C-cant…” Woojin wheezed. “Breathe…”

“What’s this song called?” Daehwi inquired. “It’s not ‘Magu Otter and the Animal Farm Friends’ is it?”
“Nope,” Jihoon reassured him, shuffling through the workings of his brain in search of the perfect title.

“This song is entitled,” he decided. “Oh Little Girl.”

***

The air in the waiting room outside Lai Ter Chien’s office at Tàiyáng’s headquarters in Seoul was unbearably cold.

Immediately, Jihoon bemoaned having changed out of his windbreaker into a polo-shirt, tie, and skinny-fit jacket, all of which fit the strict corporate dress code, but most certainly did not fit the Siberian weather brought about by the inessentially gargantuan air-conditioner.

Jihoon arrived with Kuanlin, flanked by Wooseok and two other bodyguards, both of whom Wooseok had commissioned to stand on-guard just in case media personnel were hiding in the shadows.

At present, they were stationed by the door, keeping a close watch on every single point of entrance into the President’s Office.

“Was this a good idea?” Jihoon whispered. “I don’t trust in Jung Wooseok one bit. What if I enter into the office, and he takes the opportunity to drag you into his car and fly your ass out to Taipei?”

“Not gonna happen,” Kuanlin assured him. “Wooseok won’t stoop that low. And neither will my father. If they want my return, it will have been because I’ve chosen to.”

Jihoon rubbed both arms along the length of his shoulders, unable to keep the frigid blast of air at bay. “I’m sorry, Kuanlin-ah. I think it might’ve been wrong of me suspect either of them of foul play. I just…”

“You’re worried,” Kuanlin interrupted. “And so am I. You’ll be alright in there, won’t you?”

Jihoon nodded, more to allay his fears than Kuanlin’s uncertainties. “I’ll be perfectly fine.”

“I wish there was something I could do to help,” Kuanlin sighed. “But I’m afraid I’ll mess things up if I try and get between either of you. Besides… you’re your own man. You have your own perspective on things, and I’d like to respect that.”

Jihoon smiled, still unsure of what he’d done to deserve a gentleman as thoughtful, and compassionate, and unsurpassably perfect as Lai Kuanlin.

This is why I have to fight for him to stay, Jihoon thought. Because he’s one in seven billion.

More precious than the rarest, most exceptional diamond on earth.

“He’ll ask of me to let you go,” Jihoon whispered, leaning himself against Kuanlin’s shoulder. “You know that, right?”

“I do,” Kuanlin whispered back, wrapping an arm around Jihoon’s waist. “And you’ll tell him you won’t.”
“There are things,” Jihoon said. “That even I can’t possibly argue against. And should your father have an ace up his sleeve, a permanent goodbye may prove inevitable.”

His hand sought Kuanlin’s, for warmth, for comfort, for all the strength there was left for him to take.

For you, though, he thought. I’ll fight.

And yet, when all is said and done, you and I are powerless, vulnerable, standing unarmed before the king. If he barters your return, with the assurance of your well-being in exchange… how am I to go against that?

When that’s the only thing I’ve ever hoped for, too.

Your enduring happiness.

With or without me in the picture.

“Kuanlin-ah,” he whispered. “If I return still on your side… I’d like to make things official.”

This stunned Kuanlin into perfect silence.

Jihoon watched him intently, committing the view of him into memory, as if to hold on to him in every possible way.

“Why is it so hard to say those three words?” Jihoon whispered, reaching out to touch Kuanlin’s face with the tips of his trembling fingers. “Because I’m worried that I’ll never hear them back. It’s like an author dying and leaving a story unfinished before it has the chance to turn into a masterpiece.”


Jihoon leaned into him, pressing a soft, slow kiss onto his lips.

“But you’ve said them before, haven’t you?” he whispered. “Those three words, in your native language. And because of that, I no longer have anything left to worry about.”

That very moment, the door swung open, Lai Ter Chien’s middle-aged secretary standing stiffly by the entrance. “The President’s video call with his client just ended. Apologies for the delay, but he is ready to speak with you now.”

Jihoon nodded in acknowledgment, waiting for the door to creak gradually to a close.

“Don’t let him get to you,” Kuanlin pleaded. “Father does have a way with words, but… please. Promise me you’ll let him know I wish sincerely to stay.”

Jihoon smiled, extending a hand upwards.

Gently urging both of Kuanlin’s eyes closed.

He bent forwards, hands caressing Kuanlin’s cheek, letting the warmth of his only lover seep right through his skin, soothing him mightily from within.

And then, he kissed his sweet prince goodbye.

“I love you, Lai Kuanlin,” he whispered. “Keep that in mind. Always.”
Unbeknownst to Jihoon, until then, but Lai Kuanlin was in fact the spitting image of his father. Both of them had the same piercing eyes, the same impressively arched nose, the same flawless complexion, and the same world of secrets waiting on discovery.

This time around, however, Jihoon had no interest in probing Lai Ter Chien’s secrets for meaning. 

*Otherwise, his secrets, heavy as they are... may wound me.*

*And for these very same wounds, I may have yet to find a cure.*


“The pleasure is mine, sir,” Jihoon responded, feigning outward calm. “I apologize for having taken up your time.”

“Nonsense,” President Lai exclaimed. “I did ask for you myself. I suppose you understand what I’ve been meaning to tell you? It had to be in person. Dismissing you otherwise would’ve been tactless, I’m afraid.”

Jihoon winced, hands gripping the vinyl chair firmly by the armrest.

“Dismiss me,” he murmured, almost to himself. “Is that... what this is about, sir?”

President Lai withdrew from his easy recline, angling himself forwards instead, resting both elbows atop the varnished oaken table. He scrutinized Jihoon’s impassive expression, clasping both hands together as if in astute contemplation.

“What else is there for us to discuss?” he said simply. “As I’m sure you know, my son is engaged to marry Yuèliàng’s first daughter. Yuejun herself has taken gratuitous pains, if only to warn you as such, and thus I assume you’ve been briefed on the overall situation. Yuejun is, after all, rather... *impulsive* that way. Headstrong. Foolhardy. Were it not for the influence her family exerts, I would’ve chosen a more dutiful, subservient lady.*

* Dutiful? Jihoon thought. *Subservient?*

*You want a docile lamb ready to conform to your every whim, another servant obedient to your every order?*

Jihoon tensed up, his right eye twitching in repressed agitation.

*I’d though this confrontation problematic because he’d intimidate me. Blackmail me, even.*

*Not provoke me to the point of no return.*

“They aren’t officially engaged as of yet,” Jihoon pointed out. “There is time left to make amends, sir.”

“I’m afraid not,” President Lai argued. “Her father and I have been comrades far longer than...”
you’ve been alive. His daughter’s been promised to my son for thirteen years as of counting, and I am in no position to repeal so binding an avowal for the dismal reason that my son fancies himself in love with the likes of… you, Park Jihoon. A boy. With nothing to his name.”

_Ahh_, Jihoon thought, smiling to himself. _He’s finally said that._

_Now let the mind-games begin._

“I do have something,” he spoke up. “You may find of interest, sir.”

“Oh?” President Lai exclaimed, eyebrow shooting upwards in buoyant curiosity. “Do tell.”

“I wonder,” Jihoon gambled. “If the floor is open to… shall we say, negotiations.”

“Interesting,” President Lai remarked, fingers tapping restlessly against the compact surface of the table. “You have a flair for the dramatic, child. But I do hope you’ve kept this in mind: I, by trade, am a businessman. And Tàiyáng Group did not build itself from scratch; it had me at the helm, and as such you must know I take business deals very, very seriously.”

Jihoon nodded with simulated confidence, internally unsure of the hazards to this lofty transaction.

“I understand, sir.”

President Lai nodded, flashing him a sardonic smile. He unclasped his Rolex wristwatch, settling it atop the table onto a miniature ceramic plate.

“I’d like to make amends to the itinerary, madam Yoo,” he spoke into the intercom, letting his secretary know of an abrupt change in schedule. “The stockholder meeting pushes through, but do inform the Board of Directors that I may clock in a trifling number of minutes late to the meeting. In order to entertain… ahh. An unforeseen client.”

“Understood sir,” Secretary Yoo’s voice echoed in response. “I shall make the appropriate changes to your schedule immediately.”

_Excellent_, Jihoon thought. _Now we’re talking._

_With all the time at either of our hands at my disposal._

“Carry on,” President Lai urged, gesturing with a sweeping flick of his wrist. “I’m all ears, Park Jihoon-ssi.”

Jihoon straightened out his necktie, sifting mentally through his intellect for the appropriate response.

“If we win the _Idol Project_,” he began. “I’d like to ask in exchange for kind reconsideration, with regard to your agreement with Yuèliàng. In order that Kuanlin might continue pursuing his dream, along with the rest of us.”

“I have not the time enough to make a decision until then,” the President shrugged, thoroughly unimpressed by Jihoon’s proposal. “I need an offer more immediate then that. And besides, I fail to see why reconsideration is to bear fruit, at least where profit is concerned. If I do that, I stand to gain _nothing_.”

“Then what of _this_ round?” Jihoon back-pedaled. “If we make it to first place, and into the finals? Will that be enough to warrant your attention? _Please_, sir. We can’t have Kuanlin backing out of
this—he’s crucial to the team. If the merger with Yuèliàng pushes through, and his engagement to Yuejun made public… the Mireu Artist Agency will undoubtedly second-guess their decision to let him debut, or let him participate in the program altogether. He’ll lose half his fanbase—perhaps, even more—and his popularity will plummet inevitably out of control. And should that happen, your company won’t remain unaffected. The circumstances are unfortunate, but that’s exactly how this industry works. It’s cutthroat, and unkind, but so is everywhere else.”

Jihoon studied the President’s stolid expression, unable to penetrate into his pyche.

“And our viewership ratings are high, too” Jihoon added. “Skyrocketed even further after the fifth episode aired this week. If we debut… we might hit the jackpot. It’ll afford Kuanlin widespread recognition, and then—“

“I’m afraid,” the President interrupted. “The stakes are impossibly high, given the jarring possibility of an uncalculated downturn. Other factors are at play, beyond either of our control. How shall Kuanlin be edited into this program? How shall his agency treat him, should he make it in? And what of these scandals idols keep on getting into? Where is my son to turn to for protection?”

He struck repeatedly at Jihoon with an enduring barrage of objective concerns, who, for his part, had no counter-argument left to provide.

“All things considered,” the President shrugged. “Tàiyáng stands to gain more from setting the merger with Yuèliàng in stone, with stellar terms of agreement to go by, my son eventually taking my place with no other obligation left to tie him down. The alternative, on the other hand… is to let him wander off into the unknown, chasing after a faraway dream, his chances of success hanging on by a thread. And these chances are… what? More volatile than stock market data at the Wall Street Journal? I think it’s clear, to you and I both, that the former is not only more profitable, but also puts the company at much less risk to begin with.”

He retrieved his wristwatch from the ceramic plate, fitting it back onto his wrist.

“And now that we’re on the topic,” he continued, adding salt to Jihoon’s harsh, open wound. “You do realize that our company’s stocks do rise and fall relative to Kuanlin’s public standing, do you not? A pity though it is, these do not change at my behest. The future of Tàiyáng, instead, rides on Kuanlin’s reputation, as the only son in line for ascension to the Presidency. And time and again he’s proven more than capable, having been groomed into position for years in the making. As for rapping… it’s little more than a hobby. I watched a short clip of him once, and it shamed me. What makes you think he’ll make it far? That the hard-hearted public will not make a mockery of his voice? I would have no complaint had he taken up basketball, but even that he’s given up altogether.”

Jihoon could only gape at him in shock, utterly upset that Kuanlin’s father had the audacity enough to label his son’s earnest rapping ‘shameful'.

“You must think it unfair,” the President continued, until Jihoon was resentful enough to knock his jaw out of alignment had he not the slightest measure of courtesy left. “That I exercise this much control over him. But a business is a business, and I am unwilling to enter into voluntary compromise. Billions of won are on the line here, given especially that I stand to lose Yuèliàng in the process. And Yuejun’s father grows impatient. He wants an answer, and wants it quickly.”

He was given an ultimatum, and Jihoon knew there was but the slightest way out.

“I understand,” he whispered. “Sir.”
Lai Ter Chien nodded, pleased that Jihoon put up minimal resistance. “You’re much easier to bargain with than I’d anticipated. Anything else you might wish to offer?”

Jihoon smiled, his turn to gloat.

*You spoke much too soon, Mister President.*

*I have yet to deal the final blow.*

“As a matter of fact,” he said. “Yes.”

Jihoon watched the President’s self-assured smile vanish out of existence.

“You must know this, sir,” he argued. “But high risks do yield high rewards. And Kuanlin has risked *everything* for this dream. More than the billions of won he amounts to in your eyes, he stripped himself practically naked of every advantage his privileged background had to offer, every exemption he enjoyed as the scion to an exorbitant fortune. He was *that* desperate. And this very moment… so am I.”

Jihoon reached carefully into the depths of his pocket, sliding a rectangular piece of paper across the President’s colossal table.

“I procured this for you,” he explained. “It’s a ticket to the *Idol Project* showcase at the Seoul Olympic Hall.”

He engaged the President in a short-lived staredown, whose jaw had gone slack in consternation.

“And why give this to me?” he inquired. “I have neither the time nor the interest.”

“Just then,” Jihoon reminded him. “You were able to delay your attendance to an urgent meeting with foreign investors, in order only to accommodate *me*. I’m sure you could do much the same for your son? More than anything, I think… he misses you. He tells me about his family almost every single day.”

Jihoon hid both hands in his jacket pockets, less to keep them warm than to keep the President from noticing how fiercely they trembled.

“And that’s why I’m sure… that if he knew you were there to cheer him on, it’ll give him more than enough strength to do his best for the next performance. That way, too… you’ll see for yourself what Lai Kuanlin—the *performer*—is truly capable of in person.”

“In person, you say…”

“In person. Onstage. At his truest, and at his best.”

President Lai extended a hand outwards in acute hesitation, skimming through the details printed onto the modest-looking ticket.

“If you wanted a sneak peek,” Jihoon added, fishing his phone out of his pocket. “I have one here too.”

He scrolled through his data files, having remembered the footage Danbi had taken of their practice session.

*Perhaps it was not so immense a waste of time.*
He found the video clip in question, one of Kuanlin rapping to Machine Gun Kelly’s ‘Home’, unaware that as he sang his heart out, a little, little girl was recording everything.

As if for his father to see.

“I don’t think you’ve ever met him,” Jihoon said simply, hitting the play button eagerly. “But this is your son.”

Kuanlin’s rich, singsong voice reverberated powerfully throughout the office instantaneously.

Look, I've been through so much pain  
And it's hard to maintain, any smile on my face  
'Cause there's madness on my brain  
So I gotta make it back, but my home ain't on the map  
Gotta follow what I'm feeling to discover where it's at  
I need the memory  
In case this fate is forever, just to be sure these last days are better  
And if I have any enemies  
To give me the strength to look the devil in the face

And make it home safe

“Ahh, that smile of his,” the President mused fondly for a moment, having let his guard down by accident. “I don’t remember the last time I’ve seen that.”

A melancholy smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, and Jihoon, from where he sat, could almost see his hardened heart swelling with pride.

You have no idea how vastly he’s improved, Jihoon thought.

Because you never gave yourself the chance to find out.

And then, the President’s gaze shifted away from the screen, as if to snap out of the spell Jihoon had boldly cast upon him.

“Do you think this enough to sway me?” he demanded. “Appealing to my emotions, and sentimentality as his father?”

“I’m not trying to sway you into doing anything, sir,” Jihoon clarified. “Whether or not I succeed in what I’ve come here for, I’m leaving with my head held high. Knowing that finally, you understand how important this is to him. How much he loves what he’s doing.”

Jihoon snatched the phone away, restoring its place within the folds of his outerwear.

“And did you know this, President Lai?” he added, voice rising unwittingly in volume. “That months ago, he wrote a song by himself. With lyrics dedicated to both of his parents. The odds were stacked against him at the time, as he had neither the time nor the opportunity to prepare for a satisfactory performance. But even though he lacked in virtually everything—language skills, movement, flow—he made into the Idol Project with that song. Why? Because he meant it, and I could tell from the moment he stood there, with burning zeal before the audience. He said he wanted to pay you back. For everything you’ve given him. And he left Taipei neither to spite you, nor to abandon his family… but to thank you, make you proud, and prove to you that he can make it without your help because he’s strong enough. Because he, after all, he is his father’s son. And just like his father, brave enough to risk everything in order to establish Tàiyáng Group’s foothold in the industry, he endeavoured to brave the Idol Project in order to build his career. And I intend
to help him see that vision through.”

This silenced Lai Ter Chien effectively, and it was the most triumphant Jihoon had felt in a long, long while.

“Did you even know that, sir?” he whispered. “That he wrote this song for you. That even in Seoul, he thinks of you and sings your praises? Every single day. But he never cries, because you taught him not to. Instead, he holds on to the hope that someday, his father might come to support him. To believe in the beauty of his dream. And that’s why that golden ticket is sitting in your hands, this very moment. Because I too, want to give you the chance.”

Jihoon rose to his feet, dusting off the tepid air from the fabric of his clothing.

“But I’ve said my piece,” he declared. “And I know that I’m in no position to ask this of you, sir. But I’m desperate, and so is your son. And yet I… I do understand, that you’re a businessman first, and a father second. Were I in your position, I might’ve come to agree with you.”

He pushed the chair towards the table, preparing himself for departure.

“But you don’t agree, then?” the President whispered, his cocksure tone replaced with hapless uncertainty. “My logic… is sound in reasoning, is it not?”

“I don’t agree,” Jihoon shook his head. “Because I’m not in your position. I’m not Taiyáng Group’s Park Jihoon, or Yueliàng Group’s Park Jihoon, but Wanna One’s Park Jihoon, and that makes all the difference. You’re right, sir. I have nothing to my name, and thus shall never understand the value of money made in wanton excess. But I do have a dream. To debut, to perform, to love in perfect freedom. And that’s why I’ve gone all out on the line, fighting this hard for Kuanlin to stay. Because he’s all that I have. And he’s all I’ve ever needed.”

President Lai shook his head, to the bitter end doubtful of Kuanlin’s abilities.

“Some risks, Park Jihoon,” he sighed in resignation. “Are quite simply… not worth taking. And should I dare to take them, I’d have gone staunchly against my own credo.”

“Perhaps so,” Jihoon shrugged. “But for Kuanlin, any risk I’ve taken is more than worth it. As long as it’s for him.”

He bent himself forwards, bowing to the President politely.

“Do consider the offer, President Lai,” he urged one more time. “This coming Saturday, the Seoul Olympic Hall at 7 in the evening.”

“I…” Lai Ter Chien stammered, fingers pressed against his temple in unrest. “What am I to gain from this?”

“Everything you’ve missed out on, thus far,” Jihoon smiled. “A priceless experience, one a couple billion won shall never equal or amount to.”

He bowed in deference once more, before pivoting on one heel and making for the door.

“And that,” he whispered. “Is my final offer.”

***
When Jihoon stepped out of Lai Ter Chien’s office, Lai Kuanlin was nowhere to be found.

For a small moment, he stood there, panicking uncontrollably.

*Has Wooseok kidnapped him?*

*Has he departed to Taipei without saying farewell?*

And then, his phone buzzed in his pocket.

Kuanlin had, in reality, been calling him on repeat for the past twenty minutes, which Jihoon was heedless of as he’d put his mobile on silent.

“Sheesh,” Jihoon muttered. “And here I was thinking you’d gone for good.”

He swiped at the screen, pressing it gingerly against his right ear.

“Hello?” he spoke into the phone. “Kuanlin-ah, where are you? Have you gotten into an emergency? You called a grand-total of thirty-seven times before the confrontation was over. I wonder if you’ve forgotten I’ve been speaking with your father. By the way he—“

“*Hyung,*” Kuanlin interjected. “*My apologies, but... wait until you’ve arrived here before you explain in greater detail. We’ve... we’ve got something far more pressing at hand.*”

Jihoon blinked, skeptical of having heard Kuanlin correctly over static.

“What happened? You’re scaring me.”

“It’s... it’s Danbi,” Kuanlin exclaimed. “*One second, she was jumping around in breathless circles, and the next... she’d just collapsed onto the floor with a thud.*”

“D-Danbi?” Jihoon echoed, voice quivering audibly. “Is... is she alright?”

“The hyungs rushed her to the clinic soon after she fainted. Apparently, Taejoon had taken her there before they left for home, after she’d gotten temporarily discharged from the public hospital. He might’ve had no idea she’d find a way to slip past the nurse, and the staff have been restless in search of her since then. She must’ve seen us exiting from the practice room on her way out of the clinic, and then trailed us from a distance all the way to the plaza.”

“Is she there, still?” Jihoon asked, heart beating in frantic palpitations. “Where else have you taken her?”

“She’s at the Gangnam General Hospital,” he explained. “*I’ve asked Wooseok-hyung to tend the hospital bills, for now. She left the Emergency Room a couple minutes ago, and now she’s been transferred to a room of her own. At the moment, Daehwi and Jinyoung have established contact with Taejoon-hyung, and are filling him on the details of Danbi’s condition. The rest are outside waiting for Seongwoo and Daniel-hyung to arrive. Apparently, Haechan’s back on the loose, which makes things even worse for all of us. As for Danbi herself... she has yet to wake up since she fell unconscious.*”

“I’ll be there,” Jihoon assured him, unable to process the bombardment of distressing information all at once. “Wait for me Kuanlin-ah.”

“*Of course,*” Kuanlin replied, sending him a kiss from the other end of the line. “*I’ll be right at*
the door the very moment you arrive.”

***

Much to Jihoon’s despair, things were worse for Yoon Danbi than they’d thought.

She’d fallen into a coma, and none of them had any idea when she might begin to regain her consciousness.

From where Jihoon stood, she seemed in tranquil slumber, strands of hair falling gently onto her pastry-puff cheeks.

An army of stuffed animals were on display by the stack of pillows, a brand-new otter doll propped next to the familiar bunny and chick.

Jihoon half-expected her to awaken at any moment, to hear her address herself in third person again, for her to smile at him and say ‘Mister Bunnykins, how do you do?’

Minutes passed however, and Danbi remained unmoving, still in comatose, her fragile heart beating in short bursts of rhythm.

Jihoon couldn’t even bring himself to look at the electrocardiogram monitor.

Taejoon was crying by her bedside inconsolably, pleading incessantly for her to wake up.

“Danbi-ya,” he kept on whispering. “You should’ve listened when I said to stay still… moving around like that was dangerous. You could’ve… you could’ve…”

“Hush, Taejoon-ah,” Daehwi cooed, himself powerless to keep a steady stream of tears at bay. “Danbi understands. She’ll wake up eventually… She has to... she just has to…”

Jinyoung, a statuesque figure standing almost immobilized to the side, stepped forwards indecisively in order to console Daehwi himself. His expression was blank, his inner thoughts at the sight of Daehwi and Taejoon utterly impenetrable. He simply laid a hand against the small of Daehwi’s back, patting him gently in small gestures of solace. Moments later his gaze slid to the floor, wiping cautiously at a solitary tear.

Jinyoung rarely ever cried, and seeing him like that, holding fast to the strength Daehwi had all but lost, sent pangs of wrenching pain through Jihoon’s chest.

“Are you alright?” Kuanlin asked. “I’m sorry, Jihoon-ah. This must have been a very stressful day for you.”

“I can’t even complain,” Jihoon whispered. “How can I? When Taejoon’s gone through this before, all by his lonesome.”

*Because his mother is dead, and his father lives abroad.*

*Danbi is the only living relative he has left in Seoul.*

Taejoon’s anomalous behaviour now made perfect sense.
In order to visit and care for his sister, he frequented the hospital at an alarming rate, making every excuse to skip out on class, leaving the dormitories on occasion at the ungodly hours of daybreak.

In order to help pay for Danbi’s medicine, regular check-ups, and periodic blood transfusions, he waited tables at Sapphire Bay, never mind the crippling exhaustion of juggling a part-time job with both schoolwork and practice.

And in order to combat the debilitating heartache, he actively sought out Daehwi’s companionship.

*The only real friend he’s ever had in his life.*

*Only to find out that a certain Bae Jinyoung had entered gradually into the picture.*

“Tell me the truth, Taejoon-ah,” Daehwi whispered. “We have to help, somehow.”

Jihoon treaded sideways into Kuanlin’s space, anchoring to him for support. Kuanlin wrapped an arm around his lithe figure, caressing his shoulder in gentle motions.

Eventually, Taejoon lifted his head from where it was buried in the folds of Danbi’s blanket, wiping at the tears he’d shed with his sleeve.

“My sister Yoon Danbi,” he began. “Is a terminal patient.”

Jihoon let slip an audible gasp, unwilling to accept the depressing epiphany.

“Our first visit to the hospital,” he continued. “I was told that at best—without the transplant—she had four months left to live.”

“Trans…transplant…” Jihoon stammered.

*End-stage kidney failure?*

“No,” he whispered. “She’s… she’s just a child.”

“We tried our very best,” Taejoon added. “To prolong the life she fought so hard to hold onto. But my father and I… we live paycheck to paycheck. I’m on a scholarship at Mireu, and that’s why I’ve gone on double overtime, in making sure my academic records don’t fall too far behind.”

He cast Jinyoung a sullen look, whose hands were fisting in the fabric of Daehwi’s parka, hugging Daehwi to his abdomen as if to drown out the sorrowful news.

“And that’s why I need this,” he said. “This chance at debuting. At winning the *Idol Project.* And for a while, I admit… I’d been eager enough to make it in, such that I’d think plagiarism a viable alternative. I have no excuse, and I feel sorry for what I’ve done to this day. But I hope you understand. I’m just as determined as you are, perhaps even more. Because my sister’s life is on the line. Because if I make it, and get paid… I’ll be able to afford the transplant Danbi so desperately needs to survive.”

And then, Daehwi burst into sobs of anguish. He buried his face in the fabric of Jinyoung’s shirt, who held him close as he struggled not to break down himself.

Jihoon’s hand flew to his mouth, only then able to comprehend the severity of Danbi’s situation.

And moreso, her brother’s, whose ignoble actions he’d mistaken for pure malice, when in truth it sheltered a heart-rending secret far worse than he could’ve possibly imagined.
“It’s my final glimmer of hope,” Taejoon whispered. “At keeping my sister alive.”

“How… how long ago was that?” Jinyoung spoke up, voicing out the words Jihoon had not the courage enough to say aloud.

“Three months and fourteen days ago,” Taejoon replied, recalling the memory of their fateful visit in vivid detail. “Do you understand what this means, Jinyoung-ah?”

The doctors say she has at best, four months left to live.

Four months, without the transplant.

“This,” Jihoon began. “This means…”

‘This means she’s dying,” Taejoon whispered, shattering their delicate hearts in harmonious discord. “And now that she’s collapsed, she might’ve fallen into a slumber she may no longer awaken from.”

~PANWINK 7 END~

Chapter End Notes

Welp, it's been a while hasn't it? My apologies for uploading a month later, but I'm really busy these days and can't help having no time to write. But I'm planning on updating a bit faster next time, so that this story can reach it's conclusion around May or early June. But how did you like this chapter? I just introduced the final original character into the story, Taejoon's little sister Yoon Danbi. Admittedly, she's my favorite out of all the OG characters I've written, but she also happens to be the hardest to write for. Why? Because she's six, and I happen to dislike children myself, so poring into the mind of a child was a massive challenge. But I think she turned out great! I hope you liked her too~ As for the reason why she's essential to the story (ESPECIALLY to the next Jinhwi chapter), it's because she's the secret Taejoon's kept hidden from Daehwi for a long, long time. And now you know why Taejoon is such a broken soul, too! He didn't grow up with his parents and spent very little time with them, having to play mom and dad to his sister. And because of his loneliness he was pushed over the edge, hence the reason why we hate him at first. The next chapter will be VERY emotional, so do brace yourself for that!

But that's it for this note! See you guys next time, and as always, thank you for continuing to support this tory and for leaving me lovely comments (if you do!) It means the whole world to me, truly <3

Pertinent links if you wanna get to know me better (or wanna ask me questions regarding the story, or anything actually)

Twitter: @lilicadearest

Curiouscat: lilicadearest
Despite the daredevil façade, Bae Jinyoung feared death more than anything.

He supposed it understandable, logical to a certain extent—that one should cower in dread before the great unknown. The aftermath was a far cry from the adrenaline-pumped free-fall over the ledge of a towering skyscraper, cushioned by the knowledge of the blistering pain that was to follow. The outcome of death, on the other hand, was but a mystery to all of mankind. It was a boundless conundrum, a cliffhanger at the epilogue, the crux of existence itself. And death itself was the occult grim reaper, requiring neither face nor shape for it to bring the mortal populace to its knees, bargaining desperately for just a little more time.

And nobody knew what lay in wait in death’s embrace. Is it eternal nothingness, a pit of despair, an absence of thought? Or perhaps a closing of the eyes from this world, and thereafter an opening into yet another?

But more than the uncertainty, Jinyoung feared the loss. Not his own, but that of his beloved, for grief to stalk them in the places he’d walked upon before his passing, for tears to replace the smile they’d worn in reminiscence of the memories he’d once been a part of.

The silver lining, he thought, was this: should death see it fit to come for him now, he’d have accomplished enough in his lifetime to believe—wholeheartedly so—that death would not be so unfair as to take him. Young as he may have been, he’d found happiness in his friends, support in his family, and completion in the love of his life.

Yoon Danbi, however, couldn’t possibly have said the same for herself. She was all of seven years old, far too young to have gotten very far in life, far too sickly to have properly enjoyed what most other children would’ve taken for granted.

And neither would she in the future.

Unless Taejoon, by some miracle, procures the resources enough to pay for Danbi’s kidney transplant.

And I….where do I stand in all this?

You’re an obstacle, Bae Jinyoung, his conscience echoed.

A bothersome dint in the greater scheme of things. Why remain that way? Let Taejoon win, for once. Give him back the only source of joy he has besides his sister.

Who may, before you know it, disappear altogether. After all, life may provide for its master, but death serves no man. It harvests aplenty, and cares not for your concerns. It takes whomever it wants, whenever it wishes.

And it never, ever returns what it’s already taken.

Jinyoung clenched his fists within his sweater pockets, ensconced in the eerie, almost unearthly silence of the hospital corridors. He was chilled to the bone yet drenched immensely in sweat, as if his mind and body were at odds in their response to the immediate environment.
The clock had stricken midnight long ago, and not a soul was in sight where he stood.

“You alright?” a throaty voice spoke up, startling him out of his stupor. “You’ve barely moved an inch from that spot by the door.”

Jinyoung turned sideways, sparing Yoon Taejoon a cursory glance. “Given the circumstances, I do believe I’m in more of a position to fret over your welfare.”

He rubbed awkwardly at the back of his neck, an air of disquiet washing over him.

“Are… are you alright?” he ventured. “We should’ve known better than to wear out your sister. Our ignorance put her at risk.”

“Danbi’s physical limitations were unknown to you,” Taejoon shrugged. “And I’m sure her sprightly, happy-go-lucky behaviour served only to conceal her disease. I have myself to blame, and myself alone. For letting my sister run amok beyond reach.”

Jinyoung had to admit he’d expected Taejoon to snap at him for getting involved in his private affairs. Yet it seemed almost as if he was grateful for the additional company.

He sighed to himself, the makings of a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

You’re even harder to comprehend than Daehwi is.

“I still am sorry,” he insisted. “Very much so.”

“Didn’t think I’d live to see the day,” Taejoon chuckled. “Things have certainly taken a turn for the worse. And some… for the better.”

“Is this because I’ve apologized?” Jinyoung demanded. “Or because I’ve asked if you’ve been feeling well?”

“Both,” Taejoon exclaimed, clapping a hand against his shoulder. ‘Almost as if… we’ve been friends. As if you’ve never made an attempt at severing my arm from the rest of my body.”

Jinyoung made a move to swat at his hand, pausing abruptly in conscious observance of the pain stamped onto Taejoon’s countenance, the fatigue in his weary expression, the exhaustion in his sluggish posture.

“As if you’d find it in yourself,” Taejoon sighed dejectedly. “To forgive me for the trouble I’ve put Daehwi through.”

Jinyoung flinched, as if in distress, away from their point of contact. Enmity and outrage came rushing back in forceful torrents, a harrowing reminder of Taejoon’s flagrant misbehaviour.

He plagiarized Daehwi’s song.

He forced himself upon Daehwi, after having met recurrent rejection.

Not once, or twice.

Would thrice have been enough?

Perhaps not, had I been unable to circumvent his behaviour.

For all I know… he may have wasted no time in taking from Daehwi what is rightfully mine.
“You alright?” Taejoon inquired. The concern in his tone threw Jinyoung off, curbing his thought process altogether. “Your face looks rather ashen. You’re not feeling nauseous, are you?”

“I…” Jinyoung began. “I’m quite fine, thank you.”

“That’s my line, buddy.”

“B-buddy?” Jinyoung stammered. He blinked at Taejoon, unable to fathom the situation at-hand.

Death was an enigma, a face yet unseen.

But Yoon Taejoon was a chimaera, many-headed and strange, as if to trick you in jest into thinking you’ve lifted the cipher at last, only to watch him peel off yet another mask, strip away yet another layer.

And then, for the hundredth time, you find yourself staring into the eyes of a stranger.

“We buddies now?” he asked. “That’s new. I thought you hated my guts.”

“Didn’t even think you had guts, I’ll admit,” Taejoon shrugged. “Thought you the ultimate typification of what I’d call a wuss.”

“That’s the Taejoon I know and love,” Jinyoung grumbled, hoping Taejoon was intuitive enough to read into his sarcasm. “Sucks to say, but I’ve missed him.”

Taejoon let loose a back-slapping laugh, taking Jinyoung entirely by surprise. He blinked once, twice, goggling at the vivacious display unfolding before him.

“I’ll give it to ya,” Taejoon relented. “That was hilarious.”

“Your sense of humour is misplaced,” Jinyoung smirked. “But I’ll take it.”

He let the unease die down a little, relaxing the biting tension at the pit of his stomach.

A chimaera, is it? He thought. Why not? I’ll wrestle with that.

“But how come I’m the wuss?” he demanded. “Logic dictates otherwise. It points a finger at you. The risks you’ve taken thus far are… how shall I put it? They’re escape routes for spineless invertebrates.”

Jinyoung expected retaliation, even the slightest twinge of discernible pain in Taejoon’s neutral expression. And yet, true to his astonishing streak of incongruous behaviour, Taejoon flashed him a curt smile instead, as if to affirm his allegations.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Taejoon shrugged. “I’d sucker-punch the living daylights out of you, had I been capable. For no reason other than resentment for having lost Daehwi to the likes of you, when I have no one left to turn to. When I’ve been in love with him far longer than you’d think. But I’m a little… incapacitated, as of the moment. I’m better off calling a truce.”

He tucked both hands into the pockets of his jeans, as if to withdraw even further into himself.

“Besides, I have a debt to repay. For leaving my sister in your hands without meaning to. To tell you the truth, Danbi’s rather… mistrustful, where strangers are concerned. She heavily disliked the staff at the clinic, and I’m sure it’s why she’s orchestrated an escapade. But Daehwi tells me she warmed up to all of you almost instantaneously. I’m sure it’s because she could tell you weren’t the bad guys.”
“She read our aura, is that what you’re saying?” Jinyoung snickered. “Sounds to me like some magical unicorn type phenomenon. You believe in that?”

“Do I have a choice?” Taejoon sighed. “I have to. Against my will, I’ve been indoctrinated into faith in the impossible. Only the impossible will save my sister now.”

Danbi’s memory tugged at Jinyoung’s heartstrings, thawing at the ice shielding his heart.

*Of course. Of what use is resentment now?*

“For Danbi’s sake,” Jinyoung whispered. “I’d be more than willing to put every single ‘if only’ and ‘as if’ behind us.”

He cast a sideways glance Taejoon’s way. “And Daehwi’s, too. If setting aside irreconcilable differences is what it takes to extract the thorn both of us have pierced him with, I’d be more than willing to forget the unforgettable, forgive the unforgivable. If you’re calling a truce, then so am I.”

Taejoon’s eyes bore into his own, probing them for meaning. “Does that mean what I think it means, then?”

“I’m not saying,” Jinyoung clarified. “That I’m folding here. You’re still an idiot for thinking it wise to sexually harass your former best friend.”

“Great,” Taejoon muttered. “Yet another thing you and I can agree upon.”

He fished an aluminum can out of the paper bag in his right hand, which, until then, Jinyoung had been much too preoccupied to notice.

“Here,” Taejoon offered, extending the drink towards him, beads of moisture still rimming the exterior. “Take it.”

“Peach Soda?” Jinyoung inquired, reaching for the beverage before he could regret it. His throat was parched, and he was in no position to reject any freebies. “Is this your idea of a peace offering?”

“Hardly,” Taejoon smiled. “It tastes quite nice, though. Care to join me?”

He made for the bench adjacent to Danbi’s hospital room, Jinyoung gingerly trailing his tracks. He sat a comfortable distance away from Taejoon, pulling at the tab of his soda in order to pop the can open.

He downed half its contents in one go, gulping noisily at the fizzy drink. Taejoon watched him in ardent fascination, smirking as Jinyoung wiped at his chin in haste, a paltry attempt at concealing how messily it sloshed onto his chin.

“Someone’s thirsty.”

“Shut up.”

“Shall I tell you a secret?” he offered.

Jinyoung’s mouth flew open.

*Again with the surprises.*
“You’d… you’d do that?” he gawked. “Daehwi tells me he’s never had the honour.”

“Daehwi speaks the truth,” Taejoon nodded. “So do you. And so shall I, given the chance. Just to prove a point.”

“The point being?”

“That I’m not the perverted, degenerate scumbag you may have already presumed I am.”

Jinyoung compressed his grip around the soda can, the sound of ductile metal crinkling at his fingertips piercing through the muted air.

“Talk. I’ll listen.”

Taejoon extended his right hand towards Jinyoung, his can of grapefruit soda swishing lightly back and forth. “Before anything else… here.”

“No thanks,” Jinyoung shook his head. “I can’t overdose on the sugar. One monster burp is enough to scare you senseless. Might even startle your sister out of her coma.”

“I’d like that,” Taejoon grinned. “But that’s not what this is for, you dumbass.”

“Excuse me?”

“Cheers,” Taejoon interrupted. “To the brotherhood you and I would not—under a thousand other circumstances—have forged even under duress. And yet, here we are, at the point of launching into civil dialogue. For the moment, at the very least.”

His eyes bore through Jinyoung’s nonchalance, as if in valiant challenge.

*Should the hereafter change in tide, I won’t spare even a second’s worth of hesitation before I charge you and stomp you flat.*

Jinyoung flashed him a crooked grin, his sharp incisors on full display.

“Sure, I’ll drink to that,” he exclaimed, clinking his canister against Taejoon’s in mutual accord.

“Bottoms up, my friend,” Taejoon offered, before the both of them held their refreshments to their lips in perfect synchronicity, chugging their *Tropicana Sparkling* down all at once.

“Ahh,” Taejoon exclaimed, wiping at his lip. “That was tasty.”

“Now spill,” Jinyoung urged, patting lightly at his bloated belly. “What’s the big secret?”

“The secret,” Taejoon began. “Is that I’m quitting.”

Jinyoung gaped at him, flabbergasted.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. “I don’t… I don’t think I heard that right. Did you just say you’re quitting?”

“Don’t mean to pitch a curve ball,” Taejoon apologized in return. “But you heard that right. I’m quitting.”

“Quitting... what, exactly?”
“Everything.”


Taejoon gave an audible exhale, shrugging faintly in mimicry of apathy. “Right. I’m leaving the Idol Project. Dropping out of school. Raising the fabled white flag. Daehwi’s all yours from this day forwards.”

“You expect me to thank you for that?” Jinyoung barked, harsher than he’d intended. “Why, out of the blue?”

“Why else?” Taejoon quipped. “You think I’m doing this because I want to? Because I’ve given up? I’m fighting, Jinyoung-ah. Fighting tooth and nail for my sister.”

He seized Jinyoung’s drink, wresting it from his iron grip before Jinyoung’s fist tore through the can altogether.

“I thought you were competing for her,” Jinyoung whispered. “I thought you hounded after victory at the Idol Project because you wished to succeed in her stead. Because you’re trying to earn the money enough for her surgery. Was that all talk? Another party trick I’ve fallen for? Was that it?”

“That was then, Bae Jinyoung,” Taejoon argued. “This is now. That was the master plan before Danbi fell into a coma. Things are different. Her condition is critical. And you expect me to… what? Sit around and wait for her to die? Have the time of my life with everyone else, while she suffers through treatment alone? I can’t do that. Not to her.”

Caustic pain bloomed at the base of Jinyoung’s temple. He knit his brows, unable to form a singular coherent thought, as if he’d bitten into the apple of discord, and the seeds nested within its core had sown themselves deep within him.

What is he thinking? Is there no other way?

“I have to find work,” Taejoon confessed. “Full-time work. I can’t do that while I’m at school. As of now, I make enough waiting tables at Sapphire Bay to pay for the bare minimum: a decent flat, Danbi’s caretaker, a filling meal every now and again. But once the medical bills have been factored in… a part-time gig won’t even cover half the costs. Danbi’s monthly check-ups, her dialysis, the antibiotics she’s gotten prescribed… where am I to turn to for help? My mother is dead. My father’s abroad. And even then he—“

Taejoon stopped himself then, unable to cough out the words he’d meant to say.

“Even then he… what?” Jinyoung persisted. “Is… is your father alright?”

“My father,” Taejoon managed. “Is a colossal dickhead. Ever wondered who it is I’ve taken after? He’s your man. If only I could trade in his life for my sister’s.”

“Don’t say that,” Jinyoung urged, even then uncertain if he’d said the right thing. “He’s…”

He’s still your father.

And yet… has he valued you, the way a father is meant to value his son?

“After our mother died,” Taejoon disclosed. “He promised my sister and I he’d fill the gap she left wide open.”
He chuckled impassively, cloaking his bitterness beneath a veil of indifference. “That was bullshit. He escaped to Shanghai. Fell into shambles. Into sin, and vice. Gambled away his fortunes, then sank into debt. Left his children to fend for themselves. And even though he sends wads of cash home every now and again… I have no way of knowing if I’ve paid for my sister’s life with dirty money he’s made through some shady business. I take it, without question. Because once again, I’m left no other choice.”

Jinyoung clapped a hand against his mouth, clamping it forcibly shut.

His mind was reeling, misguided resentment flying promptly out the window.

*Has all this gone on behind the scenes without my knowledge?*

“Daehwi,” Jinyoung spoke up. “Does he know?”

Taejoon buried his face in both of his palms, resting his elbows against both knees, as if their discussion on his spendthrift father had thoroughly sapped him of energy.

“If Daehwi knew,” Taejoon replied. “His heart would break. I could never have been able to stomach that. Not because of my family. He has nothing to do with any of them.”

“He does now,” Jinyoung corrected. “You have to let us help.”

“How?” Taejoon asked, the skepticism evident in his impotence, in the haplessness of his tone. “Danbi dies without the transplant. And as it stands, she isn’t high enough on the priority list for her to make it out of this battle alive.”

“Priority… list?” Jinyoung stammered.

“The hospital has one,” Taejoon explained. “For kidney recipients. With neither a donor, nor a payment guarantee… the doctors can’t make the necessary arrangements. It’s not their priority.”

“That’s unfair,” he whispered.

“That’s reality, Jinyoung-ah. As bitter a pill as it may be to swallow.”

Jinyoung stared at his feet, utterly helpless.

“Don’t try and stop me,” Taejoon warned. “I clued in you in to get you out of the way.”

“What about the performance?” he asked. “The others are counting on you.”

“What about the performance?” he asked. “The others are counting on you.”

“Not with their lives on the line,” Taejoon reiterated. “Don’t you see, Jinyoung-ah? I’m willing to disappoint everyone for Danbi. My group members, my fans, our mentors and professors, the general public. I love her far too much to care for the rest. She’s all I have left, now that…”

His voice trailed away, but Jinyoung knew in his heart of hearts the words left unspoken between them.

*Now that Daehwi’s gone.*

*Now that he’s yours.*

*Now that I’m friendless. Loveless. Desperate.*

“I understand,” Jinyoung reneged, unable to put up any further arguments. “I won’t get in your
way. I promise. Do what has to be done. And then make your return.”

Taejoon nodded gravely. “That’s the plan.”

They sat in bitter silence for the next few minutes, much too reluctant to delve any further into the matter.

Jinyoung had to admit he’d played out Taejoon’s surrender in his head much differently.

It was triumphant, rather than bleak.

A win as opposed to loss, after loss, after loss.

“For how long... have you been keeping things to yourself?” Jinyoung pressed, shattering through the lull of silence. “Daehwi’s been worried. Did you even know that?”

Taejoon shook his head, hands clasped together, the veins lining his arms more prominent than ever.

“I never wanted his pity.”

“Good,” Jinyoung nodded. “Because he never pitied you.”

“What makes you think you’d know that?” Taejoon whispered, an evident strain in his voice, caught between anger and despair.

“He tells me,” Jinyoung shrugged. “Because I listen. And so does he. You can’t have a functional relationship without reciprocity, you know. Without scaling the walls standing between either of you. That’s all he’s ever wanted, and all you’ve ever refused him. A chance to be of help. Because you were a friend, and you were important.”

He extended a hand outwards, patting Taejoon’s shoulder haltingly. Taejoon stiffened for the briefest of moments, before inhaling deeply and then releasing a breath, letting his tensions go.

“I’ve been a jerk,” Taejoon sighed. “To everyone, myself included. Because of Danbi’s disease, my father’s uselessness, Daehwi’s rejection... I was mad at the world. And the anger led me off course. I was no longer myself, at the time. No wonder Daehwi thought to replace me.”

He offered Jinyoung a pensive smile, as if to cocoon himself within a thin veneer of acceptance, even though his eyes—ever reflective of the truth to his soul—spoke volumes of the pain he sought to keep hidden.

_Don’t say that, Yoon Taejoon_, Jinyoung thought.

_Not while I’m on the brink of letting him go._

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He offered Jinyoung a pensive smile, as if to cocoon himself within a thin veneer of acceptance, even though his eyes—ever reflective of the truth to his soul—spoke volumes of the pain he sought to keep hidden.
Jinyoung nodded, letting a discomfiting lull settle in the atmosphere. Neither of them spoke for what seemed an eternity.

“So—“ he and Taejoon ventured at the exact same moment.

They peered at each other, ears turning red.

“You go first,” Jinyoung coughed.

“No, I...” Taejoon began. “You go first.”

“I insist,” Jinyoung argued. “You—“

Taejoon stared at him in disbelief, as if to question the atypical courtesy.

“R-right,” Jinyoung stammered. “I’ll go first.”

He scratched at his nape in discomfort, unsure of where to begin. “About Daehwi. The both of you have... quite the history together.”

“That, we do.”

“When exactly did you...”

“Meet him?”

Jinyoung blushed, flustered by Taejoon’s predictive skills.

“Ahh, forget it,” he amended in haste. “I’m being nosy. If you’d rather not tell me, I’d understand.”

“You’re right,” Taejoon smirked. “I’d rather not tell you.”

“...Oh.”

“But I will.”

“Ehh?” Jinyoung gawked. “Why is that?”

“I think you deserve to know. Why the luckiest man alive is the man fortunate enough to call Lee Daehwi his own.”

He settled his plastic bag onto the floor, leaning against the wall.

“Back in high school, Daehwi was a victim of severe bullying.”

Jinyoung felt his own heartbeats come to a screeching halt.

“Severe bullying?”

“He’d run to class in stealth,” Taejoon pressed on. “Actively ran for cover from the kids at school who picked on him for no reason at all. Most of the time he’d succeed, but on days less auspicious, he’d sustain small scratches, tiny nicks, purpling bruises from being shoved around and manhandled by these rascals twice his size.”

Jinyoung ran a hand across his face, a feeble attempt at shaking away the outrage rattling him to the bone.
“And I knew this, because I’d watched him from afar,” Taejoon concluded. “Shared in his dream of becoming an idol. So I offered him a helping hand, once. Tended to his wounds at the infirmary. And then…”

“And then?” Jinyoung asked, even though he knew exactly what had befallen Taejoon next.

“I fell even deeper in love,” Taejoon smiled, confirming his suspicions. “With the boy whose voice was sweeter than honey, richer than chocolate, and smoother than silk.”

Jinyoung grinned, acknowledging the truth to Taejoon’s words.

“The boy whose eyes shone brighter than the moon at night,” Jinyoung continued, quoting Daehwi’s lyrical description of him from memory. “Whose smile could replace a lifetime’s worth of sunshine.”

_The boy who wore his heart on his sleeves and inked his soul onto paper, shared a piece of himself with the rest of the world through his music._

“The boy the world thought broken,” Taejoon added. “Though it dared only scratch the surface, under which it might’ve found—had it paid enough attention—the gold that shone so brightly beneath.”

Jinyoung let his eyes close, let himself sink into darkness.

Reading into the words Taejoon chose to leave unspoken between them.

_The treasure you’ve so effortlessly stolen._

Jinyoung’s right hand rose subconsciously to his chest, resting above the spot where his heart beat in steady rhythms.

“Sometimes,” he admitted. “I wonder if you understand him more than I do. Because you share these experiences with him. I for one have only known happiness with Daehwi. Outside of the problems you’ve brought upon us, at least.”

“How many times more do I have to apologize before you’re satisfied?”

“I don’t need another apology,” Jinyoung smiled, eyes still closed from reality. “Just promise me you’ll be there.”

“For?”

“For Daehwi. And for your sister.”

“Dumbass. You needn’t ask me for that. Any more questions?”

Jinyoung’s eyes fluttered open, ever so slowly, the pristine white walls of the hospital corridor coming gradually into focus. “One more.”

“Will it make me uncomfortable?” Taejoon wondered aloud.

“ Likely.”

“You sure are frank.”
“Why did you fall in love with him?” Jinyoung asked, setting hesitation aside.

“Was that all?” Taejoon beamed. “Because he’s perfect, that’s why.”

“It’s that simple, huh?”

“I’ve never thought him any less than that.”

“Can’t say it’s been the same for me,” Jinyoung confessed. “Must be nice, not having to go through conflicting emotions.”

“If you’re looking for specifics,” Taejoon added. “I fell for his music first.”

“His music?”

“His lyrics. His voice. His heartstring melody. And I wanted to be a part of that. The world he sang so fondly of. And since the day I’d come to befriend him… I’ve believed he’s all I’ve ever needed to fill the void I’ve suffered through for so long, the vacancy my parents’ absence carved into my heart by force. And I sucked at making friends. Because at the time, no one understood why I’d chase so stubbornly after a career in music, when my chances of making it were slim to none.”

Jinyoung watched Taejoon cast a faraway glance, into an unseen horizon beyond the harshly lit corridors.

“But Daehwi understood,” he whispered. “And more than that, he embraced my dream, shared it with me. He gave me new life, a renewed sense of purpose, the strength I needed to be there for my sister. To be the hope for a future she can never enjoy herself. Because if… if by chance she won’t make it far enough to pursue her own dream, at the very least I’d like to pursue mine for the both of us. It’s all I can do to make her happy, and Daehwi’s played a massive role in that.”

“Danbi thinks Daehwi is your dream.”

“That she does. Can’t say she’s wrong to think so.”

“But you’re giving the dream up.”

“Isn’t that great? You no longer have to worry about me.”

Ah, Jinyoung thought.

But that’s where you’re wrong.

He clutched at his heart, as if to grasp at the pain was to crush it between his fingers, banish it from existence altogether.

“The promise,” he reiterated. “You’ll keep it won’t you?”

“Like I’ve said--”

“It’s a serious matter, Taejoon-ah,” Jinyoung interrupted. “If by chance, Daehwi chooses you over me, you had better not put him in danger.”

Taejoon blinked, taken clearly by surprise. “You make it sound as if you’re about to break up with him. Or he’s about to break up with you.”

“Don’t ask me why,” Jinyoung pleaded. “Just… promise me. And swear upon your honor.”
Jinyoung expected yet another retort, but Yoon Taejoon, thankfully enough, chose to keep his mouth impenetrably shut.

Another eternity passed between them before Taejoon’s voice filled the roaring void.

“I swear upon my honor. I’ll keep him safe. But you… you had better not break his heart, Bae Jinyoung. Because the moment you do is the moment I’ll kill you.”

Jinyoung chuckled, less unfazed by Taejoon’s threat than he’d let on.

“I guess,” he whispered. “We’ll see about that.”

***

“How is she?” Jinyoung asked, having re-entered Danbi’s hospital bedroom. He stole a glance at the clock, which read 3:27 AM.

The clock was half an hour late.

“She’s asleep.” Daehwi replied, murmuring almost to himself. “Nothing new to see here.”

“And how are you?” Jinyoung smiled, patting Daehwi’s mop of hair affectionately.

“Sleepy,” Daehwi yawned. “I might just collapse any minute now.”

Jinyoung chuckled, fetching a stool from the nearest corner of the room. He settled himself beside Daehwi, pulling him in by the shoulder.

“If you’re about collapse,” Jinyoung whispered. “Then collapse into my arms instead.” He let Daehwi rest his head against the crook of his neck, using his own head for support. The fragrance of Daehwi’s shampoo wafted lightly through the air, drowning out the scent of the iodoform disinfectant.

“Hmm,” Daehwi sighed, gently closing his heavy-lidded eyes. “Sounds tempting.”

“Jinyoung leaned in slightly, planting a kiss onto his cheek. “Get some rest, Daehwi-ya. I’ll watch over from here.”

“What if I tire you out?” Daehwi whispered. “I’m heavy.”

“I don’t mind. Tire me out as much as you’d like. In whatever way possible.”


Jinyoung blushed, only then noticing his words could’ve been taken much the wrong way.

“You…” he began. “You know what I mean.”

‘I know,” Daehwi replied, already nodding off. “We aren’t adults, but we aren’t children either. I can tell between the things you mean, and the things you can’t mean, unless you want me to slap you.”
“No slapping,” Jinyoung chided. “No more talking, either. Sleep, my love. I’ll be right here.”

“For how long?” Daehwi inquired.

“Ah, how disobedient,” Jinyoung grinned.

“For how loooong.”

“Until you wake up.”

“You’re no fun,” Daehwi grumbled, and Jinyoung could tell without looking that he’d flashed his signature pout, bottom lip protruding outwards. Jinyoung swallowed, quashing any such desires to kiss them swollen.

_Bad, Jinyoung-ah. This isn’t the time for that._

“I thought,” Daehwi whispered, burnout and fatigue on the verge of lulling him into sleep. “I thought you’d tell me you were staying forever.”

Another twinge of pain came over him, as if an alien force were strumming at his nerves like an acoustic guitar.

“Get some sleep, Daehwi-ya,” he pleaded. “You’ll need it.”

“Promise me you’ll stay?” Daehwi whispered. “I can’t possibly rest easy, not knowing the answer to that.”

“I’ll stay,” Jinyoung whispered, holding Daehwi even closer to himself.

*I’ll relish these moments*, he thought.

_For as long as they last._

“Daehwi-ya,” he spoke.

_Forgive me._

_If heartbreak is written in the stars, then so be it._

_But I hope you know, I’ve chosen not the path of least resistance, but the path of least wrongdoing._

_Not for my sake, but yours._

_That’s how it’s always been._

“I’ll stay,” he lied. “I promise.”

***

A week had passed since Danbi’s hospitalization.

Nothing of particular note had gone on since then, and by some heaven-sent miracle, they’d made enough progress on ‘Oh Little Girl’ for them to enjoy an idle weekend dilly-dallying around. They
had rehearsals for the television program in the afternoon, but for now they were off the hook.

Most of their time, however, was spent in hour-long shifts at the hospital, waiting in inexhaustible hope for the instant Danbi’s charming, doll-like eyes were to open.

It was rare for patients to last in a coma for more than two weeks to a month at most, and though Danbi had thus far crossed the halfway mark, none of them were weak-willed enough to think she’d lost the race against time.

Their new mantra was: One day, she’ll wake up.

One day she’ll find a donor.

One day soon.

Our little, little girl.

“...will wake up,” Daehwi’s voice spoke up, suspending his innermost thought. “Won’t she?”

They were sitting at the outdoor park a few blocks away from Mireu’s school grounds, having just bought Melona popsicle sticks from the nearby convenience store. Daehwi was sitting by his lonesome at the swing set, Jinyoung watching over him by the fountain, where a faceless cherubim angel sat atop a weathered marble orb, pouring a limitless stream of water from a glazed ceramic jar.

“How are the lyrics coming along?” Jinyoung inquired, walking in gentle strides towards him. He tore at the wrapper of his banana popsicle, unsure of why they’d gone for frozen treats despite the chilly weather.

Then again, he’d given in to Daehwi’s craving.

He smiled, licking at the ice cream contentedly.

“The lyrics are all set,” Daehwi exclaimed, looking pleased with himself. “I hope Assbrass and Kiggen approve.”

“I’m sure they will,” Jinyoung reassured him. “You’ve worked hard, Daehwi-ya.”

“Do I get a reward?” Daehwi ventured, flashing him a painfully beautiful smile.

His heart pounded in his chest, the butterflies in his stomach performing one backflip after another, as if they’d flown through fields of roses and gotten heavily drunk on nectar.

Jinyoung strolled towards the patch of grass by Daehwi’s feet, pushing softly at the swings to get him moving. He leaned in slightly, grinning in mischief. “What exactly do you have in mind?”

“Hmmm,” Daehwi pondered for a moment. He licked at his popsicle, gaze moving in alternate motions between Jinyoung’s eyes and his mouth.

“Something banana-flavored?” Daehwi smiled.

Jinyoung gaped at him, astonished by Daehwi’s surprising initiative.

That made him happier than he cared to admit.

“Someone’s gotten braver,” he grinned, an eyebrow raised in challenge. “You forget we’re in
“I haven’t forgotten,” Daehwi shrugged. “I simply don’t care.”

“Ahh,” Jinyoung smiled, leaning even closer towards him, an inch away from his nose. “Well, neither do I.”

He pulled at the swings, pressing Daehwi’s mouth to his.

The overwhelming taste of strawberries hit him full-force, and he found himself unable to think beyond the sensation of Daehwi’s pillowy-soft lips moving against his. Before long, Daehwi’s arms climbed from his chest to his neck, pulling him even further in.

The park was deserted, and the air silent around them, save for the sound of their lips smacking lightly together.

The thought sent blood rushing to Jinyoung’s face.

“Mmm,” Daehwi sighed, breaking the kiss momentarily. “That feels nice.”

“We should stop here,” Jinyoung whispered. “Before your ice cream drips onto my shirt.”

“We should,” Daehwi agreed. “Doesn’t mean we will.”

“Hah,” Jinyoung grinned. “Of course not.”

He claimed Daehwi’s lips once more, savouring the moment between them. Daehwi responded to him in earnest, free hand rumpling Jinyoung’s shirt. The gentlest touch of his fingertips set Jinyoung’s heart afire, tore him asunder, as if to realize he’d been a puzzle incomplete until Daehwi’s lips locked and fit perfectly against his.

God, I love you, he thought.

“God, I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you too,” Daehwi replied, pressing a kiss onto his cheek.

Jinyoung tilted forwards, touching his forehead to Daehwi’s. “Just one more…”

“Two more,” Daehwi pleaded.

“No more,” another voice declared. “You guys are sick.”

Jinyoung and Daehwi broke apart in alarm, utterly embarrassed to have been caught red-handed.

“An outdoor park, really?” Jihoon exclaimed. “Kids could’ve walked in on the both of you.”

“Ugh,” Jinyoung groaned, burying his face beneath the palms of both hands. “Not you again.”

“How’d you find us, Jihoon-hyung?” Daehwi asked, blushing profusely. His lips were an even more vivid shade of red, and Jinyoung reddened to a proper crimson in having known they were like that because he’d kissed them much harder than he’d initially intended.

“Jinyoung asked for me,” Jihoon explained. “Claims he has something important to tell me. I hope you didn’t drag me out her just to bear witness to the earlier spectacle. It’s nothing I’ve never seen… or uhh, done before.”
“That wasn’t it,” Jinyoung declared. He peered at his wristwatch, inspecting the time. “Also, you’re a couple hours early to the appointment.”

“I know,” Jihoon shrugged. “I thought I’d invite Daehwi out to the café across the street, but it seems he’s kept himself busy, gallivanting about elsewhere.”

“Wait,” Jinyoung interjected. “You were planning on taking my boyfriend out on a date?”

“Pretty much,” Jihoon smirked, wiggling an eyebrow. “Problem?”

“I—” Jinyoung began. “Well, no. I would’ve stolen your boyfriend in the meantime. Guess we’re even.”

“Hmph,” Jihoon muttered. “As if I’d let you borrow him.”

“What was that?” Jinyoung demanded. “Unfair!”

“But I’m possessive,” Jihoon explained. “I can’t take risks. The both of you spend enough time practicing together, as it is.”

“Then I’d never let you borrow Daehwi either! Even if you’d come to me crawling and begging for him on both knees.”

“You said you had no problems,” Jihoon reminded him. “No takebacks!”

“You don’t make the rules!”

“Well you don’t make the rules that I don’t make the rules—”

“CHILDREN, PLEASE,” Daehwi roared. “Stop acting like five-year olds. Even Danbi wasn’t this immature.”

This silenced the both of them effectively.

“Ahh,” Daehwi exclaimed, having sensed the dismal atmosphere he’d cast upon them. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to depress either of you. I just…”

“You miss her, huh?” Jinyoung spoke up. “I do too.”

“I miss her smile,” Jihoon added. “Though for some odd reason, she has one plastered onto her face despite the unconscious state. As if her mind is adrift in fairyland, and she’s sitting atop a cotton candy cloud watching over her animal farm.”

Jinyoung’s chest constricted violently, pain searing through him, of the sort he’d never once experienced before.

_I don’t have siblings_, he thought. _This must be what it feels like, then. Having to worry over one of them._

He crouched near the grass, plucking out one blade after the other. “I miss Magu Otter.”

Daehwi sat himself beside Jinyoung then, linking an arm around his. “Magu Otter’s right here.”

“I remember how Danbi used to say it,” Jihoon mused, joining them a heartbeat later. “Her voice squeaks at the final syllable. Kind of like a mouse.”
“Is she a mouse?” Jinyoung asked. “Might be why she dislikes me so goddamn much. Snakes do eat mice, after all.”

“Remember how she’d tuck herself away beneath the folds of my coat? I do find it funny how she skulks in your presence. Most children love you.”

“Can’t blame her,” Jinyoung shrugged. “Taejoon’s words are gospel truth to her, given how impressionable most children are at that age. I’ll wager an arm and leg that he’s slandered me in private before Danbi and I met.”

“How did we meet her again?” Daehwi reminisced, staring almost blankly at the clouds drifting past them. “Was it… the Outdoor Plaza?”

“She planted herself amongst the daisies,” Jihoon recalled, smiling wistfully at the trimmed hedges lining the park’s periphery, as if the camellia blooming there reminded him of their very first encounter with that little, little girl. “Quite literally. I don’t think I’ll ever forget that.”

“That’s her way of embedding herself into your psyche,” Jinyoung smiled. “It worked, didn’t it? This seven year-old is clever, I’ll tell you that. She knows how to make an entrance with pizzazz enough to make a lasting impression.”

**And what of the exit?** He thought, unable to desist his contemplations before they spiralled out of control.

*It can’t end here.*

*Not yet, Danbi-ya. I have so much left to tell you.*

*You have so much left to learn.*

*Your twelve eager brothers have so much left to teach you.*

*A song written in your honour.*

*Won’t you come home?*

“So wake up,” he whispered. “Please wake up.”

His vision went murky, the landscape blurring into hazy silhouettes.

He squeezed both eyes shut, and only until he felt Daehwi’s fingers wiping at his cheek did he notice that—after holding out for days on end—he’d finally shed a tear for little Yoon Danbi.

***

Several hours later, Daehwi made his way back on-campus, having promised Jaehwan a discussion of their progress thus far, while Jinyoung and Jihoon claimed a vacant bench to lounge a couple hours more at the park. It was late enough in the day for elementary school children to have gotten dismissed from class, and for this reason the once-neglected park had come alive with youthful energy.

“So…” Jihoon prefaced. “You were saying?”
“Saying?” Jinyoung blinked. “I didn’t say anything. The both of us have been staring into space.”

“Not that,” Jihoon clarified. “You asked for me, remember? You had something to confess?”

“Oh...right.”

“Right. Well? Carry on.”

“Yeah, well… there’s something I need to get off my chest.”

Jihoon goggled at him, mouth ajar. “Uhm, Jinyoung, honey. We’ve already established that. What in the world is this *something*, then?”

“Chillax,” Jinyoung retorted. He fiddled around with both thumbs, fishing around his mental folder for the right point of entry into the matter he’d mulled over for a month now.

*Where to begin?*

*Everywhere, and nowhere at all.*

“Let me guess,” Jihoon cut in. “It’s about Daehwi, isn’t it?”

Jinyoung’s eyes narrowed into slits. “Why is that the default answer?”

“Your world revolves around him, nowadays.”

“This conversation is headed into ‘you’re wrong, he is my world’ territory, so let’s end this here.”

“Oh, red alert,” Jihoon muttered. “Seems you’ve been infected by Daehwi’s intractable sass. Didn’t think that was transferrable, to be honest.”

“It’s not. I’ve been this way for years. Or have you forgotten?”

“What else has he transferred onto you?” Jihoon teased. “Apart from his saliva.”

“His saliva?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Why’d you have to mean it?!”

“Someone’s embarrassed,” Jihoon grinned, nudging him playfully by the shoulder. “Relax, it’s just kissing. We’ve all done it.”

“Now *I* wonder what Kuanlin’s transferred onto *you*.”

“Nothing,” Jihoon chuckled. “I’ve been this way for years. Or have you forgotten?”

“Kind of,” Jinyoung admitted. “I forget you have this… irksome side to you. You’re a devil in disguise, Park Jihoon.”

“Welcome to the underworld.”

Jinyoung gave up a hearty laugh at the comment, Jihoon observing him in ardent contentment.

“I think I’ve missed you, Jinyoung-ah,” he sighed. “Guess we no longer spend as much time together as we used to.”
“Guess so,” Jinyoung agreed.

“Do you… wish things were different?”

“Not in this regard, no,” Jinyoung replied. “But I do wish some other things would’ve played out a little differently.”

“We’ve gone off-track,” Jihoon exclaimed, intercepting the trajectory of their exchange. “Care to tell me what’s on your mind?”

“It’s not about Daehwi, mind you.”

“Danbi, then?”

“Guess again.”

“Taejoon?”

“Park Jihoon.”

“What is it?”

“No, I… it’s you. Park Jihoon.”

“Yes, it is. I know who I am, thank you very much.”

“NO, HYUNG,” Jinyoung exclaimed. “I had something to say about Park Jihoon.”

“…Oh,” Jihoon began, utterly taken aback. “What about him?”

“He’s denser than a hollow block, that’s what.”

“Excuse me?!”

“He would never have known, had I kept myself from saying it face-to-face.”

“Saying what face-to-face?”

“That I loved him.”

Jihoon’s eyes nearly popped out of their sockets.

“That I still do,” Jinyoung added. “Despite everything we’ve been through.”

“Jin… Jinyoung-ah…”

“I love you, Park Jihoon,” he confessed. He relished in the implicit, albeit palpable stupefaction he’d thrust Jihoon into, whose jaws had gone slack, rendered thoroughly speechless.

He released a breath, feeling as though he’d been relieved of dead weight.

Jihoon’s facial muscles rearranged themselves in progressive motions, and it felt to Jinyoung as though he’d witnessed a live reaction unfolding at snail pace.

“I…” Jihoon ventured. “Uhh… well, you see… that, uhm… you know, I… the thing is just, uhm… FUCK!”
He hid his salmon-pink face beneath the fabric of his sweater, muffling the sound of his voice. “Sorry, Jinyoung-ah.”

Jinyoung inexpertly stifled a laugh before he launched into fits of laughter, unable to resist the hilarity of Jihoon’s mortified response.

“But I love you,” he clarified. “No longer as man, but as brother. My own flesh and blood. I’m sorry, hyung. It’s taken me this long to sort my feelings out, but I have now, and you deserve to partake of the respite it’s given me.”

Jihoon’s eyes narrowed into serpentine slits, peering guardedly at him. “You mean it?”

Jinyoung nodded, reaching out to rumple his neatly-styled hair.

“I had feelings for you, once,” he admitted. “Forbidden, unrequited, one-sided, you name it. And far be it from me to deny the fact that it broke me.”

He withdrew the hand he’d used to pet Jihoon, inserting it into the pocket of his lightweight fleece jacket. “I’m not saying this to pass the burden on, you know. I’m saying this because we’re friends. The best of friends, in fact. And friends don’t keep secrets.”

He stole a glance at Jihoon, whose lips were turned inwards, as if to zip them airtight for the remainder of their startling discussion.

“I… I hope this won’t change things between us,” Jinyoung endeavoured. “I’ve kept mum on the issue out of fear for the repercussions. But now I happen to think that’s just me being selfish. And I can no longer digest that. Not after Danbi.”

_Who, young as she may be, wished for nothing but happiness for another._

_Her brother’s._

_Who deserves more than the scraps he’s been fed._

“Thanks, Jinyoung-ah,” Jihoon whispered, after what seemed a lifetime and a half. “Regardless of the circumstances… that makes me happy.”

Jinyoung nodded, pleased to have receive his long-awaited response. “It doesn’t freak you out?”

“That just then was my version of a freak-out,” Jihoon grinned. “I’m past it, though. Next.”

“I take it you’ve known. Or harboured suspicions, at least.”

“I’m dense, but not that dense. I do admit, the death-stares you’ve sent hurling Kuanlin’s way have tipped me off a moment or two. Though I’m much too insecure for presumption, so I left the notion largely untouched. You and I are happy enough as it is.”

“Right,” Jinyoung conceded. “I suppose I could’ve left it at that.”

“Don’t you worry,” Jihoon smiled. “You and I are far too close for any such curveball to succeed in driving a wedge between either of us.”

“Good to hear.”

“What else were you expecting? I’ve known you for ages. I’ve seen everything. Even your dong, remember?”
“My… what?”
“Remember that one time when—“

“Shut up,” Jinyoung pleaded. “Oh please, shut up. I’d flushed that memory down the toilet centuries ago. If you let it re-materialize, I’ll bonk your head until it tilts permanently sideways.”

“Next time,” Jihoon snickered. “Remember to lock the door to the bathroom.”

“The lock was broken!”
“Remember to have it fixed.”
“Ugh,” Jinyoung sighed. “You asshole.”
“That, I haven’t seen.”

“MOM, JIHOON’S HARRASSING ME!”

Jihoon launched into convulsive fits of laughter, pointing a finger Jinyoung’s way.

“I’ve missed this,” he exclaimed. “I’d forgotten the simple joys of forcing reactions out of you.”

“You think you’re funny, huh?” Jinyoung retaliated. He poked at Jihoon’s sides, aiming for his ticklish spots. “Wait ‘till Kuanlin finds out you’ve written his name onto a grand total of fourteen sheets of homework because you’ve spent sleepless nights dreaming of him even though he—”

“STOP,” Jihoon demanded, slapping a hand against Jinyoung’s mouth. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Or better yet,” Jinyoung added, swatting Jihoon’s hand away. “I tell him of how often you mutter his name in your sleep whenever—“

“MOM, JINYOUNG’S BEING A DICK!”

“STOP IT WITH THE DICKS, YOU’RE TWELVE!”

“I’VE HIT PUBERTY YOU PINHEAD, MY VOICE HAS CRACKED!”

“IS THAT WHY YOU USE IT TO CROAK OUT KUANLIN’S NAME IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT!”

“What if I pummel you into sand particulates!”

“What if I roundhouse kick you into the afterlife—“

“What if I haunt you, and three generations of your descendants—“

Jihoon halted mid-sentence, having noticed several pairs of eyes trained at either of them.

“Now you’ve done it,” Jinyoung muttered. “We’re done for.”

“Hyung?” a familiar voice spoke up. “What in the world…I’m calling the police.”

Their heads swivelled laterally in perfect concurrence, towards the cobblestone footpath where Kuanlin stood, staring accusatorily at either of them.

“I… I can explain—” Jihoon began.
“Save it,” Kuanlin waved him away. “I already feel betrayed.”

Jihoon hung his head, ashamed of the hyper-active display.

“Now would be a good time for Mother Nature to decide she’d like to swallow me whole,” Jihoon whispered. “Why didn’t you remind me we’ve been sitting in public, spewing profanities around minors?”

Jinyoung stared daggers at him, mouth unlatched in disbelief.

“You have got to be kidding me. I’m a minor!”

“Well then reflect on your misdeeds, young man!”

“Still at it?” Kuanlin chuckled, making his way towards them. “No worries, hyung. I was kidding.”

“How long have you been standing there anyway?” Jihoon inquired.

“Since ‘I’ll bonk your head until it tilts permanently sideways’, ” he snickered. “Sounds nasty.”

Jihoon nodded, reaching out to hug Kuanlin’s waist.

“Kuanlin-aaaah,” he whined, busting out his disturbingly convincing aegyo. “Jinyoung-ie’s being a bully.”

“Has he hurt you, sweetheart?” Kuanlin asked, playing decidedly along. “Where exactly?”

“Right here,” Jihoon replied, tapping a finger against his forehead.

Kuanlin smiled, planting an eager kiss onto the exact spot Jihoon’s index finger landed upon.

“Better?”

“Worse,” Jinyoung grimaced. “The second-hand embarrassment is draining me of energy.”

“That’s the point of all this,” Jihoon smirked. “Kuanlin knows how many times I’ve sworn to let go of the cutesy persona.”

“At least he already knows the big secret.”

“Right,” Kuanlin chuckled, pinching lightly at Jihoon’s marshmallow cheeks. “Really, hyung? You talk in your sleep?”

“That—” Jihoon began, flashing Jinyoung a venomous glare. “YOU IDIOT—”

That very instant, Kuanlin’s phone buzzed from with the pockets of his jeans, alerting him to an incoming call.

“Ugh,” Jihoon grumbled discontentedly. “Who is it?”

“Taejoon-hyung?” Kuanlin spoke into the phone. “What’s up? Ahh… nothing much. I walked into horseplay moments ago, they aren’t busy at all… is that so? Would you happen to require our help? I do have free time. Though rehearsals are in fifteen. Hmm? I’m not sure about making it to the hospital at this time… Is Danbi alright? Is she—“

Kuanlin trailed off, lips quivering markedly, as if his voice-box had resolved to shut down on the fly.

“Understood,” Kuanlin spoke up, a borderline inaudible whisper. “I’ll let them know.”

Oh, god, please, Jinyoung thought.

Please tell me she’s alright.

“Has something happened to her?” Jihoon asked, voice filled with genuine concern.

“Yeah,” Kuanlin nodded, dumbstruck. “Apparently, she woke up this morning.”

***

Jinyoung didn’t think he’d miss Danbi’s distrustful stares before she awoke from her slumber.

Her body was much too frail for strenuous movement, and thus she’d retained the supine position, her head reclined at an angle.

Taejoon was at her bedside, a rectangular tray of silver perched atop his lap, from which he spooned mouthfuls of food into Danbi’s lap. The nurse on duty busied herself with the replacement of her IV drip, profoundly disinterested in the eleven above-average visuals milling about the room.

“How is she?” Jinyoung inquired. “Has she gotten rest?”

“She should’ve,” Taejoon replied. “She’s been asleep for a week.”

“Oppa,” Danbi whispered, tugging at the sleeve of Taejoon’s shirt. “Danbi saw Jin Snake last night.”


“No, no,” Danbi shook her head, waggling both arms about. “Danbi saw oppa, too. He was riding Jin Snake.”

“I…” Taejoon began, perplexed. “What?”

Daehwi suppressed a snort, which sounded almost as if he’d choked on powder.

“In the skies,” Danbi added, tracing an arc through the air. “Jin Snake was fat. He had whiskers and bad breath.”

“Do we have an interpreter?” Jinyoung asked. “What is that supposed to mean?”


“Ugh,” Jinyoung grimaced. “Does she hate me even more now?”

“Nonsense,” Taejoon replied. “Danbi loves dragons. She thinks they’re mythical creatures with wish-granting capabilities.”
“Ugh,” Jinyoung grimaced. “Someone didn’t tell her *genies* were a thing.”

Jinyoung nudged at Taejoon’s shoulder, mildly enough for him to keep steady lest he spill Danbi’s lunch onto the hospital floor. “Now what?”

“Rehearsals are in ten,” Daehwi spoke up. The rest of Wanna One had begun filing out of the room, about to stuff themselves into the tiny elevator box. “The same goes for you, Taejoon-ah.”

“No worries,” Taejoon replied. “Rehearsals are skippable. I don’t need them.”

“Now that isn’t true,” Daehwi chastised. “No worries, you may attend to your group’s needs for the moment. I’ll call a nurse, and--”

“I said,” Taejoon reiterated, rougher this time around. “I don’t need them.”

The severity to his tone left Daehwi thoroughly astonished, as he’d never been addressed in that manner before. “T-Taejoon-ah…”

“It’s alright,” Jinyoung interrupted.

*He’s not ditching rehearsals.*

*He’s ditching the show.*

“Taejoon knows what he’s doing,” Jinyoung reaffirmed. “He’ll be fine.”

He strove to keep his cool, though he knew in his mind’s eye that Daehwi saw clean through the charade.

Nonetheless, he let the incident go. “Understood. I’ll leave Danbi in your hands, Taejoon-ah.”

He strode over to Danbi, dipping forwards to peck gently at her cheek. “Rest well, princess. You’re in good company.”

“Where is Magu Otter going?” Danbi whimpered. “I’m scaaaaared. What if Jin Snake is hungry?”

“What about it?” Jinyoung grumbled.

“Jin Snake won’t gobble Danbi up?” she asked, eyes blinking in utmost innocence.

“He won’t,” Daehwi laughed. “He’s a dragon, remember? He grants wishes now.”

“He does?” Danbi asked, the light in her eyes enough to illuminate a thousand burning candles. “Danbi has a wish!”

Before Jinyoung could retort, the door burst abruptly open. The nurse-in-charge sashayed into the room, smiling at the four of them in turns.

Her teeth were impossibly white, and Jinyoung castigated himself inwardly for having imagined she’d replaced her toothpaste with Clorox.

“Thrilling news, Yoon Taejoon-ssi,” she announced. “You have the doctor’s approval.”

“Is that so?” Taejoon beamed. “Oh, thank goodness.”

Jinyoung met Daehwi’s glare from across the room. They exchanged bewildered glances, having
been deprived of the context enough to make sense of the abrupt declaration.

Taejoon must’ve noticed the air of trepidation around the room, as storm clouds will across the firmament before it splits the skies open. He lifted Danbi’s tray from his lap and set it hastily aside before jogging to the nurse’s side in order to escort her out the room.

“I’d rather we discuss the particulars elsewhere,” he remarked. “My friends need not stress over details.”

“Where are you going?” Danbi wailed. “Don’t leave me…”

“It’s alright,” Daehwi comforted. “He’ll be back soon.”

Jinyoung strolled over to Daehwi’s side, pulling him in by the waist. He angled himself forwards, whispering into Daehwi’s ear.

“What was that all about?”

“Beats me.”

Their inquisitive glares followed Taejoon out the door, until the very instant he disappeared out of sight.

“When is he returning, exactly?” Daehwi wondered aloud. “Shall we tell the others we’re running late for practice?”

“You go on ahead,” Jinyoung offer. “They need you there. You’ve composed half the song, after all.”

Daehwi studied him intently, as if to filter out the half-truths he’d employed for the sole purpose of embellishment. “You’ll keep her company?”

“I’m here to grant a wish,” he shrugged. “Remember?”

Daehwi giggled, ostensibly shrugging away his suspicions. “Alright. Guess I’ll see you later.”

He tugged at the hem of Jinyoung’s shirt, pulling him into a kiss.

Jinyoung let their lips linger a moment in physical contact, much too greedy to break away first.


“Yeah,” Jinyoung grinned, sneaking another kiss onto his forehead. “I love you, too.”

***

No sooner had Daehwi sauntered out the door than Danbi let loose a terrifying shriek.

Jinyoung panicked momentarily, caught between joining in her attempt at summoning the devil and clamping her mouth forcibly shut, nevermind the distinct possibility of going partially deaf.

He went for the latter, lunging at Danbi with both arms outstretched.
“Don’t do that,” he pleaded, muffling the sound of her impossibly shrill voice. “I won’t hurt you. I promise.”

He and Danbi spent the next fifteen seconds engaged in a stare-down of epic proportions, before yielding moments later to the dolorous silence.

He let Danbi go, smiling gingerly at her. Her lips quavered in response, and Jinyoung wondered if he’d smiled disturbingly enough for her to think he was about to chuck her into a pot of boiling water.


He mustered the courage enough to strike a cutesy pose. “See? Jin Dragon is harmless. He’s here to make your life’s wish come true.”

Danbi’s ears perked up at the sound of that, the first indication of success. “Really? Danbi won’t end up in Jin Snake’s soup?”

“Of course not. Jin Snake is full, you see. He no longer has an appetite. He’s Jin Dragon now, remember? Jin Snake is gone. You’ve banished him from this world altogether.”

“Then Danbi wants it,” she exclaimed. “Her wish come true.”

“And what is that?”

“For Taejoon-oppa to live happily ever after.”

Jinyoung’s face fell, heart torn into shreds.

*How selfless a wish, for one so young.*

“How exactly…” he began.

“Magu Otter,” Danbi exclaimed. “Danbi wants to give oppa his Magu Otter.”

Eyes moist with tears, she plucked up the courage enough to reach out for Jinyoung’s sleeve, the first time she’d done so since the moment they first met.

“Please, Jin Dragon,” she begged. “If Danbi makes oppa smile… she’ll die happily.”

Jinyoung bit his lip, taking Danbi’s hand in his. “Don’t say that, Danbi-ya. Don’t you dare even say that.”


“That was a dream,” Jinyoung whispered, more to himself than to Danbi, whose bravery, he thought, was a twisted by-product of having lived where Death loomed, until she no longer came to fear him, but welcome him as friends.

“That was a dream,” he echoed. “Just a dream.”

“Then… no wishes for Danbi?”

“I… aren’t you afraid, Danbi-ya? Death is unkind. He’s a monster. More the enemy than Jin Snake ever was.”
“Not true!” Danbi frowned. “Death is a friend. He’s sitting at the stairway to heaven.”

She smiled at him, eyes twinkling in pure, untarnished delight, as if she’d never known sadness or gone a day without bliss.

“You… wanna make it to heaven?”

“Mmm,” Danbi nodded. “Taejoon-oppa said it once. That eomma is waiting up there. And Danbi misses her. But she can’t leave until Taejoon-oppa is happy. Because as long as he’s sad, then eomma is too. That’s why he likes the rain, you know? Because the rain is eomma letting him know she’s still watching up there. And she cries for him, letting him know… what was it again? ‘Taejoon-ah, don’t be afraid’. After the storm ends, the rainbow appears. Life is colourful again.”

Jinyoung smiled at Danbi in utmost wonder, before touching the back of her hand to his lips, pressing her baby-soft palm against his cheek. “Did you know this, Danbi-ya? Your name means “sweet rain” in Korean. In many ways… you’re the gift your mother’s left Taejoon before she climbed that stairwell to the stars.”

“Really?” Danbi exclaimed. “Danbi is Taejoon-oppa’s gift?”

“Of course,” he nodded, choking back tears. “You’re a gift to me, too. And to Magu Otter. You’re a gift to the entire world. And that’s why you aren’t supposed to leave, just yet. If you do…”

“Oh…” Danbi whispered, understanding dawning upon her. “What should I do, Jin Dragon? What if I make Taejoon-oppa cry?”

Jinyoung squared his shoulders, brushing strands of hair away from Danbi’s face. He fished a hairpin out of his pocket, fashioned into the likeness of a serpent encrusted in jewels. He reached for Danbi’s hair, pinning it in place.

“I’ll tell you what, Danbi-ya,” he whispered. “I’ll grant you this wish. Jin Dragon will give Taejoon-oppa back his Magu Otter, but you’ll have to promise me that in return… you’ll give full recovery a shot. You listen to the doctor, do as the nurses say… go through treatment with as little protest as possible.”

He inclined himself forwards, pressing a kiss onto Danbi’s cheek. “That hairpin is yours now. It’s your lucky charm.”

Danbi giggled, slinging both arms around his neck.

“I will,” Danbi exclaimed, and it was the first he’d heard her refer to herself as an ‘I’ rather than a ‘Danbi’, as if she’d finally acquiesced to her identity.

*Take charge of your own destiny, Danbi-ya.*

*You have the power enough.*

“I promise,” she whispered into his ear. “I’ll do my best.”

“Then your wish,” Jinyoung smiled. “Is my command.”

***
Jinyoung had to admit he’d sorely missed the thrill of standing before the audience.

Far from the timid, apprehensive failure of a student he’d gotten labelled once, suffering from bouts of stage-fright which earned him the nickname “Deep Dark”, his insatiable thirst for the spotlight now stood testament to an improvement throughout the hard-won journey.

They spent week, after week, after week polishing the song, practicing until their voices went hoarse, dancing until their joints ached and their spines bent double.

They worked themselves weary, and thus spent the final rehearsal schedule holed up within their respective rooms, recharging the energy they’d siphoned out through a day’s worth of rest and relaxation.

And then, it arrived.

_**D-day.**_

“Gather ‘round everyone,” Jisung called out. They arranged themselves into a circle around him, arms interlocked at the shoulders. “You guys ready?”

“For the fans,” Daehwi offered.

“For our families,” Jihoon exclaimed.

“For the dream,” Daniel added.

“And for Yoon Danbi,” Jinyoung whispered.

Jisung smiled at each of them in turns, proud of the journey they’d ploughed through together. “For one and all,” he agreed. “Let’s show them _exactly_ what Wanna One is made of.”

***

**Daniel:**

I’ll protect you

**Jisung:**

What do I do, the spell isn’t releasing

**Daehwi:**

How, how did this happen

**Jisung:**

My heart that is hotter than that sun

**Jinyoung:**
Maybe, maybe, it’s probably love

Woojin:
You take me high
Fly me up so high
Like a balloon, I float up
My heart, you shake it up very much

Daehwi:
I’ll embrace your happiness and sadness and everything
And only know of you

Minhyun:
I feel an emotion that is deeper than love
Right now, I’m weaker than anyone else, but also strong

Seongwoo:
Sure, I’ll change things like fate

Minhyun:
Baby baby when you tell me something bad
Whatever sort of tears you drop, I’ll wipe them for you

Jihoon:
Break up with things like break ups now

Seongwoo:
Shout loudly

Wanna One:
Oh little girl

Jaehwan:
with any sort of words

Wanna One:
Little girl

Jaehwan:
It can’t decorate you

**Sungwoon:**

You, who is more like love than love itself

**Wanna One:**

Oh little girl

**Sungwoon:**

In this world

**Wanna One:**

Little girl

**Sungwoon:**

Even if I were to lose everything

**Jaehwan:**

You, who is more like fate than fate itself

**Daniel:**

I’ll protect you

I’ll protect you

I’ll protect you

**Jinyoung:**

Even if the spell were to release sometime

**Minhyun:**

Somehow, somehow if it were to

**Jinyoung:**

Even if the sun were to lose all its light

**Seongwoo:**

Trust me, trust me

We could be something

**Guanlin:**

Even when the flower petals wither, I’ll be by your side
Time has given me a treasure now, which is you

**Seongwoo:**
Yes, that head to your toes, lean on me
I’ll bet my everything

**Daehwi:**
I feel an emotion that is deeper than love
Right now, I’m weaker than anyone else but also strong

**Minhyun:**
Sure, I’ll change things like fate

**Seongwoo:**
Baby, baby when you tell me something bad
Whatever sort of tears you drop, I’ll wipe them for you

**Jihoon:**
Break up with things like break ups now

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Shout loudly

**Wanna One:**
Oh little girl

**Jaehwan:**
With any sort of words

**Wanna One:**
Little girl

**Jaehwan:**
It can’t decorate you

**Sungwoon:**
You, who is more like love than love itself

**Wanna One:**
Oh little girl
Sungwoon:
In this world

Wanna One:
Little girl

Sungwoon:
Even if I were to lose everything

Jaehwan:
You, who is more like fate than fate itself

Jinyoung:
I’ll protect you

Minhyun:
Baby, there’s no more loneliness

Jaehwan:
And we, jump across seasons

Sungwoon:
The whole world is jam-packed with you

Jinyoung:
I know you and me

Wanna One:
Oh little girl

Daniel:
A melody for you

Wanna One:
Little girl

Daniel:
Shout as if your throat would burst

Daehwi:
You, It’s a love song bigger than love itself
Wanna One:
Oh little girl

Sungwoon:
Even if this world

Wanna One:
Little girl

Sungwoon
Were to fool us

Jaehwan:
You, who is more like fate than fate itself

Daniel:
I’ll protect you

Jihoon:
I’ll protect you

Jinyoung:
I’ll only protect you

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Yoon Taejoon was nowhere to be found.

This perplexed everyone save for Jinyoung, as he’d been in the know since their reconciliation weeks ago.

“What happened?” Daehwi asked. “Where is he? Their group is performing next.”

The remaining members of B.O.I., however, were just as unperturbed, and Jinyoung had taken that to mean Taejoon had at least given them a cautionary regarding his departure from the Idol Project.

“Jinyoung-ah,” Daehwi insisted. “I’m worried… what if he’s given up? Has the stress gotten to him? I should’ve known the moment he refused practice...”

“It’s alright,” Jinyoung comforted, pulling Daehwi into a comforting embrace. “You have nothing to—”

“Before the Best of Idols take the stage,” Leeteuk’s voice rang through the speakers. “I’d like to make a brief disclosure regarding trainee Yoon Taejoon’s absence, which some of you may have
“already noticed.”

“What is this?” Daehwi stirred. “J-Jinyoung-ah…”

“Shh,” Jinyoung whispered, burying Daehwi’s head into his chest. “Just listen. I have no idea what all this is about, either.”

“Yoon Taejoon,” Leeteuk declared. “Has withdrawn from the Idol Project.”

Sharp intakes of breath echoed throughout the waiting room, collective shock settling into the heavy climate around them.

“What… is that supposed to mean?” Daehwi asked. “That can’t be…”

“He didn’t want you guys to worry,” Jinyoung explained. “That’s why they’ve kept things under wraps ‘till now.”

“That’s… but where is he now?” Daehwi urged. “Where is he?”

“At the moment,” Leeteuk declared, as if in response to Daehwi’s panicked query. “Yoon Taejoon-yonsusaeng is preparing for surgery, as he’s volunteered himself the donor for his sister’s kidney transplant.”

Jinyoung’s mouth flew open, stunned by the revelation.

This, he thought, dumbstruck. He never said this.

“Are they for real?” Seongwoo exclaimed. “I sure do hope they air this with his permission. His private affairs needn’t become a public matter.”

“They’ve mixed that into the script for the sake of boosting viewership,” Daniel sighed. “Watch this episode blow up the moment it airs on television.”

“I don’t…” Daehwi stuttered. “I don’t understand, he…”

“He’s chosen to sacrifice his dream in order to attend to his sister’s health, and as such, may we keep him in our thoughts and well-wishes. That’s all for now, everyone. Best of Idols is up next! Give them strength and cheer them on in Taejoon’s absence. Coming at you live, in 3, 2, 1…”

The static cut off, the lively beat of B.O.I.’s music blaring loudly in Jinyoung’s ears.

It makes sense, he thought. The risk of Danbi’s organ system rejecting the kidney are mitigated this way. They’re related, after all. And Taejoon’s healthy enough, physically-speaking.

He’s the perfect candidate.

“But what of the expenses?” he wondered aloud.

“Apparently… they’ve been taken care of,” Daehwi spoke up. He was staring into his phone, where Taejoon left him a lengthy message before he’d gotten wheeled into the operating room. “Several days ago, he received assistance from an anonymous sponsor, apparently.”

“A sponsor?” Jinyoung echoed. “Makes sense. That’s why the transplant procedure’s gone underway posthaste. Someone must’ve guaranteed a lump sum payment of sorts. No other reason why the hospital would choose to expedite the process.”
Taejoon must’ve been desperate, Jinyoung thought. For him to so readily accept the support of a stranger.

It’s the miracle he’s long since waited for.

“Does he even know this sponsor’s identity?”

Beside him, Kuanlin bristled, ears perking up.

“You know about this?” Jinyoung asked.

“Not really,” Kuanlin shrugged, staring into the distance. “I’ve got very little to do with any of this.”

Jinyoung scrutinized his stark expression, the glassy stare, the sweaty palms, the foot tapping rhythmically against the floorboards.

“I’ll have you know, Kuanlin-ah,” he remarked. “You’re not a particularly convincing liar.”

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Hours later they arrived at the hospital.

The announcement of the winners for Round Two were put on hold, which Jinyoung found himself thankful for, as he was in no mood for celebration given the distressing plight at-hand.

“Danbi is fine,” the doctor proclaimed. “We have her in intensive care at the moment.”

“She’ll make it, right?” Daehwi asked. “The surgery went well?”

“We have faith in our doctors,” was the only response. “She does require close supervision, nonetheless.”

“And Taejoon?” Jinyoung ventured.

“Yoon Taejoon has yet to regain consciousness, though his vital signs are stable. Likely a side-effect of the general anaesthesia. He should wake up any minute now.”

The doctor adjusted the rim of his spectacles, placing both hands inside the pockets of his laboratory coat.

“I’ve been advised, however,” he added. “That Taejoon is prone to psychological stress. The transplant experience may aggravate this, and that renders companionship a necessity to the recovery process itself. I’ve been informed that he no longer has family in Seoul?”

“His grandparents,” Daehwi responded. “But...both of them are much too frail at this point. They’ve been checked into a haven for the elderly.”

“Doesn’t matter,” the doctor remarked. “We’ve gotten into contact with his father. He left us a call from a roaming device in Shanghai, says he’s returning home this weekend.”

Jinyoung and Daehwi exchanged apprehensive glares, unsure of what to make of this scrap of
“He’s given us the go signal,” the doctor clarified. “For Taejoon’s friends to enjoy access to his room. And his sister’s. Provided they surrender identification, of course.”

The doctor shrugged, sparing his wristwatch a perfunctory glance. “I do hope you care for him well. His mental state may interfere and make things even more difficult.”

Jinyoung seized Daehwi’s wrist, unable to stomach the doctor’s apathy any longer, as if he’d spoken of inanimate objects all the while.

“Noted, doctor,” he uttered, turning at the heel.

“W-wait, Jinyoung-ah,” Daehwi exclaimed. “We still haven’t--”

“Time is of the essence, love,” he said simply. “Can’t afford to waste our time on pointless chit-chat.”

***

“I can tell,” Daehwi sighed, after letting Jinyoung drag him like a sack of potatoes out to the hospital lobby. “You dislike doctors.”

‘I dislike this doctor,” Jinyoung corrected. “Doctors are nice, you know. Danbi might’ve died without them.”

“Right,” Daehwi smiled, offering Jinyoung a hand. They strolled out the door side-by-side, walking along the grassy pavement lining the circumference of the hospital building.

“You had something to say?”

“Yeah.”

“What is it, then?”

Jinyoung stopped in his tracks, gaze drifting skywards. Daehwi halted before him as well, turning at an angle to face him.

“I love you,” Jinyoung whispered. “I really do.”

Daehwi giggled, skipping merrily towards him. He wrapped both arms around Jinyoung’s waist, pulling him into a loving embrace. “I love you too, Jinyoung-ah.”

Both Jinyoung’s hands roamed the length of Daehwi’s arms, stopping for a while to cup his beautiful face.

He gave a gentle tug, claiming Daehwi’s eager mouth, fingertips tracing his cheeks streaked in tears.

They kissed under the azure skies, the stars above bearing witness to their moment of passion.

Daehwi’s lips parted to make way for his, the sound of his shallow breathing filling Jinyoung with
fierce, and desperate longing. He held Daehwi by the waist, captivated by his scent, drawing him in even closer.

_to hell with caring for loving you out in the open_, he thought. _I deserve you, too, Lee Daehwi._

_and the world deserves to know that I do._

He cupped the back of Daehwi’s neck, guiding him into their kisses, deep, gentle, and selfish all at once. His fingers twined in Daehwi’s hair, desire licking through him, searing through his mind… and then, through his conscience.

He gripped at Daehwi’s arms with a shudder.

“We can’t,” he said, between ragged breaths. “We can’t do this.”

“Jin...Jinyoung-ah,” Daehwi murmured. “Why… all of a sudden?”

“I’m sorry,” Jinyoung shook his head. “It shouldn’t have been this way.”

Daehwi’s hands fisted in his shirt, near the small of his back. He pressed a cheek against Jinyoung’s chest, a wordless plea for affection.

“Don’t say that now,” Daehwi whispered. “Not now.”

Jinyoung pushed him gently back, staring into the eyes he’d gotten lost in, time and time again.

_death is harsh_, he thought.

_But love, pure and true, is even harsher still._

_and yet…_

“Thank you, Lee Daehwi,” he whispered. “For choosing me. For loving me, and letting me love you in return.”

He stroked Daehwi’s cheek, brushing at the skin with the tips of his fingers, as if to commit to memory the planes of his face, the velveteen touch of his delicate skin, the crimson hue to his lips swollen red.

“How, once upon a time, you asked for me to love you?”

Daehwi looked at him, eyes glazing over beneath a downpour of tears. “Of course. How can I forget?”

“It was the easiest thing I’ve ever had to do,” Jinyoung smiled. “And you were the easiest decision I’ve ever had to make. I simply… resisted. Because I’m foolish. Faint-hearted. A spineless coward.”

_See?

_I don’t even have the guts enough to back out of the mess I’ve put us through._

“You’re breaking up with me,” Daehwi said. “Aren’t you?”

Jinyoung let slip an impassive laugh. “Even just hearing you say that hurts.”
“You can’t break up with me, Bae Jinyoung,” Daehwi exclaimed, voice unshaken. “I forbid it.”

“If that’s what it takes,” Jinyoung replied. “To give you the freedom enough to be there for Taejoon, the very minute he needs you the most… then we have to break up. It’s just a label, Daehwi-ya. A social construct. It doesn’t mean I no longer love you. It doesn’t mean the very notion of ‘not loving you’ has become a possibility. Because it’s not. And perhaps, it never will be.”

He took Daehwi’s hands in his, kissing them one after the other.

“I’m sorry, Daehwi-ya. I wish… things didn’t have to be this way.”

Daehwi drew in a sharp breath, eyes squeezed shut.

“It won’t do either of us any good,” he replied. “To wish for the impossible.”

Jinyoung nodded, letting Daehwi’s hands slip from his grasp.

“Instead… promise me,” he whispered. “That in my stead, you’ll exact revenge upon Yoon Taejoon.”

Daehwi’s eyes reopened, peering dubiously at him beneath thick lashes.

“What is that supposed to mean?” he inquired. “Revenge, at this time? Jinyoung-ah… you can’t possibly be asking this of me. Danbi—“

“Danbi,” Jinyoung interrupted. “Deserves a wish come true. And that’s why I’m asking this of you. Because I’m Jin Dragon, remember? That’s what dragons do.”


He sighed heavily, tilting Jinyoung’s chin downwards. “You aren’t all that different now, are you? Revenge, you say…”

“Haven’t you known?” Jinyoung smiled, pinching at Daehwi’s cheek. “That the single best way of disarming the enemy…is to kill them with kindness and lead them into the light.”

He leaned in, pressing a feather-light kiss onto the tip of Daehwi’s nose.


Daehwi stared at him in wonder, the makings of a smile playing at the corners of his lips. “Ahh, I’ve fallen ever deeper for you. And yet… there you stand. Giving me up.”

“For the time being,” Jinyoung amended. “Until Taejoon regains his strength. You need not ask for a sign. The only thing there for you to do is listen. To Taejoon, to Danbi, most of all, to your heart. Until then… this is goodbye.”

The words he’d spoken pierced through his being, even as he spoke them, and yet there was nothing he could do to keep them from spilling forth from his traitorous lips.

Jinyoung searched Daehwi’s expression, half-expecting defiance, and half-dreading hatred.

And yet, his eyes were dull, his stare vacuous, his face inscrutable.

Tell me you refuse, Jinyoung thought.
Tell me this feels wrong.

Tell me I’ve gone overboard.

Stop me, Daehwi-ya.

Before I let you go.

“I’m sorry, Jinyoung-ah,” he whispered instead. “I’m really, really sorry.”

Jinyoung’s heart shattered, pulverized into sand.

“But I can’t let you break me up with me,” Daehwi added. “Because I’m breaking up with you first.”

That was all it took for Jinyoung’s composure to crumble, for his bravado to dissolve into nothing.

It felt as though his insides were being hollowed out, one excruciating bit after another, until he was but an empty shell, void and aching, gutless, heartless, close to breaking.

He took one step backward, unable to look Daehwi in the eye.

And then, hit swiftly by an emotional deluge…

Bae Jinyoung broke.

He fell to his feet, sobbing quietly for the love he’d let go of.

Your fault.

All your fault.

He wiped at the tears rolling down his cheek, ashamed and humiliated that Daehwi had to witness him looking so utterly vulnerable.

And he knew, that even if he managed to piece himself back together, intact though he may look, he’d no longer be quite the same person he’d been before the fall.

That’s how it is, Bae Jinyoung.

You live.

Learn.

Crash and burn.

And then, what?

“You get up,” Daehwi’s voice broke through his psyche, stunning him into silence. “I’m on the verge of breaking down myself, you know. That can’t happen. We can’t…”

Jinyoung sniffed, patting his face dry. “Sorry. I’m a mess.”

He stood himself up, dusting his clothes off. “That was fucking embarrassing.”

Daehwi laughed softly, inching towards him. Jinyoung felt Daehwi’s hands rubbing against his cheek, the warmth of his touch searing through Jinyoung’s fevered flesh.
I’ll miss this.

“We’ll be alright,” Daehwi whispered, tears pooling at the corners of his eyes. ‘Won’t we?’

For a while the both of them simply stood there, wiping at each other’s tears, cherishing the moments they had left before they had to say farewell.

“We’ll be alright,” Jinyoung assured him.

“I’m really sorry. But I have to be there for him, without making him feel guilty for it. He’s in a bind, at the moment. Especially in knowing that his father…”

“I get it,” Jinyoung nodded. “You needn’t explain yourself, or apologize for having love enough in your heart to share with others besides myself. I’m proud of you, Daehwi-ya. I would never have been courageous, or selfless enough, to be there for the very person I’ve feared, or despised once. And yet… there you stand, an angel on earth.”

“Then promise me you’ll wait,” Daehwi pleaded. “Promise me.”

He fell into Jinyoung’s arms, one last embrace.

“Then promise me you’ll return,” Jinyoung whispered. “Promise me.”

Daehwi looked at him, for the briefest on moments, and for a thousand eternities, until Jinyoung heard, in his heart of hearts, the words left unspoken between them.

I will. I promise you.

As soon as possible.

No matter how long it takes.

I will.

“I love you,” Jinyoung whispered. “Never forget.”

He offered Daehwi a kiss, full upon his burning lips.

“But for now,” he whispered. “This is goodbye.”

And then he watched as Lee Daehwi, the love of his life, walked ever so slowly into the hospital.

And out of his life.

***

Jinyoung was wrong to think the night couldn’t have gotten any worse than the break-up.

As soon as he returned to the dormitories at Stella Peak, he noticed the swarm of unnerved women stampeding towards him.

“Is it true?” one of them demanded. “What it says in the article?”

“He’s that kind of person?” another accused. “I feel cheated!”
“I…” Jinyoung began, getting increasingly frazzled by the second. “I just got here. I have no idea what it is you’re on about.”

“Check SNS!” a third insisted. “It’s on the main page of Naver!”

“I can’t believe the day has come that such news would make the headline,” another remarked. “Why is your co-member like that?”

“Are all of you like that?”

“Did you know? Were you hiding it?”

“What’s wrong with you people?”

Jinyoung turned himself about, in every possible direction, unable to find an exit wide enough for him to power through without having to shove anyone out of the way.

“Hey!” he heard Daniel call out. “You’re encroaching upon the boys’ dormitory. Off limits to women, remember?”

The mob around him scattered angrily, grumbling heated cuss words under their breath.

“Hyung… is anything the matter?” Jinyoung inquired. “What was that all about?”

“Your face is looking pallid,” Daniel observed, ignoring his query. “As if someone’s sucked all the lifeblood out of you.”

“Well,” Jinyoung muttered. “You’re not that far away from the truth.”

He looked over his shoulder, saw the throng of women gossiping about as they walked further away down the hill.

“About the article they mentioned…”

“It’s Seongwoo,” Daniel disclosed. “An article written about him… it’s gone viral.”

Jinyoung clutched at his chest, unable to repress the terror-stricken palpitations.

“Let me guess,” he sighed. “His demented cousin’s threatened him again? Was he behind this mess?”


“If Danbi thinks I’m a snake,” Jinyoung shook his head. “Wait till she meets the King Cobra.”

“Let’s pray she won’t. Unlike you, that one bites. And I’ll be the first to say his venom not only stings, but poisons.”

“What exactly did he say this time? Is he looking for Chaerin?”

“Looking,” Daniel grumbled. “Is also an understatement. He’s gone frantic. Thinks Seongwoo’s not willing to hold up his end of the bargain. But that isn’t even it. Chaerin’s just… how shall I put it? Hard to get a read on.”

“And the article?” Jinyoung ventured. “Was that—”
“Hey!” another voice called out. Jinyoung and Daniel turned towards the source, where Seongwoo was jogging towards them, almost out of breath.

“Are you alright?” Daniel asked. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“Sorry,” Seongwoo said, looking genuinely apologetic. “That call from Haechan had me shaken. I spent a couple minutes walking to and fro around the room. I’ve devised a plan.”

“Set that aside for a while,” Daniel whispered, eyeing him worriedly. “Someone… someone published an article of you. It’s all over my newsfeed.”

“An article? What about?”

“A fan account,” Daniel explained. “This fan claims to have known you since you were children. Ring a bell?”

Seongwoo’s eyes narrowed into slits, utterly expressionless.

“What did the article say?”

“I didn’t read through the whole thing,” he admitted. “Just… skimmed through it, here and there. But if you must know, she accused you of bullying. Posted a couple pictures of the both of you, standing side-by-side in school uniforms. She blurred her face out, but kept yours in quality. There’s no mistaking it, Seongwoo-ya. Your face hasn’t changed much in five years.”


“I’m involved in this aren’t I?” Daniel asked. “This bullying issue is about me. I’m the supposed victim.”

“Don’t you even dare,” Seongwoo warned. “Don’t you even dare think of getting yourself involved in this, for the sake of defending my honour. If we risk an exposure of the past… we risk the possibility of people finding out you’ve faked your own death.”

“Uhm… it gets worse, guys,” Jihoon added, pulling over at the curb on his bicycle. “The second most read article is about us, too.”

“WHAT?” the three of them bellowed in unison.

“Oh no,” Jinyoung exclaimed. “Has Kuanlin’s father caught wind of this issue?”

“Taiyang Group’s stocks have been plunging since the news came out,” Jihoon admitted. His expression was grim, and it looked almost as if he’d just gone deep-diving in a pool of sharks because of how much he trembled where he stood. “Investors backing out one by one, because of Kuanlin’s direct association to Seongwoo-hyung.”

“This is insane,” Daniel whispered.

“Oh,” Jinyoung sighed. “It gets worse. Daehwi and I just broke up.”

“WHAT?” the three others roared, even louder than the first time around.

“But that’s not the issue, right now,” Jinyoung exclaimed. “What else did the article say? Was that it?”
“She—okay fine, Chaerin—made an even bolder claim,” he said. “Apart from the bullying, she claims you’ve stalked her. And now she’s asking for an apology.”

“Does the public even buy into this bullshit?” Jinyoung cursed. “What proof does she have of these claims?”

“So far it seems the public is split,” Jihoon noted. “But given that she’s surrendered a voice recording with incriminating evidence…”

“Voice recording?” Jinyoung inquired.

“And if she doesn’t get the apology?” Seongwoo asked.

Heavy silence settled around them, all four of them thinking as one.

Isn’t it obvious?

“She’s threatened to sue you for sexual harassment.”

~JINHWI 7 END~

Chapter End Notes

Once again, I'd like to preface this note with an apology. I understand that I have been AWOL for a very long time, and many of readers have given up on this story altogether because I take way too long to come up with an update. I'm a reader myself, and thus I understand how frustrating it must be to wait ages for an update you're not even sure will arrive. To be perfectly honest, it isn't even that I've always just been busy. Sometimes, I have time, but have lost the inspiration, and thus I can't bring myself to write no matter what I try to do or how much I try to convince myself. It's frustrating, and makes me feel guilty. Once or twice, I've even thought of abandoning the story.

But I realize I can never, ever do that, because I still have readers who have waited so very patiently for the update without complaint. If you are reading this, then you are one of them, and I want you to know that I am very, very thankful that you exist on this planet. You give me the motivation enough to forge on with writing, moreso because this story is my very first. It's my baby! I would never abandon it just like that. So please stay tuned for further updates! I can't promise that I will work at the speed of light, but I CAN promise that this story will reach the end one day. Cheers to you for sticking around till then!

If you wanna be my friend (because I wanna be your friend), hit me up on Twitter! @lilicadearest

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