### 10, nine, 8 (maybe this is fate)

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**by sodakissed**

### Summary

After an accident at work, 25-year-old Minghao comes into the physical therapy clinic and votes that Wonwoo would beat Mingyu in a fistfight.

Alternatively//
Ten years ago, Mingyu makes a big scene in the cafeteria and therefore ruins Minghao's high school career.
Ten years later, Minghao makes Mingyu realize that not everything he does is as momentous as he assumes it to be.

A story where two people help each other recover in different ways.

[ started november 8th ]

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**Notes**
This story reads better in chapter-by-chapter mode, so please change it to get the full experience.
Thank you for tuning in. Enjoy.

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

Mingyu likes his job working as a PT.

A physical therapist, not to be confused with a personal trainer (that was his job in college). There’s something nicely methodical about creating low-impact exercise regimens for athletes and the elderly. There’s little responsibility in his job and no one’s life is at stake. His job is just to make people feel better and recover and that’s fine with him. He remembers his manager’s warning about not ‘flirting or falling in love with the patients’ which he doesn’t have to worry about. Mingyu hasn’t always been a head over heart kind of guy, but while other people were partying through school, he was hitting the books and staying in.

Okay, okay, sure. He had his share of fun—the post-finals karaoke nights and Sunday morning hangovers from wild parties at Jungkook’s fraternity—but it was always the future first. He honored his parents’ sacrifice to put him through university and his expedited doctor’s degree at UCSF, and now at 26, he’s happy to have a stable job and finally start repaying them without burden.

He’s happy.

It’s kind of a bittersweet happiness.

He works from 9 to 3 on most days with a lunch break whenever he wants, shorter hours since he’s still on trial before he can be a resident, but it’s better than the hours he had a few months ago. It’s a peaceful and quiet job and his patience is often never tested. The clients they accept are all here for recovery and if Joshua’s voice didn’t disarm them at the front desk, coming into a room where someone as aesthetically pleasing as Mingyu or Jeonghan has to put their hands on you often gets rid of any remaining malintent. They often joke around and make the patients laugh in passing; the atmosphere is usually cheery and light. This is recovery after all.

It’s bittersweet because he gets attached. It’s hard not to.

It’s hard not to when you’re holding the hand of a five-year-old who fell out of a tree after playing adventure and she comes in with an arm brace that’s as big as her backpack. Her mom gives you a sympathetic smile as she whines about doing exercises and stretching, but you give her a lollipop and things get better. And weeks later, she brings you a drawing that she made at school depicting you helping her and she feels like a million bucks and all of a sudden you’ve gone from being a nobody-temp into being some kid’s superhero. But then you realize that once they feel better, you’ve done your job and you’ve got to let go. You’ll likely never see them again and they’re on to bigger and better (and hopefully safer) adventures. It feels sad, but it feels good. He still has Sophia’s drawing hung up above his desk in his home office among a couple other ‘Thank You’ cards and a macramé fish that Jiyoung’s daughter made him after helping her mom feel better. It’s all stuff that holds a place in his heart and in his memory.

And as Joshua had told him when he first signed on, “A job like this is sometimes hard to handle. You help people recover, so—unlike other medical jobs—it’s a good thing when you don’t see them again.”

Mingyu is a professional.

He’s a sweet talker and has charisma through the roof and honestly brings in more business for the clinic (as Joshua has mentioned offhandedly several times: “People come for therapy but stay to
gawk at Mingyu” to which he remembers Jeonghan responding with a retch) and Mingyu’s not shy about it. It’s been like this since puberty hit him in high school. He’s been at the center of social circles and penned amongst hearts in the notebooks of fellow students. Mingyu’s nice to everyone, he’s disgustingly polite and sociable with a great physique and a one-shot-one-kill grin. He would be considered an Adonis if he wasn’t so clumsy. But, whatever, he’s making good money at a stable job that he’s held for almost six months and he’ll likely be signed on full-time at the year-end review. Then all will be even more stable, impossibly stable. He’ll have a good career that’ll make his parents proud. In a few years he’ll start dating again and maybe get married and carry on what he believed to be the perfect, stable life plan. In case you haven’t noticed, stability is the main theme in Mingyu’s long-term goals.

“Hey, don’t forget to pick up the new client list on your way out.” Jeonghan reminds him.

He forgets on occasion, but it’s especially important today since Jeonghan is going on a well-deserved vacation. He’ll be out for a month, vacationing the tropics with a friend from college. He told Mingyu that he’ll bring him back a jar of air to which Mingyu can only roll his eyes. He would much rather have something he can add to his desk-collection of memories and a jar of air just doesn’t fit in. Above all else, jars of air are only impressive if they’re from the tops of mountains hiked with- His thoughts are interrupted by Joshua handing him a clipboard and a stack of patient files. Most of the names look familiar. Actually, all of them do.

“No one new?”

“Oh,” Joshua turns his attention back to his screen and clicks a few times, “No, there should be at least one new patient in there. I kept most of your patients the same, but I moved a couple over from Jeonghan’s list since I don’t want to overwork the new guy.”

Right, the new guy, Wonwoo. He should be starting in a few days, after the weekend. He’s experienced, having worked in the field a bit longer than Mingyu. He apparently skipped his trial period since his last clinic liked him so much and hired him right after he finished his internship. Mingyu wonders what would move him out of the city and to a smaller, suburban college-town like this. It’s dead in the summer and there’s nothing to do if you aren’t over 70 and under 12. But he can’t say much, he’s here, isn’t he?

Mingyu looks through the name tabs again, wondering why none of them stood out.

“Ah, Minghao Xu. That should be your only new patient.” Mingyu pulls out the folder and looks at it, flipping through it briefly. He vaguely remembers the name. He thinks for a minute, shuffling through names and faces of people he’s met within the last few years. When nothing comes up, he tries to think about people he met in college and even further back than that. Then it hits him. This is going to be awkward. This is going to be the worst.

“Can I switch with the new guy?”

“Why?” Joshua doesn’t even look up.

“No reason in particular.”

“Wonwoo focuses on waist-up recovery and since you’re a generalist I thought you could take leg-guy.”

“Leg-guy?” Mingyu flips through the file again. Right, damaged ACL and meniscus. Rarer in men than it is in women thanks to muscle formations, but it’s no surprise. Back in high school, Minghao was an avid dancer. Maybe his risky dance moves were starting to catch up with him.
“Yeah.” All he hears is the keyboard clacking and not a sprinkle of sympathy from the cat-eyed manager. Not that Joshua would be any the wiser, he doesn’t know anything about Mingyu’s past with Minghao or what little there was of it.

He sighs, “Okay, I’ll see you on Monday.”

“Have a good day, Mingyu. I’ll message you if anyone switches their appointments around.”

This was going to be hell.
Chapter 2

As expected, Monday rolls around and he meets Wonwoo first thing when he gets in at 8:30 for prep. Wonwoo looks stoic, but his smile warms him up nicely; maybe Joshua's family has a habit of hiring pretty boys. Wonwoo is kind of lanky and thin but has chiseled features that would nudge you to double-take if you met him in the streets. After being questioned as to why he came to work in town from the city, he simply responds that his significant other works a moderate drive down the road in one of the open commercial buildings in a shopping plaza and that his commute to visit from the city was too long and cumbersome for the frequency they’d liked to meet up.

Joshua quips about Wonwoo making a bold move to live together, to which Wonwoo shrugs and says that they’ve been dating for the better part of the last five years and that for one of them to move was inevitable. Since Wonwoo’s job transfer was guaranteed and paid better than his partner, he was a prime candidate to relocate.

“Moving is a hassle, you must be exhausted,” Mingyu remembers moving for his graduate’s studies a few years ago. Since he’s the type to keep a lot of little trinkets and ‘junk’, moving was indeed a big hassle, especially since he wanted to make sure that nothing got lost in the move (which it so often does). Aside from that, he’d never really moved. When he came back to town, he moved into a one-bedroom apartment a fifteen-minute drive from work. His parents decided to retire near the coast where his mom transferred for her managerial job and his dad spent his days before retirement overlooking the beach and playing the stock market. Things had gotten better since high school. Money wasn’t tight any longer, but he was still hellbent on repaying them for his education on top of his student loans.

“It wasn’t too bad. Soonyoung is probably stronger than I am, so all the boxes weren’t horrible.” It somehow seems expected that Wonwoo would date someone physically stronger than he was. He just gives the impression to be the type. The Sunyoung Mingyu knows is tiny but packs a punch. She’s peppy and bright, just like Wonwoo’s Soonyoung.

“Are you engaged?” Joshua asks, spying the silver band on Wonwoo’s finger.

“Oh no, not yet.” If Mingyu paid more attention, he could see that the older man was a bit flustered, spinning the ring on his pinky with his thumb, “Promise rings, you know. Soonyoung really likes stars.” He holds out his hand to show off the silver band with two stars stamped into the metal, one set with turquoise and one set with ruby.

“Soonyoung has good taste, it’s cute.” Mingyu makes that statement before they part ways and officially open for the day. He’s always apprehensive of people that are way too attached to their significant others, but Wonwoo seems nice. It’ll definitely be a different dynamic than working with Jeonghan, but he’s welcome company for now.

Tuesday is much less awkward with Wonwoo bringing in cookies. Well, ‘cookies’.

“Look, Soonyoung wanted to make sure I got a warm welcome at work, so, ta-dah, cookies. You might need to get your stomach pumped, but I brought them anyway. Please don’t feel obligated to consume them.” Mingyu smiles at the sweet gesture. They’re clearly made from store-bought cookie dough—not even boxed mix—and they’re terribly shaped and burnt on the bottom, but he and Joshua are polite and take a cookie each. They aren’t going to tell Wonwoo that they end up in the trash after he goes in for his first appointment.
“Those were bad.” Joshua wheezes exaggeratedly after spitting into a napkin. Mingyu just laughs. His cookies could easily put Soonyoung’s to shame, but he’s not going to tell Wonwoo that.

“They weren’t that bad.”

Joshua gives him a pointed look, knowing that he’s lying through his teeth before shaking his head and picking up a phone call, “Hello, oh yes, we can reschedule for the 14th. That’s not a problem…”

Nothing’s ever a problem. Joshua’s just extremely good at handling clients; good-natured and surprisingly easy-going for a manager. It’s a small clinic, that’s obvious, considering they only have two or three PT’s on staff on any given day. Mingyu works most weekdays, he keeps his weekends open and occasionally takes Tuesdays off if the schedule works out like such. If Wonwoo’s replacing Jeonghan for the month, he’ll probably just take over his hours; Monday thru Thursday. He’ll likely get the full 9 to 5:30 that Joshua works. The other PT that works afternoons, Seokmin, is wrapping up his master’s studies and Mingyu rarely sees him since he’s usually out for lunch when he comes in and their appointments keep them busy after that.

Wednesday is full of banter because Mingyu brings in macarons that he couldn’t help but make after Wonwoo’s unfortunate cookie delivery yesterday. They’re time-consuming and require some technical skill, but it’s not like Mingyu has anything else to do in his free time since he only works part-time. He makes enough so all the staff can have some with a few to spare for the patients that come in today. The custodian is especially happy about them, saying something about Mingyu outdoing himself time and time again with the baked goods he brings in to share. “I’m pretty sure these are full of cocaine.” He states, thankfully well before any clients come in. Mingyu gives him a few to take home to his wife and kids.

Wonwoo makes some remark about Mingyu trying to one-up Soonyoung and that they might have to resort to fisticuffs after work which is a joke that Joshua won’t drop for the rest of the day, even telling a longer-standing patient, Jongin, that the two might start brawling at any moment. He even goes so far as to start a cookie-jar voting system at the front desk where patients can drop their receipts into either Mingyu or Wonwoo’s jar with a bold ‘Who would win in a fistfight?’ sign taped under the counter.

It’s hard to tell who gets more votes. At first glance, it’s Mingyu, but most of the receipts in Wonwoo’s jar are crumbled up which will make the count unofficial until Joshua decides to go through the votes next week. It was decided without them that the loser would bring in doughnuts the following morning from DonutBoo, the best doughnut shop in town that required you to get up at ass-o’clock in the morning just to beat the lines and get a fresh batch. That’s one pastry place that Mingyu can’t beat. No one can beat Mama Boo’s homemade doughnuts. No one.

He remembers when the place opened about a decade ago when he was still in high school. Damn. A decade. That sounds way longer than it actually feels. It was all the rage with the teens as her son had attended the only other high school in town and often worked there on weekends. Mingyu remembers him as a spritely boy with round cheeks and honey-colored hair. He’s not sure where he is now, maybe he took over the family business. He hasn’t been to DonutBoo in a long time. He knows that Minghao and his troupe of b-boys would often stop by the downtown shop after practice sometime around 5 or 6 when Mingyu would finish his own sport practices and make his way to a nearby Starbucks to work on homework before going home. They usually wouldn’t hang out long. Mingyu wouldn’t even get through his first assignment before the boys went home. Although, there were times that Minghao would stay and chat with Mama Boo’s son if he came in to
close up shop with his parents. It seemed like they hit it off and became friends despite the high 
school rivalry.

That friendliness scored Minghao more than a few free doughnuts.

Fatefully, Thursday rolls around and Minghao shows up at the front desk.

Mingyu sees him after walking his last patient out and makes a beeline for the bathroom just 
because he feels a crippling cringe sneaking up his spine. He at least thinks it’s Minghao. It’s the 
right time for it to be Minghao, his appointment is in ten minutes. The image that comes to mind of 
Minghao is of him in the cafeteria with a black sweater and his bangs in his eyes. It was the fashion 
at the time, he guesses. He was always curious how he could see with his hair in the way, but it 
looks like he’s since cut it. Of course he would, that was ten years ago.

It was ten years ago. It’s no big deal. Ten years. Ten years. Ten years. A decade. There’s 
nothing to worry about.

“Good afternoon, Minghao, Jeonghan is actually on vacation, so his replacement will come 
out and get you when he’s done with some paperwork. I hope that’s no trouble.” Joshua’s sweet 
voice can be heard down the hall from where Mingyu is leaning on the wall around the corner next 
to the imaging rooms. The radiographer gives him a funny look as she makes her way to the lab with 
a stack of prints under her arm. He smiles and waves her off. Was he sweating a minute ago? Ew. 
Mingyu, pull yourself together.

“No, that’s fine.” He guesses that’s his voice. He hadn’t talked to Minghao enough to know. 
On the rare occasion the dancers would cause a ruckus in the commons during a rainy day, Mingyu 
vividly recalls his peppery laugh between rounds of spins and flips on the cement floor. It was 
always a passive practice and a means to show off. They always had an audience; large or small, rain 
or shine.

“Great. Would you like to take a seat while you wait?”

“Sure.”

Okay, well, he’s just a patient.

Just like any other patient! Mingyu’s worked with people from high school before. Definitely! 
Like Johnny Seo who graduated a couple years before them and had come in after his on-the-job 
accident. Who even gets hit by firetrucks while working on powerlines? Or like Jeffery Jung who 
shared Mingyu’s homeroom and came in a few months back for back problems he started having 
after falling off his fishing boat. Yeah, whatever, these are just past-peers turned patients. It’ll be fine. 
Mingyu’s a people person. He’s an expert at smooth-talking flattery! It’ll be okay!

He takes a deep breath before entering the hallway again, employee badge flapping 
haphazardly and getting stuck in his armpit for a moment. He fixes himself up and refocuses, taking 
long strides at a breakneck pace before slowing just as he comes into the lobby. Joshua holds out a 
hand for the paperwork he forgot he was holding and swaps them out for Minghao’s patient folder. 
Mingyu flips through it, his back to the said patient who is sitting quietly in the waiting room, eyes 
trained on the TV that’s playing Spongebob reruns (from a decade ago).

Right, damaged ACL and meniscus. Simple. Simple.

“Xu.” He calls out into the empty lobby.
Joshua gives him a look.

If there’s no one around, Mingyu should just go up and greet his patient. They almost never call out for them unless the whole complex is booked, by last name at that. The people who are coming in for CT scans and x-rays are waiting on the other side and Minghao is the last patient of the day. There’s no need to call out his name.

Minghao seemed to have been reading a book instead of watching the TV like Mingyu had assumed. He tucks it under his arm before getting up. His steps are very ginger on his left leg and since he’s wearing shorts Mingyu can tell it’s a bit swollen.

“Right this way.” Mingyu turns his back to lead the patient down the hallway back to the PT room. He gestures Minghao to sit up on an examination table before turning his back to him again. The man hops up carefully, but with a certain misplaced grace. Mingyu just can’t look him in the eye. It’s so awkward. *Ugh.* “So, your knee?”

“Yeah. Busted it on a bad landing I think.” Minghao leans over the edge to drop his book, wallet, and phone onto the floor in a neat stack.

“Landing?” Mingyu is busying himself with typing patient information into the dated computer system.

“I’m a dance instructor at Performance Studio up the street over in Honeyrun Plaza. Some co-workers and I are preparing for a competition and… yeah.” Yep, this is Minghao, the same one from high school. Clearly, dancing hadn’t left his system. “I’m banking on not needing surgery, so I checked myself in, but semi-finals are in three weeks and finals are a month after that.”

“I don’t want to promise anything before I check you out- check it out.” Fuck. “Usually, if you tear your ACL, you’ll need several months to recover, maybe more than half a year if you need surgery.” Mingyu gets brave enough to actually face him. Oh no.

*He’s hot.*

“Well, hopefully that won’t be the case.” *What’s the case? What was he saying a minute ago? Wait. What?*

“Huh?”

“Surgery.” His voice is a little curious, a little impatient. Mingyu would be impatient too if his therapist was tripping over his words and not making any sense, “Hopefully I won’t need it.”

“Right.” Mingyu shuts his mouth. He’s worried if he doesn’t that it’ll hang open, gawking at the evolutionary miracle that is Minghao Xu. It’s not that Minghao was ugly in high school, far from that. While most of his attractive qualities lay embedded in how he moved, he was known for a cute face and soft features. And although he was quiet, Minghao had a sharp tongue and his playful nature came to surface when the setting was right. But the man sitting in front of him now is in his mid-twenties, still lanky, but filled out with a few more ear piercings and his hair styled messily, swept to the side and out of his eyes.

Oh man, those eyes. He lost a lot of the baby fat around his cheeks. He’s handsome even though he still carries that aloof manner he had a decade ago.

“So…” Is Mingyu staring? Is that *inappropriate*? Yeah, it’s probably inappropriate. He’s an adult. A full-fledged adult. High school troubles don’t matter a decade down the road.
“Let’s get started.” A lot of the first half-hour consisted of Mingyu pulling and pushing on Minghao’s leg, asking him to rank the pain on a scale of one to ten and it’s pretty clear that the latter has a strong resolve because most of his rankings are pretty low, between a 5 and 6 for the most painful areas where other patients would go up to 8 or 9. With how bruised and swollen the area is, and how it clicks when he reaches certain angles, it’s apparent that he should be up where the 8’s and 9’s are.

After figuring that out, Mingyu moves Minghao onto some exercises. These ones are pretty basic. Minghao lays down on the machine and props his legs against a panel that he has to push against. It’s awkward just to sit there, listening to his breathing. The room feels stuffy, so he moves to open a window, but that doesn’t seem to help. It’s the atmosphere that’s viscous. He wonders where Wonwoo is. It’s possible that he took a late lunch today or that he’s working outside with his patient. The fresh air usually treated those with more sedentary lifestyles well during their recovery. He should break the silence, “Did you go to Oakdale?” That’s a safe question. “I think we were students at the same time.”

It’s **totally** safe. Maybe—if he’s lucky—Minghao won’t remember him. Okay, it’s kind of hard to forget a guy as stunning as Mingyu Kim especially at the height of hormonal teenage interest, but they were in completely different social circles and were popular for different reasons. They barely ever talked or interacted despite being in the same year since they had different schedules and homerooms. Hell, Minghao transferred in mid-way through sophomore year. There’s a big chance that he doesn’t remember Mingyu at all.

“Right, you were the guy that made a huge scene in the cafeteria about not wanting to date me.”

Mingyu wants to vomit. He remembers. *He remembers*. How could he *not* remember? Mingyu essentially ruined his life. He took poor Minghao’s teenage years and flushed them down the big public toilet of high school peer pressure. Even if he wasn’t the direct cause or even stood near the tormentors, Mingyu made life horrible for Minghao.

A decade ago.

He laughs nervously, “I don’t remember it being a huge scene, but- yeah. So, what are you doing now?” He’s going to sweep it under the rug as quickly as possible. They’re in a professional patient-PT relationship now. There’s no room for high school drama.

“Uh,” Fuck. Minghao already told him what he did earlier. The patience this man has for him is godly, “Dance instructor. Choreographer. The guys and I have worked with performance venues a few times, like backup dancing for music videos or on stage with artists. No one super huge, but it’s pretty interesting to hang out with people who can afford to burn money. Big competition semi-finals coming up next month and state finals after that, so…”

Mingyu finally realizes that Minghao’s been done with his leg presses for the last three minutes and quickly shuffles him over to a wall where he hands him a resistance belt and instructs him on how to move, “You sound confident about semi-finals.” When he pulls his knee forward—the resistance band in his hands—it’s evident that he’s been working out.

“Well, we haven’t been defeated this year. So, I think my confidence in my team is sound.”

Minghao has always been good at leading teams to victory. That’s what he did back in high school at least. He became captain immediately after transferring despite not being the club’s
founder. At that time, the current president was gearing up for his college entrance exams and handed over the reins to whoever he thought was the best suited for the job. Sophomore dance prodigy Minghao was the prime choice and the rest of the team agreed; he pulled ahead in a team vote. He had an impressive portfolio of trophies and routines already, so he was probably the obvious choice. He still had a light accent back then since his family had moved to the States halfway through his elementary career, but that accent is completely gone now.

They spend the remaining half hour in silence. Aside from Mingyu leading him through exercises, counting reps with barely a whisper, and asking if he’s feeling okay every few minutes, there’s no other exchange. Mingyu’s filled with guilt and Minghao is probably filled with seething, bubbling hate. Probably. It doesn’t show on the surface, but it’s probably there; underneath. Mingyu knows that he would have absolutely hated anyone that put him in that position, enough hate for it to stew and concentrate for ten years. What else would drive Minghao to this small-town clinic if not to square Mingyu up about the events that transpired ten years ago?

When they’re done, he provides Minghao with a green resistance band to take home and a black knee brace to wear full-time, telling him to go over the exercises a few times every day and to stretch before doing any of his work— and only if he had to work. He should be taking time off. Resting. Taking care of himself. He walks the shorter man out to the lobby and says goodbye before quickly returning back to the PT room to finish paperwork.

“Oh, you’re here.”

Wonwoo squints at him, “Mingyu, I’ve been here the whole time.”

“What?”

“Yeah. Like, the last twenty minutes. I took my patient back in almost half an hour before you walked Minghao out. Seriously. Are you okay?” he comes over to look at Mingyu up close, worry on his brow. That worry doesn’t last long because it’s quickly replaced with a scoff and a chuckle, “Man, you were really out of it.”

They aren’t yet familiar enough for Wonwoo to put a hand to Mingyu’s forehead to check his temperature, but that’s probably what he would have done.

“Out of what?” Mingyu straightens up.

“Stay professional, Gyu.” Wonwoo stacks his papers and heads out of the PT room.
Chapter 3

Every memory of Minghao Xu is incredibly… vague.

Everything from his weird nickname to facts about him. Everything is a little blurry around the edges; hazy, if you will. After all, it was ten years ago. But there are some things that Mingyu remembers so clearly, like how he effortlessly backflipped over three people at a pep-rally junior year, making the crowd scream and earning them the spirit stick for homecoming (the seniors weren’t thrilled that year). He’s the kind of person who excels in the spotlight. It was the only time Mingyu had seen his dancing up close.

Normally, he would have watched with half his attention on his phone from up in the stands. He usually sat at the top or far to the right where the rest of his friends and the rest of the football team would sit, whooping incessantly for everyone in their year. Sporting kids and the decidedly popular kids usually took the center of the bleachers while everyone else sat around them. Mingyu was the soccer MVP, track-and-field superstar, and had more than a handful of friends in the starting string for football which is why he sits with them.

A lot of kids, Minghao included, wouldn’t even show up to rallies, but since he performed he had to be there and Minghao isn’t the type to pass-up a minute in the spotlight. During the homecoming rally, Mingyu was on the court. They held all their school-wide rallies in the Big Gym. The one with the newly-redone basketball courts, the smell of wood polish still in the air. Each year had their own wall, the seniors taking the nicest set of bleachers front and center while the freshmen sat opposite to them on the floor or on crappy fold-out metal bleachers. Sophomores and juniors took the bleachers on the side, but the main stage for whatever performances or speeches would face the seniors. But, yes, Mingyu was on the floor, standing on some weird people-drawn carriage made of plywood and recycled bike wheels, wearing a ridiculous costume with wolf ears and tail.

Homecoming was weird. The theme this year was to be ‘the supernatural’. His female counterpart also sported the same wolf ears and tail and it was hard for them to stand still without scratching at their itchy, discount costumes, both complaining and laughing about it between stages. They’d already done their introductions and laps for junior homecoming prince and princess candidates. When the dance club came out they killed the lights. Everyone whipped out their cellphones and screamed, waving the lit screens in the air. It was a hot event for the small-town high school. And when the spotlights came on, the thirteen dancers stood with Minghao Xu leading them from the center, Mingyu thought his heart would stop.

The music was so loud they could hear static in the crappy gym speakers and the drama kids had a hard time following the dancers with the spotlight rigs. Mingyu didn’t even like EDM, but here he was, absolutely enraptured in the performance. They flipped, they popped, they krumped, they… well, Mingyu doesn’t know that many dance terms, but they wowed the audience.

By the bridge, Minghao had left center-stage to take his place in the dark, in the sidelines, trusting his team to carry the performance without him. A small group of them struck a pose in the spotlight and just as the music cut off and fell silent before the drop, Minghao ran out of the dark and sprang into a hands-free backflip over them, twisting in the air and landing on his knees with a dramatic slide just as the bass shook the building. For the fraction of a second where he was weightless, the gym held a collective breath, Mingyu included. Everyone’s screaming too loud. The crowd was too hyped. It was a great closing performance, outshining everything else and was to be talked about for the next few days which was a great deal of time for high school gossip.

But everything surrounding that event fell foggy.
It’s as if that one shining moment occupied a space in time and all else fell into the background; out of focus and lost.

He’s sure that Minghao got a few date proposals from peers, underclassmen, and seniors alike. He was soft and cute and undoubtedly charismatic on the dancefloor, but (as he had heard through the grapevine) he had turned all of them down. It was then that an interesting rumor popped up.

After the cafeteria incident later that year, Mingyu suddenly became hyper-aware of Minghao.

The ASB president had essentially begged the dance team to perform at every single rally since homecoming their junior year because the upbeat performances drew in students that often skipped out, earning them a heated rivalry with the performing arts club who normally occupied the finale performance. Mingyu can guess that’s where the rumor might have catalyzed. Drama kids love drama and the elegant and unassuming leader of the dance team was a prime target.

He feels silly for playing their game.

He regrets it.

And, now, he regrets not sleeping enough hours because it’s 8:30 and he’s going to be late for work.

Friday passes without anything to note. He gets to go back to his apartment after lunch because his 2 o’clock cancelled last minute. The importance of bingo to the elderly baffles him.

“When you’re old and alone, a bingo hall is probably the best company you’ll have.”

Wonwoo shrugs as he packs up the papers from his last patient. He still has half a day to wade through, Mingyu’s ready to go home. He’s surprised Wonwoo is in today, having expected him to just take over Jeonghan’s schedule. Wonwoo says he’s working this Friday because Soonyoung has some sort of unplanned make-up class.

For those of you wondering, Mingyu’s been in the lead for the fist-fight voting. He’s a little proud of that although it’s not much to brag about. He already looks bigger and stronger than Wonwoo. It’s no secret that he’d probably win, but Joshua and Wonwoo won’t take his bets just yet.

“Your patients are just voting for you and because they don’t really know Wonwoo yet you’ve been stealing his votes. Just give him a week or two.”

“Who did Minghao vote for?” It’s Wonwoo who asks, not Mingyu. The latter is baffled. The audacity the new guys as-

Joshua thinks for a minute, “Oh, he voted for you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. When I asked, he said it was because Mingyu’s a big softie and would probably cry if he ever got into a fight.” Wow. Rude. What the hell, Minghao, “I’d have to agree. You would cry if Wonwoo actually wanted to throw-down.”

“Would not.”

Wonwoo just pats Mingyu on the shoulder and laughs as he makes his way to his next appointment.
Monday and Tuesday roll around, again without much event. It’s the same clients as last week for Mingyu, Wonwoo has a couple new ones since he told Joshua he could take a bigger workload and not be shy offering him patients since Seokmin’s been struggling to keep his grades up while working. Wonwoo’s the type to like staying busy. They go out for lunch together, walking across the street and a few blocks to come into an area where several local restaurants are lined up, each with their own charm. Monday is pizza, Tuesday is gyros. They talk about random topics, usually about their pasts and their college experiences. Occasionally, they dip into pop gossip or politics, but neither of those topics are really that interesting and they don’t watch enough TV to be in the know. Mingyu doesn’t go to the movies, a trait picked up from when money wasn’t so abundant, so he just waits for things to come out online or on Netflix. By that time, they’re usually out of the mainstream. Wonwoo’s not much better off. He doesn’t really care for movies unless they have upstanding reviews and the rolls of film that came out this season are under par.

On Wednesday they decide to arm wrestle in the breakroom, deciding to take a break from delicious restaurants in fear that Wonwoo will grow tired of them too quickly. Wonwoo eats leftovers from his dinner last night and Mingyu’s left eating instant noodles (with a couple slices of pork cutlet that Wonwoo spares out of pity). Normally, Mingyu’s all for healthy meal-prep at the beginning of the week, but since he’d arranged to go out with Wonwoo on Monday and Tuesday, he decided not to do the whole shebang and just pack snacks. However, the snack that he did pack today was unfortunately left on his counter in his rush to get to work on time for his 9 o’clock appointment.

Wonwoo wins the arm wrestling match.

He lets the younger off easy, not rubbing it in his face since it seems that Mingyu’s already having a rough day with his second and third clients falling into old habits and forgetting to do their exercises. “You must be starved weak.” He jokes dryly, looking back to his phone between spoons of food.

“Ha. Ha. Very funny.” Mingyu debates if he wants to drink the sodium-loaded soup base. It’s tempting. The last time he had instant noodles was probably his freshman year in college before he could afford very many meal points. Having gotten a job on campus after first semester afforded him a healthy freshman fifteen and a few more pounds to boot from the gym.

The breakroom is quiet aside from the printer-fax machine that sounds off every now and then. He wonders why Joshua doesn’t just keep it at the front desk. He said it’s because the noise will bug the radiology nerds, but it’s really because there was a time that Old Man Perelman—who has a bad back and neck sores—came in and talked his ear off about it for three hours. He always had something to complain about. Jeonghan’s then-shoulder-length hair was a constant slew of negative comments. Perelman stopped coming a month ago after Jeonghan got a fresh ear-length haircut for his vacation. They’re not sure if it’s because he’s better or because he’s dead. The running joke at that time was that Jeonghan had enough and murdered him; his hair was lost in the fray. Mingyu decided a while ago to not care.

He takes a sip. Ah, holy MSG goodness.

“One time, when I was in high school, I almost broke my coccyx from sitting on a skateboard and getting pushed down the street.” He’s not sure what compels Wonwoo to share the random fact, “So my back hurts on occasion. Sometimes you can’t fix people all the way.”

“Are you trying to tell me something?”
“Not really, just scrolling through Facebook reading stupid quotes my uncles keep posting makes me think sometimes. A lot of old people seem oddly driven to fix their pasts,” he turns his attention to Mingyu, “I think it’s much more efficient to create a future you don’t have to apologize for.”

Thursday comes around.

A day that Mingyu has recently dubbed the worst and most dubious day of the week. When he asks Wonwoo out for lunch, the older is quick to apologize for his last-minute change in plans.

“Soonyoung got cancelled on, so I agreed to go out for a lunch date. It’s been a while since we’ve had one, I hope you don’t mind.” His eyes say that his apology was in earnest, so Mingyu can’t stay mad at him. Besides, Minghao is his last appointment of the day. He can hold out for another two hours. He’s wanted to try the new Thai place that opened up on 2nd Street a few days ago, but hasn’t found time.

“That’s fine. Try to focus on eating lunch instead of face.” He tests the waters. He doesn’t actually know that much about Wonwoo’s relationship with Soonyoung, just that they fight a lot, but not seriously and that they like to push each other’s buttons.

“Nah, I’ll probably eat equal parts face and lunch.” Wonwoo laughs as they walk out to the lobby. At least he didn’t give him a bad reaction, “In all seriousness, guacamole probably doesn’t taste that great eaten off someone’s face. I’d much prefer it on chips.”

“Stay safe, kid.” Joshua coos absentmindedly as Wonwoo leaves the building, tossing his employee badge behind the counter and leaving his cardigan behind. The weather is nice and toasty today. A welcome change of pace from the breezy afternoons they’d been having in the valley. Wonwoo looks more handsome without his cardigan anyway, “Mingyu,” his attention snaps towards the manager after seeing Wonwoo step into his car, “Minghao called and said he might be a few minutes late, so you could probably grab some lunch and make it back in time.”

“I think I’ll just take a nap in the break room.” and that he does.

His nights have been horrible at home; spent tossing and turning and sometimes his body wakes him up as the sun rises just like it did back in school. Mingyu regularly likes to sleep as much as he can, normally from 10 until 8. It’s the only way to feel rested. He’s not sure how he pulled off three-hour nights back in high school during finals week or even went a couple days without solid REM when it came to college finals. All he knows is that now, as a real adult, he can’t make do with less than nine hours and recently he hasn’t been able to fall asleep until well past midnight.

Last night was the worst so far.

He had pulled out a yearbook from his sophomore year and just gotten lost in it.

He doesn’t have one from freshman year. His family was too poor at the time to afford one, but he was lucky enough sophomore year that a friend that worked in yearbook spared him an extra copy. He didn’t get it signed or anything, he left it at home most days since finals were what ate most of his attention. He signed at least a hundred yearbooks that year, but there wasn’t a single H.A.G.S. in his. Mingyu wasn’t sure what he was looking for outside of laughing at the funny picture they put of Shinwoo half-way through a tennis serve that became infamous that summer and spent a healthy amount of time online as a viral meme. But then he found Minghao’s headshot almost at the very end of the sophomore section. He was wearing a light blue flannel over a white t-shirt with his hair a light
brown and almost long enough to cover his eyes. Mingyu can tell that the photographer told him to push his hair to the side because the middle-part looks ridiculous and unnatural. His picture was different from the others, but not the only one of its kind.

Kids that missed picture day at the beginning of the year had their pictures taken in passing, usually in the hallway. So, instead of the normal blue-grey background and photo-booth lights, Minghao and a few others had the brick background of the library stuck behind their heads with light carding through their hair and washing out their faces a bit, forcing them to squint in the sun. He thinks this is the last time that Minghao had black hair. A few weeks after he transferred, he dyed it red. Not the best picture, in fact probably the worst picture Minghao’s ever had in a yearbook.

He’s still mad that Minghao got so hot.

It’s amazing what braces, a haircut, and puberty can do to someone.

His phone chirps five minutes before 1. Not a wink. He didn’t get to sleep at all.

Mingyu stretches and yawns before washing his face in the breakroom sink, careful not to get his button-up wet. These days it’s been getting a little chilly and he’s ready for sweater weather. He might even pull out his old letterman.

When he comes into the lobby, Joshua looks up from his computer, “No nap, I see.”

“Don’t get me started.” Despite not getting any sleep, it’s heavy in his voice. Laying on a too-small couch in a catatonic state does that to you sometimes. He can hear himself deflate.

“Well, finish off Minghao quickly and get home to nap.” He winces at Joshua’s choice of words. Plus, he can’t go just yet, he has some errands to run and bills to write up and pay.

Said man is just pulling up in the parking lot, but the car he’s riding in passes several parking spaces. Oh, a drop-off. The person that drops Minghao off is some gloriously beautiful man who also appears to be in his mid-twenties, black hair styled nicely in a coif without a strand out of place. They seem to be exchanging words as Minghao steps out and points to the clinic. There’s a lot of pointing happening. Maybe an argument. Mingyu can’t tell. But he’s pretty and something in Mingyu itches, makes him shift the weight between his feet and chew on his lower lip. The manager makes some off remark about the scowl that Mingyu quickly wipes off his face with a cough.

Is this envy or jealousy?
The one with black hair keeps calling Minghao back to the car window every time he takes a step away until Minghao throws his book at him and briskly walks away, laughing. The way he walks is free and easy, it looks like he’s a lot better already. The steps are even, without him favoring one leg over the other, showing no signs of pain.

Mingyu wants to hear it; that laugh. But he doesn’t. Minghao stops laughing as he walks in through the sliding glass doors, but there’s still a smile on his face. His gait changes when he passes the wall, turning back into the one he wore last week, if not worse. Mingyu can see the restraint. He’s trying not to limp, trying to move as smoothly as possible across the floor which isn’t difficult for someone as graceful as that, but the hesitation bugs him.

“Checking in. Sorry I’m late.” It sounds like he’s been holding his breath. Minghao leans onto the counter, putting all his weight onto his right side, giving it a break by supporting himself with his arms.

“It’s okay, you’re only a couple minutes late and Mingyu doesn’t have any other appointments today.” Joshua glances over at him. Mingyu has his eyes trained on Minghao’s knee. No brace which is suspicious.

And he confronts him when they’re back in the PT room.

“The brace gets in the way when I’m dancing and I just came from practice.” Minghao sets his phone and wallet down next to the examination table like usual. As Mingyu expects, his pain ranks rise one point on average. “What?”

“What?” Mingyu looks up.

“Your face was like this.” Minghao pinches his brows down and frowns—well, pouts—at his hands that he’s holding up to imitate Mingyu’s clipboard. “Is something wrong?”

“Uh, yeah, you’re doing worse than last week,” Mingyu takes a seat on the wheelie stool that he pulls over from the computer stand, “and I’m no genius at this job, but usually my patients do better after a week.”

Minghao sighs, pulling his right leg up to cross over his left thigh. He somehow looks a lot smaller like this, not in a physical sense; his presence seems smaller, “I had some extra practices to attend this week since semi-finals are next-next weekend. My bad.”

“You need to rest.”

“Look, resting is something I can do when I’m dead. Dancing is something I can do now and I can’t do in thirty years. So, if it bites me in the ass then, who cares? I’ll be more than halfway to death by then-”

“Minghao,” the name feels strange on his tongue, something he didn’t expect from saying it for the first time, “you’re supposed to be resting with every opportunity possible.”

“I am.” He snaps. Yeah, pain makes people snappy, Mingyu’s used to that, “You can ask my dog. He hasn’t been on a walk in days and he’s not very happy about that.”

“You have a dog?” Mingyu changes the subject. He knows that he’s getting snappy too with
his lack of sleep.

“Yeah, a Spitz-mix. His name is Cacahuate.” He chews on a cracked lip, “Jun’s been walking him, but Jun hates dogs, so I’m having some difficulty getting him out of the house without promising him a million and one favors and- Sorry, I’m a little on edge today. I’m sure you’ve had a long day too.” Sometimes he forgets that they can be mature grown-ups that don’t need to fight over trivial and small things. In high school, Minghao probably wouldn’t have dropped his aggressions too readily. He’d gotten into an unfair share of fights late into their junior year. It was a particularly bad streak for him and the sweet Minghao the teachers had gotten to know suddenly seemed to turn into a bad egg, showing up to class sleepy-headed and with his homework incomplete. He struggled to keep his grades up, but managed to skirt by with the skin of his teeth.

Mingyu’s taken back to one particular scene when he runs into Minghao on his way back from the bathroom after lunch. Minghao hadn’t shown up for AP English, marked absent without much hesitation by Mr. Craig. Instead of sitting in class, he’s sitting on the linoleum floor, leaning against the chipped blue lockers of the C-wing. Mingyu can see him through the dusty glass windows. He rolls his head back, covering his mouth and nose with a hand before standing up and shaking it off. When he comes out to make his way to the bathroom with his backpack in tow, he passes Mingyu with little more than a glance. It was quick, too quick for Mingyu to glean any solid details. Again, his memory of Minghao is kind of vague and foggy, but he was roughed up. His nose was bleeding and there was a cut on his cheek.

“It’s okay.” Mingyu and Minghao sigh at the same time, “You’re in pain. It’s expected that you’ll be on edge. Let’s just try and get through the exercises today. We’ll go slow.”

They get on rather cordially.

They were both known for being friendly after all. Ten years ago.

Through gritted teeth, he asks if Minghao’s seeing anyone and after giving him the weirdest look Minghao just smiles and says no. That clears up the curiosity about the person in the car waiting in the parking lot. He’s glad that Minghao didn’t make a big deal of the question. If it was any other client, he definitely wouldn’t have asked, but because he and Minghao shared a past to some degree, the question seems more casual than its undertones paint it to be.

“Feel any better?”

“Yeah, a bit.” Minghao carefully extends his left leg out to its full capacity, “Thanks.”

“I think a couple more months with constant work will get you back on track.”

“Too bad I only have two more sessions.” Minghao snickers.

“What- why?”

“I can only afford a month of weekly sessions. Believe it or not, being a dance instructor isn’t exactly the most lucrative occupation.” He starts gathering his things.

Mingyu walks him out to the lobby, “Hey.” Minghao turns around, “If you don’t mind, starting next week, I’ll teach you the exercises you have to do so you can do them on your own before the final competition.” Minghao just nods without saying anything. He watches as he takes a few steps to straighten up and drop the limp, clenching his jaw and walking with a calculated precision akin to a dance step.

“He voted for Wonwoo again.”
Wonwoo comes in just as Mingyu’s starting to pack up his things, “How was lunch?”

“Eh,” he stretches and tweaks his lips to the side, “lunch was lunch. Soonyoung was kinda testy today. How was Minghao?”

“Also testy.” Mingyu laughs, “But, really, what happened? I thought you were looking forward to this lunch date.”

The older male scratches behind his ear hastily, clearly wanting to drop the subject as soon as possible, “I don’t know- Just something at work probably.”

“Well, she has to put up with you. I don’t blame her for getting testy.” The joke falls flat when Wonwoo doesn’t laugh and just looks up at Mingyu.

“He.”

“Oh.”

Wonwoo nods with a tight smile and pats Mingyu on the shoulder as he straightens up to get to his next patient who is an elderly woman that’s waiting in the lobby with her knitting needles and half a scarf in her lap.

“Oh probably wasn’t a very good response. I didn’t mean anything by it. I’m sorry if I made any assumptions and made you uncomfortable. I just know a girl named Sunyoung and I’ve never met a guy with the same name and-” Mingyu unloads his worries first thing Monday morning before Wonwoo can even reach the brew button on the coffeemaker.

“Chill, Mingyu. I’ve had more adverse reactions than an oh.” Wonwoo laughs a deep but bright laugh and presses the button with a smack. It’s clear that he isn’t as caught up about the situation yesterday as Mingyu has been since. It’s another weekend without much sleep. Half of it was the Wonwoo situation. The other half of it was the Minghao situation. Making an exercise regimen for Minghao was supposed to be easy, but all he could think about was high school and what Wonwoo had said about not dwelling in the past.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay. If I had a dollar for every time someone apologized for an awkward reaction when I told them I was going long-term with a guy I met in college, I’d be rich enough to afford lobster dinner dates every weekend and I’m allergic to lobster.” It’s Mingyu’s turn to choke out a laugh and lighten the mood, “You know, if you want to make it up to me, you should come out to lunch with us this week.”

“That’d be nice.” The prospect of meeting Wonwoo’s significant other is somehow a little scary. Even though Mingyu’s only heard good things about him, he’s still not sure what to expect. Most of the worry is on his end. Being the third wheel during a lunch date just doesn’t sound very fun and sounds like it might have the potential to be a Bad Time, “but if it’s at the same time as last week, I might not be able to because of Minghao’s appointment slot.”

“That’s okay, I’ll see if he can reschedule to make it an hour earlier.” Wonwoo likes to do this
thing where he twirls his employee tag as fast as he can when he’s thinking about things and right now it’s swinging faster than most propellers Mingyu’s seen.

“Something on your mind?”

“Not really.” The toothy grin is a little more mischievous than Mingyu would like, “Joshua told me that Minghao voted for me again.”

“Well, he knows where to place his bets.” Wonwoo pours the coffee with a particular slowness.

Minghao knows who wins in fist-fights thanks to experience is really the only thing that comes to mind. He’s been in plenty thanks to Mingyu.

“You’re doing that thing again.”

“What thing?”

“Whenever Minghao is brought up you do this thing where you start biting your lips and avoid eye contact. It’s a complete 180 from whatever façade you have one with us and the other patients. Do you want to talk about it?” Wonwoo finally gets his first sip in.

Mingyu isn’t one for black coffee. He’d rather drink water, “There’s not much to talk about and our first appointments are in a few minutes.” He consciously stops worrying his lip between his teeth and combs a hand through his hair to muss it up. Hot, professional Mingyu is back, high school Mingyu is buried along with the hatchet.

Lunch with Wonwoo and cheeky, bright Soonyoung comes earlier than expected.

Soonyoung seems to have seniority at his workplace and got Wednesday off, so he’s out to lunch with him and Wonwoo around 11. They thought about going to Pascal’s, but Wonwoo chides about free alcohol with every entrée being a bad idea. Mingyu agrees. Soonyoung doesn’t. After almost ten minutes of deliberation, the three end up at Chopstick, a higher-end Asian-fusion food truck that stops right in front of the children’s park on 5th. The weather today is perfect for eating outside. There’s a nice breeze billowing through the trees and they can sit in the sun and feel that peaceful sort of warmth on their backs.

Mingyu picks a bench just out of earshot from the kids that are running around. They’re probably on break from the nearby preschool. After getting all the rudimentary questions about Wonwoo and Soonyoung’s relationship out of the way, they melt easily into casual conversation and small talk. Soonyoung isn’t quite short, but he isn’t as tall as Wonwoo. He has this infectious smile and along with his bleached-blonde hair, it might shine brighter than the actual sun above them.

“Wonwoo said you were mad last week.”

“Yeah, I was, but it was nothing big. One of my co-workers dropped a really important arrangement we had, but we’ve since made up and he hasn’t skipped out on me since.” He has a habit of talking fast and when the conversation switches over to business instead of small talk, it’s clear that Soonyoung gets a lot more serious and mature.

“That’s good.”

Soonyoung and Wonwoo aren’t very into public displays of affection. Mingyu supposes that
the matching rings on their fingers are enough. Belonging to someone seems to have some sort of appeal, but he appreciates not feeling like a third wheel. Wonwoo is quiet for a lot of their lunch, but he doesn’t seem unhappy or uncomfortable, just the opposite. Soonyoung just does a lot of the talking. His parents are like that too. When he’s alone with his dad, he’ll talk a lot about a lot of things, but when they go out with family friends for dinner, it’s his mom that does most of the talking. No one is stepping over anyone, but the social dynamic switches. It seems like Wonwoo doesn’t mind taking the backseat. He walks his fingers through Soonyoung’s hair when the wind starts blowing, scrambling the blonde locks. Soonyoung smacks him when his fingers get stuck on a kink. Bleached hair must be a pain to deal with and Mingyu regrets not asking what Soonyoung does as an occupation since he’s allowed to look so cool.
When Minghao essentially stumbles into the clinic on Thursday, he’s ostensibly upset.

And again, much to Mingyu’s chagrin, he’s not any better. Luckily, he’s not any worse. Well, at least his leg isn’t, but he’s sporting a soft wrist brace now. If Minghao leaves a bad Yelp review of their clinic just because he didn’t get better in four weeks, he will personally hunt him down and punch him in the face even if fighting might make him want to cry.

Once they’re alone in the PT room, with Wonwoo out for lunch with Soonyoung and Seokmin outside with his patient, Mingyu takes the silence as a cue to berate him. He doesn’t mean to nag or be so casual about his aggressions, but being alone with his high school stressor makes that ideology difficult. He hopes they don’t fight again, but it seems inevitable with Minghao’s words.

“I’m paying you to fix me, not be my mom.”

“I’m trying to help you, I really am, but you’re literally not taking my advice.” Mingyu sets down his clipboard a little too loudly with Minghao sitting on the examination table and the latter jolts from the noise; flinches maybe. Something aches. “If you really want to get better, stop dancing for a few months.”

To which Minghao just rolls his eyes, seeming to shake off whatever jitters the clipboard gave him. Mingyu’s request is not unreasonable. Minghao should be able to take paid leave from work without much trouble with how highly he’s regarded in the field locally and professionally.

“Have you even tried the exercises I assigned you last week?”

“Yes. I have.”

Mingyu takes a breath and closes his eyes.

Minghao mentally does the same, eyes still trained on Mingyu’s hand that’s laying on his clipboard.

There’s clearly some unresolved tension between them. Neither is sure who is bringing that tension to the table, but it’s more than likely Mingyu. He’s dealt with difficult patients before, ones far worse than Minghao, but he’s choosing today to retaliate for the first time. The zipper he had put on his lips for Old Man Perelman, Mrs. Wilson, all the crabby old folks; that resolve is dissolved.

Thanks to his better judgement, Mingyu just licks his lips and recomposes himself, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Talk about what?” Minghao just leans back on the table, seeing as Mingyu’s positioning himself to start.

“Whatever’s making you snappy.” Mingyu answers as he pulls Minghao’s leg up to stretch. The latter taps out faster than he normally does, drumming his fingertips against Mingyu’s forearm when the stretch turns strenuous.

“Not really, no.” Mingyu tries again, “Fuck-” Minghao grunts between his teeth as his breath hitches and suddenly Mingyu’s mind goes blank. What was that? What was he doing again? “Fuck,
Mingyu- stop.” He smacks his arm repeatedly, egging him to let go.

Mingyu sets his leg down to bend a different way. “I haven’t seen you this snappy since that time in junior year when a senior threw your backpack on the roof and you got in trouble for it.” He pushes Mingyu’s hands off and sits up.

“Can we not talk about high school?” He expected that to make Minghao more irritable, but it just sounds like all the fight is out of him. “If you must know, a teammate of mine kept yelling at me for skipping practice to come here. So, I changed my schedule with the team this week so I could come without missing practice. Then he goes and skips out on us for some unplanned mimosa brunch and no one says anything about it.” Minghao scratches at his neck out of frustration before flopping back down onto the padded examination table.

Mingyu decides to spend the next while not talking. They don’t need to find any more opportunities to argue since Seokmin has entered the PT room with Mrs. Margaret, a retired seamstress who threw out her back hoeing in her garden. Instead, he offers to take Minghao’s hand experimentally. He knows Minghao is paying for his knee, but right now he’s doing sitting presses that have nothing to do with his hands.

Minghao seems to understand the cue without Mingyu having to instruct him. He rips off the Velcro and gives the brace a short toss back to the examination table where it lands with a soft thud. Mingyu is probably exaggerating when he says he melts into Minghao’s touch just ever so slightly. His hands aren’t that soft, rough from his profession, especially compared to Mingyu who goes out of his way to moisturize and make sure his hands are as soft as a baby’s since he touches so many people. But Minghao’s touch is electrifying, as sharp and keen as his eyes.

Experimentally, he bends the hand back to find the point of agitation. Minghao’s breath is enough to tell him where he should pay attention. Without much thought, he starts ironing out the knots in the dancer’s wrist. He puts tension on the fingers and makes sure that the joints are loose. He often provided this service for other students when he was at university. There’re almost a million things that can cause carpal pains and wrist pains, most of his friends got them from writing so many notes, but Minghao is different and his is likely from impact.

A hand-wrist massage is nothing big and nothing to brag about being able to do. He’s sure that Wonwoo could do a much better job considering he specializes in the upper body, but the short massage was efficient and Minghao nods in thanks when Mingyu gives him his hand back with little less than a lingering touch. He rubs his hand on his shorts, telling Mingyu that his hands were probably too sweaty to be comfortable.

Mingyu helps him over to the leg press, explaining how he can do the same exercise at home by pushing against a wall before having him start on the machine, “Does your team know you’re coming to PT appointments?”

Minghao scoffs, “As if I’d ever tell them about this.”

“Why not?”

“If he finds out that my knee is fucked, then he’ll tell the boss and my boss won’t let me teach or compete.”

“Slow down.” Minghao’s pressing harder and faster today and that’s not how therapy is supposed to work, “I think you should tell them and get some time off.”

“Commission-based work doesn’t pay like that. I’m going to keep working even if it kills me.”
“You’re going to really hurt yourself if you don’t take recovery seriously.” Mingyu grabs the panel so Minghao can stop pushing, halting the exercise and eliciting a sharp breath from him when his leg meets resistance, “So calm down and think seriously about this. Maybe you should stop pursuing dance for a minute.” He can already tell that anything Minghao’s about to say will be said with needles and blades by the way his eyes cut into him.

“And maybe you should eat my ass.”

The ‘fight’ ends there because Mingyu chokes on air and on his words. His coughing fit is enough time to say that he’s lost the argument and Wonwoo laughs at him when they’re in the breakroom later, right before Mingyu leaves work. At least he got to explain the right moves to Minghao before he left, but didn’t get much response outside of hums and nods. Minghao isn’t the worst patient he’s had, but he’s seriously the worst patient that he’s had.

“You were about five minutes from punching him in the face. I could tell.” Wonwoo chuckles that deep chuckle that evolves into high pitched wheezing he does when he finds Mingyu’s habits hilarious.

“He’s frustrating.”

“He’s cute.” Wonwoo is pouring his third cup of coffee. It’s decaf if you’re asking. Mingyu has to turn up his nose when Wonwoo says it’s for the taste and not for the caffeine. Who just drinks black coffee for enjoyment? Those that can’t be trusted, obviously, like Wonwoo Jeon.

“Ew. Not cute.”

“He’s cute. He’s cute. I can tell you think so because you did that thing again.” Mingyu will vehemently refuse to admit that he does a thing when Minghao’s on his mind. He most certainly does not do a thing- to his fault, he shouldn’t have brought up high school. It was a bad time for both of them; Minghao just for existing, and Mingyu for knowing that Minghao was suffering just for existing, “Speaking of cute, you got the greenlight. Soonyoung thinks you’re cool.”

Mingyu perks up a bit, “Do you need his permission to be friends with me?”

Another hearty laugh, “No, of course not,” he sets his mug down in the sink and rinses it before rinsing his mouth and popping a piece of gum into it, “but it’s nice when your sig fig likes your friends, y’know?”

Something in Mingyu bubbles up happily because anytime someone you consider a friend verbally states that you are (indeed) friends it’s always a good feeling. It feels so good. Okay, maybe Mingyu is a little socially stunted from making a ton of new friends since he’s moved for college and coming back to a town where everyone from high school triggers a bad memory. Who they bring up memories about, Mingyu doesn’t want to say, but it’s already written on his sleeve. Wonwoo knows.

“Have you ever considered reconnecting with Minghao, like, outside of the clinic?”

Maybe, “No.”

“I think you should- At least find room to talk to him, clear up this unresolved tension that you’ve been carrying around the office with you since we’ve met. I don’t know what it is, but I’ve asked Joshua and he says you’ve only started acting like this since Jeonghan left. So, you’re either sick in puppy-love with Jeonghan missing or Minghao is the real issue here.” He spits out the gum and wipes his mouth, straightening his button-up and sliding on his cardigan.
“Well, back in high school,” Mingyu starts, keeping an eye on the clock, knowing that Wonwoo will have to leave for his next appointment in ten minutes. He’ll try to keep it short, but since Wonwoo afforded him the luxury of the ‘friend’ word, he’ll tell him about his troubles, “it was a well-known rumor that Minghao had a crush on me. And there was a day that I was told he would confess to me in the cafeteria. So, I might have cut him off and made a scene about it and Minghao got a lot of heat because of that.” Mingyu was the catalyst to a reaction that didn’t have to happen.

Wonwoo nods knowingly, telling Mingyu that he probably doesn’t have to go into detail about the hell that Minghao went through later that year since he already knows based on personal experience. Something in the older looks a little disappointed in him amongst a mix of other emotions that are breezing over his normally stoic face.

“To be fair, it was late in junior year and he-”

“Did he actually like you? Or was all this trouble you went through to stop him based on a lonely rumor?” Yeah, Wonwoo is definitely disappointed in him for something he did ten years ago. That’s okay. Mingyu’s disappointed in himself too.

“The whole school knew he did. I mean- Back then, it wasn’t a surprise. A lot of people liked me and-” He knows he’s just digging a deeper hole trying to defend himself with childish facts based on air; nothingness. He sounds like he’s 16 again and arguing with his peers about who has the sleeker sneakers. He also doesn’t understand why he’s trying to defend his past decisions. It’s probably because Mingyu isn’t familiar with all that disappointment and discontent being directed towards him even if it’s nonverbal and completely based on speculation.

Mingyu worries his lip, weighing on words.

“So, you ruined his high school experience based on something someone else told you.”

The reality of that situation somehow hurts a lot more when it’s thrown into his face by someone real instead of the voice in his head. Wonwoo’s eyes look a little cold and detached from their normal honey warmth. The stark contrast between his face now and their lunch in the park with Soonyoung yesterday is obvious; he looked at Soonyoung with love and, now, at Mingyu with everything but that. Luckily, Wonwoo is professional. Maybe it’s just in his nature or maybe he just wasn’t that upset about Mingyu’s past choices, but Wonwoo smiles a soft, sad smile, “What?”

“I think you really need to talk to him, Gyu. Y’know, before your lip falls off and your eyebrows get stuck like that.” Now conscious of the way his face is, Mingyu relaxes the tense muscles and licks his bottom lip free of his teeth.
“Did you like me,” Mingyu has to take a breath because he didn’t know he’d been holding his
for the last while, “back in high school.”

“Dear god, do you have to bring that up?” Minghao shuts his eyes, back against the table and
leg propped up on Mingyu’s shoulder for the stretch. No, this isn’t the correct, professional way
Mingyu is supposed to hold his leg, but he doesn’t think Minghao cares and there’s no one in the
room to tell him otherwise. There’s nothing sexual about it, their crotches are as far apart as they
could possibly be. It’s just easier to get to the right angle like this. He won’t admit that he’s lost sleep
over the curses Minghao threw into the air last week despite how they’re cemented into his brain. He
didn’t know someone’s swear could have that effect on him.

“I just want to clear it up and apologize if I have to.” He has to take this opportunity. This is
their last session together and with how much they’ve managed to argue the last three sessions, he’s
sure that Minghao will likely never set foot in this end of town again if only to avoid meeting
Mingyu.

“You don’t have to apologize.” Mingyu steps back, bringing Minghao’s left leg down slowly
and bending up his ankle to test the tendon, “I never liked you.”

“What?”

“Yeah.”

Mingyu takes a minute to digest the information. That’s a whole lot of information, like more
than Mingyu could have ever hoped to hear. Even though he knew that Minghao not liking him was
a possibility and (more than) likely true, he could never admit to himself that that was a reality that he
wanted to exist. “Then why did everyone think so?”

He motions Minghao to sit up so they can talk face to face. If it was a normal patient, they
would probably mention something about Mingyu eating up precious, paid PT time to talk about
trivial matters like the past. Minghao isn’t just any other patient. He humors Mingyu—talks to him—
and doesn’t complain about Mingyu eating up his pricey time. Part of Mingyu hopes that it’s because
Minghao wants to clear up the air too.

Minghao sighs.

“I mentioned, offhandedly, to some guys that I thought you were conventionally attractive. It’s
not a hard thing to comment on and they were polling for the superlatives ballot; asking for a short
list of people who were the best of the best. And a lot of people at our school were conventionally
attractive.” He shakes out his hair and looks at Mingyu, “A lot of people asked me out after the
homecoming rally junior year, so many that I didn’t think that going to it was a good idea.” He
shrugs and thumbs his knee, “I guess the rumors grew from there. You know how high school was.”

Mingyu takes the cue to set up the electrotherapy. He stickies the four nodes to Minghao’s
knee and flicks on the machine. It’s usually a special treatment that patients pay extra for, but Mingyu
figures he’s eating up Minghao’s time with stupid, deadbeat questions and it’s not like Joshua
actually cares what they do behind closed doors. “So, you were attracted to me-”

“Noooooooooo.” Mingyu wants to suck his words back into his mouth. Did he hear wrong?
Didn’t Minghao just say he was attractive- “There wasn’t a single thing I liked about you in high
school, much less found attractive. Don’t flatter yourself.”

He can only manage to laugh to cover up his crippling embarrassment, “Of course. Of course. I guess we were in different social circles.”

“Definitely, fuckboy.”

He cranks up the current briefly before shutting it back down. Just enough to send Minghao a sore sting and based on how he’s glaring at him now, he would kick him if his leg would allow based on the little twitch he gives it before regretting his move. They spend a moment in awkward silence before coughing into stifled laughs. It was a joke, the fuckboy line.

But now they have a whole fifteen minutes to kill while the machine works its magic and that’s a whole fifteen minutes of silence that Mingyu has to fill. For his older patients, he’ll usually leave them with the TV or a book to stew in their electromagnetic waves and for the kids, he sometimes offers a videogame or a couple short-run cartoons on the wheezing computer. Minghao left his book at home today and his eyes have more interest in his lap than they do in the TV. Maybe Spongebob reruns weren’t his thing.

“So, your dance thing.” Minghao’s eyes slide up to him, “It’s this weekend?”

Again, Minghao’s patience with Mingyu’s terrible memory is both a blessing and a curse, “Yep.”

“Is it still b-boying?”

“Nope.”

“No?” That’s a surprise.

Mingyu has never seen Minghao dance anything else. Every performance from his time admitted into their high school to the performance he gave during graduation was bombastic and played on flips, footwork, and tricking. Somehow, in the last ten years, that was the only thing he had assumed Minghao could do; his talents immortalized in his memory.

Minghao was one of routine.

To a point, all the performances he directed ended the same way; big. The endings were always huge and loud and would happen during the beat drop. All of the music after that was spent hyping up the crowd as they ran around the gym, or the field, pulling people out of the bleachers or shooting confetti into the audience. It was almost a godsend that he graduated because it got to a point where there was likely no way he could outdo himself again.

During graduation, they received a sponsorship from the rather-rich parents of one of the freshmen that Minghao had scouted for the team earlier that year. Because their child was so happy and excited to finally be a part of a team sport, they told Minghao it’d be wonderful if they could provide outfits for them for what would be considered the biggest performance of Minghao’s life to that point. Minghao had agreed, but spent frugally. All the dancers were dressed in white except for the seniors who wore black (because seniors always wear black since it’s the coolest color) and everyone had rave bracelets on.

When it came time for the senior solo, Mingyu found out how much a light up choker could turn him on (his attraction to chokers still lingers because of this event). It wasn’t a particularly suggestive or sultry performance—there were children and parents in the audience, after all—but it was powerful; a lot more stomping than usual. They had pulled their black snapbacks down over
their eyes, serious in the spotlight of a football stadium filled with a few thousand people. Their movements were unified under their president’s lead. It was almost like he could feel the marching band’s drums in their steps. Their collective yells got the crowd going and Mingyu could feel that peer unity that he’d been aching for; school spirit during their last hurrah. This would be the last time he’d see Minghao for the foreseeable future. They were going different places for college and Minghao was on to big cities and big parties; he knew.

“Well,” he can tell that Minghao’s taking time to think—likely of a way to phrase it so that Mingyu would be pardoned from all the dance jargon he knows, “it’s a mixed style. New age? Performance art? Something like that. We wanted to keep it technically advanced while paying homage to more traditional dance styles from the east. Like, broad so everyone in the audience will enjoy it, but specific enough so the judges will be impressed.” He can see that Mingyu’s a bit spaced out trying to envision the dance style and pities him with a curt chuckle, “But if you consider doing flips and a lot of advanced footwork b-boying then, yes. Sill b-boying.”

Mingyu speaks without thinking, “Whatever you come up with will be impressive.”

“Aw, is that a compliment?” Minghao hums, maybe pouts, maybe smiles, but he’s sarcastic. Mingyu can hear it in his voice.

“Yeah.” The silence falls heavy on them again. It stays that way until the machine beeps, signaling the end of Minghao’s last session, “Please try and take it easy.”

“Trophies don’t come easy.”

Mingyu didn’t think that (not) saying goodbye to Minghao would be so hard.

He had walked Minghao out to the lobby without many words and waited quietly as he made his payments and cast his final vote in the stupid fist-fight cookie jars. He wonders why Joshua’s been holding out on counting the votes since both jars are almost full and he’d said he’d count the receipts two weeks ago. This Thursday is different, however.

Minghao puts his receipt stub in Mingyu’s jar before walking himself out the door.

“Ooh, what did you do today, Mingyu?” Joshua’s voice is coy.

Mingyu plays along as soon as Minghao’s out the door, “I don’t know. Gave him a service few can afford.”

“Mingyu!” The mock-scandalized shock in Joshua’s voice brings laughter to them both. Mingyu’s never done anything unprofessional, Joshua can count on him for that, but he’s also never seen Minghao Xu laid down on a table with his leg up in the air and his breath staggered in aching discomfort. He can only give Joshua this look that the latter has deemed his Handsome Squidward face. It’s supposed to be a smolder, but if we’re all honest, Mingyu can’t pull off things like that with his current sobriety and inhibition levels.

The day ends in earnest and Mingyu doesn’t know how he feels.
Chapter 7

It’s been a week.

This would mark the first Thursday that Mingyu doesn’t have to worry about styling his hair in the last month. He knows it’s silly to feel anything different, but he had strayed from routine and now he has to stray from his new routine. Something is missing, something is vacant. He isn’t done yet; they aren’t done yet. But they are. There’s nothing left to say and nothing left to do. Minghao will probably never set foot in the clinic again—him nor his stubborn ass—and Mingyu can just sweep all his troubles about high school under a metaphoric rug and vacuum well afterwards. It’s simple. Life moves on. Life continues.

He can continue living as he had for the past decade.

As if.

When he left high school and moved for college with his full-ride scholarship and mass amounts of professional connections, he had also left behind his guilty conscience. It was a period; an end to what he believed was his and Minghao’s story. The book was complete and they’d never have to cross paths again. It was a weight off his shoulders and he would never have to look back, but having Minghao show up out of the blue in September—just being reminded that he exists; that was already enough to destabilize him. Now he has to live knowing that Minghao is in town and any trip to the grocery store might force them to meet again.

He’s going to need to sleep on this.

But against his luck, Joshua picked yesterday to take the voting jars down and put them behind the counter to tally the votes. They would learn the results after their lunch breaks, but Mingyu has a good idea that he’s won. His jar was filled to the brim with receipt stubs by last week and he’s been glad to see Wonwoo dreading the prospect of waking up before the sun and driving downtown to DonutBoo’s. This would be adequate revenge for the teasing that happened earlier in the month.

“DonutBoo’s is great. Even their plain glazed donuts are amazing. You have to try their croissants and on Fridays Mama Boo sometimes makes hoddeok from scratch, but it’s on their secret menu and—”

“Why don’t you just go with me?” Wonwoo asks.

“And get up while it’s still dark outside? No thanks.”

“Oh c’mon. It’s just one time and it’s my first time there. I won’t know what to order.” Sometimes Mingyu forgets that Wonwoo’s only been in town for a few weeks. Sure, he’s visited Soonyoung several times in the past years, but he hasn’t ever stayed more than a couple days and has never had time to explore their town’s little gems. They just click so well that Mingyu can’t really imagine not knowing him for years. Maybe they were friends in a past life. Who knows, maybe in an alternate timeline, it would be Mingyu and Wonwoo who might’ve dated during college, but in this universe, this Wonwoo belongs with Soonyoung. Mingyu can’t see it any other way. And in this universe, this Mingyu wants to belong.
“Just get two dozen original glazed. That should be enough for our office and the imaging center to share.” It’d be enough for everyone to get (maybe) two. He knows that Joshua isn’t a big fan of sweets unless it’s chocolate—and despite dating the human embodiment of a Lemon Head, he’s pretty sure Wonwoo doesn’t have a sweet tooth either—but the rest of them will definitely be having more than a couple.

“That’s kind of boring, isn’t it?” Mingyu shrugs. Getting only one type would make it fair for everyone, “And if I’m waking up so early, I’ll want to get something for Soon and his work friends.”

“Where does he w-”

The breakroom door swings open with a loud bang. Mingyu and Wonwoo look over as Joshua holds the two jars over his head, one in each hand. As it appears, he had opened the door with his foot, “Mingyu, you’re a fucking nerd. Wonwoo kicked your ass in the fist-fight.” The manager seems a little loopy because of the results. Can someone physically kick ass in a fist-fight?

“I won?” Wonwoo’s deep voice is bright and surprised.

“Hell yeah, you won.” Joshua gives him a high five.

“Wait-wait, okay, but by how much?” Again, Mingyu was sure his jar was full and Wonwoo’s wasn’t. It’s clearly filled with more votes even as Joshua’s waving the two jars around. The one labeled ‘Mingyu’ has receipts up to the brim.

“One vote.” Joshua puts the jars down on the table, “You can recount them if you want, but you really did lose by one vote.”

When Mingyu approaches the jars and picks them up to take a look, it’s actually clearer now. He remembers that a lot of Wonwoo’s patients had crumbled their receipt stubs earlier that month and Mingyu’s patients usually curled theirs or just tossed them in without a second thought. He feels likes this is somehow foul play. At face value, Mingyu still looks stronger than the other PT, but Wonwoo really does look meaner in the face.

He flops down into his chair, defeated.

“There, there, young Gyu, that’s no way to admit defeat.” Wonwoo teases, earning a laugh from Joshua.

“I want a butter croissant, a salted-caramel puff with pumpkin spice crème, and a chocolate-filled coconut whip bar.” That’s a fucking tall order, Joshua Hong.

“Do you want to write that down, or?” Mingyu hasn’t opened his eyes. He’s still recovering from the fist-fight. Joshua doesn’t give him a sliver of his attention as he waltzes out of the room, leaving the two jars behind.

Wonwoo slaps his shoulder, “It’s okay. I’ll go with you if it’ll make you feel better.”

“Nah,” Mingyu looks up at the ceiling, “this is my punishment for being a huge weenie.”

Wonwoo laughs that warm, hearty laugh. Most people wouldn’t agree to wake up at 6:30 in the dead of Fall to go out and get pastries, “It’s okay, Weenie Hut Jr., I don’t mind. Soon gets up at 7:30 anyway, so it’d be nice to surprise him with breakfast for once.”

Again, this sickeningly sweet friend of his is absolutely made of boyfriend material, “If you really want to, sure.” They’d be getting in half an hour after it opens, but from experience, Mingyu
knows that the queue is usually out the door by then, “Dress warm.”

DonutBoo hasn’t changed that much since the last time he was here. The logo and storefront sign have gotten a nice upgrade to something that looks a little more contemporary, as has some of the décor on the interior, but the walls still remain a dusty rose with the lower half lined with dark, wooden slats. The Starbucks across the street that he used to do homework at is now gone and replaced with a local coffeeshop called Garnet. It looks classy, but not really Mingyu’s taste.

Mingyu is five minutes late, but that’s forgivable. What’s less forgivable is that Wonwoo’s already gone inside, placed his order, and come out with a half-dozen pastries for Soonyoung in hand and a hot drink in the other. The older male is wearing a thick scarf and red, knitted gloves with little, white hearts cross-stitched into the wrists. Mingyu wouldn’t be surprised if they were from Soonyoung’s mother. As he tosses his box in the car and greets Mingyu, he apologizes for going in first, but the queue was getting long and he didn’t want to hold them up. True, the line is just barely inside the entrance.

“You can wait out here if you want.” Wonwoo appreciates the pardon. Mingyu predicts that Wonwoo’s the type that might get claustrophobic if he’s packed in like a sardine, “It should be pretty fast.”

“Eh, I can wait with you.” He’s not going to turn Wonwoo away to wait in the cold. As much as Wonwoo might hate crowded places, he probably doesn’t want to stand outside where he can see his breath. After straightening his cap and wrapping his scarf tightly around his neck, Mingyu shuffles into the bakery, holding the door open for Wonwoo who follows in behind him, letting the warm smell of puff-pastry and butter hug them from the inside out. There’s a blanket of noise inside. It’s not incredibly loud, but everyone is chatting and the kitchen is operating—as it should be—and there’s a coffee grinder going off in the background. The neon ‘Hot Boos!’ sign hanging above the checkout is on, meaning that everything was fresh off the press and hot out of the oven.

In his pocket, Mingyu has the list of orders that he’d gathered around the clinic. He knows that they’ll all work this Friday, but he doesn’t know the imaging department well enough to figure out who needs to place an order and receive it the next day aside from their manager. The compromise was just to get them their own box of original glazed donuts. That makes it fair. The list isn’t too long, but ordering twelve special doughnuts for everyone is a little pretentious, so he just hands the list to the man behind the counter.

He has to double-take on who the worker is because he looks a little different from a decade ago. He’s a little taller, his cheeks are a little rounder, and he’s not wearing his Riverside hoodie, but he still retains that old, soft sweetness that comes inherently from working in a bakery for so many years. The embroidered title of ‘Littlest Boo’ on his apron gives him away. It was one of the few details Mingyu could remember from his spot across the street. His nametag says ‘Seungkwan’, a name that Mingyu doesn’t recall. The more he stares and waits, the more familiar Seungkwan looks. He looks less cute and more mature now, but there’s something about him that seems ageless.

“Is this it?” He beams brightly at Mingyu. Is it physically possible to be so lively this early in the morning? It takes Mingyu a minute to remember what he wrote down.

“Oh, and a dozen original in a second box.”

“Got it!” Maybe it’s a coincidence that he got Seungkwan to cater to them because there are four other workers shuffling around helping customers (or ‘Patrons of the Pastry Arts’ as the welcome sign had stated). Seungkwan flaps open a baby blue box, folding it in half-a-second flat;
something that can only be achieved after working there for so many years. He grabs a set of tongs and starts plucking the original glazed doughnuts out of the display case. The lifespan of a doughnut in the case is touch-and-go. They literally come off the conveyor belt, put into a tray, and are thrown into the case before the workers start pulling them off and into boxes. The pace is fast, but Seungkwan takes an extra few seconds to make sure everything looks nice and the doughnuts are evenly spaced.

Mingyu glances over his shoulder to see if Wonwoo’s paying attention. Said man is distracted by what he deemed to be ‘the magical doughnut machine’; mesmerized by its intricacies. It’s really just a little conveyor belt that waterfalls the doughnuts in their glaze. They’re piped onto the fryer by a worker and flipped with a little lever. Seungkwan’s close enough to him that he could probably hear Mingyu if he spoke loud enough, “Did you go to Oakdale? I feel like I’ve seen you before.” Playing dumb never used to be a thing.

Seungkwan looks up, smile still on his face, eyes bright and glistening, “Me? No, I went to Riverside, but I had a few friends that went to Oakdale.” Seungkwan briefly pauses his doughnut packing to think, “Do you know Jasmine Moreno?” Mingyu shakes his head, “Rebecca Patel?” he shakes his head again, “Minghao Xu?”

Mingyu can’t help but smile. His lips do a weird spasm, trying to get rid of the reflex, “Yeah, kinda.”

“Cool! Yeah, he comes in from time to time and we sometimes go out for coffee on the weekends. Can you believe that guy is still dancing?” Oh, yes, he can. And he really wishes that he’d stop for a little, “He’s really nice, have you seen him recently?” Mingyu nods.

What the hell? Is this another pretty-boy in Minghao’s entourage? Is he some sort of collector of nice, beautiful people? “Yeah, I’m actually his physical therapist!” Mingyu tries to pack as much enthusiasm into his response so that he doesn’t dull in comparison to Seungkwan.

“Oh! You’re Mingyu!” he continues the doughnut harvesting before shutting the box with a flip and handing it over to Mingyu. He takes the list out of his apron pocket and opens another box single-handedly.

“He talks about me?” he questions as he receives the box over the display case and shuffles down the line a bit, a step closer to the checkout. Everything in the case looks absolutely mouth-watering. Some of the pastries are hot enough that they steam up the glass.

Seungkwan sort of shakes his head and nods at the same time. It might be Mingyu’s imagination, but it looks like his happy expression falters for just a second, “Yeah, your name’s come up a couple times.” Or maybe he’s just focused on the list. Seungkwan falls silent when Mingyu doesn’t respond. Wanting to avoid an awkward stare off, Mingyu turns slightly to scan the interior of the bakery.

At that time, a dashing man who isn’t in uniform shimmies his way through the crowd. No one seems to mind. He must be a regular. With a quick step to slide between Mingyu and the other customer in front of him, he makes his way behind the counter. He looks like he’s in a rush as he heads in the back, possibly late for work, but that’s debunked when he emerges after five seconds, shrugging on a black Sherpa jacket that he wasn’t holding earlier and grabbing a cup of coffee with ‘ Sharpied on the cup sleeve that looks like it’s been set out for him on the back counter. He looks more Caucasian than he does Korean since he’s got slightly-wavy, fawn-colored hair, but there are a lot of kids of mixed race in town. He quickly takes an order and fills a box or two as his coffee heats up in the microwave, barely having enough time to smile with his eyes as he pulls his facemask down to his chin. Mingyu looks at his watch, 7:01.
“Morning. Sorry, I’m running late.” He calls to Seungkwan as he gathers his things and presses a warm kiss to his cheek, making way for the back door. *Ugh, another couple full of tooth-decay.* “I’ll stop by to help during my lunch break.”

Seungkwan’s eyebrows pinch together, “It’s okay.” His voice sounds both hurt and worried, “I’d rather you go home and rest.” Hansol stops where he is and turns around, a gentle, tired smile on his thin lips. He quickly backtracks to Seungkwan, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m fine, don’t worry about it.” Now Mingyu can hear the raspiness of his voice. It’s rough and probably isn’t from waking up late, “I’ll be here. I want to spend time with you.”

Seungkwan smirks and rolls his eyes, “Fine, but try to take it easy today.”

“I’ll try, I’ll try.” He pulls him close to give him another peck in his hair, above his ear before sprinting out the door. The Littlest Boo continues packing the doughnuts as listed, ears a flustered red.

His attention turns to Mingyu, “Sorry, we’re out of Unicorn Tummies for,” he looks at the kitchen, moving his head around a bit to peak at every surface, “the next twenty minutes or so. Would you like to wait or do you want to get something else?”

Mingyu tries to think as fast as he can. For a moment, he doesn’t remember who wanted the Unicorn Tummy pastry until he remembers that it’s him, “Yeah, that’s okay.” He shakes his head, “Just whatever is fine.” Seungkwan nods and picks a cute, round ‘Spoopy Boopy’ ghost doughnut off the top rack. Those were limited edition and only came out around Halloween.

He can’t really shake the curiosity. What did Minghao say about him to Seungkwan? Was the impression good or bad? He has doubts that Seungkwan knows everything that happened in high school, but he also doesn’t know if Minghao is still that close to him. It’s none of his business, but he doesn’t want to be remembered as the horrible person that ruined Minghao’s life.

Build a better future, build a better future, *build a better future*, “I’ll ring you up dow-”

“I’m not a horrible person, I promise.”

Seungkwan’s mouth shuts before he gives Mingyu a raised eyebrow.

Cutting someone off probably isn’t the best way to prove that you aren’t a horrible person, “Sorry- I just-”

“I never said you were? You seem plenty nice to me.” Seungkwan laughs, abolishing any sort of awkwardness, clearly finding humor in how much of a stuttering mess Mingyu is. It even pulls Wonwoo’s attention away from the doughnut machine.

“Stop that, Mingyu, you’re being weird again.” Wonwoo laughs along, seeing that making a joke of the situation is making his friend feel better. He gently elbows him in the ribs and pushes Mingyu to move down the line.

“Sorry.” Mingyu apologizes again and takes the box of doughnuts from Seungkwan as he sidesteps over to the cash register. Seungkwan already has his back turned to them, doing something over at the doughnut machine and leaving them with his older sister. Mingyu knows that much because ‘Little Boo’ is embroidered on her apron. They share the same round cheeks and glee-filled smile.

He pays with his credit card and waits for the receipt to print. As she hands it over to him, he
drops a few dollars into their tip jar, and Seungkwan calls out to them, “Here! Two fresh ones on the
house.” He holds out two, piping-hot glazed doughnuts to him and Wonwoo.

Mingyu’s out of hands.

“Of course!” He chuckles, “Any friend of Minghao’s is a friend of mine.”

Mingyu and Wonwoo shout their thanks as they’re pushed away from the counter by the
crowd. Seungkwan waves them off as he grabs another customer to help. Mingyu would have liked
to share a few more words. Mama Boo wasn’t there, she might be as old as his parents now and
working so many hours at a doughnut shop would probably be rough on her aging body. It looks
like the baby Boo’s have taken over.

Wonwoo hands him his hot doughnut as he transfers both boxes of pastry to one hand. Then,
he slaps an arm over his shoulders as they walk back to their cars, “Aw, Mingyu, he said that F word
that you like so much.”

Mingyu holds his doughnut in his mouth and jabs his fingers under Wonwoo’s ribs. How did
he lose a fist-fight to this guy?
Aside from the amazing doughnuts and thanks from the imaging department (including them buying the PT team fancy coffees in the late morning), the rest of Friday moseys by in a blur. He blames it on the morning sugar-high and the afternoon crash.

The weekend falls flat and Mingyu doesn’t even leave his apartment; calling in delivery for dinner four times. That’s right, four dinners in three nights because he’s losing sleep. He can only dust his entertainment center so many times. There’s a lot he could be doing. He could be volunteering somewhere, helping someone, doing something, doing anything, but the skies are overcast, and he just wants to lay on his couch unmoving.

All he can do is count the stitches on his cuff, watch the raindrops race each other down his living room window, catch dust as it falls from his ceiling; it’s a boring weekend that stays vacant and will remain his least productive weekend for the foreseeable future. It’s disgusting. It’s atrocious. He’s not a mess and he’s not put together. He’s somewhere in limbo between a slug and a stale slice of bread. Maybe he’s catching a cold. He can feel it in his limbs and how heavy they feel, as if the air was made of molasses. It’s been a while since he’s been sick. He had a horrible immune system as a kid and well into high school. It only started getting better after he started hitting the gym and eating better during college, but look at him now. He could go to the gym, but running on a treadmill and lifting weights for hours at a time just doesn’t feel like the right medication. Maybe he should go for a drive, but, oh, his car is so far away. The couch seems like a perfectly sound place to spend this dreary day.

Wonwoo would probably berate him for being little-more productive than your average pet rock, but Mingyu’s just not driven to do anything. He spends all his time wondering if Hansol made well on his promise to come back into work just because he wanted to spend time with Seungkwan. He wonders if Soonyoung and Wonwoo have situations like that too. Does Wonwoo venture to Soonyoung’s workplace just to say hi or make sure he’s not bored? Soonyoung’s come in a couple times to bring Wonwoo his work ID or a jacket he left behind on chillier mornings. How long do you have to date before that kind of thing becomes normal? Acting like you’re married—Mingyu laughs mentally—well, Wonwoo and Soonyoung are practically married. It just feels so natural between them, effortless even, but Mingyu’s pretty sure that’s just how they make it look. Relationships take effort, they take energy and commitment from both sides. He knows it’s about being able to meet in the middle, about compromise and compatibility. It’s the reason he hasn’t been able to match up with anyone since the beginning of time.

Everyone was always so eager, so ready to put everything they’ve ever worked for on the back burner and focus on a future with Mingyu and when he was young that was scary. Even as he’s getting older, he can’t imagine someone just putting everything down and waiting for him, needing his approval for a joint decision. The idea of ruining someone’s potential always pulled Mingyu out of promising relationships prematurely. The people he dated were always amazing in their own right, good at what they did, dedicated to what they did and what they wanted, but they could always put Mingyu ahead of that dream for one reason or another. And despite being flattered about those choices, Mingyu will admit that he never felt worthy of such attention.

He wasn’t worth a crushed dream. He wasn’t worth the tears and he wasn’t worth the heartbeat. Up until now, he still doesn’t feel like he deserves the warmth and joy of a relationship with another, living, breathing, dreaming human-being.

Of course, Mingyu doesn’t know when that started to change. Ever so slightly, that notion
started to change. He could never give up his dream of stability, but now that he has it, he’s not sure he has a dream to wager in a relationship. What’s next? What’s the new goal if he’s already achieved what he set out to do? He’s only in his mid-twenties. It’s too early to be done.

Achieving stability—disappointingly—was not to be the root of his happiness.

“Hey, you’re coming out to lunch with me today.” Wonwoo comes into the breakroom, his tie untied and his hair a little messy. When Mingyu looks up at the clock, he sees that it’s 10 till 9.

Wonwoo is late for work.

“Okay?” It’s not that Mingyu doesn’t usually go out to lunch with Wonwoo. In fact, within the last few weeks they’d gone out all days but the weekend and the two days Wonwoo didn’t work. Asking him out to lunch on a Monday was usually only spoken between their grumbling stomachs, not with words, especially words that are so demanding. Maybe he’s worried about Jeonghan coming back to work on Wednesday or maybe he’s worried about something more pressing. Joshua has probably told him enough horror stories about Jeonghan and Old Man Perelman, but that’s probably not enough to deter Wonwoo who has worked in the city with undoubtedly worse city-forms of their most atrocious patients. Cities are always filled with angrier, more bitter people.

“Don’t agree so fast. I need to talk about something.” He looks for an explanation for the out of character behavior as Wonwoo fixes his hair in the reflection of the paper towel dispenser and ties his tie with nimble fingers only to realize he’d forgotten his cardigan in his car. He quickly excuses himself to half-run, half-jog back out to get it. He comes back in with three minutes to spare, “So, Soonyoung,” Mingyu is surprised to draw the connection that the sparkly beam of sunshine that can’t bake for his life might be the reason for Wonwoo being so frazzled this early in the day, “I need to complain about him to someone and you’re my lunch buddy, so I need you to clench your asshole and deal with my sob story later, okay?”

“Okay.” Wonwoo blinks a couple times, not expecting Mingyu to agree again. The thought of burying Mingyu in complaints doesn’t seem to burden him all that much because he just takes a deep breath, smiles, and pats him on the shoulder on his way out to the lobby to search for today’s first patient.

Monday morning passes easily. Mingyu’s patients are back on track and doing well and (a little bitterly) he makes some statement that Minghao’s anti-recovery curse has been lifted from the clinic. Wonwoo doesn’t bat an eye which is cause for concern because, for the last three weeks, Wonwoo would usually jump at a chance to tease him about his high school ghost. He tests the waters by making another off comment about how the weather is better because Minghao hasn’t stopped by, but Wonwoo just hums in agreement while finishing up his last patient’s paperwork and sorting the file away to hand back to Joshua. Lunch was surely going to be interesting.

“So, what happened with Soon-” Mingyu can’t even unwrap his banh mi or finish his sentence before Wonwoo spits out the boba straw and starts rambling.

“He’s been working on this number for a really long time and it was coming together well from what I heard. But his teammate elected to change it last minute and omit one of the more technically advanced moves in place of a crowd-pleasing move. And Soon agreed. So,” he takes another sip, “I went to go watch their practice on Friday since I couldn’t make it to semi-finals last weekend and it’s basically a lap dance- a striptease- I don’t know.”
Mingyu almost chokes before he can swallow, “He’s a dancer?”

“Yeah, at Performance Studio.” Wonwoo finally takes a breath to take a bite of his own sandwich. Mingyu’s sudden curiosity about Soonyoung’s profession briefly derailed his train of thought. He could have sworn that Mingyu knew.

“Well,” Mingyu draws out. Curiosity is on the tip of his tongue and probably written all over his face, but Wonwoo probably doesn’t know that Minghao works there too. He would never hear the end of it if he found out his boyfriend and Minghao were co-workers, “I mean, he’s a professional. It’s just choreography. What’s the problem with that?”

“Nothing, and I know- I know he’s a professional, okay?” he seems to weigh his words, “But you’ve never seen Soonyoung dance so sinfully.” Mingyu heaves a cough with how Wonwoo drags out that last word, “It’s something I thought I’d only see behind closed doors, and it’s not entirely his style so I have a feeling he didn’t choreograph that section.”

“Did you talk to him about it?” For a guy that’s never been in a real, long-term relationship with any man, woman, or anyone in between Mingyu has some awfully sound advice, “If it really bugs you, I think you two should talk it out. It’s okay to tell him if something like that makes you uncomfortable even if it’s part of his career. I’m sure he’ll understand.”

Wonwoo just narrows his eyes at Mingyu’s baseless advice, but shrugs, “We’ve been arguing about it since the competition and I got to sleep on the couch for the last three nights. He always gets so uptight when it comes to being on stage- it’s frustrating.” He swallows and wipes his mouth. Apparently, that was enough to help him reset his aggressions, “But whatever, they won and they’re moving onto finals. I’ll have make-up sex when the semi-finals winner’s plaque comes through the mail in a couple days, but the main point here is that it’s essentially Minghao’s fault that my back is acting up again from sleeping on the couch.”

Oh.

He knew.

Maybe that’s why he wouldn’t let Minghao’s name die on all the days he didn’t have to come in. Every day in between Minghao’s appointments, Wonwoo would experiment and bring up his name casually in front of Mingyu and each time he’d call him out for doing a thing. It’s come to the point where he has to consciously relate Minghao’s name with not biting his lip and not staring into space ‘with a dreamy look in his eyes’. Wonwoo, however, can see that his brain processes the method every time the dancer is mentioned and ends up pointing that out too.

“Look, I know why Minghao changed the moves. It was a hard one for him—handsfree kickflip and landing on his hands, busted knee yadda yadda, but why did you tell him to change it to that?” he scrunches up his nose before taking another bite and sipping another sip. “I don’t even get lap dances and I have to undress myself.”

A pearl shoots up Mingyu’s straw and he chokes prematurely. The timing couldn’t have been better (or worse, depending on the perspective) because he at least gets Wonwoo to drop his angry face and laugh for a minute, “I didn’t tell him to change anything. I don’t know the first thing about dance. If anything, I’m surprised that Soonyoung is still letting him compete despite knowing about the injury.”

“Soonyoung doesn’t know.”
Chapter 9

He states it matter-of-factly like Mingyu should have found it obvious, “And since Minghao basically swore you into secrecy, I would assume that he doesn’t want Soon to know. Or anyone else on the team. Or their boss.” Wonwoo thinks for a minute, looking up at the ceiling tiles and presumably going through names, “I’m pretty sure Jun’s the only one that’s aware of his condition since he took Minghao to the clinic once, but I doubt he knows about the severity. Actually, yeah, this is something I wanted to talk to you about now that my saltiness towards Soonyoung has sizzled down. Do you want me to say anything?”

“Huh?” Mingyu polishes off the sandwich and crumples up the wrapper, tossing it onto his tray. He wipes his mouth and tosses the napkin as well before swallowing, “Why are you asking me?”

“I assume in the tense PT sessions you and Minghao have been braising in for the past month he would have revealed something about why he hasn’t told Soon.” Wonwoo is close behind on finishing his food, but stops to wait for Mingyu’s answer.

“He said that if anyone found out, they wouldn’t let him compete.” Mingyu meets eyes with Wonwoo intentionally. He doesn’t want to be teased about the thing, “And for good reason. If his ACL is damaged any more than it already is, it could really put him out of dance forever and for something like that to be taken from him so young would be… unfortunate.” Wonwoo’s giving him a look.

Or maybe he’s imagining it.

Wonwoo leans back in his chair, the last bite of banh mi between his fingers. They should have sat outside where the weather is delightful and so they wouldn’t smell like the kitchen when they go back to work. There are even birds singing, “So should I tell Soon or not?”

“Again, why are you asking me?”

“Because Minghao and his love of dancing mean something to you.” Wonwoo takes the bite and swallows before speaking again, “And you know him better than I do- longer than I have. Why is competing so important to him?”

Mingyu sits on his hands, thinking.

Part of him knows the answer already. Minghao loves the feeling of competition, of standing on a stage under the applause of thousands of people. He hates letting others down. He doesn’t hate losing, but he hates not winning. Part of him knows that that answer is based on loose facts, most of which were gathered from observations over ten years ago, “I don’t know, but I don’t want to speak on his behalf. Were his injuries not obvious during practice or during the performance?”

Wonwoo shrugs, “I was too focused on Soonyoung.” He admits it sheepishly, “Minghao didn’t show any signs that were obvious. The crowd loved him,” as expected and as they should, “and Soonyoung didn’t say anything other than that it was rude of him to want to change the choreo so last minute. Actually, I think they’re a little on edge with each other right now.”

It’s Mingyu’s turn to weigh his words, “If you go to his practice, could you check up on Minghao? If you think that he’s seriously hurting himself, I think you should tell Soonyoung.” His mouth is dry, “If he seems to be okay, then I think it’s alright to let his secret stay a secret.”
“Why don’t you come?”

Mingyu’s first few words are flustered and unintelligible, “Because that’d be weird, wouldn’t it? Showing up out of the blue? I’m not even on good terms with Minghao, to just show up to his practice would be a little creepy, don’t you think?”

Wonwoo laughs, clearly seeing the fault in his coworker’s logic, “Well, you’re friends with me and Soon, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, but-” Mingyu stutters for the first time since preschool. Wonwoo knows. Wonwoo sees.

“Then it’s fine.” He picks up their trays, moving to throw them away. Mingyu follows a step behind, “I’ll get to show you how cool Soon is on the dancefloor and you’ll get to ignore him the whole time and gawk over Minghao.”

“I’m not entirely convinced that you actually want me to go.” He takes the last sip of his boba tea. It’s amazing how the ratio, no matter where he goes, always leaves half the pearls behind by the time he finishes the liquid portion of the drink.

“I want you to come.” Wonwoo singsongs as they exit the restaurant, “You want to come.”

They set the time for Tuesday after work. That’s fine since Mingyu takes it off anyway and he has enough house chores to keep him busy until 5:30 when Wonwoo gets out of work. His house chores are supposed to be meditative and help him relax, but clipping plants with a can opener and accidentally bleaching his favorite pair of jeans doesn’t spell relaxation today. By noon, he feels like he must be hyperaware that he’s doing the menial tasks correctly. Is this a sponge in my hand and not the steel wool? Are the reds in the right basket? Did I turn the stove off? Did I already run this laundry through the rinse cycle an hour ago? No? Better run it again. He even goes so far as to forget which rooms he’s Swiffered through already and ends up mopping the flat three times.

All for nothing since no one ever sees his house and it’s never ever in disarray anyway.

He almost forgets to eat lunch with all the happenings. He even is so lucky as to burn his soup and it’s incredibly difficult to burn something that’s suspended in water. At least it’s edible. More edible that Soonyoung’s cookies.

Around 3 he feels like the clock has stopped moving or is at least moving at a pace akin to that of dying snails. Maybe he should bring a peace offering. Cookies? Cake? Cocaine-filled macarons? He picks the first option. Hopefully bringing a plate of orgasmic cookies will deter Soonyoung from ever sending a plate with Wonwoo in the future. He and Joshua couldn’t live through that and Jeonghan isn’t as nice as them when it comes to sharing his opinion. Seokmin was lucky he escaped thanks to his internet cutting out in the middle of an online lecture.

Cookies it is.

“Cookies.” Wonwoo looks at him when they both step out of their cars in Honeyrun Plaza’s crowded parking lot. The parking lot isn’t that small, but the sporting good’s shop on the corner is having a blowout sale so it really is lucky that they scored two spots near the dance studio, “I would actually consider fighting you if I wasn’t so butthurt about Soonyoung. You take those cookies in there and make him cry.”
Performance Studio is sitting where his old gym used to be. The place shut down after he graduated high school. Admission was crazy cheap back then and he had begged his dad for enough allowance to join a few months at a time. All his friends went there. He’s not sure if they did more working out or talking, but regardless, he has fond memories of the place. It’s gutted now, replaced with sleek Cherrywood floors and any wall that isn’t windows is mirrors and curtains. The main lobby is mostly the same aside from a fresh coat of paint and a load of performance pictures that litter the wall. Even the drinking fountains are still the same.

The place still smells the same, sweaty.

It’s not like B.O., it’s just hot, salty; sweaty. People working hard and exerting a lot of energy for hours on end tend to make an area smell like that. The interior paintjob makes it look more professional than the old gym did. The floors don’t have an inch of carpet and the ceiling tiles no longer have stains from the water leaks. Well, maybe they do, but they’re black now instead of that spackled white.

“This way.” Wonwoo guides him down a hallway. All the walls are new. It used to be an open floor plan with exercise equipment scattered about, but now it’s sectioned off into several dance studios with a central, main floor for groups evaluations and class showcases. Most of the dancers are teens, high school kids. Mingyu recognizes the old Oakdale colors streaming from a backpack and a letterman that looks like the one he has buried in his closet. It’s clear that this dance studio is a pretty popular place. Even kids from Riverside are here.

Their shoes and bags say that they’re Riverside kids; from a different tax bracket as expected. However, the hostility between the schools that Mingyu remembered from a decade ago seems to dissolve when they pass through the main doors. The teens are supporting each other and cheering for each other; sharing water and laughs.

“Hey, Wonwoo. Looking for Soonyoung?” the man sitting at the front desk asks him.

“Hey, Yixing.” Wonwoo smiles at him, “What studio is he in today?”

“If his class is out, he should be in A3.” The soft-toned man looks at his watch, “Did you just get out of work? What’s the occasion?”

“No occasion really, just wanted to show a friend the studio.” Yixing nods and is distracted by a man bringing his daughter to the desk with warm greetings. Something about the dance studio helping her gain confidence in school and praising the instructors and thanking Yixing for opening Performance in the first place. He’s humble, “Down this hallway.”

Wonwoo seems to know his way around the studio which is to be expected since he’s in a long-term relationship with one of the lead instructors. A few students greet him on their way back to the locker room, one even gives Wonwoo a high-five and finger-guns as she spins into the bathroom. He’s well-liked, “Look at you, Mr. Popular.”

He laughs, “Nah, not me, Soonyoung.”

When they pass A1, Mingyu realizes that a small group of people is gathered in front of what he assumed to be A3. Logically. The doors are glass so that people can peer in and see who is in which room right away without having to disturb practice, but this room’s glass door is just to match with the others since the entire wall is glass. The other three walls are mirrored and in the center of the deep, red dance floor sit six people. He immediately recognizes Soonyoung’s blonde hair from the back. Two have brown, one has blue, and the other two have black. One face looks familiar and it’s the face of the man that dropped Minghao off at the clinic that one time. Somehow Mingyu isn’t
The kids and adults gathered by the door clear the way when Wonwoo makes his presence known. It actually takes him a little bit of effort since his clothes make him look like a parent at first glance. Mingyu’s dressed down in jeans and a t-shirt today instead of his office-casual button up and slacks. It’s a comfortable appearance. But even still, Mingyu makes sure to check his hair in every reflective surface he passes. The mirrors are fogged up with steam and heat from their bodies. You could say the dance was pretty hot.

“Soon told me that the finals have three more sections in addition to the set the performed at semi-finals. It’s going to take a lot of stamina.” Wonwoo mumbles to Mingyu who is shuffling by the window beside him. The six are looking at a notebook that Soonyoung is scribbling in. A couple of them point here and there and then Minghao stands up to show them the move in question. They nod and the shortest one follows the movement. Soonyoung corrects him twice before they demonstrate again. The youngest looking guy comes over to the side and cues the music.

“That’s Chan. He’s a few years younger than us and is just starting to stabilize his career dancing. He’s one of the senior students here. Vernon’s the same, the brown haired one.” Mingyu squints, he’s almost 90% sure that the man is Hansol from DonutBoo, but he may be losing it. It was really early after all, “He actually works front desk most of the time, but Soonyoung recruited him to participate which is why Yixing covers his shifts when they have group practices.” Mingyu appreciates the one-sided introductions not that he holds much interest in the other members, “The short one with blue hair is Jihoon. He’s a freelancing audio engineer that moonlights as a DJ. He and Soon make most of the music arrangements. He doesn’t actually work at or attend the studio, but he and Soon have been friends since high school. The tall one is Jun. He’s actually really nice and shy so tone down that misplaced aggression, would you?” Wonwoo elbows Mingyu in the side. What aggression? There’s no aggression here. Not at all, “He and Minghao are pretty close. He’s actually the one that introduced Soonyoung and Minghao a few years ago and Minghao scored him a job here at the studio.”

The following four minutes are filled with bated breath from them and the people around them. Each step falls in tune with the beat. Each of the six members has a special charisma that is very restrained since they’re focusing solely on the movements of their choreography, but, even then, their personalities show through immediately. On paper, they’re all doing the same moves. In reality, you can tell that Jun is more introverted. His movements aren’t as sharp, but they’re incredibly languid and fluid, blending into each other with a ribbon-like grace. Jihoon isn’t as experienced, but he’s feisty. There’s a peculiar amount of swagger behind his dance style that’s hard to put into words. In the nicest way, it looks like he’s trying to make up for his lack of physical stage presence by being more aggressive. Vernon (or Hansol, he swears they look the same) is excitable and a little early on most key moves, but his energy works well with the upbeat tune. Chan is the sharpest. His movements cut like a blade, almost robotic in nature. Soonyoung is the loudest, his movements are strong and powerful with confidence behind every step. You can’t miss him on the dancefloor just like you can’t miss him in a room full of people.

And Minghao is…

Well, Minghao is perfect.
In Mingyu’s eyes at least; this is the same Minghao from ten years ago.

Each step is fresh and a little carefree. He has a tendency to get to his place a little too fast or miss his mark by a hair, but he slows it down before he actually reaches the key pose. This whole start-stop method to his dancing is and was something that translates directly from his experience in martial arts. There’s a different aura to him compared to the others. Even compared to Soonyoung, to which he’s the most similar, he’s not as concerned with perfection as he is with performance; expressions, delivery, and the reactions of the crowd. But because they aren’t facing the crowd and just watching themselves in the mirror, Minghao’s eyes are trained on himself and the other members, their backs facing the onlookers.

As they watch, a new song queues up and the dancers take their places after Minghao and Soonyoung dispute something.

It’s a little muffled through the Plexiglas, but Mingyu can tell there’s a lot of synth and heavy beats in the undertone. He doesn’t know that much about music. Out of the corner of his eye, he can already tell that Wonwoo’s attention is pinned on the blond, but his arms are crossed, his eyebrows furrowed, and his eyes narrowed.

“What’s wrong?”

“They’re rehearsing the song they used for the semi-finals.” He doesn’t even look at Mingyu. His lips are in a tight line, “So?”

“Soonyoung and Minghao have a tradition of throwing out choreos after they’ve won with them.” Mingyu understands that much, “This is that choreo, by the way.” It’s almost like he’s reminding Mingyu to watch and behind the crowd of people and masked by the focus of the dance team on themselves, he doubts that he and Wonwoo are visible.

The choreography revolves around giving each member a moment in the spotlight leading the rest. They watch as the energy seems to oscillate in the crowd as they rotate. Off to the side, he hears a group of girls coo over Jihoon’s provoking steps and how they wish he came around the studio more often. Another group of people adjacent to them mumble something about how Vernon is a surprisingly good dancer despite not hitting the floor that often. There’s also something else muttered about how they wish he was single. The group of kids in front of Wonwoo and Mingyu are especially excited about Chan. They think he’s the coolest and they all want to dance like him. He even hears some of the older kids declare Chan as their rival and how they’ll ‘definitely beat him by this time next year’ followed by an instructor reminding them that their studio doesn’t have a ranking system and that ‘your only competition should be yourself, Alex’.

Mingyu’s watching, but not for details. His eyes are glazed over, eavesdropping on all the conversations. The most outstanding ones are of course those about the three instructors, Soonyoung taking up most of the chatter because he’s the most popular—and most intimidating—one. Jun occupies a good portion, too. Jun’s popular because he’s the nicest and most soft-spoken instructor at the studio. He’s apparently only ever full of compliments and constructive criticism. Minghao’s students don’t really seem to be around. The only ones talking about him have also spoken on the other two instructors. It’s not uncommon for students to enroll in more than one class if they have the time. Dancers are rarely exclusive as it’s important to be able to memorize more than one set; it’s just more work-realistic.
The only comments he hears about Minghao are about how he has a ludicrous amount of stamina and how he makes his students run through sets over and over again despite them already nailing the moves. They don’t hate it because they end up toe-to-toe with Soonyoung’s students during studio showcases and they don’t have to deal with the senior instructor’s wrath—he’s supposedly only serious when it comes to dance. It’s curious how Soonyoung’s personality can flip like a switch once he’s on the floor, but Mingyu supposes that most performers are like that. Minghao is like that, too.

Wonwoo nudges him with his elbow, interrupting his observations and nods towards the window. The beat rises in speed, as if a drop was going to happen. Almost if on cue, the older students and instructors shuffle the children and their parents away from A3 casually; making the excuse that they’re closing up for the night or something along those lines.

Instead of a bass drop as he’d predicted, it falls silent and a distorted voice cues the transition into a slow song. Does he hear violin? Cello? Probably cello, there’s something low and earthy about it. The dancers have partnered up, but retain their formation, one couple taking the center position. The first leads are Jun and Jihoon. Their size difference makes their dynamic look interesting since Jihoon’s clearly the dominant one in the roles they’re assigned. If anything, it looks a bit like a slow-motion fight scene; a lot of punches into the air and sliding past each other. The two pairs on the side alter their moves slightly. They aren’t as close as the couple in the center and their moves aren’t as intimate. At the end of the round, the side pairs end back to back, but the centers’ turn ends with Jihoon holding Jun to the floor by his collar, straddling him over his chest.

Okay.

So this is the direction the dance is moving in.

Mingyu gets flustered and looks away for a second as the people around them mutter and clap, commenting on the smart pairings. He even misses their cool transition move to rotate to the next pair. Wonwoo hasn’t stopped burning holes into the glass with his laser vision, but Soonyoung and Minghao haven’t even done anything out of the norm. Their moves are sharp and crisp and strong. Nothing unusual for them.

Vernon and Chan take the floor next; Vernon jumping over Chan who crouches on the floor. He slides onto his knees in front of the black-haired man. The fight scene continues with Vernon occasionally sweeping his legs in low kicks that Chan has to dodge and jump over. It looks strenuous and the pseudo-fight scenes match fascinatingly with the slow, bedroom-worthy music. There’s a drum snare or a sharp jab on the violin every time they try to strike each other. Those key notes slightly change up the pace of the music in the background. Chan and Vernon match up well. Mingyu doesn’t know anything about them, but Chan moves with intention and his extremely controlled power plays well off of Vernon’s skittishness on the dancefloor. Their round ends with Chan locking Vernon’s right arm behind his back, putting him in a bowed-down and vulnerable position.

The other pairs end in a handshake.

Maybe he missed the different endings of the last round because he was too rattled by the boldness of Jihoon and Jun’s dancefloor chemistry.

Wonwoo speaks during the transition after clicking his tongue. He already sounds a little
impatient, “You know, this is supposed to be a dance about an unhealthy relationship. The pairs on
the side represent how healthy relationships deal with fights and the centers represent a couple that
can’t resolve the conflict.” He sighs, “The idea is that from the outside, it’s hard to tell which couple
is in trouble since they seem to be going through the same motions. It’s only at the end do you realize
the main couple keeps hurting each other.”

“What do they get their ideas for this stuff?” Wonwoo shrugs, brushing off the question.
Again, he’s a little thankful for Wonwoo’s explanations, filling him in on pockets of information that
give context to whatever is happening. Mingyu wants to cheer Wonwoo up. He looks too serious
right now, “Last I checked, you and Soonyoung were the ideal relationship.”

The chord strikes up for the last couple to start, “Up until here, it’s a narrative written about
their parents.”

Mingyu shuts his mouth. He’s not sure who the ‘their’ is.

And for this moment he doesn’t care because Minghao’s throwing a spinning kick to
Soonyoung’s face. His heart stops for a minute because it looks like he actually hit him, but of
course, it’s all method acting. Soonyoung falls forward and comes back to him with a one-handed
cartwheel, swinging a punch that Minghao blocks. They do a bit of a tango around each other before
locking arms, catching fists, and giving each other a hard stare. Soonyoung pushes Minghao prone
and takes a big step forward to slide under his legs with a scissor sweep, effectively standing behind
him at the end of the complicated move.

He keeps trying to touch Minghao and Minghao keeps pushing his hands off, acting annoyed.
The charade goes on for a few more beats until Minghao takes a seat on the floor, sliding backwards
against Soonyoung’s legs. Soonyoung hooks a leg over Minghao’s shoulder and twists them around,
forcing the brown-haired dancer down onto his back. One knee is on Minghao’s chest, holding him
down, while the other is on the floor, holding most of his weight. His orange jacket has fallen off his
shoulders and to his elbows. He has a hand at Minghao’s throat and their exaggerated breaths are in
sync with the low hums in the song. The disc scratches and cranks out a few strong beats to which
Soonyoung stomps his hands into the floor on either side of Minghao’s head with each jab. The latter
dodges and pushes Soonyoung off so he can sit up, grabbing his hand to stand as Soonyoung starts
to walk off.

When he pulls Soonyoung back into his chest, the two are getting a little too close for Mingyu
to avoid being red in the cheeks. Soonyoung roughly pulls down Minghao’s jacket, leaving it just
hanging by his wrists. He runs a hand up into Minghao’s hair and forces him down on his knees.
The impact makes Mingyu wince for him. That had to hurt so badly. Minghao shifts his weight to his
right side slightly, but it isn’t long-lived since Soonyoung pushes him to the left and back so that he’s
bowing forward on his knees. Minghao looks up at the blond, biting his lip, looking equal parts
turned on and ready to fight, but Mingyu’s convinced he’s biting his lip in pain.

Soonyoung starts a brief striptease. He’s really just resuming the choreography as it were,
clearly, this short spot was for a solo. When the section ends, Minghao shrugs his jacket back on and
stands up with a deep breath held, Mingyu can see his chest hold the air and his jaw tighten. He
exhales only once he’s right behind Soonyoung. They roll their hips together a couple times before
Minghao’s hands are pulling up Soonyoung’s shirt, running over his toned stomach up to his
collarbones, offering the entire hallway a gratuitous look at the instructor—well, his reflection—and
slipping a hand to the waistband of his sweatpants. Soonyoung looks back at him when the music
stops and they slow down to the point where Minghao’s just holding him, pulling him in for a kiss,
but before their lips meet Soonyoung has one hand behind Minghao’s neck and the other grabbing
the back of his shirt and he flips the taller dancer over his shoulder.
The move isn’t executed by the other four due to obvious reasons and it would probably look comedic if Minghao wasn’t so graceful. Minghao’s got the best acrobatic ability and he can do a perfect handsfree front flip easily, making it look like Soonyoung’s slammed him into the floor when the beat drops. He follows it up with his own solo stage. Luckily, it’s mostly leg-free spins. This particular one—as Mingyu has overheard—is called a one-handed air flare. It’s apparently extremely hard.

Even though they resume a rather normal and non-romantic performance, the dance is difficult not just to Mingyu’s untrained eyes but to the other dancers around them that coo and mumble amongst themselves when particular moves are executed. It’s plain to see that at least a few of the six are above and beyond the rest. Mingyu’s money is with the three dance instructors, all of which are center stage for a tricky move. Before he knows it, Minghao is being tossed into a flip. He stumbles on the landing, but the others don’t seem to mind since it’s not front and center, but Mingyu catches it; the brief break in concentrated expression. That had to hurt, too.

In fact, instead of focusing on how hot or how charismatic Minghao and the rest of the dancers are, Mingyu’s just worried about his insane pain tolerance. Watching his patient endure the stressful choreography is the only thing he’s seriously immersed in, not the context of his lithe and nimble dance moves. Sure, he understands why Wonwoo was upset and he knows that half the people around him are a little hot and bothered by the performance, but he just can’t be right now.

Minghao’s in pain.

Minghao is hurt.

He’s torturing himself.

And no one is doing anything.
Chapter 11

“Three sets of that caliber has to be insane.”

The song wraps up quietly, praise in whispers surrounding them, and the next song starts without break, “That was the easy one. The three new sets are harder.” he crosses his arms over his chest again, “Minghao and Soonyoung have been piecing it together for weeks, maybe months. I lose track sometimes since the choreos evolve a lot from start to finish.” Mingyu looks over at Wonwoo studying the dancers behind his metal-rimmed glasses. He looks concerned, a little mad maybe, but mostly concerned. The taller coughs to get his attention and they meet eyes and share a little laugh about how serious Wonwoo is getting over this.

His attention is still pinned on Soonyoung for obvious reasons.

“You know, you live with the guy.”

“I know.” Wonwoo snorts, “But that doesn’t mean we’re romantic all the time. Most nights, we just eat dinner and pass out after showering.” Of course, they do, again, they’re practically retired and married, “What’d you think about the dance?”

“It looks,” Mingyu has to think of the right word because it doesn’t come to him right away, “troublesome.”

As if on cue, the music cuts off with Chan hitting pause because Minghao has slipped and officially messed up the choreography. He’s down for enough beats that they’ll need to start over. The six look frustrated. Clearly, this isn’t the first time they’ve had to restart tonight. They’re probably hungry and tired since, according to Wonwoo, they have been working all day. Soonyoung had to lead three adult classes in the morning and two student classes in the afternoon. Mingyu can safely assume that Jun and Minghao share a similar course load.

“Can you take this seriously?” he hears Soonyoung’s voice cut through the glass, pointed at Minghao who is taking an unsteady knee, rubbing sweat off his face with the collar of his shirt. Mingyu worries his lip. Soonyoung’s drastic change in persona catches him off guard.

Minghao gets up to stand at eyelevel, if not a little above that of the blond dancer. He rolls his shoulders and shakes it off, shifting all his weight to his right leg, “I am taking it seriously. Cool it. Let’s just start again-”

“No, you keep botching the moves, Hao.” Soonyoung gets up in his face. Wow, tonight was not a good night to come. Some of the students avert their eyes from the room and make way to leave. Looks like Soonyoung is known to have a temper. This feels like a complete 180 from their interactions during the first dance. The pain makes people prickly and if Soonyoung’s the type to fan a fire, then this might be an equation for a fight.

“Are you trying to tell me something?” Minghao looks upset as well. Mingyu would be too if someone started yelling at him if it was just one little mistake that set them off. The other four dancers stand back and occupy themselves doing other things like checking their phones and toweling off sweat. These two must fight seriously. They still look uncomfortable not being able to do anything about the argument that’s rapidly unfolding before them on the floor. Jihoon and Vernon pass glances at each other and the small crowd gathered behind the glass, probably debating if they should tell people to move on or not.
Soonyoung grabs Minghao by the collar and not in the sexy way he did it earlier. Mingyu looks at Wonwoo unsure of what to do in this situation. Aren’t these two supposed to be friends?

“Just maybe try to not throw the competition for the rest of us.” If it wasn’t evident thirty seconds ago, it’s pretty evident now that the two are itching to start a scuffle.

It’s Jun that steps in to break it up, or at least try to.

He pulls them apart at least, separating them physically is probably the best precaution to take, “Should we- should we do something?” Mingyu shoots over to Wonwoo.

“They’re grown-ups, they can work it out.” Mingyu almost misses the quiet ‘I hope’ at the end.

Jun gets a firm shove to the chest from Soonyoung before he and Minghao are back at each other’s throats. “If you have a problem with me, say it directly and clearly.”

“My problem with you is that you keep switching things last minute and then you can’t even complete a full set without fucking up. It’s almost like you’re trying to fuck up at this point.” He shoves Minghao who stumbles backwards, catching himself on his right leg and takes a lunge to shove Soonyoung back. There are several shouts from the other members, trying to tell them to stop, but the warnings fall on deaf ears and Soonyoung has his fists balled up into Minghao’s collar again.

Wonwoo already has the door open.

Those actions probably warranted a punch to the face that Wonwoo likely wants to save Soonyoung from. Mingyu is tailing after him without a second thought, shutting the door behind them. He’s not sure when it happens, but he has his arm around Minghao’s midsection, pulling him back a few feet. He didn’t want to go for a wrist in case it was still hurting and he can’t remember which wrist had the sprain. Mingyu feels him struggle for a minute, expecting the hostility to be redirected towards him, but no fists come flying into his face and Minghao stops flailing almost immediately. Wonwoo stands in front of Soonyoung, arms outspread to fence him off, trusting that he won’t be the one getting hit; trying to keep the blond’s eyes on him and not on the object of his fury.

“What are you doing here?” Those honestly aren’t the words he expected to hear from Minghao, in such a tiny manner at that. They still have an angry undertone, no doubt about that, but they don’t bite into his ears.

Mingyu lets him go and takes a step back, “Obviously here to stop you from doing something you’ll regret in, like,” he pretends to look at his watch, “five minutes?” Minghao rolls his eyes, but that’s okay because it seems like thirty seconds is long enough to get Soonyoung to calm down and unfold his fists.

He can barely hear Wonwoo mutter to him, “Really? Two guys in their late twenties about to throw fists over something as small as a dance move?”

Soonyoung isn’t shy about his counter and speaks loud enough for Mingyu and Minghao to hear him clearly, “To be fair, this is the move that Minghao wanted to change last minute, but he hasn’t been able to get it right for the last five rounds!” Wonwoo puts a hand on his shoulder, pushing him back another few feet just in case he wants to go ballistic. Sweat is dripping from his hair, flying when he barks at Minghao.
Minghao just shakes his head and lets out an exasperated sigh, “I agreed to move this move over from the other set because we turned that one more sensual. It’s not like I pulled a new move out of my ass—”

“Then act like it!”

“That’s enough, Soonyoung.” Wonwoo keeps trying to get his attention and also trying to keep his own cool.

“You wanted three clear sets! I gave you three clear sets!” Minghao strips off his jacket and tosses it to the side. Most of the people in the hallway have cleared out, not wanting to bear witness to their favorite instructors get down and dirty in a brawl. Mingyu is surprised how much respect these two have in the studio.

“Then show me you can do three sets, Hao!”

“Hey, look,” Jun tries to wager again, “what we have now is enough for finals.” His voice seems to stop the two momentarily, “As long as we can nail them, I think it’ll be perfectly okay.”

“Yeah as long as we can nail them, Minghao.”

“Oh, fuck off. I’m not the only one making mistakes—”

“You’re right, you’re not, but Vernon has a bad cold and Jihoon just worked a three-day gig in the city. You don’t have an excuse—”

“Jesus- Wonwoo, can you just, like, take Soonyoung home and fuck the fight out of him and bring him back in an hour?” Jun’s bold request almost makes Mingyu choke. Children dance in this room. However, he understands the desperation in Jun’s voice. He looks extremely tired as well. They all look tired, having worked all day and come to an unpaid practice in their free time. This is something they’re all pouring extra energy into and it’s definitely more of a passion project than anything else, but it seems like nothing can get these two to calm down. Not even Mingyu’s cookies.

Wonwoo still has his hands holding Soonyoung to his place, “I mean, I could, but I don’t think I’m very welcomed to do that right now—”

“Damn right, you’re not welcome to do that right now.”

Minghao takes a step forward and winces with just the slightest movement of his eye. That slip did it. Even still, he looks ready to fight. He is ready to fight. It’s as if high school ingrained this instinct into him and Minghao was never one to back down from the start. He’s already flexing his fingers, curling them experimentally before taking a deep breath and looking up at Mingyu who hasn’t let go.

Mingyu holds him in place, hands on his biceps, telling him to stop and drop his hostilities. Something about the way Minghao looks equal parts like he wants to fight and wants to die makes his heart hurt as much as his head.

What’s so worth the pain? A fifteen-minute high from being on stage? Is that all it takes?

Minghao is being stupid and childish. He’s thinking about fighting and then dancing some more. He should understand that being reckless like this has consequences that are sometimes irreversible.

Mingyu can’t let him do that; throw away his future for another fifteen minutes of glory.
“Minghao.” His eyes snap up to Mingyu’s face, “I think you need to tell Soonyoung.”

Mingyu’s attention is so focused on how mortified Minghao looks that he doesn’t realize another set of eyes click over to him. He opens his mouth to continue, but before he can even breathe into his next sentence, there’s a hand on the collar of his shirt, dragging him out the door, slamming it roughly behind them. He didn’t know Jun was this strong. He certainly didn’t look the part.

The last thing he hears from the room is Soonyoung’s bitter voice mutter, “Tell me what?”
Chapter 12

Mingyu’s back meets a cold locker with a shove.

He certainly never thought that this would be where he’d end up today. The lock pad is digging into his shoulder, but he’s too scared to move from his vulnerable spot. Jun didn’t come off as the type to spark a fight.

“You two, out.” He gestures to two high school seniors, motioning them to leave and they scurry without hesitation. Jun probably gets mad very rarely; maybe he’s a force to fear.

“Whoa, whoa, hey man. We’re trying to break up a fight, not start one.” Mingyu puts his hands up. He doesn’t want to fight Jun. He doesn’t want to fight anyone, especially not in his old gym locker room. Jun backs up, putting a good three feet of space between them, but no more, no less. The air is stiff and stale. The door closed behind the two teenagers echoes in the now-empty space, the soft bass from another dance studio reverberates against the back wall, and everything is still.

“You can’t be serious.” Despite the light, endearing accent that finds pockets in Jun’s speech, his voice is a lot deeper than it was earlier. More serious, more accusatory, “Minghao worked so hard to get here and you’re just going to ruin it for him?”

“No!” Mingyu objects immediately, rescinding his initial fire when Jun expression darkens, “He’s hurt. You know he’s hurt.”

“You have no more business with him. He said he’s getting better-”

“Does it look like he’s getting better?!” Mingyu doesn’t know where his anger is bubbling up from. A fraction of it is protective, a fraction of it is frustrated. How could his teammates not see him hurting? Mingyu caught it within the first ten minutes he was in the studio, it was plain to see. Were they just too captivated by the lure of competition to realize the damage being done? It doesn’t matter to Mingyu. A friend should come first—before any sort of trophy.

“My best friend has no reason to lie to me.”

“My patient has no reason to lie to me.” The black-haired man folds a fist, drawing his fingers in with a particular, dominoed grace. His formerly sleepy-looking eyes are now filled with mixed feelings and agitation. It’s possible that Mingyu’s ruining a lot more than Minghao’s shot at Finals; ruining more than junior year. But he can’t stop there. He has to make it clear for Minghao’s sake, “He’s hurt and this is making it worse. If he doesn’t stop now, he could be doing some permanent damage and never be able to fully recover. You know what that means, don’t you?”

Jun is quiet, calculating words, his and Mingyu’s and then his eyes drop to the floor, “He won’t be able to dance anymore.” The realization is so quiet, Mingyu’s almost worried that he heard wrong. He really wants to make it clear that his intent isn’t to sabotage whatever dream Minghao has, but to just prolong it a little longer so that he can heal and achieve that dream in full a while later. He wants to make sure that Jun knows they’re on the same team, but the black-haired man sounds defeated and sad. There’s clearly something left unsaid, something deep-seated and perplexing that will need a few nights of thought, but Mingyu doesn’t have time to worry that much about how Jun feels. He knows Jun is important to Minghao—just like Soonyoung and the rest of the team are important to Minghao—and even though Mingyu may be the least significant person in the room to Minghao, he’s determined to put punctuation to the situation for Minghao.
“Are you really going to let him continue like this and lead him to give up what he loves forever or are you going to make him take a break and recover?”

Jun unfolds his fist and runs a tired hand through his hair before giving a deep sigh, mumbling something that dissolves in the air before it reaches anyone’s ears.

Mingyu knows his answer.

More than he is happy that he got his message through to Jun—the most influential person in coolly persuading Minghao to rest easy—he’s happy that he didn’t have to fight. Oh, lord, that would have been so scary if he had to fight with Jun. He’s pretty sure Jun could kick his ass in no time flat with the way he moves and with how strong he is. He looks rather thin on the surface. At a glance, maybe the same as Wonwoo, but he also carries a surprising amount of strength. The way Jun moves also says he has some experience in martial arts, so Mingyu really dodged a bullet there. Whew. Sweet relief. He’ll have to start counting his blessings.

Opening the door to the locker room for him is Jun’s way of saying he understands that Mingyu did what he did. He would have done the same had he known how serious Minghao’s condition was, Mingyu can tell. They both have Minghao’s best interest in mind. Mingyu probably won’t admit that Jun’s aggression caught him off guard. After all, wasn’t it Mingyu who was accused of placing false aggressions on him? The murmurs in the hallways had led Mingyu to believe Jun was the softest, kindest, most reasonable person at the studio, but he supposes that Minghao can give people ulterior motives to stray from their common characters. He’s no different.

However, their walk back to the A3 studio isn’t as amicable as Mingyu would have liked.

They don’t talk and Jun doesn’t even spare him half a glance. Thankfully, he’s stopped by Yixing who motions him over for a chat, leaving Mingyu to walk the rest of the way alone. When he rounds the corner, he’s surprised to see the hallway empty of onlookers. However, it’s the room that some of these people have migrated to. A sharp-eyed man with burning red hair is holding Soonyoung down on his ass by his collar. His jaw is locked so tightly, his dimples are showing through. Soonyoung’s sitting with his legs outspread and Wonwoo nursing his bloody nose. Blondie Soonyoung is avoiding eye contact and pushing his boyfriend’s hands away. Opposite to them, a tall, broad man is standing above Minghao, running a hand through his bleached-yellow hair—he looks to have taken Jun’s place, physically creating a blockage between the two—while another man with ash-grey hair and thin limbs offers him a tissue. Looks like the two exchanged blows and not the good kind.

Wonwoo sees Mingyu enter and comes over to him, leaving the circle of people and the instructors who are trying to calm down the situation, “I tried, but they’re fast.”

“You’re off the team.”

The words are so sudden that all that follows is silence. They settle into the floorboards and brush up against the walls.

“I’m not off the fucking team, Soon, you can’t do that.” Soonyoung brushes off the redhead and comes over to squat next to Minghao, getting into his face again.

His rage has dissolved which is the only piece of good news they’re afforded, “I will literally walk out into that hallway and tell Yixing and he will put you out of a contest and a job, so cool it with the aggression.” Mingyu wants to say the same to him. Minghao wasn’t the one who was
hostile first and at this point, it doesn’t seem like he’s going to be the last.

“I’m still competing.”

Abruptly and unexpectedly, Soonyoung stands up and turns to Mingyu. Under his gaze, Mingyu freezes up. This kind of stare is unfamiliar and the polar opposite of the very bright and carefree Soonyoung he had met not too long ago who smiled with his eyes in crescents and let Wonwoo play with his hair. He wishes that Soonyoung would just drop the acid in his words and revert back to mischief like his boyfriend would have, but his intonations are so serious, “If Mingyu gives me the okay by the end of the month, then sure.”

“That’s not fair. It’s not like I can afford more sessions- Are you telling me you’d rather rework the entire choreography to fit five people instead of six just so I can’t compete-” Mingyu has a feeling that if Minghao makes Soonyoung say why he’s cutting him off, he won’t get very far. Evidently, Soonyoung seems like the type to punch you in the face before he can say how much he loves you. And if Soonyoung could get into a literal fist-fight with Minghao and if Jun was willing to shed his soft exterior to square up Mingyu for wronging Minghao, then, goddammit, Mingyu could do something for Minghao as well.

“I’ll meet with you after work. Everyday. For free. No catch.”

“No.”

Mingyu doesn’t expect to be met with opposition for his very kind and open offer to give PT sessions to Minghao on the fly for the next month without charge. Hell, that’s a better deal than he’d ever given anyone ever, his parents and grandparents included. For someone who can’t afford to be picky regarding his options, Minghao’s sure making it more difficult than it has to be.

Before Mingyu can even counter, Minghao clarifies his words, “I’m not going to live indebted to you.” He looks around at the room of friends and foes that stands still, “Especially not for something like this.”

The door opens again.

In the peripheral of his vision, he can see Jun roll his eyes and shake his head before grabbing his bag and waving everyone off; hitting the door again before it even has a chance to shut from him entering the room. Tonight’s been a long night for everyone. Jihoon, who is apparently carpooling with the lanky, model-esque dancer, quickly tags along, grabbing the straps of Jun’s bag to tell him to slow his stride. Chan and Vernon follow in succession; Vernon ruffling Minghao’s hair with a rough hand with exasperation before shouting his goodbyes and clarifying when the next meeting is.

“As much as I’d like to stay and fight with you some more, I’ve got an 8am tomorrow.” Mingyu’s just glad that most of the aggression has dropped from Soonyoung’s voice. It’s level now; steady and calm with only the slightest infliction of annoyance and wit, maybe a little intrigue, “You should take Mingyu up on the offer. It’s not that I don’t want to be on stage with you- I want that more than most things, but you’re just not…” Soonyoung seems to lose his words in a train of thought, opening and closing his mouth a couple times before biting his lips and staring at his friend. Minghao meets eyes with him, also grasping at nothing. If Mingyu didn’t know better, he’d think that Soonyoung is standing on the edge of tears. The blonde waits for the room to clear up a bit more, it’s obvious that he wants to say something that should only be heard between them.
Wonwoo gives Mingyu the cue. They follow the other instructors out into the hallway where most of them disperse to go home. The two PT’s stay behind, waiting with their backs to the glass wall. He’s fine giving Minghao and Soonyoung their space; they’re close and having such stressful and serious news dropped a month before a career-breaking competition can put a strain on any sort of relationship. He picks now to dwell a bit on his choice of words with Jun. He’s one of Minghao’s closest friends, if not his best friend, but Mingyu still had to go and pull the professional-card out of his ass and wave it in the air. It’s not like that’s a new thing. That’s how he usually convinces people to listen to his advice, but showing Jun a hand where he threatened the honesty in his friendship with Minghao was a little low. He’d never do that under normal circumstances, but he was in a fight or flight position. He came to the studio to check up on a patient, not be punched in the face and ruin friendships.

Mingyu still has his bag of cookies sitting next to him at his feet; he somehow doubts that they’ll be consumed tonight. Wonwoo is quiet, seeming a little embarrassed by Soonyoung’s behavior.

“He’s not usually like that.”

“I know.”

Wonwoo sighs and glances over his shoulder into the room, then looks back down at his hands, fiddling with his promise ring, “This competition is just really important to him, to them. The prize money is good and there’s a short-term contract deal that follows it where they’ll promote with several name-brand companies. The exposure is ridiculous for them as individuals and for the studio.” His voice is so low and soft that it almost sounds like he’s whispering, “I don’t want to speak for Soonyoung or try and justify his behavior, but that’s why they’re so pressed. Soon and Hao fight sometimes. They’re just push and push and push and sometimes communication and compromise get put to the side. With the team not at their best- well, Soon’s been working on not bringing that stuff home with him, but I guess it’s building up at work instead.” He faces Mingyu after noticing that the serious talk has the other a little uncomfortable in this unfamiliar setting. He sits up straight with an abrupt snap and forces a cheesy, toothy smile to surface that becomes genuine after a second or two. He speaks in a pattern akin to a mother bribing her toddler, “I promise if you saw Minghao and Soonyoung under normal circumstances, you’d be more jealous than this.”

Mingyu laughs.

Wonwoo laughs.

And from somewhere behind the glass, they can hear Minghao and Soonyoung laugh as well.

And the laughter stops immediately thereafter.

Wonwoo and Mingyu turn around to see why, but Soonyoung’s just patting a very disgruntled Minghao on the shoulder. He cups his face in his hands and shakes his head for him. Minghao shrugs the hands off and frowns. After giving him a friendly shove before he beams his signature smile and gathers his bag before walking out the door with a little more pep in his step, “Let’s go home, Woo.”

“Uh,” Wonwoo looks between the three, maybe addressing Mingyu verbally feels a little too stuffy right now, but he does nod and smile at him, “are we taking separate cars or-”

“Yep.” Soonyoung doesn’t wait for Wonwoo to catch up and takes long steps out of the
hallway. Before Wonwoo catches on to the plot or plan, his boyfriend is already halfway into the lobby.

There’s some sort of surprise on Wonwoo’s face and it quickly settles in as deviance and joy, “See you at work tomorrow.” He grips Mingyu firmly by the shoulder and shakes him quickly.

“Okay?” Mingyu looks at Wonwoo’s hand until he lets go, then follows his hand up his arm and to his face. He narrows his eyes, “See you tomorrow?”

Aside from Jeonghan returning to the clinic tomorrow, there’s nothing suspiciously different on the schedule. Things will return as they were with more people on staff which is fine because there’s been an influx of new patients recently (baby boomers, you know). Wonwoo’s acting weird and not for any good reason. Even as he walks backwards after Soonyoung, directing both his pointer fingers at Mingyu and then pointing towards the studio, he’s still got a sly grin on his face. Even as he rounds the corner and leaves, Mingyu can still feel him smirking. It’s then that Mingyu realizes that the studio is empty aside from a couple on-going classes in the back.

The hallway is barren and all that’s left is Minghao.

Minghao and Mingyu.

And all the other people in the lobby and the other studios, but they don’t matter.
“Hey.” Minghao opens the door, wad of paper still held to his nose. Mingyu looks up at him, “If you’re going to be sitting here, could you watch my stuff for a minute? I need to clean up.”

Mingyu nods as Minghao retreats around the corner into the bathrooms. He set his bag down next to Mingyu’s feet, an old black and white Adidas bag, worn from years of use with a tiny hole up by the left shoulder strap and a keychain on it with a few picture tags, a picture of him with his parents, a picture of his gorgeous dog, a few flags; America, Hong Kong, China, and the last one being Korea’s. Maybe Soonyoung got it for him during a trip. The only other accessories on the bag are several buttons from what appears to be meet-ups and conventions centered around choreography and performance art. There’s one from a corgi meet up in Oregon and one that just says ‘my dog > me > you’. Some are dinged and scratched up from their time weathering on the side of a well-loved bag. Some are pristine and new.

Minghao’s gone for almost five minutes before he comes back into the hallway, a wad of damp paper towels in his hand. His bloody nose had stopped, so why is he toting around paper towels? The auburn-haired man glances at Mingyu with straight, affirming lips and enters back into A3 with a full body push of the door. He’s tired, but he’s still bent over cleaning blood off the floor. Mingyu leaves their things; the bag and the cookies. He follows in after Minghao, kneeling next to him and asking for half the napkins to clean the other side of the dancefloor where Soonyoung had left a few speckles of blood in his wake.

Minghao stubbornly refuses.

Mingyu sighs.

It’s been a long-ass night and he’s just about done with everything. He especially doesn’t want to deal with Minghao’s salt at this hour and it’s not even that late. It’s only 7:30.

“Stop being so stubborn. I just want to help you clean up.”

“It’s fine.”

“You shouldn’t be bending down like that. It’s okay, just hand me a few.” Mingyu keeps holding his hand out until Minghao gives in and hands a few over. He may be a stickler for being clean and it seems like Minghao is as well because he cleans very thoroughly. Even still, there’s something kind of pitiful about watching a patient clean his own blood off the floor of his studio.

“Thanks.”

It’s genuine, but it sounds like it takes a lot of effort for Minghao to say it despite how curt it was.

“No problem.” Mingyu tosses the paper towels in the trash with an easy motion. He misses and hears the other man cough out a scoff before shaking his head and picking up Mingyu’s mess. At least he’s smiling now. “Are you going to take me up on my offer?”

“No.” Mingyu opens his mouth to argue for some reason, “If I can’t afford it, I don’t want it. Simple as that.”

He waits for Minghao to turn off all the lights and double check that all the sound equipment is off. Jihoon had left his headphones in the rush so Minghao locks them away into the storage space under the desk holding the soundboard before he comes to the door. Mingyu is already holding it
open for him and he steps through with hesitation, “Then consider it a gift?”

“I don’t accept gifts.” Minghao picks his bag up, slinging it over his shoulder with a heave. All his weight is on his right leg, his contrapposto stance says it all.

“Then an apology…” he debates his choice of words, “for high school.”

At the mention of high school, Minghao looks like he wants to leave.

Mingyu knows—for the millionth time—that high school was a bad time for them both. Minghao never saw the end of a particular group of drama kids picking fights with him and spreading that rumor around campus. Most of him, 95% of him, wants to apologize wholeheartedly for the ordeal. 5% of him wants Minghao to accuse him of actually doing something wrong. There were nights during junior year that he should have spent awake in guilt, but he slept because studying is hard, college entrance exams are hard, tests are hard. Mingyu shouldn’t have been afforded sound, sleep-filled nights when Minghao was nursing bruises and split lips in the dark of his bathroom that was only lit by the moon.

He should have stood up for him or gone to seek help from a higher power in the system. There were resources for that. Adults were willing to stop the bullying; all one needed to do was speak up, but for Minghao Xu no one ever spoke a word about it. That’s unjust. That’s not right. It wasn’t. Mingyu knows all about the names Minghao was called behind his back. He heard them in passing, in the corridors, behind the bleachers where people made out during games. No one dared say them to the dancer’s face aside from the few individuals that tormented him on the daily. And Minghao wasn’t the type to run. He’s got that sort of stupid, boyish pride to him. He would fight. He would get in trouble. And he’d often finish the school day hurt in one way or another. Mingyu knows it was bad.

There was even an instance where Minghao couldn’t perform, the vice president of the club took his place leading the team. It was the rally right before Spring break and at the apex of Minghao’s torturous junior year. His mother had called in to tell the school he was sick, but Mingyu knew that was a lie. Minghao had a neighbor on the soccer team who told them that Minghao couldn’t get out of bed that Friday; that he’d taken a metal rod to the leg on his way home from school on Thursday. He had too much pride to go to the hospital, but couldn’t even stand.

Mingyu’s guilt from that day stewed. It stewed and boiled harder than anything had ever hurt him before; as if he was hurting for them both. In reality, Minghao probably just popped a few painkillers and got back on his feet. He went to school on Monday ready to fight and the fight never came because Minghao had real friends. Friends that weren’t Mingyu. Friends that stood up for him and went to go give the bullies a taste of their own poison that weekend. After his friends found out, they never let Minghao go anywhere alone. It was always a pack of two or more. Even the soccer team saw notable strength increase in their teamwork when Field Day came around and all the clubs competed against each other. Of course, track and field won, but dance was a close second. Mingyu could only watch from the track team’s perch on the highest of outdoor bleachers as the dance team accepted second place and threw their leader into the air. It ached and it burned in his gut to know that he didn’t do anything to help. Mingyu was useless.

And he still desperately wants to fix his past.

But Wonwoo’s random words keep coming to mind and he thinks about building a better future.

“Can we just not bring up high school every time you want me to do something?” Minghao raises an eyebrow, frowning. He picks up his bag and makes way for the lobby.
“Okay. Then, how about this,” Mingyu follows him into the parking lot where the latter stops walking, “you come over to my place every day after I’m done with work. Bring dinner and we’ll call it even.”

“Wow. Forward.” Yeah, that probably wasn’t the smoothest way to propose a plan.

“Don’t take it the wrong way, it’s not like I have a private practice. My place is the best I can do. There are cameras outside if you’re worried about getting murdered or something.”

“Mingyu, you couldn’t hurt me even if you wanted to.” What does he mean?

“Hey, don’t you want another piercing?” The shot is made in the dark, but Minghao’s wide-eyed reaction tells Mingyu that he’s finally on to something.

If the math works out—which it should since it’s simple addition—then there ought to be a direct correlation between the number of trophies won and the number of piercings Minghao has. It was a detail he hadn’t paid much attention to since Minghao’s had his ears pierced since he’d first laid eyes on him, but the large increase in quantity from then till now is what grabbed Mingyu’s attention. That and maybe because so much silver in his ears made Mingyu’s nerves do silly things.

“My ride’s here.” Minghao clears his throat, “Soonyoung tried to stick me with you, but my roommate got back into town yesterday, so joke’s on him. You can get my number from Wonwoo.” He steps into the street and into a sleek BMW that pulls over. When the lights come on from Minghao opening the passenger door, Mingyu’s shaken that his roommate is so uniquely handsome.

What the actual hell, Minghao Xu.

It takes Mingyu a few minutes to realize that Minghao had essentially accepted his offer because he’s still caught up over the dark-eyed roommate who dresses too nice for someone who just exists for a living. He must have a good job somewhere outside of their town because nothing around here pays that well. Then again, if he’s paid so well, why would he need a roommate especially one that struggles financially as much as Minghao?

Maybe Mingyu’s imagination goes haywire, creating a fantasy about how Minghao is somehow indebted to his roommate, or maybe he’s halfway to the truth. A more reasonable explanation is that his roommate isn’t that rich and just likes to spend his money on showy things. That could be it.

Still, the amount of attractive friends that Minghao has now is stupid.
“His roommate?” Wonwoo sips on his morning coffee and takes a bite of the day-old cookies. It’s a shame that no one got to eat them fresh because they’re amazing, but it’d be more of a shame for them to go to waste. Jeonghan won’t be in until after lunch. He says it’s jetlag, Mingyu thinks it’s just because he’s taking advantage of someone covering the morning shift, “He should be out of town.”

“He said he came back over the weekend.”

Wonwoo shrugs, “I don’t know that much about him. I know he’s a local and that he’s a writer, but that’s about it.” Not that he’s ridiculously good looking? No? Okay.

“Are they a thing?” Mingyu tests. And fails.

Wonwoo catches on immediately and grins ear to ear, “A thing?” The next sip (slurp) of coffee is obnoxiously loud and drawn out, “Like, domestic?” Mingyu wanted to hear the word ‘dating’. ‘Domestic’ takes it a step further and he knows that Wonwoo’s just toying with him at this point, “I don’t know. Seungcheol comes to studio showcases sometimes. He doesn’t really talk to anyone aside from Minghao and Jihoon. For the last few months, he’s been stopping by more frequently.” He snickers, “I see Soon’s plan to have you drive Minghao home failed. He probably didn’t account for Seungcheol being in town.”

“Doesn’t he have his own car?”

“Oh, he does. It’s busted though. Seungcheol was supposed to fix it, but he went on vacation for a few weeks so Hao’s been taking the bus and carpooling with Soonyoung since he passes his apartment on the way home.” Mingyu doesn’t like several things about those words. One, the fact that Seungcheol is some artistic writer who looks super hot and can also fix cars is just unfair. Two, Minghao lives with this Fabio-esque fantasy man from bad romance novels. Three, Wonwoo probably knows Minghao better than he lets on. And four, who told Wonwoo he could give Minghao a nickname?

“Great.”

“You seem extra curious about him today. Did any part of Soonyoung’s plan work?” he smiles into the rim of his pantone mug.

Mingyu looks at him with tired eyes, “I’m not sure what Soonyoung is planning, but I’m not that curious-”

“With the bold offer you made last night, you sure made it seem like you care a whole lot.” He has Mingyu there. There’s no denying that the offer was out of pure bias, “So, Soon and I have a bet going. Winner gets back massages every night for the week.” Mingyu waits for the bet, trying to give Wonwoo the most frustrated eyes he can muster. He’s not very excited that his pressing matter of righting wrongs has somehow turned into a lovers’ feud, “Did you get his number?”

He rolls his eyes and almost his entire upper body in exasperation. These two will be the end of him; he wants to curse, “No. I didn’t. He told me to get it from you.”

“Damn.” Clearly, Wonwoo had faith in his non-existent confidence in front of Minghao, “But did you at least ask?”
“No. He just told me to get it from you.” He makes sure to enunciate the sentence with scrutiny just to ensure that the shorter man understood every word. Wonwoo winces and pinches his brow dramatically before pulling his phone out of his pocket and tapping here and there. He turns the screen to show Mingyu Minghao’s contact card to add into his own phone’s address book. Mingyu punches in the numbers meticulously, but most of his attention is on the big, smiley profile picture. That was a face he hadn’t seen in a long time if ever. “He looks happy.” Mingyu immediately wants to vacuum up the words he let slip.

Wonwoo flips the phone’s screen to take a look, forgetting about Minghao’s caller ID photo. He’s more focused on how frantic Mingyu is about his last comment, “Oh, this? I took it a couple years ago when they won their first competition together. Honestly, I only have Minghao’s number for emergencies and for when I can’t contact Soonyoung. We aren’t that close.”

‘Aren’t that close’ his ass.

Soonyoung and Minghao have been friends for at least a few years and Wonwoo expects Mingyu to believe that he knows more about him than he does. That sounds like a bunch of hoopla.

The afternoon rolls in quietly and Mingyu intentionally stays an hour later just to be there when Jeonghan meets Wonwoo. These two have made Mingyu’s work-life hell in their own unique and fun ways. Jeonghan, of course, asks about the ring, about the stars, and about why Wonwoo moved to town and is ecstatic to find out the reason why. The older male already finds Soonyoung to be the most precious thing when he asks to see a picture of him and Wonwoo cringes when he realizes that the only pictures he has of Soonyoung are incredibly personal ones. Not those kinds of personal ones, but the kinds where the blonde is spooned up in a mountain of blankets with only his head poking out or ones where Soonyoung has a flower crown on (to which Wonwoo admits that he’s the one who made it). All the other photos are of them together in different, odd places.

This is Mingyu’s first time seeing the photos as well.

After meeting Soonyoung in person, he’s not surprised to see that all the monumental photos aren’t taken at your typical tourist locations. There’s one from when they visited the nearby wildcat sanctuary and Wonwoo is in the background screeching from being attacked by a large locust. Soonyoung looks pleased. There’s one from when they went on a shopping trip to the city, but found a fork stuck in a tree in the IKEA parking lot and obviously had to take a picture with it. There’s one from their trip to Walmart last week when Soonyoung found an entire bouquet flattened on the pavement and decided to pose over it in a headstand. Wonwoo’s head barely makes it into the frame and it’s evident they had to take the picture several times to get it right.

“You two are disgusting.” Is Jeonghan’s only comment.

Mingyu couldn’t agree more. He also wants to curl into a puddle and vomit at the same time. Wonwoo and Soonyoung are grossly compatible and he can tell that before they’re a romantic couple, they are best friends.

The two get along well from what Mingyu can see before he leaves. Wonwoo and Jeonghan aren’t particularly loud or extroverted, so it works nicely in their workplace dynamic of calm deviance. Wonwoo probably isn’t the type to get super worked up over Jeonghan’s practical jokes and Jeonghan doesn’t mind having more serious chats on occasion. Joshua is happy to have Jeonghan back in the office since they’ve been working together since day one and the familiarity is welcomed back with open arms.
Jeonghan stops Mingyu before he can leave the lobby, dropping a little package in his hand.

When Mingyu gets into his car, he opens the tiny box to find that there’s a little bottle inside, filled with star-shaped sand and a few miniature shells of varying colors. The outside is painted with little waves and clouds. Mingyu’s almost revolted that there’s glitter on the lid where a pearl sits glued down. The micro-glitter rubs off on his fingertips just from holding it. Sure, he could have probably bought the same thing off Etsy for the same markup, but he appreciates the thought. Jeonghan knows that Mingyu isn’t the type for material things and because he doesn’t like clutter, large gifts aren’t the best. Arguably, buying Mingyu a tiny vile of sand instead of, say, a fridge magnet isn’t the best tourist-gift, but, hey, at least it isn’t a jar of air.

He hangs it up on his rearview mirror next to his high school and college graduation tassels.

He’s pretty sure that Jeonghan got the same thing for Wonwoo, too, knowing that there would be a new employee when he got back. Seokmin’s the one to receive the pretty fridge magnet and a little stack of photos that Jeonghan took of the coast. He always plays favorites. Joshua gets a bigger box, one that Mingyu would have felt troubled to receive. It’s about the size of a tissue box, but it sounded heavy and must’ve taken up quite some space in his luggage to transport home. Joshua just smiles up at him from his chair, spinning around to kick his legs out.

Those two have had some sort of cat and mouse game going on since Mingyu can remember. However, something has changed in their dynamic since Jeonghan’s returned from his vacation. For lack of better description, it feels like they’re both tiptoeing around each other, careful not to fight or bicker. He can tell that Joshua is happy to have his longest-standing employee back in the clinic, but today just feels off. They usually pal around and throw pens at each other, flick paper footballs across the lobby. Sometimes Jeonghan will put Joshua in a headlock and sometimes Joshua will lock Jeonghan in the breakroom when he naps during his lunch break. Today they’re being professional.

Jeonghan’s picking a piece of lint out of Joshua’s hair while he’s taking a call and straightening out his bangs, making some comment about how Joshua’s a mess if he’s not around. When Joshua hangs up, it seems like some air of normalcy has returned to them because the manager kicks Jeonghan in the butt after opening his present.

Mingyu never found out what was inside the box.
Chapter 15

Texting Minghao or calling Minghao.

Texting Minghao or calling Minghao?

*Texting Minghao or calling Minghao.*

Well, he has the third option to just *never* call or text and just pretend like yesterday didn’t happen, but there’s no way he can do that. It takes Mingyu almost an entire hour to get back to his complex and straighten up an already tidy place. It’s not showroom-organized. It’s a cozy place that looks lived in, but it’s clean and each and every surface is free of dust and grime. So, you can infer that cleaning up *nothing* shouldn’t have taken him an hour. Most of that time was spent unlocking his phone, looking at Minghao’s contact information, and locking his phone again.

He’s 85% nerves by the time it’s 4:30.

But, nevertheless, Mingyu sucks it up and hits ‘call’. And it rings. Each trill fills his silent flat for five seconds at a time until he realizes that no one is picking up and it goes straight to an automated voice messaging system.

“Hey, um, it’s Minghao Xu. I can’t get to the phone right now. Just, uh, text or leave a message or something and I’ll get back to you as soon as possible. Thank-” There’s a rustling in the recording, like someone’s blowing into the microphone or that the phone is dropped, “*Oh my god, put your pants back on and give me back- what are you-*” and it cuts off then beeps, waiting for Mingyu’s message.

He just hangs up.

Mingyu can’t help but laugh. He thought *his* voicemail recording was embarrassing and awkward, but Minghao’s got him beat. He’s really curious about the situation in the background and will be sure to pry about it if he has the chance. Regardless, he didn’t get his message across, so he unlocks his phone again to send a text. His fingers are sweaty and leave prints on his screen as he swipes over the glass.

’Hey, it’s Mingyu. I got your number from Wonwoo. If you’re free today, the address is 520 Lexington Street, Apt 2N. It’s on the first floor, so don’t worry about stairs. Let me know if we’re meeting up.’ Texting was a lot easier than calling anyway. He didn’t have to worry about repeating the address over the phone a million times and he didn’t have to worry about stuttering or sounding like a fool. Hitting send was easier than finding a closing to a conversation, but now he has to wait for Minghao’s response; if Minghao will respond.

At least he does that much, ‘Sorry. I was in a meeting.’ And the ellipses wave at the bottom of the screen, ‘What do you want to eat?’

Mingyu tries to flatten the grin that sneaks up on his lips. Minghao can’t even plainly type that he’s complied to their agreement of therapy and dinner. ‘Anything’s fine. Surprise me.’

‘Okay’ A very simple response, but the dots appear again after a few seconds, ‘What time do you want to eat?’

He looks up at the digital clock that’s been counting silently above his TV and small entertainment center, ‘6-ish?’
‘Any allergies?’

Aw, he *does* have common sense, ‘Nope :)*’

‘K. I’ll be over around 6 then.’ And it falls silent. Mingyu leaves him on read and wonders if he should go and take a shower. He doesn’t smell bad, quite the opposite and his hair looks rather nice today even though he didn’t go through the trouble of styling it. Wonwoo’s claim earlier that afternoon still rubs him the wrong way just because Jeonghan was there to say something about it. Mingyu used to only fuss over his hair on Mondays and Wednesdays when a majority of his patients were elderly women.

He liked their compliments and their fawning over how handsome he was (and the idea that they’d like to set him up with their grandchildren), but since Minghao had started coming into the clinic, he stopped caring and usually wore it down until Thursdays where he would rush to toss it together in a messy do. It looked disheveled and casual, almost not work appropriate and almost too club appropriate. Joshua hadn’t said anything about it at the time, but when Jeonghan asked why his hair was down, Wonwoo answered for him saying that he only wore it up on Thursdays because of ‘a special patient’. Jeonghan could only pry until his first appointment reigned him into the PT room, but that was long enough for Mingyu to get antsy.

He decides to shower anyway. It’ll kill some time.

After showering, it’s barely close to 6, so he wipes down the entire kitchen (twice) and puts some water on the stove to make tea.

As if arranged by cosmic forces, just as the kettle screams at him, making Mingyu jolt and drop his mug (yes, he was spacing out) and having the handle snap off on the counter, there’s a rapping at his door. With clumsy limbs, he tosses the pieces of ceramic into the sink and switches off the stove before pattering over to the door. He takes a deep breath and shuts his eyes just for a minute. He’s not sure why he’s so nervous. They’ve had four PT sessions already, well, maybe it’s because three out of four of those sessions ended in negative tension, but the point is that it’s not like *this* is the first time he’s seeing Minghao after a decade. He already crossed that bridge a month ago. He already broke up a fight between him and one of his closest friends. Meeting him again should be no big deal. Right? Right.

Minghao, for lack of better words, looks nice.

He’s got a red hoodie under a black leather jacket. His hair is topped with a loose beanie and the Ray-Ban glasses he has on makes him appear cuter than he should. At least he’s wearing his knee brace over his jeans. That’s a step towards recovery, “Oh, hey.”

“Hi.” Minghao just stands in the doorway before he wiggles the box of pizza that he’s balancing in his hands. Celestia’s! That’s a great choice. Mingyu remembers going there for lunch quite often in high school. Their pizza was the best and their staff was even better; often slipping Mingyu an extra-large slice.

“Sorry- Come in.” Mingyu steps aside to let Minghao through. He hands over the pizza, still shouldering his bag, and takes his shoes off before walking into the living room. He’s glad that habit carries over between different Asian cultures, “Did you just come from the studio?”
“Huh? Yeah.” Minghao just stands around awkwardly. He probably noticed that there’s not a thing out of place and doesn’t know where to set his stuff down or if he’s allowed to sit, but Mingyu’s really not that uptight about people moving his things or entering his spaces; he just likes cleaning in his free time.

“You can put your stuff down wherever. How’s your knee doing?”

Minghao finally comes over to Mingyu in the kitchen and sets his bag down over on the tile by the foot of the island instead of on the carpet. He takes a seat on one of the two stools there, “It’s okay.” He seems anxious, “Soonyoung spoke with our boss about the terms to this whole,” he moves his hands in the air, wiggling his fingers, “thing.” How vague. “He agreed, so I spent the last,” he flicks his wrist free of the oversized jacket sleeve, looking at his watch, “two hours bargaining with him about teaching.”

“And how did that go?” Mingyu sets the box in the oven where it can preserve its warmth until they decide to eat. He’s glad that the conversation seems casual so far. Maybe Minghao just didn’t like clinics. That idea never crossed his mind before now.

“Okay, I guess.” He tugs his sleeves back over his knuckles, “I’m allowed to keep the classes I’m teaching, but I have to find someone else to demo. I can still yell at them, but there’s no dancing on my end.”

“That’s probably for the better.” Minghao just nods in response, “What was with your voicemail?”

Mingyu grabs his red pepper grinder form the cabinet. None of that pre-packaged stuff in this household, “Oh, that.” He’s not sure because he only passes Minghao a glance, but it seems like he looks a little embarrassed, “Jun was spending the night at my place after an entire day of bar hopping. He smashed my phone earlier that day so I had to get a new one and record a new voice message.”

“But the pants?”

Minghao nods, cracking a wry smile, “Jun’s pretty wild when he’s drunk.” He looks at his phone to fill a gap in conversation, ”I should record a new one, but I feel bad getting rid of a memory like that.”

That’s a little endearing.

“So are you hungry? Do you want to eat or do you want to exercise first?”

“I’m fine with whatever. You said you wanted to eat at six, so I assumed you’d be hungry.”

Mingyu wasn’t that hungry, or if he was, he isn’t now, but the two decide to eat first. Mingyu pours them the tea and even though green tea and pizza is a weird combination, Minghao doesn’t complain or ask for a different drink when prompted. It’s a comfortable silence—Mingyu decides to throw it into that category—not an awkward one. Sitting up on the stools with Minghao feels a little odd since he usually eats on the couch, but it’s okay since he doesn’t want to bother him to get down and move. He wants to giggle every time Minghao picks up his teacup and blows on the hot tea, steaming up the lenses of his glasses, but he refrains. There’s little chatter about going to Celestia’s during their time at Oakdale, but it turns out that Minghao had never been. He says he’s had better pizza in the city, but who hasn’t had a better food experience in the city. Still, he makes sure to wrap up his comment by saying that Celestia’s is the best in town and puts Pizza Hut and Round Table’s to shame.
Mingyu reaches for a third slice and takes a bite just as Minghao decides that he’s full after two and sets down his paper plate. The fact that he asked the place for paper plates is probably a habit formed from college and not ever wanting to do dishes unless absolutely necessary. Mingyu won’t complain. He doesn’t want to do dishes either.

Without his mouth full of hot ‘za, there’s little left for Minghao to do other than talk.
Chapter 16

“How did you know about the piercings?” Did Mingyu knowing eat at him?

Currently, at least from Mingyu’s visual inference, Minghao has six piercings on his left ear and seven on his right. They’re well decorated with tiny studs and some classy, geometric pieces that Mingyu particularly likes, “I pay attention to things.” He swallows and wipes his hands and mouth, “You got that one,” he points to Minghao’s left lobe, a little up from the one front and center. He already had the standard two piercings coming into school, “after that contest junior year. Your name was in the newspaper. And you got that one,” he points to his lowest helix on the right, “at the beginning of senior year when you and your team skipped school to play hooky in the city.” He drops his hand back into his lap, “I presume that was another contest since you guys were in the papers again.” Mingyu squints, trying to draw out his memories as well as he can and points up at his right side again, “And that one too, but I don’t actually remember when.” Another bite of pizza is taken and swallowed.

“Wow, I’m not sure if I should be creeped out or not.”

Mingyu has the boldness to even look smug.

Minghao just shakes his head, “What about the rest?”

“I don’t know about the rest, but counting the trophies in your studio, I assume that’s—what-like, eight more victories since high school.”

“Eighteen, actually, but some of them didn’t heal right and I took out my snakebites and tongue ring after I decided they weren’t cool.” Mingyu thinks that snakebites and tongue rings look cool, “Plus having that many piercings would look pretty crazy if I filled them all. I also work with kids, so I think this amount is probably more appropriate for work.” Minghao drops his napkin into the plate, “Midway through college I decided that the sides didn’t matter, but up until that point, the right side was for solo-victories and the left was for group and team wins.”

After Mingyu throws the plates away, washes his hands, and wrestles the dishrag away from Minghao who had started wiping the island clean, they start on stretches. Halfway through, Minghao asks if it’d be easier if he had shorts on instead of his restricting jeans. Mingyu agrees and shows him the bathroom so he can change, the latter emerges in a minute with black gym shorts and thermal wear underneath. It’s pretty chilly after all, “Are you cold?”

“Hm?” Minghao looks up from putting his jeans into his bag, “Not really.” It was a dumb question since he had voluntarily taken off his jacket and hoodie an hour ago.

Their stretching continues with the resistance band. Mingyu’s just guiding him through the motions. In all honesty, these are all things that Minghao could probably do at home, especially if he has a roommate to spot him and help him hold the resistance band in place. But Mingyu’s a professional who can adjust the exercise immediately after receiving feedback from his patient. He’s better for Minghao than the roommate would be.

“How do you feel after a day of rest?” Mingyu sits back and Minghao follows suit, not crossing his legs, but sitting with them bowed out.

“Restless.” He chuckles, “But better.”

“Good. I was really worried that the slip yesterday might have made it worse.” Minghao’s
eyes look up at him, big and round and Mingyu wonders what he said wrong.

Before he can apologize for bringing up yesterday’s events, Minghao’s already speaking, “About yesterday.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“It’s okay. I don’t think you’re any less of a dancer for messing up. Everyone messes up sometimes.”

“Not that, well, yes that, but also about the fight with Soonyoung.” Minghao scratches behind his ear, “Um, that was just really unprofessional. And after fighting with you during our sessions and showing that kind of attitude at my own workplace… I don’t want you to think that I’m just a giant asshole who has some quarrelsome complex.”

It could be wishful thinking, but maybe Mingyu is right when he’s convinced that Minghao did spend a lot of time thinking about how his actions affected this PT that he hasn’t seen since high school. Maybe Mingyu’s opinion might actually matter to the dancer to some degree. Aside from being a very painful thorn in Minghao’s side ten years ago, Mingyu had figured that he didn’t mean much outside of being another NPC in Minghao’s quest to become the world’s coolest choreography expert.

His opinions are quickly changing, “Could’ve fooled me.” He singsongs.

It’s a joke, but Minghao’s expression snaps up at him with a serious weight that is a little concerning, “Really, really, Mingyu,” he emphasizes, “I’m not actually rash or irresponsible- I’ve grown a lot since high school. It’s just that his whole knee thing is really fucking with me mentally.” Minghao holds his tongue between his teeth, handpicking words that could tone down the severity of his previous word choice. He speaks again after a deep breath, letting it linger in the air surrounded by silence, “The prospect of me enjoying what I’m doing can easily lead to me never being able to do it again… it’s really conflicting and under normal circumstances, I would listen to you, I would stop dancing even for a little bit, but-”

“I get it, the Finals- this whole competition is super important to you and your team.” Mingyu puts a hand on his shoulder, hopefully, it comes through as support instead of him trying to stop him from rambling, “Wonwoo told me that it’s a big deal.” Minghao’s eyes spend more time on the floor than they do on Mingyu, “It’s okay. I know you- I know that you don’t mean to be so prickly. I understand, but Minghao, you have to take recovery seriously. Try your best for the next three weeks.”

Minghao nods and nods and nods; not eagerly or in detest, but just like he’s processing something and is taking some time to compute an answer befitting of something that Mingyu wants to hear.

But Mingyu beats him to the punch, “I really was worried when you fought with Soonyoung.”

“Yeah, I was too. We both have martial arts training, so if those punches were dealt with intent, we might have ended up in a walk-in.” Minghao licks the inside of his top lip, “My tooth actually cut into it.” He tilts his head up so Mingyu can see the red sore. If Mingyu hadn’t seen the wound, he might have thought more about those lips.

It looks like it probably hurt for a while and is still tender, “Ouch.” He sympathizes. Eating
delicious pizza with a wound in your mouth probably makes it slightly less enjoyable, “Do you guys fight a lot?”

Minghao sits up, “Actually, I wanted to say something about that, too.” Mingyu gives him his attention, “Yes. We do fight, but it’s usually in private over text or something like that. Soonyoung’s one of my best friends and I completely understand his position in all of this mess- Look, punching each other in the face was probably not a work-appropriate way to handle things, but between us, it’s not as serious as you might think it to be.” His wording is awkward, like he’s writing out a speech or paper on the spot, “Um, yeah, we had a little talk afterwards and cleared things up. He’s really a good person, really- I just don’t want you to think poorly of him.”

Mingyu smiles with as much earnest intent as he can muster, “No, I believe you.” He’s still not convinced that punching your friend in the face is just a casual thing you can do, but to each their own, “I met Soonyoung once before the studio and I’m also co-workers with Wonwoo, so, yeah. I’m going to assume that Wonwoo isn’t dating a psychopath.”

Minghao nods and offers a shy grin, “Good. I don’t know what kind of tall tales Wonwoo and Soonyoung have told about me, but I trust they aren’t too bad considering…” What, that you’re here right now and that I’m helping you? That thought makes Mingyu a little warm inside.

They wrap up the session with silence, maybe a couple coughs and chuckles to clear up the air, but something has changed now that Mingyu knows that he’s not the only one concerned about the opinions of the other party.

“You’re chipper today.”

That’s really the only thing Mingyu remembers hearing at work. He doesn’t even remember who said it, if it was a patient or a friend. But he is. He’s very chipper and in the mood to do some good. Mingyu leaves work to buy lunch for the homeless man who spends his days begging on the corner of Cherry and Hassleforth and bakes cookies for the single-mother family of four that lives above him. He writes a check for a generous donation to the local no-kill animal shelter, a hefty chunk of this month’s paycheck, and he pets every single dog in that animal shelter. Mingyu whistles when he walks and skips every crack in the sidewalk. He waters all his plants and even sings while doing it.

And Mingyu never sings.

‘Are you coming over today? Same time?’

‘What do you want to eat?’ Mingyu lays down on his couch, propping his too-long legs up on the armrest. He doesn’t really care what Minghao feeds him.

‘Anything is fine :’

‘Anything?’

Minghao comes over a little after 6. He apologizes for being late, but the restaurant messed up the order. He is less stiff today and Mingyu remembers to step aside and let him in instead of staring at him. Today’s outfit is a little more casual, just a black jacket over a white shirt and the same shorts and thermal combo, but Minghao’s clothes always have these tiny details; a ring here, a chain here, a useless zipper here—Mingyu’s not sure if they’re DIY or if he bought them like that, but it makes
him look fashionable and cool.

He brings butter curry and naan today.

Their session goes well, without any arguing aside from Minghao commenting on how Mingyu’s apartment smells more like a grandma than it does normal-people candles. Mingyu’s not sure what that constitutes, but the next session Minghao brings him a cup-sized blue candle labeled ‘Nights By The Lake’ in addition to falafel and pita sandwiches. He’s doing a great job so far of picking exceptional food from around town. They clearly share a similar taste.

“I don’t know what you like, so I’m just going to keep bringing different things until you tell me.”

And Mingyu’s just fine with that.
Chapter 17

Mingyu doesn’t really celebrate Halloween. He doesn’t get trick-or-treaters since his apartment isn’t on the main street and while he did go out when he was a kid. They never trick-or-treated in his neighborhood. His parents would always take him and his friends to the richer areas on the other side of town; the Riverside side of town. As the years passed, Mingyu would trade his parents candy for time on his Xbox as he got older. In high school, he’d just buy his own candy and hang out at a friend’s house. College wasn’t much different other than the excess amount of alcohol and shortage of clothing, but now as a full-fledged adult and professional physical therapist, he doesn’t have much reason to treat Halloween as different from any other day of the year.

So, he’s surprised when he comes into work Monday morning to see Joshua’s desk decorated with little pumpkins and fake spiderwebs. The customer service desk is littered with plastic spiders and chains of alternating black and orange construction paper and above it all is a sparkly, dollar-store banner reading ‘Have A Spoopy Halloween’. He’s not sure what to make of it. Joshua didn’t come off as the type to celebrate, much less decorate.

When the cat-eyed manager looks over at him, staring with his eyebrows knitted and questioning, he simply answers, “It was already like this when I got here.” Maybe one of the people from imaging decided to get active about their Pinterest DIYs and execute them on Joshua’s workstation. It doesn’t look like Joshua has the heart to take down the decorations prematurely since Halloween is tomorrow, but it doesn’t look like he’s excited about digging for pens amongst pocket-sized plastic skeletons and bat rings hanging from the polyester spiderwebs, “And I’m not complaining because they left a giant bowl of chocolate behind the counter.”

Mingyu’s over in a second.

While he doesn’t really have a sweet-tooth and doesn’t really like hard candy like Jolly Ranchers or Tootsie Pops, he’s a sucker for a good ol’ Kit-Kat. Reese’s come in a close second, followed by Twix and Snickers. It looks like Joshua might be hoarding all the Milky Ways over by the phone, he can see the silver and purple wrappers poking out behind the chord, but whatever. Milky Ways are second tier chocolates anyway.

A hand whaps onto his shoulder as he feels an arm weigh behind his neck, “Chocolate for breakfast?” Wonwoo sounds delighted. He’s been wearing some ‘special’ ties for the last few days, maybe a week. Joshua and Mingyu don’t have the heart to tell him that they’re hideous and garish especially against his neutral-colored wardrobe. Wonwoo is usually all pastels, taupe, and khaki. These saturated black, orange, purple, and green ties are just the worst. Jeonghan—who Mingyu is convinced has a heart the size of eight dimes stacked—has commented on how those ties make him want to burn his eyes out. But the ties aren’t Wonwoo’s, they’re Soonyoung’s.

Wonwoo doesn’t even wear ties normally, but Soonyoung loves Halloween and buys a stupid amount of Halloween themed ties every year when they go on sale the day after. He seriously buys two of every unique print just so he and Wonwoo and match when they go to work. And, no, Soonyoung doesn’t wear his ties like a normal human being does around the neck because that would be to vanilla of him. He wears them as belts or wrapped around his wrist, maybe tucked into a back pocket or something. Wonwoo’s mentioned that he sometimes goes to work with them tied on like a headband; like a sober drunk. Jeonghan started to think it was cute, but by the time Wonwoo got to the part where they both wore the same tie to work, he wanted to vomit. Mingyu as well. His friend is just so grossly whipped that it’s both endearing and disgusting in the sweetest way.
“We’re adults, we can eat candy for breakfast.”

He doesn’t want to say he was inspired by the imaging department’s Halloween décor, but he stops by Safeway to buy a pumpkin on his way back from work. This late into the month, he’s not able to find anything amazing or beautifully round, so he settles for a kind of lumpy thing with a couple nicks and scratches. It doesn’t matter, it’s not for a competition or anything. It’s just for Minghao. If he was going to be festive, then Minghao would have to be forced into the festivities too.

The dancer isn’t thrilled when he shows up at Mingyu’s apartment with chakalaka and pap. Mingyu seriously doesn’t understand how he’s able to find these hidden ethnic gems, but when he looks at their names, he’s sure he’s seen them in passing around town. Maybe he just never went out of his way to sit down and try them while Minghao probably has to dig around to find ones that Mingyu’s never had.

Apparently, Soonyoung is a festive child at the studio.

It’s not a surprise given that he’s been making Wonwoo wear his spooky ties to work, “He dyed his hair orange. I’m pretty sure it’s so that he could look like an actual pumpkin.” Minghao takes out his phone to show Mingyu a picture of Soonyoung posing with a cute inflatable ghost that’s taking up most of the lobby. Vernon’s smile in the background says ‘help me’. Soonyoung’s hair is indeed orange, but not like a real pumpkin, more like a clipart pumpkin. It’s seriously highlighter-sunset orange.

“Why.” It’s more a comment than it is a question, but it makes Minghao laugh and shake his head.

“He just really loves Halloween. Did Wonwoo tell you about the tie thing?” Mingyu nods as he takes the takeout containers from Minghao and plops them onto the counter, “Soon told me that the first year they started dating, he and Wonwoo wore matching costumes, but a different costume to every party they had to go to.”

“That’s,” Mingyu looks up from unpacking the food, “really extra and kinda gross.”

“It’s absolutely atrocious, but look where they are now. So precious.” He puts his hand over his heart and shakes his head. The sarcasm is so heavy in his voice that Mingyu doesn’t notice the corners of his mouth lifting upwards, “So why the pumpkin? I didn’t take you for the Halloween-y type.”

“I’m not usually, but I thought we could use it for weightlifting or something.” He keeps an eye on the food that’s reheating and one eye on Minghao who walks over to the sizeable pumpkin and picks it up, not with ease, but not with a struggle either. He rolls it around with both arms, but it’s size and shape make it a little difficult to maneuver.

“Am I supposed to squat this or?” Mingyu shrugs, “You can’t shrug, you’re the PT.”

“I didn’t think you’d actually humor me.” He separates the food into two bowls and two plates. Okay, more dishes than normal, but whatever.

Minghao comes over when he smells the food, “Have you had it before?” Mingyu shakes his head. It looks really appetizing, though, “Me neither, but it had good reviews. It’s only been open a couple months.”
Praise Yelp, this food is amazing and Mingyu doesn’t even know what it is.

By this time, Mingyu realizes that their arrangement is a little silly. Okay, a lot silly. For the money that Minghao spends on gas and food, he could probably afford more than one session a week back at the clinic. Equally silly is that Minghao can do everything he’s doing at Mingyu’s place in the comfort of his own home. Mingyu should have told him to go back to the clinic where they have some actual equipment instead of all these homebrew exercises, but Mingyu will never bring it up. He knows he’ll never tell Minghao to do the smarter and cheaper thing because having him over for an hour or two a night has been surprisingly enjoyable so far.

“Hey, I won’t be coming over tomorrow,” Mingyu sets his spoon down. He has half a mind to ask Minghao why, but he also doesn’t think he’s in a position to pry. Minghao’s an adult and doesn’t need to explain himself, so the following clarification is just courtesy, “Soonyoung convinced Yixing to throw this Halloween party for the students, so us instructors have to chaperone. It’s nothing big, but a lot of the kids are showing up since their parents think the studio is safer than them going out at night.”

“That’s fine. No strenuous stuff though, okay?”

“I’ll be putting up decorations and guarding a punch bowl, I think it’ll be okay.” Doting on Minghao like a mother is unnecessary, but he doesn’t know if Minghao’s one of those chaotic patients.

Every once in a while, they’ll have a Chaotic Patient.

It’s the clinic equivalent of someone who is a Chaotic Good or Chaotic Neutral. It’s a patient who does incredibly well for an extended period of time, but on some days they just say ‘fuck it’ and do something in lieu of their old habits for the sake of a good time. It usually results in them backtracking a week or two in progress although they often mention that it was well worth it for whatever they could do with that one day of leniency. Minghao may very well be the type given that he essentially did that during their first month of sessions.

“Sure, sure, that’s what you’re telling me, but knowing you, you’ll probably want to throw down on the dancefloor with Soonyoung or something.” Minghao raises an eyebrow at him and chuckles into his next bite of food.

“Don’t need to worry about that.” He swirls his food around, “I’d rather the night pass without Jun and Soon breathing down my neck.”

“Are they keeping you off your feet?”

“Oh, my god.” He sounds exasperated, putting his hand to his forehead and then gesturing towards the ceiling with a grunt before folding his arms again and picking up his spoon, “Out of habit- okay? Out of habit, today, I got up to demonstrate. You know, like instructors do because that’s what I’m paid for. Soonyoung was in the hallway and caught me in his peripheral. He seriously dropped what he was doing and came into my practice room and swept me off my feet. Then he told my students to report me to him if I danced again! It’s ridiculous.” He thinks he sees Minghao pout as he rubs his temple before jabbing his fingers at him, “Thanks a lot, Mingyu.” The heavy coyness both satisfies and pricks at Mingyu.

“Did anyone actually report you?”

“Yes!” Minghao drops his spoon in mock anger. He’s probably more frustrated than anything else, but part of him also finds humor in it. Mingyu can tell by the way he staggers laughs into the
next sentence, “I had three students report me. Those kids are fucking snitches.” He laughs normally after the last quip. He doesn’t mean it. Mingyu understands that Minghao’s one of those teachers that loves their students and job more than most things.

Their session goes rather smoothly and it’s kind of funny to see Minghao lug a pumpkin around the flat instead of the normal weights. He complains more than usual today, but it’s nothing malicious, most of it is just little things like how ugly the pumpkin is or how he’s disappointed that Mingyu bought a pumpkin but forewent the only good part about Halloween; the candy. Mingyu has an equal amount of faux complaints to add to the banter, like how Minghao’s form is terrible from holding the grip-less pumpkin and how he could work on his footwork a little more. Menial things. Things that they both know Minghao has no control over.

Overall, it’s a good night and Minghao leaves a little after Mingyu has the thought of carving the pumpkin. They don’t. That’d be a little too forward for whatever place their relationship is at now. He’s not sure if they’re on completely good terms yet or if they can be considered friends yet, but he likes that they’re no longer choking on tension. It’s breathable; whatever space they’ve made for themselves. It’s bearable and may be comfortable.

The last thing he asks is something menial like what Minghao is going to dress up as for the party. To which he plainly says, “Nothing.”

“You can’t not dress up, especially if there are kids.”

“Do you think I could get away with wearing a plumbob and saying I’m a Sim?”

“No.”

Minghao tells Mingyu that he’ll think of something, but that he doubts that there’s enough time to scrounge together an adequate costume. Minghao’s never really dressed up for All Hallows Eve, not even when he was a kid, so this would be a first. Offhandedly, he mentions that his roommate or Jun might have a costume he could borrow. When questioned about Halloween-afficionado, Soonyoung, Minghao fervently stops his thoughts, stating something about not knowing where Soon’s costumes go or what he does with them in the off-season. Mingyu wants to offer as well, but then he remembers that all his old costumes have probably been donated years ago. His mother is good like that. So, in the end, Minghao leaves empty-handed.
Chapter 18

At work the next day, Mingyu decides to switch it up and wear a navy blue button up and black slacks, a big change from his usual neutral tones. He even goes so far as to add the most-orange tie he owns which is something just shy of peach. Generally, everyone kept their outfits quite light since it matched well with the calm color scheme of the clinic. Dressing up in darker shades was rare and usually left to days when their pastels were in the laundry. It seems like he wasn’t the only one with the idea. In fact, everyone seems to have come to work sporting darker colors, Joshua wearing a loose black button-up with the first few buttons undone to show off a thin, red leather choker. It’s probably not work appropriate, but Mingyu’s more surprised that he owns an accessory even this moderately kinky. Then he spots the red devil horns atop his head.

For a god-fearing, church-going man in his late-twenties, dressing up as a demon to work at a family clinic is probably some breach in moral conduct.

When he turns, he sees that Wonwoo’s final tie for the spooky season is replaced with a black dog collar. His hair is styled and spiked up messily to blend in with a pair of clip-on ears and Mingyu’s pretty sure that he’s wearing smoky eyeliner. He can’t really tell because the shorter man swerves past him and towards the breakroom, clearly spending more time getting ready today instead of making his morning cup of joe—the importance of caffeine to the working professional really ought to be monitored. In his professional opinion, Wonwoo looks really attractive in fitted black clothes with an oversized, grey knit cardigan. It’s a professional opinion. Absolutely professional. Is he a werewolf, a dog, a furry? Who knows, but he should come to work with his hair up more often.

Mingyu’s starting to regret not dressing up in the slightest other than wearing dark colors because even deviant Jeonghan dresses up, “This seems… uncharacteristic.”

“Are you telling me that this costume isn’t completely telling of my character?” The audacity of a man who comes to work dressed in all pressed white with some organza cloth shit streaming out from under his plush, cream sweater; an angel by claim as if the golden halo on top of his head wasn’t telling enough.

“Yeah, okay, Satan.”

Joshua passes him a glance before flinging a paper shuriken at Jeonghan’s face. Mingyu’s almost glad that Joshua has horrible aim and hits Jeonghan’s chest instead because he knows the senior PT would make a big deal out of being hit on his moneymaker, “With my grace, I’ll forgive you.” Sassy. It seems like these two want to play into their characters today, “Where’s your costume, Mingyu?”

“I didn’t know we were dressing up.” Admittedly, all their costumes look like last-minute, closet-casual excuses for ‘costumes’ so he doesn’t feel too bad about missing out on the memo.

“It’s Halloween, Mingyu.” Joshua states matter-of-factly.

“And?” He just wants to get into the breakroom and prepare, maybe steal a few more pieces of candy from behind the counter. Joshua had hidden all the chocolate from their patients, stating some wives’ tale about chocolate being bad for healing joints.

“Give me a minute.” The manager leaves his position at the front desk and crosses over to the imaging side of the clinic. Of course, they ought to have some emergency costume box if they oversaw Halloween-bombing the whole building. Mingyu waits patiently, watching with pleading
eyes as Wonwoo reenters the breakroom without him, giving him a cheeky wink before he dips out of sight.

Joshua returns three minutes later with a can of silver hairspray and a headband, “Tie off and bend over.”

“Straightforward.” Mingyu earns a slap to the arm before he complies and leans forward, lowering his head. He undoes his tie and slips it off, tossing it blindly onto Joshua’s desk. Suddenly he’s surrounded by a cloud of sticky spray. He appreciates that Joshua has at least enough heart to make sure his darker clothes don’t get stained, but not enough heart to make sure he doesn’t choke.

After he coughs for a solid minute and straightens his posture, Joshua reaches up and makes quick work of undoing the top three buttons of his shirt, fiddling with the starched collar to make him look disheveled. He unceremoniously crowns him with the headband and takes a Sharpie to his face, giving him a thumbs up before attending to a call that comes in. This better wash off. He notices that there’s a second headband with what he believes to be a rainbow unicorn horn and white ears. He’s glad he dodged the bullet on that one; it must be left for Seokmin. Mingyu doesn’t know what’s on his own headband until he sees his reflection in the breakroom mirror, wrinkling his nose at the crooked whiskers. He needs to fix his hair; he needs to fix everything.

“Not too bad, kitty cat.” Wonwoo is sitting by the coffee machine, waiting for the day’s first brew.

“Dogs can’t have caffeine.” Mingyu snaps back as he grooms himself, pulling his bangs up and brushing them to the side. Silver already looked weird on him with his warm skin tone, not to mention it was the tacky, spotty, spray paint kind. This looks really half-assed.

The door opens, “Hey, mortal Mingyu, could you stay an extra two hours to take care of a couple patients that rescheduled? Mrs. Harrison wants to bring both her kids in before they leave for the weekend.”

“It’s Tuesday.” Joshua just shrugs. Well, Mingyu doesn’t have to meet up with Minghao anyway, he might as well get used to working longer hours at the clinic since that’s the plan for the foreseeable future, “Sure, why not.”

“Great.” He shuts the door behind him.

“Ah, right, the Halloween party.” Wonwoo grins when Mingyu looks caught. It takes him a moment to remember that Wonwoo’s Soonyoung is the cause for said party. He hadn’t noticed Wonwoo’s blue and gold contacts earlier, but now that they’re within a few feet of each other and Wonwoo’s not desperate for a hot drink this chilly morning, he can see that his nails are painted black as well, “That’s why you’re not so pressed to see Hao today, right?”

“I’m not usually pressed to see Minghao.” That earns a scoff, “Are you and Soon matchy-matchy this year?”

Wonwoo’s lips press into a shy smile and he nods before laughing, “So, he told you.”

“Will Soon be mad if he doesn’t dress up?” Mingyu laughs, deciding to take a cup himself.

Wonwoo glances down at his phone, “He’ll be salty, but probably not mad.” Pocketing it when Mingyu sets the pot down to pour himself a mug (a new mug that has a little black bat on it), “But he knows Soon loves Halloween, I’m sure he won’t disappoint. He’s dressed up other years-half-assed costumes with minimal effort like us, but he still dressed up.”
“Hey, this isn’t too bad. You even said so.”

“Yeah, it’s better than Minghao’s stupid Sims costume that he wears every year.” Oh, so that’s why he already had a plumbob in his closet.

Lunch is well-deserved.

Mingyu’s not sure why he’s so hungry today, but he just is. He and Wonwoo (and Jeonghan) got plenty of compliments at work today which was flattering and all, but Mingyu’s still self-conscious about his hair not looking right. It’s not his fault. He’s used to waking up and looking good; straying from routine and stepping out of what was comfortable made him a little uneasy.

They opt to go to a place they’ve already been and order something different on the menu, but they just order soup. A lot of soup. And bread. A lot of bread. It’s cold.

It’s so cold that Mingyu even found an opportunity to light that candle that Minghao brought him last week. He, personally, doesn’t like candles which is why his apartment isn’t filled with any. He can appreciate the aesthetic of them and how calming they are, but they don’t offer much outside of ‘there’s a tiny fire on my desk’. Mingyu lit it while his hands grew numb from writing up checks for bills; too lazy to bring the heater to his desk from the bathroom. He had crossed his fingers over the small flame any time they got too stiff. It smelled familiar, kind of like an ex-boyfriend. If he had to categorize it, it was more of a unisex or masculine scent. Mostly sweet, a little fruity, a little salty. It almost smelled like cologne.

It caused him to contemplate and stew. He went into his office looking to finish some adult-y money things, but left filled with complex feelings. The thing that can’t sit right with him is how much the candle’s scent reminded him of someone from the past. He can’t put a finger on it, so maybe it isn’t just one, but he’s certainly inhaled something close to that scent from his sheets before. Maybe it’s just a generic scent. It doesn’t smell bad, it’s quite pleasant, but despite the day’s festivities, Mingyu’s not feeling great right now. He wants to keep talking and he wants to take his mind off of the past.

Wonwoo’s spent most of the day on his phone since it dings every few minutes with a new message and Mingyu’s just slightly crestfallen that he doesn’t have much of his attention today. Their conversation isn’t bad, but it’s not like they’re talking about anything super interesting since he keeps glancing down to answer texts.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry.” He sighs, “Soon just keeps pinging me. He’s super excited because all the staff members came to work with costumes on, even Jihoon who never dresses up showed up at the studio to surprise him.” He laughs to himself, “Look, Jun’s running around with this elephant onesie on.” He flips his phone over to show Mingyu a short clip of said pretty-boy sliding across an entire studio floor on his knees with his neon-yellow pajama costume. He can hear the audio top out when Soonyoung starts shouting something about setting up rolled-up yoga mats to bowl with—using Jun as the bowling ball. He doesn’t see many familiar faces in the video aside from the three other instructors that helped break up the fight a week ago, “I don’t think they’ll get much dancing done today.”

“Looks fun.”
Chapter 19

Despite digging in his memories, Mingyu doesn’t really remember Halloween in school. He remembers it out of school and he remembers trick-or-treating in polyester superhero costumes, toting his pillowcase around and upgrading to a plastic pumpkin come third grade. High school, however, was slightly different. He only went out one of the four years and that would be his freshman year, but after that, he only dressed up to school. Each of those years he’d gone as some variation of vampire or werewolf. That stuff was popular back then and it was an easy and cheap costume to piece together. He’d let the girls in his friends’ group have their fun with the makeup during break period or before the first bell rang and he’d keep it on until he had to wash up before practice.

He doesn’t remember Minghao dressing up aside from senior year when he came to school in normal clothes, but by lunch, there was talk of Minghao Xu transforming into—quite possibly—the cutest human being to ever set foot on Oakdale’s campus. He’d lost a bet within the dance team, but what it sounded more like was that they had elected their captain for a Halloween makeover and Minghao was outvoted. He probably just did it to humor his kids, but, to Mingyu, it was plain to see that he wasn’t very comfortable walking around with some ridiculous, expensive-looking robe on with stars dangling from the cloth. Someone even outfitted him with a headpiece that was covered in glitter and fairy lights. Instead of his black hair, he sported a fawn-colored wig, curled and cut short. It was an interpretive take on a sandman or something in lieu of that. He can tell that Minghao was also whisked away by his friends at lunch so they could pack shimmer and sparkles under his eyes.

Minghao’s revenge had been dropping sand into all of their pockets in passing. Mingyu remembers hearing screams of disgust ringing through the hallways and hearing Minghao’s feet pound in full stride in the moments following the sand attack. Mingyu and a couple other popular kids won best costume time after time, but Minghao gave everyone a run for their money senior year.

His curt and short answer from earlier makes Wonwoo more interested in what’s on his mind, so he tucks away his phone, “Sorry.” He breathes out through a smile. There’s sincerity in Wonwoo’s voice and he locks his screen and pockets the phone again, “Is there something on your mind? Something you wanted to talk about?”

“No particularly, why?”

“You’re doing that thing again.” Mingyu immediately spits out his lip and unfurrows his brow.

They spend the rest of lunch with some small talk. Wonwoo riddling off tales about working in the city and telling Mingyu how nice it is in a smaller town with fewer people; how he doesn’t mind if he has nothing to do during his time off because he has a collection of books he’s finally been able to crack open. He shares a story about a time he’d rode a bike to work, but a squirrel got caught in his tire as he had passed the city park; that he’s glad that town-squirrels seemed to have more common sense than the glorified, city tree-rats who occasionally pick-pocketed tourists.

He mentions something about never getting trick-or-treaters since his apartment used to be on the 15th floor and no kids want to wait for an elevator just to get a little candy. Wonwoo complains a little bit about Soonyoung and how he had bought enough candy for every kid in their current neighborhood to get at least three handfuls, but he only bought it because he thought the Halloween party Palooza pitch would fall through. Since it didn’t, Wonwoo was concerned that they’re going to eat their own weight in candy, so he plans on showing up to the Halloween party with all of the candy since Soonyoung probably won’t bite his head off in public. “I’ll save him a bag of Kit-Kats and it’ll all be good.” Talking to Wonwoo like this, learning about him and what he was like with
and before Soonyoung, is really nice. Mingyu misses having conversations like this with people he wants to get to know.

Of course, the steady stream of texts from Soonyoung to Wonwoo’s pocket doesn’t stop, but the canine cosplayer has afforded Mingyu most of his attention. That is until the texts stop for about five minutes. That’s cause for suspicion.

It’s the end of their break so they should start walking back to the clinic. Mingyu tosses out their trash as Wonwoo quickly skims through all the earlier messages before opening the most recent one. He has that stupid, big grin on again as he looks at the photo and glances up at Mingyu before shaking his head and pocketing his phone for the umpteenth time. Mingyu takes notice, immediately curious and a little offended that his friend is belittling him with humor.

“What.”

“Nothing, nothing.” They begin the short walk back.

“That wasn’t nothing.” Mingyu wants to know. If he’s honest, he’s curious about how Soonyoung looks dressed up like Wonwoo. He can’t picture the man of bright hair and colorful clothes dressed any different. Also, Minghao. What’s Minghao wearing? Did he pull out the stupid plumbob and actually go as a Sim? Did he stop by the dollarstore? Did Jun or Seungcheol have a cool costume for him to borrow? Well, based on how not-cool Jun’s costume is this year, he’s going to assume that Jun doesn’t have a cool costume in his closet.

“Well,” Wonwoo takes his phone out again, unlocking the screen and flipping through his messages, “Soon wanted me to show you something, but I feel like I should read you his words first.”

“Sure.”

Wonwoo clears his throat as if he was going to read off some incredibly well-written speech, “And I quote, ‘Oh my god. Hao isn’t a fucking Sim for once. It’s a Christmas miracle. He looks hot. You should show Mingyu.’ End quote.”

Mingyu pinches his brow and sighs. He’s not sure why Soonyoung—and probably Wonwoo as well—think that he likes Minghao in an unprofessional way. He literally just wants to be on positive terms with him, nothing more, nothing less. He gave up on making up for high school, so if he’s going to build a future to look forward to he’s going to focus on it instead of hooking up with some guy with a broken leg and sharp eyes that can cut into your soul and pointed ears and soft lips and elegant features and- he’s going to stop there and stop biting his lip, “What’s he dressed as?”

Wonwoo is about to turn the screen over before he stops walking and looks at Mingyu, “If you let me send a picture of you to Soon, I’ll show you.” Mingyu has one of two choices to make. It’s either he takes the picture and essentially admits to Wonwoo and Soonyoung that he’s interested, or he simply says no and is infinitely plagued with curiosity about what Minghao Xu is dressed up for as an adult for Halloween. He ends up picking the first option after they cross the street, “Thought so. C’mon, give me the Handsome Squidward face.”

“Wonwoo, I’m not making the Handsome Squidward face.”

“At least try to look less like a potato. Smile or smolder or something.” Mingyu rolls his eyes and cracks the most painstaking smile at Wonwoo’s phone, exposing his snaggle-teeth and holding a fist up to his cheek like a cat paw—a fist that might end up launching that phone into oblivion if Wonwoo pokes fun at him later, “Good boy.” It takes him a few seconds to send the photo, then he
flips the screen around to show Mingyu, but the face isn’t Minghao’s, “First, Soon’s costume because he was really excited about it.” It’s almost the same as Wonwoo’s except better-executed. His hair is styled up and to the side. It’s still sunset orange, now with a few streaks of yellow. His ears are white and his outfit is black with a blue leather collar. Soonyoung even has a striped tail in yellow, orange, and white in that order- oh, he’s a candy-corn werewolf. Okay. Weird, but not unimaginable for the fiery dancer. He pulls it off nicely at that, “You can’t see it, but he has fangs on that are also painted to match the theme.” Wonwoo laughs before taking his phone back.

Mingyu grabs his sleeve, “Hey, the deal was Minghao’s picture, not Soon’s.”

“I don’t remember saying that.” Whoops. Mingyu backtracks through their conversation. Nope, no mention of Minghao at all. Damn, he was played, “But I’ll take pity on you.”

Mingyu doesn’t comprehend right away why Minghao’s costume made Wonwoo look at him and shake his head. It takes him a minute of strict staring to add up the facts. Even though elements of Minghao’s costume look more expensive and well-made, they’re uncannily the same. Minghao’s now-black hair is messily tossed to hold two, pointed black ears. His hair is also sprayed with this deep silver shimmer, nothing blotchy or bright like Mingyu’s; you can barely tell it’s there. He’s got these golden contacts on and a clean set of whiskers lined onto his cheeks along with a small reddish triangle on the underside of his nose. Smokey eyes with pointed, flicked wings at the corners of his eyes add to the cat-like appeal. Mingyu won’t even bother talking about how the loose, ripped up, black cable-knit sweater reveals too much skin because Minghao has a thin black ribbon around his neck with a tiny silver bell at the base of his throat.

“You’re going to choke on flies if you don’t shut your mouth.” Wonwoo snatches his phone back and pockets it, he laughs when Mingyu shakes his head and snaps out of his trance-like state, “It’s kinda crazy, right? You didn’t tell Hao about your costume?” Mingyu shakes his head. Obviously, he didn’t since this ‘costume’ was scavenged for in a backroom from some mysterious box and Minghao’s costume was a loaner. Wonwoo laughs, “The universe has a weird way about telling us things, huh.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“C’mon, Gyu, same costume, same shitty silver hairspray, same silly Sharpie whiskers. Aside from Hao looking a good 200% more put together than you do, you guys are essentially wearing the same thing.”

“Wonwoo. I hate to break it to you, but it’s not like dressing up as a cat is an uncommon Halloween costume. I can bet you that there are at least twenty kids in town dressed up in crappy cat costumes-”

“Yeah, but how many men in their mid-twenties are wearing unplanned cat costumes with silver hairspray?” Wonwoo jabs a finger into his side, “Two. You and Minghao.” They enter the parking lot just as Wonwoo gets a call on his phone and excuses himself to go and answer it. Mingyu takes the lead and gets to the breakroom first to give himself a once-over before going over the paperwork for the next two patients. There’s nothing cosmic about him and Minghao being handed the same costume even if they both don’t really care about Halloween and they both only deviated from their annual routines this year- absolutely nothing but coincidence!

Mingyu manages to wipe off most of the crooked whiskers and finds someone in the imaging department to borrow eyeliner from. He redraws the lines on his cheeks with a little more finesse and debates about going in for the eyes, but decides against it since he doesn’t have the slightest clue how to apply it without jabbing himself and going blind.
When he returns, Wonwoo is also back, “Soonyoung called to freak out about the costume situation.”

“There’s no situation, Woo.”

Wonwoo shrugs, “You believe what you want, but he says you can come to the Halloween party if you’re free. I’m going, but it’s not going to be super exciting. We’re just ch-”

“Chaperoning for a bunch of high schoolers? Yeah, I think I’ll pass.”

He’ll regret that decision for a few hours, but the two kids he has to deal with that afternoon take a lot out of him and he forgets his regret when he lunges through his door and flops onto his couch for a nap instead of worrying about some Halloween party. He’s sure Wonwoo will have plenty of photos to share tomorrow and that Minghao will come to him with a fun story soon.

The main reason why he said no?

Well, Mingyu doesn’t think he can keep his professional composure. A torn sweater that loose and low-hanging, exposing collarbones and that stupid, fucking choker. Yeah, Mingyu would be anything but not-obvious. He’d like to hold onto his dignity for another few nights at least and dealing with Soonyoung and Wonwoo’s feud to get him to acknowledge his nonexistent feelings for Minghao is more than troublesome. In fact, he might make it a thing now to avoid any situations where Wonwoo and Soonyoung can be in the same room as him and Minghao.
Chapter 20

It’s no surprise that Minghao has a life outside of dance practice and Mingyu’s PT sessions, but it’s still a little disappointing when he cancels on the 2nd. Ironically or not, it’s on a Thursday. Now, Mingyu is left with a half-eaten Subway sandwich and about eight pounds of discount candy. Questions about Halloween were on the tip of his tongue, but Minghao wasn’t very talkative. In addition to that, it was the first time that Minghao brought over a subpar meal. Well, it’s Subway so it isn’t The Worst, but it’s nothing compared to the stuff he’d been bringing over days before.

He remembers the short apology.

Minghao has been troubled with something daunting back at his apartment and while he refuses to tell Mingyu the exact parameters of the issue, Mingyu knows that it involves Seungcheol and something about wanting to take Thursday to go into the city and have a talk. A serious talk. Over dinner. He’s not entirely sure how he feels about that information. Although he has little experience with stern talks, personal ‘talks’ are usually full of personal things, serious matters, stuff that will carry long-lasting weight and if Seungcheol wants to call Minghao out to talk about it then it must involve him in some way.

But Minghao’s the type of person who is really good at listening. He’s able to sit down and be an emotional sponge for anyone who needs to vent. The guy isn’t really affected by it and he can give level-headed advice afterwards—at least that’s what Minghao claimed to be the reason why Seungcheol wants to talk to him. Up until now, Mingyu had assumed that Seungcheol and Minghao were roommates and just that, but they seem to be closer than he originally framed them to be. It shouldn’t be cause for worry, but there’s something about their relationship that stresses him.

There shouldn’t be. There shouldn’t be.

But there is.

Dragging the giant bags of candy to work the next day somehow makes them heavier. Wonwoo can tell right away that there’s something eating at him, but Mingyu denies it all. He’s really just a little salty that dinner was a not-five-dollar footlong. The weather is getting cold and salad on stale bread wasn’t cutting the dinner-time standard that Minghao had set the previous meals. He misses deep flavors and warm food.

“No Hao today?” Mingyu looks up at Wonwoo who starts picking at the large bag of chocolates and candies, wrinkling his nose when he discovers an entire package of Tootsie Rolls.

“How’d you know?”

Wonwoo snickers, “Hao’d I know? Soonyoung and Jun are covering his classes. If you’re concerned about the roomie, don’t. They’re just friends.”

“One, never asked. Two, their personal affairs are none of my business.” He snatches the bag shut and away from the other PT, earning a grumble. There are a lot of things that are a tad off-kilter about today. Seokmin had ditched his morning lecture halls to sleep in, but was called into work anyway since Jeonghan is a no-show. Joshua doesn’t seem very worked up about it and he usually berates anyone for not calling in ahead of schedule. This would be the first time Jeonghan slid under the radar to catch up on beauty sleep. Joshua, himself, is also set to leave work early and the
secretary for the imaging department, Siyeon, will take over for him. That’s the event that stands out the most since Joshua never leaves work early. He’s been here every day, all day since Mingyu’s started working and he’s pretty sure that the trend was there since the place opened. It’s probably just one of those weird, astral Thursdays. More so than feeling like he’s at work, he feels like he’s standing in a Safeway at midnight. There’s just something off about it.

“You’re spacier than usual.” Wonwoo ruffles his hair. It’s down today, like, rolled-out-of-bed-and-combed-it-with-my-fingers-at-a-red-light down. He’s not seeing anyone important today; it doesn’t matter, “Seunghcheol’s probably just having a bit of a rough patch right now. He probably just wants to ask Hao for some perspective.”

Mingyu, as always, is very suspicious that Wonwoo knows more about Seunghcheol and Minghao than he lets on. What happened to not knowing anything about the roommate? Lies. All of it, “Again, didn’t ask.”

“Right.”

Wonwoo lets the silence hang in the air like he’s fishing for Mingyu’s curiosity, but Mingyu has a strong resolve and isn’t going to care because he doesn’t. He doesn’t care in the slightest! He doesn’t care that Minghao’s rich-boy roommate has whisked him off to the city and is buying him a nice dinner and that they’re talking about personal stuff and that there’s going to be emotional vulnerability served at that table. “Did something happen at home?” Damn. So much for that resolve.

The older male smiles, “Not that I know of, but I don’t know that much about Seunghcheol.”

“Then how’d you know about the rough patch or whatever?”

“You seem to always forget that Soon and Hao are friends and friends talk to each other about things.” He laughs, “Hao’s just really worried about him. They haven’t known each other for that long, but I think that—to a point—Seunghcheol is dependent on Minghao for his upstanding support. Hao’s the one who pushed him to keep writing and not give up on that dream and he relies on Hao for sound advice when it comes to his relationships and publications; stuff like that. I’m pretty sure Hao even edits his manuscripts sometimes.”

This is the perfect opportunity to ask, isn’t it?

“Relationship advice? Really?”

“Hey, Hao’s dated and he definitely reads enough to understand a vast amount of relationship dynamics, but you shouldn’t be getting that information from me.” Wonwoo’s using the nickname a lot today and Mingyu isn’t too sure if it’s out of convenience or out of habit, maybe it’s just to tease him, but he isn’t very concerned.

Because now Mingyu has a hundred questions quivering at the tip of his tongue. The idea that Minghao has dated people in the last ten years shouldn’t be anything notable or odd, in fact, that’s probably the normal thing to do. Minghao was charismatic; is charismatic. He’s beautiful and has a cool occupation and probably keeps amazing stories stored in his back pocket for warm coffeeshop dates. He’s not the type to go out to bars or fall into one-night stands. However, all of that is just information that Mingyu gleans from hanging-working with him. Their conversations aren’t ever deep enough for Mingyu to pick up on less-professional traits, but he’s just sure about it.

Minghao’s probably the type to like serious, long-term stuff. Mingyu does, too.

“I know you want to ask and I know you have something on your mind, Gyu, but it’s really
Talk to Minghao. Wow, Wonwoo. If it wasn’t already obvious that Mingyu can barely meet
eyes with the guy, what makes you think he can talk to him on a personal level. To his credit,
Mingyu did try to talk about high school with Minghao and that ended poorly every single time.
Admittedly, when they’ve talked the previous few nights, the conversation had been pleasant and
steady, but, “Talking to him is... difficult.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re the one making it difficult.” Wonwoo takes the bag of candy back from
Mingyu’s clammy hands and starts searching through it again. Joshua had come through earlier and
hoarded a lot of the Milky Ways and (begrudgingly) the Kit-Kats. He pulls out a Twix, opening the
wrapper and popping the chocolate into his mouth, “Minghao likes talking. He’s easy to get along
with.”

“We can agree to disagree on that point.” But Wonwoo isn’t wrong. After Minghao settled
everything at work and started mending his knee and feeling better, he was much more amicable.
Small talk was easy, just nothing personal. Mingyu just can’t settle for an easy answer. If it’s that
simple—which it’s not—to talk to Minghao, then why was it such a chore after their first time
meeting almost ten years down the road? Mingyu is good at speaking, he’s good at sweettalk, he’s
good at first impressions, and he botched it all because Minghao was impossible.

“Maybe you guys just need a change of environment.” Wonwoo shrugs, “Based on you as a
person, I’d guess that your apartment might be a little stuffy.”

“Rude.”

“Is it, though? I mean, Minghao can learn everything about you from your apartment; how you
live, what you like—he doesn’t have to ask about any of that stuff if he’s seen your apartment more
than once.”

Mingyu hates to admit that Wonwoo makes a good point. He’s going to have to figure out a
way to open up the conversation. In addition to that, he’ll also have to figure out a way to save some
good candy for himself. He didn’t have enough foresight to leave the good kush in his cabinet and
Wonwoo, Seokmin, and Joshua are plowing through the chocolates. The imaging department has
also started weaseling their way into the candy bag, stealing a significant amount of sweets when
Mingyu’s out with patients.

Based on his apartment alone, Minghao can probably glean that he’s a neat-freak.

Minghao probably knows that no one ever comes over because everything has its place and
nothing is ever moved. Every single detail of the living room isn’t tailored to anyone in particular, not
even Mingyu. He had intended to go shopping for in-home items and décor, but the apartment
wasn’t going to be ‘home’ for long. Once he started on his full-time pay, he’d probably upgrade to a
nicer place and once he got married and had joint incomes, he’d finally settle into a forever-home.
That’s not to say that the living room isn’t nicely furnished, it does have some useless knickknacks
and bobbles that Mingyu’s saved from moving place to place during his college career, but outside of
the handful of trophies, his diplomas, and some glass ornaments that sit pretty on the entertainment
center, it’s rather barren.

Everything is neutral in color; browns, tans, blacks, whites, like the clinic. He doesn’t know
much about coordinating color or home improvement, but he figures if everything is within the same
area, then he can’t be doing a horrible job. Even the kitchen is outfitted with silver stainless steel and
dark granite. His cupboards are a warm, deep wooden color, and the floors are white tile. It looks a
little like a showroom in IKEA without all the fun pops of color. Mingyu had abandoned his creative
efforts in high school to focus on his more scientific studies. The only thing of significant hue is the blue candle that Minghao had brought over a few nights ago. It stands out, but not garishly so. It compliments the room and it looks intentional; it looks like it belongs there. He attributes that to Minghao’s fashion sense.

Mingyu feels a little bad that it’s spending its life sitting up on a shelf looking pretty because he doesn’t want to burn it more than he already has.
Chapter 21

It’s Friday and Mingyu has plans to do something different since it’s the weekend and he doesn’t have work. Minghao does though. He’s booked all day, from 10:30 until 5:30 with classes ranging from beginning adults to advanced children that would outshine Mingyu on the dancefloor without even trying. Most of his classes are high school and college-aged people which is why he tries to keep up appearances. Wonwoo mentioned something about Soonyoung dressing up for work as well and Mingyu easily understands how efficient it is to get people to listen to you when you’re easy on the eyes. On weekends, he also teaches a class in the afternoon for students 5 and under. Even though he’s sure that those kids aren’t really learning anything and the parents are just using the dance studio as a substitute daycare, Minghao apparently enjoys playing with them and running amuck. It’s adorable and Mingyu may or may not want to adopt an orphan just to show up to the class itself.

The phone rings twice before Minghao picks up, “Mingyu?”

“Morning.” He’s sitting up at the stools by his kitchen island. Before, he’d go and sit by the window or outside in the communal garden with his sunrise lemon-ginger tea, but since Minghao started coming over, they’d spent their dinners at the island. He might as well use the stools since he bought them.

“Morning.” Minghao echoes, “No, I’ll be there in a minute. Can you start stretches?” He must be in between classes, “What’s up?”

“When you get off work, let’s go to the park. You can bring Cacahuate.” Mingyu prides himself on remembering the name of the Golden Retriever-Spitz mix. He’d been brought up several times in conversation over text the last few days, “I think you can afford one day to walk him.”

“Really?” Minghao’s voice is bright, “Yeah, okay.” He says something else that’s eaten by the static of the phone, probably to his students, “I might be a little late. My roommate and his friend are working on my car and it should be done by the time I’m out, but I won’t know until then.”

“That’s fine. Do you want me to pick you up?”

“Nah,” Mingyu is the slightest bit crestfallen, “Cacahuate sheds so much it’ll ruin your car.” When the line falls silent, Minghao speaks up again, “So which park am I bringing dinner to?”

“Waterfront Park. I’ll meet you and Caca at the fountain.”

“Okay. I’ll see you then.” Mingyu thinks he’ll hang up, “Also, please don’t call him Caca.” And then he hangs up.

He doesn’t know why the last point is so important. Cacahuate was an appropriate amount of syllables to shorten into a nickname. Hell, Soonyoung has two syllables and everyone calls him Soon half the time. Speaking of nicknames, Mingyu wonders if he’ll ever be daring enough to call Minghao Hao or if he even likes that nickname. He would try out his stage name from high school, but something hardwired into Mingyu’s mouth vehemently refuses to add numbers into a name. That’s just ridiculous.

The work day flies by when he has something to look forward to. It’s a surprise, still, that he’s grown to look forward to seeing Minghao in under such a short time. Call it puppy-love if you want,
but Mingyu really wants to meet Cacahuate (aka the cutest dog in the tri-state area). Not only the
dog, okay, he’s come to realize that Minghao’s friendliness from ten years ago hasn’t faded in the
slightest, he’s just an adult now with adult stress and adult problems, just like Mingyu has.
Everything feels like it’s moving quickly, not just work today, but from the time he worried about
meeting Minghao after such a long time to how ready he is to see him now measures just a handful
of weeks, a backpack full of hours.

“You’re kind of spacey today.” Jeonghan remarks in the breakroom. Wonwoo looks up from
his third cup of coffee and Mingyu physically shakes himself out of his thoughts, earning a laugh,
“What’s on your mind?” The older picked to work his Friday this week if only to spend more time at
the clinic getting to know Jeonghan since they were still awkwardly skirting around each other.
Mingyu thinks his efforts to get comfortable are cute.

He still goes out to lunch with Wonwoo as often as he can and sometimes they invite Seokmin
if he hasn’t already eaten lunch on campus. The sunny student is peppy and loud and on the days
that he joins, Wonwoo usually stays quiet much like he does when they eat with Soonyoung; quiet,
but not left out. Speaking of, Soonyoung hasn’t had time to hang out and get lunch which is a little
disappointing since Mingyu also enjoyed his company. Wonwoo assures him that Soonyoung is a
hundred percent over the scuffle last week, but Mingyu won’t believe him until he sees it with his
own eyes. Soonyoung seems like the type to hold grudges. But Mingyu really doesn’t know him that
well. He was sure their fight would have been a little longer lasting, but Soonyoung (and Jun) had
been helping to demo for Minghao’s classes while he was out of commission. It was only a few
minutes of their time—time that they could afford to spare between classes especially since Minghao
and Jun co-taught a class or two—, but Minghao had texted him worried about how he could repay
them for their efforts. Mingyu just told him that the best payment would be to get better.

He likes texts like that. Texts that feel a lot less professional and a lot more friendly. Sharing
worries, sharing troubles, and opening up to each other was something that Mingyu had yearned for,
especially from this person in particular. Because when he listens to Minghao and when Minghao
responds to his texts, he feels better about himself. It’s inexplicable, but that’s the easiest way to put
it. It’s not like Minghao has forgiven him or that they’ve even had time to talk about The Situation,
but just talking to him about random stuff like dogs and clothes makes him feel better about whatever
transpired in the past- he’s spacing out again.

Jeonghan’s patience is running thin waiting for an answer, “Nothing, really.”

Wonwoo apparently doesn’t act weird unless it’s around Mingyu. If you ask Mingyu, it’s just
because they’re friends and he prides himself in the fact that Wonwoo feels comfortable around him;

enough to be snarky, “You say that a lot these days. Are you sure you’re not thinking about
something or someone?”

“Yeah, it’s nothing.” Mingyu looks between them, looks at the clock to see how many minutes
he has until the next appointment, and looks at Jeonghan again, “I just haven’t gotten much sleep
these days.”

Which is a total and complete lie.

After Minghao leaves his house, he showers, brushes his teeth, and promptly falls asleep with
a full stomach because the dancer always leaves his leftovers and Mingyu can’t help but fill up
before hitting the sack. Don’t do that, it’s really bad for your digestion and your body in general.
Most of the food Minghao brings over is comfort food that guarantees food comas and because
Mingyu’s been eating out so much and not watching his calories or diet, he’s gained a couple
pounds. He doesn’t really care, with all his height, he can spare a few pounds, but he could probably go for a run or something.

“Someone keeping you up at night?” Jeonghan gawks at Wonwoo’s suggestive statement and Cheshire grin, not expecting something like that to come from a man who usually comes off as composed and professional. Mingyu’s mouth runs dry and all his words and retaliations are caught up in his throat.

All that comes out is a rapid stream of, “N-nonononono,” he could have probably thought of something smoother than that and his frantic state piques at Jeonghan’s attention.

“Do tell, Mingyu, do tell. For the last few months, you haven’t shown interest in a single person. I was starting to think that your dry spell was just your nature an-”

The door to the breakroom swings open, “Jeonghan, Mr. Haltwish has been sitting in the lobby for ten minutes-”

“He can wait, he’s got a few more years before he kicks it, what’s a few minutes.” Jeonghan doesn’t even turn to look at Joshua, “Who is this mysterious perso-”

“Back to work, Jeonghan.” Joshua sounds tired as he drags the grown man out of the breakroom by the sleeves of his dress shirt.

And for a minute, Mingyu’s naïve enough to believe that the torment is over once Jeonghan has left. He forgets about a pair of sharp eyes pinning him down from behind. Going to lunch was an awful idea today.

“He talks about you, you know.” That’s the first thing Wonwoo says after they sit down with their food. Up until that time, he was quiet. Not many words were exchanged during their walk to the food plaza and the only sound between them was hums of agreement about where to eat when the other pointed to a storefront.


Wonwoo chooses to ignore his less-than-bright attempt at a clueless façade, “Never about high school or anything like that, just about the antics of your apartment and your texts. Too many emojis, he said.”

“I think I use a perfectly decent amount of emojis.” Mingyu sets his tray down, careful not to spill any of the soup. The chained-emojis thing was a habit he picked up from texting Wonwoo so much. The older likes to call it ‘non-verbal texting’, “And since when were you two so chummy?”

“We’re not. He talks to Soonyoung and Soonyoung talks to me.” He scrolls through his phone before locking it and setting it beside his soda, “So, a date at the park? That’s a little forward, even for you.”

“It’s not a date!” Mingyu wants to throw a tantrum. These coworkers are more stressful than Minghao is, “It’s not a date.” He repeats after regaining his cool and breaking his chopsticks apart, “His dog needs a walk and-”

“Seungcheol’s been walking his dog since he came back. That guy loves dogs. He babies it and everything.” Wonwoo isn’t eating yet, he’s studying Mingyu’s expressions; how his gaze falters for just a second when the facts are stated, “Mostly because Jun keeps asking for IOU’s in return and
Minghao got worried about how many were piling up. Cheols does it without being asked. He likes running in the mornings anyway.” Now Wonwoo’s just prodding at him. Mingyu can tell by the fat grin on his stupid face. When the latter realizes that he’s been caught, he just smiles and starts eating.

Mingyu gets halfway through his pho before he even wants to think about speaking again, “Getting outside is probably good for him. He’s inside all the time anyway.”

Wonwoo wipes his mouth and hisses, regretting the amount of sriracha he’d squirted in at the start, “Soon says Minghao’s worried about the date today.” Mingyu’s sits at attention, “Okay, maybe worried wasn’t the right word and maybe it’s more that Soonyoung’s worried about the date.”

“*It’s not a date.*”

“Whatever.” Wonwoo laughs. Seeing Mingyu frustrated is apparently very cute to him, “Soon’s just worried because Minghao gets sick easily when the seasons change.” And right now it’s moving from Fall into Winter. That makes sense, Minghao had been dressed warmly even on days when it hadn’t been that cold, “An injured Minghao is already bad, a sick and injured Minghao is just sad.”

“Do you think I should cancel?” he’s not really thinking about his word choice.

Wonwoo just shrugs, “It’s up to you. Minghao’s an adult that knows how to not get sick, y’know. It’s not like he’s going around licking doorknobs and refusing to wash his hands. He’s a pretty clean guy. Soon just worries a lot and look at that, I got you all worried now too.”

“I just don’t want to be the reason he gets sick.”

“If he was really concerned about it, he would have told you and asked to change plans since he’s a whole grown ass man.” Wonwoo reasons. Maybe he’s the only real adult at this table, with real logic and common sense, “But I’ll cut the jokes,” Mingyu looks up from his food again, “you’re feeling something towards him, aren’t you.”

It comes off less as a question than it does a statement.

Mingyu has to think about it. He doesn’t really mind telling Wonwoo his true thoughts about the matter, but he still has yet to sort himself out, “I don’t know? Maybe?”

“For the record, Soonyoung’s been asking Minghao the same thing, like, every time they cross paths at work.” He perks up, “He’s seriously annoying the shit out of Minghao. You’ll probably hear about it tonight.”

They finish eating, Mingyu desperately trying to drop Minghao as a topic and Wonwoo giddily trying to keep it on their lips. He’s done with work after the next patient and then it’s off to run errands. He’d like to say he’s excited about the park expedition today, but after being bombarded with Minghao all lunch, he’s almost ready to call it quits himself. Wonwoo finally catches on to the sincerity in his frustration and drops the topic. He at least appreciates that about the older PT; he’s observant enough to not overstep.
Chapter 22

The weather is nice.

In the end, they decided to meet at 6:30, leaving little room for daylight, but enough time for Seungcheol to give up on Minghao’s car and drive him to the park instead. Mingyu’s waiting at the fountain, a good five-minute walk from the parking lot where Minghao is dropped off. Cacahuate’s collar is his giveaway, the tags jingling brightly as he walks patiently next to his owner who is even slower than usual because he’s carrying two takeout bags.

“Need help?” Mingyu swings himself off the fountain’s edge, coming to stand straight. He’ll be honest, he’s more excited to see the dog than he is to see Minghao. Who wouldn’t be. That dog is the most Instagram-worthy dog he’s ever seen.

Minghao hands over one of the two bags and readjusts his backpack as it had slipped off his shoulder. It’s a good thing that Cacahuate doesn’t pull and the leash has been slack up until the time he meets Mingyu. Minghao backs up quickly after handing over what Mingyu guesses is dinner, “Sorry, he’s usually not so jumpy with people.”

Mingyu will take it as a compliment.

He takes a knee to run his hands through Cacahuate’s fur and squish his doggy cheeks into his doggy face, “That’s okay. Dogs are great.” Cacahuate seems to take a quick liking to Mingyu who may or may not have bought some jerky treats while he was out grocery shopping. He knows Minghao feeds him the dog-equivalent of paleo-gluten-free-sustainable-green-organic, so he doesn’t know if said owner would be okay with him doling out heaps of treats to spoil such a good boy even though his delicacies are probably the dog equivalent of The Good Kush.

“I hope you’re okay with roti and Panang curry.” Mingyu is more than okay with that. It sounds delicious especially since it’s quite chilly out with a breeze blowing in and swaying the trees. He may or may not sneak Cacahuate a bite under the table if only he wasn’t so hungry.

As the sun starts setting, they find their way over to the picnic area, opting for a table close to the grass so that Cacahuate can sit comfortably and have his own dinner. Mingyu learns that Minghao’s entire backpack is likely filled with dog stuff; water, collapsible bowls, a serving of food, treats, toys, and poopy bags. It’s a little charming. Minghao is officially a puppy parent (‘doggy daddy’ but Mingyu won’t admit to those words going through his brain).

“I’ve been wondering,” Mingyu hums something like a ‘yeah’ before Minghao continues, “why didn’t you ever leave town?”

“Well,” he sets down his spoon, “I did leave for a while. I left for college and I left to do my master’s degree, but I came back for work. So, I ended up living down south for about seven years. I guess it’s a small world. What about you? Seems like our town’s charm couldn’t keep you away for long.”

“I left.” Minghao spends more time making sure that Cacahuate is eating than he is shoveling food into his own mouth, “I skipped town right after we graduated high school. Studied at a community college for a bit before transferring to finish out my undergrad. Then it was straight to work in and out of the city. I travelled around a lot.”

“When did you get back into town anyway?” Mingyu may or may not have eaten his food a
little too eagerly. He’s already done. The spice from the curry is warming his cheeks and chest, the two jackets he wore to combat the cold weather are starting to feel a little silly now.

Minghao offers the rest of his meal, which is humbly accepted because Mingyu can’t say no especially if the food has nowhere else to go aside from the trash, “After I did pretty well and sent some money home, the folks got sick, so I came back about a year ago to take care of them.” He sniffs. Mingyu is amazed that they haven’t bumped into each other in the grocery store or in any of the old shops they used to frequent. Then again, the town has changed quite a bit- grown quite a bit since they were kids. They have a Super Walmart now and their local Target also sports a produce section, so their town has surely blossomed a little in the last decade, but still, not running into Minghao until last month is statistically flawed, “I met up again with Soonyoung and he got me a job at Performance Studio.” He scratches at the back of his neck, “Despite fighting with him all the time, I think I owe him a lot.”

Mingyu wants to tell Minghao that he doesn’t owe anyone anything despite not knowing the whole story himself. He’s a hard worker. He carved his own path, lit his own lights; Mingyu knows that much. Minghao built his own dreams and he didn’t owe anyone for that. “Do you like it?”

“Huh?” Minghao looks over from his dog, “Like it? Like dance? Yeah. Of course I do.” He chuckles, Mingyu follows suit. Isn’t it obvious that Minghao likes dance, “I mean, I get to dance full time as a career and that’s pretty cool. What about you?”

“I can’t complain.” Mingyu says the words without thinking too much. They were true to his feelings. He can’t complain. The job pays well, it’s steady, it’s stable. It’ll put food on the table in the future and he has a retirement plan, job insurance, and a healthcare package. He’s set. Sure, it’s not something he’s super passionate about or something he’s completely invested in, but it pays for all the little things that make him happy and that’s okay. He can’t complain.

“As I recall—and forgive me if I’m wrong, this was a long time ago—weren’t you, like, the only jock that ever wrote poetry?” Did Minghao just bring up high school? “You had people falling for you left and right.”

Mingyu laughs into his cup of curry; embarrassed.

Slam poetry was as close as he could get to rap without his parents freaking out about their prejudices. It was fun and it let Mingyu say some things he’d otherwise be too self-conscious to share with any of his peers. He could always say that he was being dramatic ‘for effect’ and play down the truth in his stress-filled words, but he never really had to. The small group of slam poetry kids would always nod, snap, and compliment him on his words. He was never close to them; it was a real touch-and-go experience. He came to the club to unload his pressures and he would leave for soccer practice right after and never look back.

“Yeah.” He recovers from his laughter. A smile plays on Minghao’s lips, a little confused as to why Mingyu is laughing like a fool, “How did you remember that?”

It’s Minghao’s turn to look away, back to Cachuate who has his attention pointed at some teens kicking around a soccer ball across the field, “Uh, well, after that last PT session at the clinic-for some reason I was just really hankering for some nostalgia, so I pulled out our senior yearbook and flipped through it. I was just skimming through the club sections because I wanted to see what the dance team’s photo was, but I saw your face in the group for poetry club.”

So, he has been thinking about high school.

Minghao waits for Mingyu to wipe his mouth before gathering all the garbage and tossing it
into their respective bins. Minghao recycles; that’s nice. Cacahuate trots a foot to his side, excited for the post-dinner walk even though it’s getting a little dark now. “We can take the lit trail.” Mingyu walks them over to a map of the park and outlines the path with his finger. Waterfront Park wasn’t here when they were in high school. It’s a lot newer and—dare he say—fancy. It was on the upper-class end of town, a moderate walk or short drive from Riverside High. It surrounded a small lake that served as a water reservoir for the occasional fires that would pop up in their county, but because it was rarely used a lot of families set their boats out on the bank opposite to the park, “It’ll end over by Johnson’s Field near the other parking lot.”

“Sounds good to me.” Minghao starts walking, Mingyu in tow and Cacahuate between them.

Okay, so Minghao definitely doesn’t need Mingyu to walk with him at the park. He could have come by himself or with a different friend, but it’s nice that he at least humors Mingyu’s request. It’s not like they’re going to be doing any complicated movements or stretches today; it’s just a day to walk a bit. Minghao doesn’t limp or favor his right leg over the left. Mingyu’s just vigilant since everything is a little damp from the rainfall they had overnight. It just makes everything a little slippery and unsafe for someone who’s trying to recover, but he needn’t worry. On the one occasion that the dog’s father does slip, his lightning-fast reflexes catch him without so much as faltering his pace.

Mingyu doesn’t even get the chance to raise his hands for a catch.

Minghao wears his backpack on his front, making easy access of the pockets to tuck all of Cacahuate’s belongings away and slip a few treats out to feed him as they walk. He watches as Minghao pulls the leash’s grip up his wrist so he can briefly free up his hands to zip up his black, gridded jacket. Maybe it’s just Mingyu’s natural habit or it’s a residual manner from how he was brought up to be a good gentleman, but without thinking, he strips off his outer coat and places it over Minghao’s shoulders. It’s probably a size or two too big and a knee-length, maroon peacoat isn’t really Minghao’s style, but when the shorter man turns to look up at him with a questionable glance, Mingyu already knows it’s too late to take it back, “I’m a little sweaty from the curry. So, hold on to it for me.”

There are probably more elegant ways to hand over a coat than saying ‘I’m sweaty’, but Minghao just smiles and nods as they continue walking in step. He doesn’t try to put on the coat, not putting his arms into the sleeves or anything, but instead tugs the lapels closer around him, blocking out the chilled breeze. The coat is already toasty from Mingyu wearing it for an hour and it’s honestly appreciated since Minghao’s only wearing a t-shirt under his jacket.

The paved trail is short and easy on them since it is without steep incline or decline. A certain awkwardness fills the air and Mingyu busies himself with picking the lint on the inside of his pants’ pockets. They’re silent for more than half the trail, the only noise being Cacahuate’s breath and collar.

“How’s the leg doing?” Mingyu breaks the silence.

Minghao looks up at him, “Doin’ good.” Despite the coat not matching with his outfit, Mingyu thinks that the sight of Minghao in oversized clothes is something he could get used to. He hopes he’s not blushing.

“That’s good.” All Mingyu can hear is the scuff of the pavement under their shoes and the crunch of the sporadic Fall leaf since the trees that line the path are rather young.

“Do you want to hold his leash?”
“Ohmygod, yes.” Minghao happily holds out Cacahuate’s black leash for Mingyu to take and Mingyu eagerly accepts. Perhaps a little too eagerly, because his energy and excitement transfers into the pooch and he gets giddy and starts tugging. Because Cacahuate is so fluffy, his fur masks a deceptively thin neck and his studded collar could easily slip off if Mingyu didn’t give into him. He’s pretty sure losing Minghao’s dog on their first not-date would not be the best way to continue their not-friendship.

So, Mingyu gets his jog in after all.

He’s not completely out of breath by the time he laps Minghao again, just sort of out of breath. It’s okay, though, because they’re reaching Johnson’s Field at the same time and Mingyu just plops himself down into the grass, wrestling Cacahuate to the ground with him. The dog shoves his nose into Mingyu’s butt-cheek, prowling for the treats he has stashed there and eventually digs one out.

“Ah, so that’s why he likes you so much.” Minghao comes over to them, locking his phone after texting his roommate that they’re done at the park and about which parking lot to pick him up from. He clicks his tongue to call Cacahuate’s attention back to him when he sees that he’s giving Mingyu a hard time. The dog’s ears perk up as he gets off of Mingyu and happily rolls over for a belly rub. Dogs are great. Dogs are the best.

“So well behaved. Such a good boy.” Mingyu ruffles all of Cacahuate just as Minghao gingerly takes a seat in the grass next to them, more careful to not sit on Mingyu’s coat than he is worried about his knee. Mingyu’s not even slightly embarrassed about the baby voice he’s using with him, but makes sure to clear his throat before speaking again, “You did a really good job training him.”

Minghao nods a couple times, smiling either at his dog or at the compliment, “Yeah? I don’t really know what I’m doing half the time, but Seungcheol’s had a couple dogs so he’s been helping me train Cacahuate.” He reaches over to fix Cacahuate’s collar, but it suddenly lights up a vibrant green. Mingyu might not know much about dogs, but he’s pretty sure that LED collars are expensive, “Let’s put Cheol’s Christmas present to good use.” The dog pants happily and flaps his tail a few times, “We don’t get to use it much since we usually walk while the sun’s out.” Minghao goes back to sitting with his hands keeping Mingyu’s coat tight around his shoulders. His eyes are rested on his dog, blissed out on attention from the physical therapist.

“Ah, let’s get out of the grass before our clothes stain.” Mingyu doesn’t want to talk about Seungcheol, the hot roommate. So, he gets up to a knee and untangles himself from the black leash, still holding it in his right hand. However, he doesn’t calculate for a butterfly to dip by them in the dim light of the early evening and for Cacahuate to go batshit crazy over it. He suddenly pulls Mingyu forward and sets him off balance, pulling him forward and, regrettably, into Minghao. Because he can guess that another extra hard tug could make him punch Minghao in the face or that he might accidentally hit Minghao’s knee, he lets go of the leash when Cacahuate lunges again. The good news is that he saves his dignity ever so slightly by catching his weight with his hands on either side of Minghao’s waist. The bad news is that the fluffy dog is now bolting through the field chasing a butterfly.

They share a look; locking eyes for just one moment with bated breath held. Minghao feels so small under him, expression open and a little confused. Again, this is just a second passing in the scope of time; thoughts can’t really be formulated with delicacy.

Mingyu wants to say it feels awkward or that it feels wrong, maybe that he’s uncomfortable or that it makes him anxious, but above all, it doesn’t feel like any of those things. What’s scary is that this feels right and that’s not okay. When did this sort of thing ever come close to feeling right? He
doesn’t want to think about it; so, he scrambles back to his feet and makes haste to chase after Minghao’s dog in the dark.

Screaming “CACAHUATE!” in the dark seems like a good distraction to the other things screaming in his own mind. Hopefully, yelling until he’s short of breath will clear his head.

He makes a round of the field, but Cacahuate is impossibly fast; he just looks like a little green dot speeding in the dark. Somewhere behind him, he hears a sharp whistle ring in the air in a short pattern. Cacahuate halts and his attention turns to the parking lot where the hot roommate is standing with his car door open. It seems like the dog recognizes Seungcheol from a distance and sprints over to him, curling between his legs and greeting him with his tail swinging with fervor before jumping into the back seat.

The next thing Mingyu hears is laughter, “Well, at least you tried.” Minghao pats him on the shoulder. Mingyu turns his head to look at him, but not too suddenly and not too obviously. Something has changed; in general or to him personally, “Thanks for the coat.” He swings it off and folds it over his arm to hand back to Mingyu. There’s something sad about seeing him without it. “Will you be okay walking back to your car alone? Where did you park? We can give you a ride.”

“Nah, it’s fine.” Mingyu breathes. Sighing before taking a step back and turning to face him, Minghao’s hand slips off his shoulder and back to his side casually, “I didn’t park too far off. And does Cacahuate just run up to anyone that whistles like that? He’s going to get dog-napped for sure.”

Minghao smiles, “Nope, just Seungcheol, but I probably should worry about him stealing Cacahuate. He already favors Cheol over me.”

“We’re lucky that he pulled up when he did.” For some reason, Mingyu’s trying to come to terms with something and he’s not sure what, “I’m sorry I let go.”

“That’s okay. I don’t usually walk him without his leash, but he hasn’t run off or anything. He’s usually not this excited.” It’s quiet between them, just quiet. There’s only about a foot and a half of space between their bodies as Mingyu had moved a bit to block the wind. Minghao having to look up slightly to meet eyes with him makes his head do things, “He must like you a lot.” Something warm fills Mingyu’s entire chest. Minghao turns his attention to Seungcheol who flicks his high-beams on a couple times, signaling that he’s getting a little impatient, “I guess that’s my cue to go.” He starts trotting over to the parking lot.

“You’re coming over tomorrow, right?” Minghao looks back at him.

“Yeah, thanks.” Responding like that sounds stiff and weird, as if there’s something eating at Minghao’s mind as well, “What do you want to eat?”

“Surprise me.”

Minghao starts walking backwards to Seungcheol’s car, making sure Mingyu can see him roll his eyes. Part of Mingyu feels bad. He knows that if he had to bring food for someone and they just kept telling him to surprise them, that he’d be exhausted trying to find new foods that they’d like. But Mingyu has yet to dislike anything that Minghao brings; he has good taste.

“One of these days, I’m just going to drop a dead fish in front of you and you’re going to have to eat it.” His voice shrinks as he gets further away. Mingyu’s not even sure if he’s supposed to hear the taunt.

“Gladly!” Mingyu shouts after him before turning to leave himself.
The park was as beautiful at night as it was during the day. He’ll have to make note to tell Wonwoo to come here with Soonyoung so they can lay out under the stars. He knows that the couple would appreciate some quality time outside as most of their days were spent cooped up indoors. Soonyoung loves stars. The air is crisp and fresh during this time of year and it’d be nice to go before it starts raining and before it gets too cold. The night sky is crystal clear, filled with little diamonds that twinkle brightly and if he wasn’t so preoccupied thinking about Minghao’s wide-eyed, lost stare, then he might have paid them some notice.

His hands are balled up in his coat.

He has yet to put it back on.
Chapter 23

‘I heard the park date went well’ Wonwoo texts him at an ungodly hour. Mingyu sits up slightly to glance at his alarm clock that reads 1:34 in red over on his nightstand.

He leaves the older male on read. *Fuck off with his late-night texts.* Mingyu doesn’t have time for them. He has a whole bunch of nothing to do tomorrow and he needs to be well rested for it. Overall, he’s a little surprised that Minghao didn’t bring up two things: the talk he had with Seungcheol and the apparent prodding at work from Soonyoung.

1:35, ‘Soonyoung hasn’t stopped talking since he got back from Minghao’s apartment. If I can’t sleep, you can’t sleep either.’ Mingyu connects the dots. He can at least do that much now; it takes a certain amount of time to understand Wonwoo Jeon. Wonwoo won’t let him sleep because Soonyoung won’t let him sleep. It’s something Minghao said that’s keeping Soonyoung up and whatever that was is probably Mingyu’s fault, but why was Soonyoung over at Minghao’s apartment?

1:37, ‘Seriously? The coat.’ He wonders, to a point, how much Minghao tells Soonyoung about their dinners. It seems like Wonwoo already knows most of what happens before Mingyu even has a chance to open up about it at work and, honestly, he’s not sure how he feels about the breach in privacy. He’s not even sure if Minghao’s saying nice things about him. ‘How did seeing Minghao in a boyfriend-jacket feel?’

Mingyu holds the lock on his phone until he can turn it off. Screw Wonwoo’s petty texts, he’s going to be left on read until the end of time and Mingyu’s going to get some sleep, but before the phone shuts off, he sees that there’s a message left unread amongst other texts. He must’ve not heard the notification earlier that night.

22:07, ‘Thanks for walking me, Mingyu!’ and attached is a picture of Cacahuate with Minghao wrapping a towel around him. He’s puffy from just having taken a bath and Minghao’s shirt is clinging to his chest. Mingyu debates saving the selfie for all eternity. Not wanting to leave Minghao on read when he wakes up in the morning, Mingyu debates a witty response. Then again, it’s almost 2am. He settles for the middle-ground and saves the picture as Minghao’s contact photo, making sure to crop him out of it and keeping Cacahuate front and center as the main subject of focus. Yes. The dog and not his owner. He may have also changed Minghao’s contact name to ‘Cacahuate’s Dad’. It’s okay. Minghao will never see it.

Phone off and forgotten, Mingyu faces his ceiling wide awake. It’s a shame, really. Ten years ago, Mingyu probably wouldn’t be this shy. He would have dropped all his thoughts on the table, sorted through them overnight, and addressed them the next day. He was straightforward and that’s how he easily ended a handful of relationships. The second something felt wrong or right, he would act upon it, but Minghao is—for lack of better word—different.

There’s nothing that makes him particularly special compared to anyone else that Mingyu’s seen in a romantic light. Each short-lived relationship was special in its own right. Each person was different and carries a unique identity in Mingyu’s memory. Minghao’s average. He’s of average build, average height, and amongst the individuals that have ever caught Mingyu’s eye, Minghao is of average charisma. At the end of high school and in university, Mingyu had briefly dated. That’s the only pool of data he has. Gender spectrum aside, Mingyu’s dated both men and women that were both closer to an ideal than Minghao could ever be. He’s dated people who were set to be lawyers,
doctors, perfect spouses, and business aficionados. He’s never mentioned a single one to his parents and they respect his privacy and his right to like whoever he wants, but it isn’t any pressure from them that’s keeping him from bringing anyone home. It’s just that it never felt right. Bringing someone home was ingrained in his mind as something you only did if you were serious and Mingyu had never felt enough balance to feel serious.

Yeah, Minghao’s not serious.

His heart has fluttered before. He’s not wanted to catch feelings before. He’s gone out on dinner dates before. His coat has looked nice on other people before. He’s broken hearts and has had his heart broken, but he supposes what’s different between Minghao and all the others is that this one person has a lasting effect.

Mingyu’s only serious about getting on positive terms with him. Nothing more than platonic positivity and even that felt like he was pushing his luck. If he stood the high school version of Minghao in front of his parents, they wouldn’t hate him, but they’d probably ask Mingyu to think hard about it. High school Minghao had subpar grades, did extracurricular in an area that wasn’t MESA or business based, and didn’t have a great track record with the school’s disciplinary system. It wasn’t his fault, but some things can’t easily be overlooked especially when you’re lumped together with other troublemakers just because of how you look. Compared to straight-A, varsity starting lineup, suave and well-spoken Mingyu, Minghao dulled even in the spotlight. They just weren’t compatible. Yeah, Minghao’s not serious. But Mingyu’s changed as a person and he’s also, very recently, understood the change in his position.

Their roles feel reversed.

Minghao’s getting infinitely cooler and after being with him- being near him, learning about him, Mingyu realizes that Minghao was never far behind in the race to be the best of the best. In fact, sometimes he was ahead. Minghao had many more troubles on his plate, stuff that Mingyu doesn’t even know much about, but he still stood his ground and worked hard. Mingyu wasn’t valedictorian, but he was close and that position was handed to him on a silver platter. His family had started stabilizing their income senior year, he had a social position in school that offered him free homework answers and test hints, and he could walk home without looking over his shoulder.

The Mingyu in high school pitied Minghao. The Mingyu now looks up to him. The Mingyu of the future feels like he can’t keep up with the breakneck pace.

There’s no cooldown period with Minghao.

He catches Mingyu off-guard and unaware. Small things amount to big things that weigh on his mind; from the way he laughs to the moments his eyes are wide and curious. The butterflies in his stomach are drowning in a thick fog, wings laminated by November’s air. They want to take flight, but he forces them to stay grounded and he doesn’t know why.

What’s so bad about catching feelings for Minghao?

And at the same time, why does he want Minghao to be mad at him so badly?

Maybe it says more about Mingyu than he expects. Maybe he just wants to mean something to Minghao; something significant like he thought he did these last ten years. But now, Mingyu is the one who doesn’t have a lasting effect.
He’s heard stories of boys that couldn’t date for years because Mingyu was still on their minds and girls that thought of Mingyu when they held their new significant others. Most of his short-term relationships ended on good notes and all his exes still said nice things about him. It’s not hard with someone like him. Mingyu is warm. Mingyu is possessive and gregarious. He’s flirty and fun. And with Minghao he’s little more than a bluberring mess.

Mingyu is a man of habit; a man of stability.

Maybe that’s what’s different now.

It’s not that Minghao is incredibly different, but his effect on Mingyu is. He’s forcing Mingyu to change involuntarily. Yes, when it comes to Minghao, Mingyu’s changing at a great speed. He’s stopped cooking every night. He’s started making friends again. He’s stopped styling his hair on select days to fish for compliments from the elderly. He’s started dwelling in the past. He’s stopped cleaning his apartment at every opportunity and started spending that time doing things that he likes doing like going out for walks or baking or learning. He’s stopped putting his jackets in the coat closet the second he comes back since that maroon coat is sitting folded up on the bar where Minghao usually sits.

Minghao’s made Mingyu question his career, his endgame, and his happiness and that’s absolutely terrifying. How can one, little person have such a life-ruining effect, but he guesses that if anyone were to ruin his life, Minghao would be the choice candidate—in his book, at least.

He’s exhausted.

There’s something here having to do with the joke about running through someone’s mind, but Mingyu’s the one running circles through his own thoughts, cycling through events and people and regret. A lot of regret. The last thing he wants to run through is high school, but he can’t help that scenes start spinning on relentless reels as he closes his eyes to go back to sleep.

If his dreams tell him anything that night, it’s that he’s pathetic and useless. No amount of effort can help him stop the bullies and change the events that occurred ten years ago. While everything feels real in the dreamscape of high school, standing there with his Jansport backpack and Adidas that he can’t afford, he knows that it’s a dream. He’s there watching Minghao get the hood of his blue jacket grabbed and slammed into a chain-link fence. He hears the scuffle of worn shoes on the pavement and a slew of curses grunted through the air. Minghao was strong back then, too, he can fight back, but he even gives the group of four a run for their money. Mingyu calls out for him, but the words aren’t heard. Mingyu scrambles to get closer, but they keep fading further back. It’s like the stretch of sidewalk outside the school is an infinite conveyor belt. The crows flying overhead fold their wings and drop down like large drops of rain, covering everything in black; like oil. It catches fire when Mingyu reaches forward.

When he struggles again, flailing to move or to make a noise; anything. Minghao and the group of drama kids pay him no attention. It’s not like Mingyu was ever a witness to the fights. He would see Minghao before and after, but not immediately. He knew they happened, everyone did. It was usually after school or during lunch. Minghao would get called out during passing period when he’d walk to class alone, and he’d usually voluntarily go to fight. On the times that he didn’t, the fights were brought to him. Looking back on it, Minghao was foolish. That boyish pride in him hasn’t changed. He endures pain silently and in solitary just like any emo dreamboat. He doesn’t tell his friends and even having him admit to it still has to be beaten out of him.

Mingyu regrets everything about everything encompassing Minghao in high school. As his experience with him builds and he becomes fonder of the dancer, it feels like the regret builds as
well. He had ten years to apologize. He had ten years to make it up to Minghao. It’s not like he hasn’t tracked down someone from high school before. Facebook exists. LinkedIn exists. If he had bothered, he could have clicked through a few Instagram profiles and found Minghao’s. Mingyu feels like crying. He feels overwhelmed. It’s not anything in particular. It’s just one of those dreams that you feel more than you see and he’s already seeing a lot.

Wonwoo stands next to him. A cold stare tracing the features of Mingyu’s face. He shakes his head at the scene, but doesn’t say anything. He’s holding his mug of coffee, taking a sip when the first punch is swung and walks past the group when Minghao knocks one of them to the ground. He’s walking down the path to Minghao’s neighborhood and rounds a corner out of sight.

Mingyu isn’t lucid, but he can damn well try to save dream-Minghao from a few punches. He can try to stop himself from calling the dance captain out in the cafeteria that fateful Friday. Maybe Wonwoo showing up for the first time means that this dream is different. It has to be different. Maybe this time, Mingyu has a fighting chance. But like always, he’s stuck. His feet are glued to the ground and clear walls hold him back. His words are caught in his throat and he can only fall silent. It’s no different from a decade ago.

Mingyu isn’t afforded an in-dream shock to wake him up. He just spends the night restlessly fighting his inner demons.
“Sushi? You’re spoiling me.” Mingyu jokes.

“I got my paycheck.” Minghao side-steps him to take off his shoes and put the three boxes on the counter, revealing a colorful assortment of raw fish and avocado. This was from somewhere in uptown, Mingyu thinks he remembers the restaurant’s logo as a place by the electronics store near Riverside. Pricy and critically acclaimed—as critical as their small town could be, “I told you I’d deliver a dead fish, didn’t I? You better eat well.” Minghao finally turns to face him and his smile drops immediately, “Woah, are you okay?”

“Huh?” Mingyu had tried to nap numerous times throughout the day since he didn’t have anything to do on his day off. He volunteered a couple hours at the animal shelter and went out to buy a variety of drinks to stock his fridge, but each attempt to sleep was met with the same dream about high school, “I just didn’t sleep well.” Normally, he’d be flustered about anyone’s comment on his appearance. He hadn’t bothered to comb his hair or brush his teeth or change his clothes. It’s absolutely not professional, but it doesn’t look like Minghao is scrutinizing him for any of it. All that’s on his face is concern.

“Oh,” Minghao pulls the chopsticks and soy-sauce packets out of the bag, pushing them to the side. Mingyu has a better tasting soy-sauce in the cupboard and his metal chopsticks don’t taste like wood. He even went out to buy a new set of chopsticks at the Asian market since Minghao had complained about the flatter, Korean ones being difficult to use compared to the rounded and long Chinese ones. So, now Mingyu has, like, four types of chopsticks in his silverware drawer, “we can keep it short tonight. If you just wanna eat dinner and crash, that’s fine with me.”

Mingyu finally realizes that Minghao’s dressed like he’s come from the studio, “How was practice?”

“Not great.” Since it seems like Mingyu’s about five minutes away from a comatose state, Minghao helps himself to the plates in the kitchen and sets up the sushi. Food this good can’t be adequately enjoyed from the confines of a Styrofoam box, “It’s hard to correct my students when I’m not allowed to demonstrate on the spot. They only get to see the routine a few times before Jun and Soon have to leave, so everything else has to be explained orally and that’s hard when you’re trying to explain a subject that’s entirely based on feel and movement.” He stacks and tosses the boxes before nuking the container holding the miso soup. He knows that Mingyu likes hot, soupy things when it’s really cold and it was drizzling today.

“You’ll be back on your feet soon.” As if he’s not on his feet now. Minghao almost rolls his eyes, knowing that he’s not very close to freedom.

Mingyu likes watching Minghao hustle around the kitchen. It’s only been a week or so, but Minghao already knows where everything is. He knows which drawer the utensils are in after they’ve dried and he knows how Mingyu likes to keep all his sets separate in different organizers. He knows how the knives should be lined up on the magnetic strip that Mingyu drilled into the wall a couple months ago, Minghao knows that Mingyu always stacks plates in the back of the dishrack and bowls sit with the pots in the second sink. Mugs and cups stand upside down on a dish towel to dry; if it’s glass it has to be dried immediately. Wonwoo was right, Minghao’s observant, almost hyper-observant, and has learned a lot about Mingyu based on how he keeps the apartment, “How are you feeling?”

Minghao looks up at him as the microwave beeps a few times before he shuts it up with a slap
to the eject button. He closes it with a quiet hand, “Alright. I might not be able to dance, but I can still bark orders at people.” He sighs.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Minghao portions out the soup into bowls so they can eat together, “Soonyoung showed me the updated routine, so I think he believes that I’ll recover by the time we leave for finals, but I don’t know if that’s enough time for me to learn and perfect the routine.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Well, you haven’t given me the greenlight.” Minghao hands Mingyu a pair of chopsticks and ushers him to sit. Mingyu is clearly out of it, but at least Minghao isn’t rubbing it in his face like Wonwoo and Jeonghan do.

Mingyu puts an entire piece in his mouth, chewing meticulously and savoring the delicate flavors. He reaches for another piece and another before he realizes that Minghao’s just holding his chopsticks and not eating, “We’ll see how you do today.”

“This sushi is one-hundred percent a bribe,” Minghao points at the food with a swirl of his chopsticks, “but you’re exhausted.” He finally takes a roll onto his own plate, “It’s fine to wait a few more days.”

Mingyu looks down at his hands while he’s chewing. Something is weighing heavily on Minghao’s mind, he can tell based on how his eyes aren’t able to focus on any one place in particular, “I’ll take a look, just eat for now.” Again, it might just be how he’s brought up to be a gentleman, or it could be that he really does want Minghao to eat more, but Mingyu clips a particularly pretty roll and serves it onto the latter’s plate.

Minghao’s eyes scan up to him. He stares at Mingyu for a moment before dropping his gaze back to the side, eating the sushi with a sigh.

“What.”

“Nothing.”

“What.”

“Nothing.” Minghao looks at him again, “It’s a little off topic, but I’m seriously running out of places and things to feed you, so if you could just tell me what you like to eat—”

“Sorry.” Mingyu chuckles into his next bite, holding the chopsticks between his teeth before speaking again, “I thought you were doing a good job and I haven’t tried a lot of these places before. I had a feeling making you figure out something new each time might get frustrating after a while, but I was just waiting for you to say something.”

“Well, I’m saying something.”

“Honestly, everything that you’ve brought has been amazing—aside from the Subway, but I can overlook that.” Using sarcasm with Minghao is nice. It’s like telling half-jokes; passive aggressive, but not maliciously so, “My favorite foods are the ones that are close to home.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Mingyu shrugs, “Local restaurants, y’know, like, family recipes, homecooked stuff, things of
that nature.” He nods, “Stuff like that always tastes better in my opinion.”

He knows that his answer doesn’t help Minghao’s cause. Most of the food that Minghao had brought had been cooked by several generations in the kitchen, changing it up now would be no fun. Sushi, admittedly, isn’t the most ‘homecooked’ meal, but he’s not one to complain. Mingyu appreciates different cultures from different places, mixes of cultures, tastes of different traditions; people at their authentic core. In fact, now that he’s thinking about it, he’s really missing his parents’ cooking. He should call them up for a recipe from his childhood.

After a couple rolls, he notices that Minghao picks up a sizeable blob of wasabi and smears it on a roll before downing it. He stares. That can’t be good. That has to burn. But Minghao is totally fine, “How much wasabi have you even eaten?” Mingyu leans over to check his plate and sure enough, most of his mound of wasabi is gone, “Are you okay?”

“You have to eat the ginger and wasabi. It kills all the bacteria in the fish.”

“Can you even *taste* the fish?”

Minghao shrugs, “You haven’t eaten any. What, can’t handle the *burn*?” he eats another piece and chases it with a bead of wasabi. He gives Mingyu a coy and cheeky grin.

“Is that a *challenge*, Minghao Xu?” He’s going to regret this in approximately thirty seconds.

“I never said that.” Mingyu takes about a quarter of his wasabi and puts it all on one roll. Why is he doing this to himself? Why. This has got to be the stupidest thing that he’s done to impress anyone ever. *And this isn’t even impressive*. Mingyu can tell that his habits from college frat parties are coming back. He can’t bow out of a challenge if it involves 1up-ing someone, especially regarding drinks or food, even if it is Minghao, “Isn’t that too much? You’re going to choke.”

Lo and behold.

Mingyu’s a hacking, coughing, tearing, screaming mess in a matter of seconds. Minghao, bless his soul, is already in the kitchen digging through the fridge and pulling out a can of Coke that Mingyu had been saving for a rainy day. He hands it to Mingyu—who is currently hunched over his stool, resting his forehead on the seat—and rubs a calm circle into his back until Mingyu’s able to take a sip and wash out the wasabi’s burn.

“Breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth.” Mingyu can’t really manage that. He’s trying to wipe the tears and snot away before he can meet Minghao’s prett- not-gross, normal face again, “You good?”

If he’s honest, the weight of Minghao’s hand on his back is more soothing than the cola, “I’m good.”

When Mingyu looks at Minghao’s knee, it’s leagues better than it was a month ago. He’s finally taking the healing process seriously and he’s not lying through gritted teeth anymore. When Mingyu pushes a little too hard on a certain point in the joint, Minghao will tell him in earnest how much it hurts or if there’s any discomfort. However, despite the strides in progress he’s made, it’s still nowhere near complete repair. It needs *time*. He can’t just stop moving for a few days an expect all the problems to disappear. The knee brace isn’t some miraculous pain eraser. Pain-killers don’t fix the problem, they just make you forget about it for a little while.

“I think you need another week.” Mingyu sits on the armrest of the couch, looking down at
Minghao who is on his back on the floor, “Just a week. Can you manage that?”

Minghao nods, “Yeah.” There seems to be more that he wants to say. Mingyu knows that Minghao’s still sore and that waiting a little longer should be better in the long run. However, he also tries his best to understand his perspective. The competition is ending in exactly three weeks. They don’t have time; he doesn’t have time. Minghao can watch the moves all he wants, but like he said earlier, it’s difficult to explain something that must be felt to be understood.

“How hard is the choreo?”

Minghao shrugs, “Hard. It has to be hard this late into the game.” He chuckles.

“How much of it do you know?” he tries to help his patient stretch, but Minghao seems a little out of it, “Minghao?”

He blinks a couple times before refocusing his attention on Mingyu, “Not enough. I mean, I know it, I know it, on paper I know it, but I don’t understand it yet.” He sits up, gently pushing off Mingyu’s hands, “Soonyoung modified a few parts because Jihoon changed some of the audio. Normally, it’s not a big deal because we practice as often as possible. There’s supposed to be this syncopated beat before silence and a sort of drop after that in our second act, but Jihoon modified it a bit and Jun and I are supposed to figure out how to air chair into a leaning headstand so that we cross like In-N-Out palm trees.” Mingyu doesn’t get it, but it sounds difficult, “It’s something that we’ll have to practice together. Our third act has a lot of partner moves and our first one has a lot of group interaction, so I can’t practice stuff like that alone. I had a few weeks to get the moves down, but I’m sure Soon or Wonwoo have told you about how often the music and choreo change as we progress.”

Mingyu nods, cracking a sympathetic smile and reaching over to pat him a few times on the shoulder, letting his hand rest there until he can feel Minghao’s body heat through his clothes, “I think it’ll be fine.” Minghao just gives him a questionable look and turns back to his hands in his lap. Mingyu retracts his own hand with hesitation. There’s something Mingyu doesn’t understand resting behind his eyes and he wants to ask about it, “What?”

“What, what?”

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

He gets Minghao to lift the corners of his mouth just slightly, “Like what?” he glances up at Mingyu again with that same, wide-eyed, coy look. He’s kind of cute; barely cute. It’s just a little sliver in time that feels liminal. It feels like they stop and five seconds grows into five minutes of just locking gazes and breathing. Maybe this is just Minghao’s power; he can manipulate time.

Mingyu would say his heart stops, but it doesn’t. It maybe skips a beat or two, but looking at good food does that to him too.

“Nothing.”
They end the night a little half-heartedly. There’s something left unsaid on the edge of Mingyu’s lips and Minghao turns back to look at him in his doorway before he ducks into his car; something that he had never done before. For the next few hours, Mingyu will pin all his mixed feelings on the sushi being an aphrodisiac; blaming the airy feeling in his stomach on the raw fish being bad. He’s fine.

What’s going on.

Sunday’s clouds hold the promise of rain. They’re stacked thick and dark, so Mingyu asks if Minghao wants to come over early before it starts pouring. Unfortunately, Minghao can’t. His students requested an extra session since they have their own Winter league competitions coming up and Minghao submitted because he knows his teaching efficiency has been subpar.

“That’s okay.”

Minghao hesitates before responding, “If you wanna call today off, we can.” The static in the receiver feels louder than normal today, “I’m sure you’d like to have a weekend to yourself.”

“Nah, my weekends are pretty vacant. If you’re up for traversing in the rain, come over.” Mingyu weighs his words, hot-potato-ing them between different sects of his brain and juggling them on the tip of his tongue, but goddammit if Minghao can look at him like that then he can say something a little ballsy too, “I want to see you.”

“You want to see me?” Minghao laughs. He guesses the dancer took his words as sarcasm, a joke. It doesn’t hurt, but it doesn’t sit right, “My, my, Mingyu. I never thought I’d see the day.”

Mingyu doesn’t know how to respond. The spot on his couch is starting to get uncomfortable and his legs are starting to feel restless, “I’ll see you after work.”

“Sure.” Minghao mumbles something off to the side, probably to his students, “What do you want to eat?”

“Surprise me.” There’s a short string of curses over the line that makes him laugh. Minghao shouldn’t have to surprise him. Going back to Celestia’s or one of the other restaurants was more than enough.

“I’ll make you regret those words, Mingyu.”

When Minghao shows up at 4 with an early dinner, the real surprise is that he’s soaked. He apologizes continuously as Mingyu ushers him in and out of the rain, taking the dripping plastic bags of food out of his hand and plopping them on the counter before grabbing a spare towel from the hallway cabinet. It’s one of those times that he moves without thinking; as if it was just second nature. Minghao’s taking off his shoes, balancing on one foot in the doorway, shutting the door behind him with one hand and using the other to steady himself against the wall. Mingyu covers his head with the towel and rubs it into his hair, akin to the method you’d use to dry a dog. He’s never dried another person before, only the shelter dogs that he sometimes washes, but Minghao’s not
complaining even though Mingyu’s roughing him up. He doesn’t move until a loose string form the
towel gets caught on his ear and he slaps Mingyu’s arm for him to stop and to detangle himself.

“Do you want me to throw your jacket in the dryer?” Mingyu realizes that he’s not being very
professional and takes a step away from the dancer. He lets Minghao stand back up to his full height
and towel his own hair off. As if on cue, the sky stops flooding the streets once Minghao’s inside.
That’s just painful irony.

He tugs on the wet sleeves of the grey hoodie; the fabric has a death grip on his arm. He tries
the other side with no luck, “It’s okay, I’ll just let it sit over here. I don’t want to stain your other
clothes.” That’s just the Minghao way of saying ‘I don’t want to burden you.’ He crosses his arms
and tries to pull the hoodie over his head, but the sticky fabric tugs his shirt along with it, riding up
on his stomach. Reflexively, Mingyu reaches forward to tug the white t-shirt down, but Minghao
can’t see and ends up punching him in the face, “I’m so sorry, are you okay?”

“Yeah, no, no, I’m fine.” Mingyu rubs his cheek.

Minghao’s hair is all over the place. One of his longer earrings is caught in one of the studs
and—much to Mingyu’s dissatisfaction—the water had seeped through his hoodie and into the top of
his white shirt. It’s now clinging to his chest and collarbones, leaving little to the imagination. Well,
at least he doesn’t have his nipples pierced.

“Here, the dryer’s empty anyway.” He offers a hand out for the jacket that is begrudgingly
handed over with cold hands. Mingyu takes it to his laundry room and tosses it into the dryer along
with a couple scented sheets, then instead of going back to the living room, he ducks into his own
room, rummaging for the smallest t-shirt he has, “Do you want to change? You’re going to catch a
cold like that.”

“Thanks, mom.” Minghao takes the shirt and strips off his own. Wanting to give Minghao a
little privacy, Mingyu busies himself in the kitchen, surprised to see Chinese takeout being the dinner
night. It’s not anything special, just your standard fast food; chow mein, pork buns, hot and sour
soup, general’s chicken, broccoli beef, rice, and very-un-Chinese fortune cookies.

Mingyu finally looks up after tossing the plastic bags into his drawer of plastic bags. Minghao
looks better in that shirt than he does. It’s just some pastel-pink t-shirt, ombréd into white with a sky-
blue pocket. He would wear it, but it’s also a size and a half too small and if there’s one thing that
Mingyu hates wearing more than wet socks, it’s clothes that are too tight. It never suited Mingyu. If
he’s honest, it doesn’t really suit Minghao either. Maybe it’s just the fact that he likes seeing Minghao
accepting his gestures that gaslights him into thinking that he looks nice.

Their dinner passes quietly. Minghao explains that this was the only restaurant that was fast
and close to the studio. Mingyu regrets not asking him what time he was off today (it was 3:30).
Minghao had to rush to get takeout and then speed across town to show up on time. The food isn’t
bad, it’s actually pretty good and reminds Mingyu of his broke college days, but it there’s something
missing.

“Sorry if the food isn’t top tier.” Minghao shovels another bite into his mouth.

Mingyu takes a drink. Getting ten varieties of tea the other day was a better idea than he
expected. Minghao’s sipping on chrysanthemum and he’s scalding his mouth with green, “It’s
perfectly fine.”

“I would have ordered something more traditional, but I didn’t know if you’d like it. Most of
my American friends don’t really like the legit stuff.”
“Oh, same here. They can’t stand the spice or get squeamish when they’re presented with bones or a whole fish. Like where do they think food comes from?”

“I know right?” Tonight’s conversation is more wholesome than anything Mingyu could have ever hoped for. While their town had a proportionately large Asian population compared to the towns around them, it was still hard to blend their at-home Asian heritage with their friends at school. While Riverside had a majority of Caucasian students—where kids of ethnic minorities struggled to form their own cliques—, Oakdale was much more diverse. Students came from every walk of life and it wasn’t too hard to share similarities between cultures. Coming to lunch with snacks that were never in English was something they sometimes got unwanted attention for—not to mention the times it was something less ‘normal’ like shrimp chips or dried squid, but it wasn’t a far stretch for some of his other friends.

Minghao points out how he and Eugene Chavez (his former neighbor and tennis team captain) had spent an entire lunch period talking about how lo mai gai was essentially a Cantonese version of a tamale. It was mind-blowing at the time; less so as they grew and saw more of the world. Minghao tells Mingyu about all the really amazing fusion restaurants and food trucks he had seen and tried in the city. Everything from vegan sushi burgers to bratwurst with spiralized potato dipped in cheese-corn. Kimchi in mashed yams was a fail, but everything else sounded mouth-watering. When asked, Minghao admits that he doesn’t care too much about traditional food. He loves it, but he gets tired of it quickly. What he does enjoy is trying new things, putting pieces of things together in ways they were never meant to be and seeing what the result is. He talks about how the spaghetti tacos he tried for his fifteenth birthday were both good and terribly messy and how he and Ian Wang decided to dissect a burrito and shove pickled daikon and charsiu into it.

“It would have been good if we took out the beans.”

“Sure, Minghao, sure.”

Apparently, his love of weird food combinations followed him through college and to work because he rattles off another tale of how he and Jun had drunk too much one night and made the choice to eat congee with 7-11 junk food. That was also ‘good’. He says that when he and Soonyoung first met, they ate a lot of Korean food since Wonwoo often brought some authentic stuff from restaurants in the city. At first, the idea of cold noodles sounded interesting, but Minghao didn’t seem to understand that naengmyeon was what it was. He ended up not liking it in the slightest. But he did later combine spring rolls with bulgogi and that was ‘good’.

He asks if Mingyu’s ever tried any good combinations and Mingyu has to dig, really dig, for any example in his memory. Mingyu is the type to dwell in the past and likes the tradition of foods and how they came to be. He can’t say he’s tried too many combinations cross-culturally. He usually goes out to eat specific things.

“Even something simple, like purple rice and marinara-”

“Are you telling me you just dumped some marinara into your rice-”

“Hey, it works for jambalaya and Spanish rice, it should work with bibimbap.”

“Minghao, no.”

“It was like a little shrimp, a little chicken, cucumber, bell pepper, Creole seasoning, sesame seeds, rice-”

“Minghao, no.”
“Mingyu, yes.”

“Did it turn out?”

“I- well- I should have warmed it up and let it sit, but it was- it was okay.”

Is this _bonding_?

They’re not talking about _high school_, just school. They aren’t talking about _high school life_, just _life_. And it’s so fucking nice. This is the kind of conversation that Mingyu had unknowingly craved. Sure, his Korean-American co-workers could have probably humored his rants about weird snacks, but none of them were as forward as Minghao. In reality, this is probably the most that he’s ever heard Minghao say in a single sitting. They just talk and talk and talk. Mingyu doesn’t mind if he’s taking the backseat for most of the night. Minghao’s sure to ask him questions often, but Mingyu’s letting him steer the conversation wherever he wants.

Most of it revolves around food and how being broke in college sparked his resourceful nature. Mingyu has to agree; combining random shit in the cafeteria in order to keep it interesting was the bane of his freshman dining experience. He even resorted to eating Cinnamon Toast Crunch with Sunny D, to which Minghao shrugs and says he’s done Cheerios with a Caprisun. Minghao says that he lived off of ramen so hard that he can’t even look at the Maruchan stuff without wanting to gag. Shin Ramyun is tolerated, but most instant noodles are a turn-off.

Mingyu laughs. Minghao laughs.

From the outside looking in, they look like old college buddies catching up over tea and takeout. From the inside looking out, Mingyu sees them getting along better than he’d ever expected. He never thought about having Minghao in his kitchen as both a patient and a friend.

Oh, the F word.

Did he just admit to the F word?

“It’s getting late,” Minghao laughs and looks at a text, “My roommate is wondering where I am.”

Without realizing it, they’d talked for nearly _six hours_. They’re both going to regret it in the morning when their voices and throats are exhausted, but in Mingyu’s book, it is well worth the strain. This is more than he’s ever talked at once. The longest conversation to date is probably a three-hour Skype call he had with Jungkook the Christmas after he moved to New York and most of that was due to poor connection. Talking with Minghao felt like talking with a better version of himself.

They barely touched on exercises and all Minghao managed to complete between changes in subject were his stretches, but he seems to be feeling quite good. It had started raining again; pouring really. Mingyu’s apartment is filled with the greasy smell of generic Chinese takeout, but the only thing he’s left with is a craving. He wants to talk more, he wants to learn more. He wants to try Minghao’s weird pseudo-recipes and tell him about his experiences in the kitchen; about how many pastries he’s burned and how he once lit a spatula on fire over an electric stove.

“I’ll walk you to your car.” Mingyu picks up the black umbrella he has by the door, “Sorry, we didn’t get very far in terms of fixing your knee today.”
“That’s okay. It was nice just talking with you for once.” Minghao fiddles with his earring before putting on his shoes. By the time he’s done, Mingyu’s already got the door open and is standing outside under the awning. He takes a step back inside, to pull Minghao to his feet. He probably doesn’t need the help, but he takes Mingyu’s hand anyway.

When Minghao steps out of the door, he turns to push Mingyu back in and stop him from following him. The air is frigid, gusting by them and sending the rain right up to Mingyu’s doorstep.

“Stay inside, it’s cold.”

Minghao has big hands and strong arms, but he’s certainly not pushing that hard against Mingyu’s shoulder. He just wants Mingyu to stay toasty and dry inside. The gesture only prompts Mingyu’s stubbornness. “It’s fine, it won’t be too long.” Minghao sighs, shakes his head, and takes his hands back.

The walk back to Minghao’s car parked over on the street is short, but their paces are slow. There’s only a little room between them as the umbrella was clearly made for one. Their shoulders bump every few steps with their other shoulders catching the rainwater that trickles off the umbrella’s spokes. Mingyu never had a need for an umbrella that could hold any more than that. So, he holds it out to his side, shielding Minghao from the rain because he supposedly gets sick easily. The wind-chill makes it feel like it’s below freezing tonight.

“Stop that.” Minghao pushes the umbrella back towards Mingyu.

“Stop what? You’re going to get wet.” Mingyu muscles the umbrella back over the dancer.

Minghao sighs and continues walking after another failed shove. Mingyu’s persistent when it comes to being nice, “You’ll regret it.”

When they arrive at Minghao’s car, Mingyu holds the umbrella over the open door so that he can get into the driver’s seat. The dancer looks up at him and his 6’1” self, eyes locked onto some detail of Mingyu’s face. He looks expectant, but also impatient and a little judgemental. He has half a mind to wonder if there’s sauce on his cheek or something, “Drive home carefully.” Minghao nods and waits for Mingyu to back up before he shuts his door.

Mingyu retreats to the pavement in front of his complex to make sure Minghao gets back on the road okay. It’s just customary for him. Yeah, he might be a little soaked, but his apartment, his shower, and his dryer are a 30 second walk away, “Good night, Mom!” Minghao half-yells as he gets back on the road. By the time Mingyu realizes that Minghao’s jacket is still sitting in his dryer, he’s out of earshot and can only wave goodbye.

In the most platonic way possible, Minghao still has his shirt and he still has Minghao’s clothes.
Chapter 26

It’s cold.

That’s an understatement.

It’s more than cold when you’re wet and there’s a strong gust blowing. Everything about tonight was great, but it also feels like it passed by in a blur. It went by too fast; absolutely faster than six hours. The clock must’ve been playing tricks on them.

He sniffs as he reenters his apartment and shuts the door behind him, throwing the wet umbrella into the bin and quickly prancing over to the thermostat after kicking off his shoes. He cranks it all the way up to 85; he’ll turn it back down in a few, but right now he wants the heater to kick on as soon as possible. The food is still sitting out, but that can wait. Mingyu strips off his clothes and tosses them into the washer before he lunges for the shower.

He’s so thankful that he was born in an era where heated, running water is an abundant thing because he’s chilled down into his bones. His shower spans at least ten minutes longer than normal and by the time he’s done, the bathroom has fogged up so densely that he can barely see the counter four feet away. He pulls on his pajamas and the thickest robe he has before coming back out to clean up the leftovers. For once, Mingyu doesn’t fill the apartment with music as he cleans.

It’s silent.

It’s silent because he’s rewinding and reliving the conversation he’s had with Minghao tonight. Is that creepy? He doesn’t think it’s creepy. He doesn’t even fight the smile on his lips as he dumps detergent into the washer and fishes Minghao’s clothes out of the dryer. They were dry, but he might as well wash them and hand them back tomorrow. It’s an untold norm that you have to wash the clothes of people that leave them behind at your place, at least that’s what his parents always did.

He flicks on the TV later that night as he’s sipping on some hot chocolate. His head hurts a little and his nose hasn’t stopped running since he’s put all the leftovers in the fridge. He blames it on the chills. Mingyu hasn’t been sick since his second year in college when the nights were long and every lab was germy. He couldn’t afford to be sick after that. There’s no one to take care of you when you’re hours away from home for school and classes are hard to catch up in. Working, he tries to save up all of his sick leave for the day that he’s actually sick.

It’s not very often that Mingyu falls asleep away from his bed and he never goes to sleep without brushing his teeth, but tonight he strays from routine and conks out on the couch. His hot chocolate would be spilled if he didn’t finish it all because he isn’t even conscious long enough to put the cup on the coffee table.

That night, he dreams of stormy skies and poppy fields. There’s a bunch of little hills, almost like a golf course. He’s not sure what he’s doing or who he’s looking for, but he finds an old classmate, Michael, up on one of the knolls and asks him what’s happening. Michael looks at him and smiles before shaking his head and vanishing. The next hill sits Arielle, the first person Mingyu had dated. He looks back to Michael’s hill; his first crush. She gives him a warm hug and backs up with a subtle smile as well. She disappears into the air and Mingyu has to move on. Each hill after that varies in height, some taller, some shorter, but overall, they’re getting harder and harder to climb. Each and every person was someone that Mingyu had felt strongly towards; that he shared history with.
A more familiar face takes shape on a sizeable hill far down the trail. He hadn’t seen Jungkook since college. The guy moved cross-country to New York and never looked back. While they never had an official relationship, there were plenty of times that Mingyu had thought about it. They both weren’t that loud, and they had both put school and success before their emotions, but Jungkook’s friends knew how to party and would often rope the two in when they could. The parties were never too irresponsible, but sometimes Mingyu has to thank those guys for helping him keep his sanity amongst the jungle of textbooks and the mountain of term papers. He and Jungkook had their share of fun with each other, but there was always something prolific about him that Mingyu just couldn’t shake at the time. He would have asked his friend out, but one of the frat-friends beat him to the punch and Jungkook had said yes without a second thought. Mingyu will admit that he was hurt for a while, but he let Jungkook go. That’s just the kind of person he is. No sense crying over spilled milk even if he did somehow whittle his way into avoiding the guy on social media. He doesn’t want any reminders.

Jungkook throws his arms around Mingyu, presses a rough kiss to his cheek with a smack, and laughs with him before pushing him off to what he thinks is the last hill. Chronologically, it has to be.

Small, soft Eunbi is standing there with her hands folded in front of her and a bouquet of yellow roses in her grasp. A slight smile is on her lips, but from her eyes pool tears. She and Mingyu didn’t get very far in their relationship but they were friends for a long time, being born in the same year and growing up in the same neighborhood did that to you. Even though she had moved to the other end of town and gone to Riverside, they had reconnected in college through some weird twist of events and ended up dating for a few months before Mingyu called it quits.

He couldn’t do it.

Eunbi, like the others, was full of potential. Her dreams were big and bold and she had all the talent to fill the gaps that their small-town upbringing couldn’t afford her in connections. Occasionally, still, Mingyu thinks about the way she carded fingers through his hair and sung him out of a mid-finals mental breakdown with a soft lullaby. Maybe more than a girlfriend, he saw her as a sister. To some level, their love was real, but its definition was different to each of them and Mingyu had broken her heart.

He had done it like a coward, right before summer break and surprisingly his conscious was rather clear after a week of sleep. He didn’t look back or reflect on it. Eunbi had studied abroad in France the following semester and in Spain the semester after that. He remembers that she had cut her hair short that summer. They lost contact and Mingyu had thought it best to not try and rekindle their friendship. Their feelings for each other weren’t balanced. He wasn’t ready for commitment and she was too attached. It was unfair to both of them in different ways. Based on Facebook updates from her mom, Eunbi’s pursuing theater now, working her way around Broadway, in New York like Jungkook, and is engaged to some gorgeous Instagram model who treasures her more than Mingyu ever could. The two girls looked happy in their engagement photo.

Eunbi looks up at him and blinks away her tears, handing him the bouquet before sniffling and cracking a smile. She’s as pretty as he remembers. When he receives the roses, their colors change from yellow to off-white with hints of green; sending him the best for a new life full of well-wishes. Eunbi had often brought him flowers since she worked weekends at a local flower shop. He remembers, vaguely, the language of roses at least; yellow for friendship, green to send someone off with hope. When he looks away from the roses and back at her, she also vanishes, a ribbon from her hair flying away in the wind.

The weather seems to progressively get worse. It’s to the point where Mingyu doesn’t know if he’s supposed to fight a boss-battle at the end of this hilltop voyage. Eunbi should have been the last
hill. She was the last relationship he’d had; junior year of his undergrad studies. Her hill was the highest. He’s exhausted both physically and mentally. Like usual, Mingyu doesn’t seem to understand his subconscious because another hill appears. One higher than the rest.

As he traverses down into the little valley that separates them, he runs into Wonwoo who adds another off-white flower to the bouquet. Soonyoung follows in the same manner, Jun after that. Jihoon, Chan, Hansol, and Seungkwan follow them. Mingyu can barely remember their faces when he’s conscious, how is it that their faces are so clear now? Once he’s almost at the top of the hill, Seungcheol stands in his way. Goddamn, it is a boss fight. The roommate gives him a hard stare and says something inaudible, but Mingyu’s going to guess that it’s a threat, before he sticks his own green rose into the bunch.

It’s almost expected by now that the person standing on top of the tallest hill is Minghao. Of course, it has to be Minghao. He can’t really see his face. You know the way dreams are. You know who a person is, but everything is a little vague. Mingyu looks at the bouquet in his hands and then back at the dancer who is staring off into the distance, the wind whipping through his hair and blowing open his jacket. When he approaches, Minghao blinks slowly and meets eyes with him the same way he had stared from the driver’s seat of his car. Mingyu offers the slightly-green flowers. He doesn’t know why, it just seems like the right thing to do, but when they touch Minghao’s hands they shift into a deep, ruby red. The wind picks up, roughly bashing the bouquet and sending the petals flying with the current. SpongeBob springs forward from Minghao’s hands and karate chops Mingyu in the forehead.

Mingyu wakes up in a cold sweat; sitting up with a hard jolt.

He feels terrible; fever dreams are wild rides. He has an ear-splitting ring in his head and a headache bruising his frontal lobe. Thanks, Spongebob.

His phone says it’s almost 6am. At least he managed to sleep through the night. He should get up for work and eat breakfast, but when he tries to get off the couch, all of his body parts object. He’s not going anywhere. He coughs and feels something in his throat, not to mention how blocked up his nose is.

It’s times like these that he’s glad he has so many sick days saved up. Sleep pulls him to his bed instead of to the bathroom and smothers him in the blankets. He texts Joshua a little after 7 when he wakes up the second time and the manager is slow to respond, waking Mingyu from his slumber. At least he isn’t yelled at and Joshua just tells him to take it easy and rest—surprisingly not snarky or mad about his last-minute absence.

He decides that medicine is probably his best bet and drinks more than the suggested dosage of NyQuil before conking out again in his soft sheets. The ding from his phone wakes him up a little after noon, ‘Hey, I’m coming over to pick up my jacket after work.’ That was rather forward for Minghao, but the three dots at the bottom of his screen do a little dance and ‘if that’s okay’ appears in a second text. Mingyu would rather not see anyone while he’s dripping from weird places and isn’t able to clear his head.

‘Sure. What time?’ it’s usually 6 because that’s just the time they arrange to meet up, but he’s not actually sure when Minghao gets off work. Today it’s some time around 5, he knows that much, but not much more than that.

‘Would 7 be too late?’
Mingyu wonders why he’s straying from routine, ‘Yeah, that’s fine. I’ll see you then.’ As much as he likes talking to Minghao, resting is his top priority so he silences his phone with an alarm to wake him up at 6:50. That’s right, he’s not even going to care about his hair or if he’s dressed because he’s going to sleep as much as possible. He doesn’t want to stay sick at in bed for more than one day. It’ll drive him crazy. Again, Mingyu rarely gets sick and he’s usually a functional sick-person at that, but this cold is knocking him out.

He’ll tell you right now that being sick as a single adult is probably the worst feeling ever because there’s no one around to baby you and in your germy, sad state all you can be full of aside from snot is self-pity. It’d be nice if someone could boil some water and bring him some tea, but he’s got to do it all himself. It’d be nice if someone could heat up one of the canned soups that’s collected dust in the cupboard that he saves for days like this, but he’s got to do that himself too. It’s not like he has an appetite right now anyway. He’s not going to get up.

It barely feels like he sleeps ten minutes when his phone trills with the alarm. Already. His eyes are caked shut, but he cracks one open to check for missed messages in the midst of sitting up and waking up.

12:41 Wonwoo, ‘I hope you’re feeling okay! Rest well.’ So many sparkle emojis and a little pill.

15:02 Wonwoo, ‘Work feels lonely without you’ followed by a string of frowny faces, the hospital building, and a broken heart.

15:11 Wonwoo, ‘Jeonghan bought a package of mini-whoopee cushions and is stashing them under all the staff chairs’ and attached is a picture of said man hunched over Joshua’s desk, installing the whoopee cushion. Normally, it’d be Mingyu to stop him and rationalize why they should only prank Joshua and not the other staff members, but, their loss, Mingyu’s sick.

16:10 Wonwoo, ‘Are you seriously sleeping all day, Mango?’

16:10 Wonwoo, ‘*Mingyu, but tbh Mango is a cute nickname.’

Unsurprisingly, that’s it.

He lays back down and shuts his eyes just for a second, but the doorbell rings and when he looks at the clock it’s already a few minutes past 7. He gets up with a loud groan and a yawn before he can meander over to the door and open it.
Chapter 27

Minghao almost pushes his way in, kicking off his shoes, putting a bag down on the counter and pulling out Tupperware. Odd, since when did takeout places give Tupperware? “Hey, I don’t know if I can actually go through with our session today.”

“That’s okay.” Minghao’s voice is a little rough and lost, “I wasn’t planning on it.” He pulls out Mingyu’s shirt from his bag and places it, neatly folded, on the counter as he puts the container into the microwave and pulls a bowl, a pair of chopsticks, and a spoon out from Mingyu’s dishrack.

Just one of each.

“What are you doing?”

Minghao comes around the kitchen island and puts his hands on Mingyu’s shoulders, guiding him back to the couch, “I just wanted to drop off your shirt. I have to meet up with Soonyoung in, like,” a flick of the wrist isn’t enough to lift his sleeves, so he glances at the clock on the wall, “forty minutes. He wants to go over some changes.” He makes him sit before he returns to the kitchen and pours out what could possibly be the best smelling soup that Mingyu’s ever wafted. It’s a somewhat familiar scent, even though he can’t really place a finger on it.

“What happened to your voice?”

Minghao chuckles—or wheezes, Mingyu can’t really tell, “I went home after all that talking and then Soonyoung called me up to go out for karaoke since it was our secretary’s birthday the other day. I really killed my throat, but I’m not sick like you are.” He comes into the living room and places the soup down on the coffee table for Mingyu to take with a little bowl of plain noodles on the side, “What do you wanna drink? I brought, like, three flavors of Gatorade, some juice, and a 5-hour Energy. I can put some tea on if you want.”

“Tea would be nice.” Mingyu’s not really thinking about his words or caring since he’s just going through the motions of being sick and not being the rudest host. He does forget that the host isn’t supposed to have the guest make the tea, but Minghao already has the kettle on the stove, he can hear the knob turn and click onto its highest power, “How did you know I was sick?”

“Wonwoo called me this morning.” If his mind wasn’t so hazy, he could have probably pieced it together faster that it’s suspicious Wonwoo called instead of Soonyoung just telling him at work.

“But why are you bringing me stuff?” Mingyu hopes he doesn’t sound like a whiny little baby, but he just wants to be a bit of a pitiful toddler. Just for a little. It’s been so long since anyone’s coddled him like this. In fact, it’s suspicious, “Did he put you up to this?”

Minghao laughs—this time he knows it’s a laugh—, “No. I felt bad that you walked me out to the car and got wet, so I thought I’d make it up to you.”

That’s silly. Germs take about three days to incubate. Any bacteria that Mingyu was exposed to three days ago is the cause for his current ailment, not walking Minghao to his car in the rain. If anything, it was probably from the not-a-date in the park and Mingyu’s own turmoil to not wear his coat, “Don’t feel bad about it.” The kettle toots and Minghao turns off the stove with a click.

“What kind of tea do you want?”

“Surprise me.”
“I’ll seriously douse you in scalding water, just tell me.”

“Chamomile.” Or at least Mingyu hopes he said chamomile because what really came out of his mouth was ‘chamo-CHOO’ since he sneezed.

He shuts his eyes, leaning back on the couch, forgetting about the delectable-smelling soup in front of him for just a minute. His mouth and taste buds just aren’t awake yet. He can hear Minghao rip open the teabag and toss the loose leaves into a mug before the water sloshes in after it. Is this a fever dream? Is Minghao really here bringing him soup and making him tea in the comfort of his own home?

The sound of the mug being placed on a coaster reminds him that Minghao is, in fact, standing in his living room, “Can you tell me where my jacket is? I can go get it.” With his voice a little hoarse, but mostly soft and breathy. Mingyu motions to where the laundry is stacked and Minghao leaves the room to get his things. While he’s gone, Mingyu leans forward to take a sip of the world’s most comforting soup ever. Oh my god. Amazing.

“Hey, what kind of soup is this? It’s really good.”

“Chicken ginseng. You can add the noodles on the side if you want it to be more filling, but I wasn’t sure how much you could stomach.” Minghao has his shirt and jacket under his arm and tosses them into his bag, “Thanks for washing them.”

“No problem.” Mingyu takes another gratuitous slurp. Ingredient-wise, it looks a lot like samgyetang, a Korean soup with chicken and ginseng, but it tastes distinctly different, “God, where did you get this?”

“I made it.” Revolutionary.

It might be the fever talking, but Mingyu almost wants to cry. He’s feeling horrible and here comes Minghao, swooping in like a god-sent angel who makes him tea and cooks for him in his time of need. Even after his shitty and exhausting dream about climbing hills for days, Minghao’s standing here in the flesh and his bouquet of flowers is soup- “SpongeBob isn’t going to jump out of this bowl and karate chop me, right?”

“Uh,” Minghao gives him a questionable look, “not the last time I checked, no- Are you sure you’re okay? Not completely crazy or anything? My car is j-”

“Yep, yep, yes. I’m good.” Not really, he’s half-gone from his excessive consumption of NyQuil and Advil and the rest of his cold makes it feel like he’s talking underwater. His tongue is lazy in his mouth, slurring his words together and it’s hard to keep his eyes from shutting every few seconds, but he wants to look at Minghao and he wants to remember this time as vividly as possible.

To think that the only image of Minghao that remained after the last decade was of him in a ratty sweater in a cafeteria that always smelled like bad bean burritos is ridiculous. The person in front of him now honestly hasn’t changed that much in the last ten years. He’s matured, gotten more handsome, filled out a bit, but every inch of his heart has stayed the same. It’s possible even that has grown. He loves dogs, he has a lot of long-term friends, he is passionate and driven, and he made Mingyu soup. Mingyu wants so badly to override that old cafeteria memory that he’s opted to staring Minghao down, not blinking with his unwavering gaze. He’s breathing in every scent he can with his nostrils slightly flared. Even though it’s just his apartment that smells like Febreze and Fall air, it now carries faint traces of the meal in front of him. And, although he’s probably imagining it, it also smells warm and familiar. It might freak him out a little, but he really, really, super-really wants to hold on to this version of Minghao.
“I hope you’re not like this when you drink.” Minghao pushes the tea a few inches closer to him and sits next to Mingyu, but on the floor, his shoulders a few inches away from Mingyu’s knees, “Have you taken your temperature recently? Your medicine?”

“Yeah. It’s not too high. My fever broke a while ago.” Mingyu mumbles into a spoonful of soup and bites into the most tender chicken. It’s all deboned even though the soup is clearly made with the chicken whole. There’s the subtle taste of white pepper and maybe some ginger in there, a little salt and just the tiniest hint of soy, but it tastes rich from the marrow that had stewed for a couple hours.

“That’s good.”

The more Mingyu steals glances at him, the more he sees how tired Minghao looks. He has dark rings under his eyes and his complexion isn’t great. His hair is messy and a little greasy from him not washing up last night. Mingyu guesses that it’s because he had work early in the morning; maybe he covered Jun’s shift or something. His weekends were usually packed morning to night with classes for school-aged students since they couldn’t actively attend the studio during the week. Wonwoo has complained about it more than a couple times.

“How’s your knee doing?”

“Fine.” Minghao looks up at him, fingers fiddling with the drawstrings of his jacket, “I got a little excited during karaoke last night, so it’s a little sore, but nothing horrible.”

“I can take a look at it.”

“Nah, it’s okay. I put on some medicinal patches when I got home last night.” He leans his back against the couch. His blue hoodie’s hood is inside-out so Mingyu reaches a hand forward to fix it; ironing it down with his hands at the back of Minghao’s nape.

“Thanks for taking care of me.” Without thinking, he pats Minghao’s head and combs a hand through his hair to straighten out the strands that had fallen out of place. It’s thick and a little coarse from the constant dyeing, but isn’t rough or incredibly unhealthy. He’s sure if Minghao bothered to deep-condition it every now and then, it might have the potential to be soft. He doesn’t realize what he’s done until Minghao glances up at him again, large eyes open and questioning. He doesn’t look annoyed or uncomfortable, but Mingyu knows from that look that he’s stepped out of line. It’s another one of those moments that suspends Mingyu in a vacuum of space and time, or maybe it’s just his fever coming back. Regardless, he snaps his hand back into his lap and refocuses on the soup, “Sorry.”

“Where do you keep your thermometer?” Minghao does this elegant leg-sweep as he stands to get up, stretching with ease and walking over to the kitchen. It’s reminiscent of a move Mingyu saw him perform two weeks ago at the studio and reminds him that Minghao’s just as much of a professional in his field as Mingyu is in his, maybe even more so. How does he move like he’s weightless? It’s not like Minghao’s a stick anymore. Sure, he might be the lightest dancer on the team next to the tiny DJ whose name escapes Mingyu, but is it possible to be so bird-like?

Maybe his bones are hollow.

He certainly has wings.
Mingyu doesn’t want to talk. He wants to curl up into a ball and cringe from how not-Mingyu-like he is right now, “In the cabinet on top of the fridge.” He can hear Minghao swing the cabinet open because it clacks against the other doors, but turns around when there’s no sound following that.

Minghao tiptoes. He can’t reach.

He jumps once and then twice, but only manages to push the small medical box further back into the cabinet. If Mingyu wasn’t already dying from embarrassment, he might have walked over and helped him. He might have trapped Minghao between his arms, pinning him to the fridge, and reached above him, pressing their chests together. He would get up in his space again just like whatever thing happened at the park. He might have intentionally done something regrettable like putting their foreheads together or grinning into a shy kiss.

But Mingyu is sick and, at that, he’s suffering more than he should be.

“There’s a stool under the sink.” He mumbles after hearing Minghao give up when the soft thump of his socked feet stop bouncing on the linoleum.

He just hears the latter sigh, flap open the sink cabinet, and search for the stool. Sometimes Mingyu forgets that not everyone is as tall as he is and that they don’t have what Jeonghan had dubbed ‘tower privilege’, but Mingyu’s not really that tall. Maybe to a Korean or generic Asian standard, he’s tall, but he went to high school with basketball players that pushed 6’4” as freshmen. It’s not like he’s the tallest person in town even though he enjoys the height difference between him and his co-workers.

And Minghao.

“Say ah.” Minghao holds the thermometer up to his lips, standing with his hip cocked and putting his weight on the arm of the couch.

Mingyu glances up at him, raising an eyebrow, scoffing before choking on the phlegm in his throat and complying immediately. After twenty seconds it sends a shrill beep through the air and Minghao pulls it away from him, “Will I make it, doc?”

He cracks a small smile, “Nope.” His frank answer makes Mingyu laugh which is regrettable because he coughs again, “101.6, do you want me to take you to a walk-in or something?”

“No, no, no- I’m fine- I’m great- I’m getting better. I can feel it.” He takes a gratuitous slurp of the tea. Minghao doubts him for obvious reasons. His weird behavior tonight likely being the cause for worry since he’s just babbling like a baby every few minutes.

“Right.”

“Really, Minghao, really.” Mingyu puts the empty mug back down onto the coffee table and stands up. Minghao’s gaze follows him, “Maybe the reading’s wrong since I’m drinking hot things.”

“Maybe,” he stretches the word out, making his uncertainties clear in his intonations, “do you want to eat anymore?”

Mingyu debates. He’s not stuffed like he normally is these nights, but he never really had a big appetite to start with. His wish of wanting to be taken care of while ill is being granted—by Minghao at that—and he doesn’t want to cut this possible fever dream short. It’s simply too nice being babied, but he can’t keep Minghao here forever. The guy looks like he could also use a good, long rest, “I’m good- hey, just leave the dishes.”
Usually, Minghao leaves the dishes to Mingyu and cleans up the table, but he’s already halfway to the sink with the bowls and silverware. He knows Mingyu has a very particular way of cleaning things—Minghao does as well—and so he’s very careful to scrub the right way and put the dishes where they need to be on the drying rack before coming back to wipe the coffee table. Mingyu was often careful about his eating manners, but in his silly, feverish state, he’d spilled a few drops on the table and there’s a noodle sticking on the edge, threatening to fall into the carpet.

“Why are you being so niiiiicceeee?” Mingyu probably sounds drunk. He hovers his hand over the numerous packages of cold medicine over by the rice-cooker that hasn’t been used in a while. The medications are all the same—well, they all do the same thing—so, he blindly flops his hand down and grabs one.

He immediately regrets shooting back the Vicks Cold & Nasal because it burns his throat. With one hand at his mouth, Mingyu reaches for the bag of drinks that Minghao brought and cracks open a juice. Oh no, another mistake. It’s better than the cold medicine, but mixing orange juice with whatever menthol was in the Vicks is revolting.

Minghao shrugs, “Believe it or not, being a decent human being isn’t out of the ordinary for me.” He walks himself back to the kitchen to put the leftovers in the fridge and tidy up a little; he even folds the plastic bag into a neat triangle and tosses it into the plastic bag drawer under the oven.

“I don’t believe you.” Part of Mingyu is relieved that he’s not being a unique burden to Minghao. Part of Mingyu is a little peeved for the same reason. He falls back down on the couch after consciously avoiding contact with Minghao when he slid past him.

“You don’t have to.” He washes his hands one more time before coming around the kitchen island. Minghao laughs as he gathers his things and slips his bag over his shoulder, “Did you need anything el-”

“Good, cuz I don’t.” Mingyu mocks a pout.

“Do you- do you always act like a five-year-old when you’re si-”

“No toasty blankets, no squishy teddybears, no forehead kisses, no Cacahuate?” he counts off on his fingers before rolling his head back on the couch and shutting his eyes, “Geez, Minghao, you’re horrible at this whole caretaker thing.” He giggles at his own sarcasm. Minghao was a plenty good caretaker and went out of his way to make sure that Mingyu was fed, hydrated, and okay. He shouldn’t be poking fun at him. He should appreciate everything he’s d-

His thoughts are interrupted by a hand slapping over his eyes and warm lips pressing into the crown of his hair with a corny smack and a puff of hot air. Minghao hits his chest a little too hard afterwards for the kiss to be romantic.

He can tell.

He can tell.

The kiss is just to shut him up, “I’ll send you a picture of Cacahuate later.” He’s already lacing up his shoes by the time Mingyu can come to his senses and sit up, “And don’t get up to walk me to my car. I’ll fight you.” He opens the door, sending a chilly breeze across the floor. Mingyu pulls his feet up to the couch to tuck under his robe, “Get some rest, Mingyu.”

If Mingyu was any sort of sober sick person, he might have stood up and marched after him, but he’s not and Minghao closes the door after passing him one last tight smile. He’s at a loss. He
doesn’t know how to feel. He was just coming to terms with the premise of admitting his romantic interest for Minghao, but receiving a kiss with no feeling behind it makes him rethink the situation. Of course, the doubts crawl back into his brain. Minghao still has no reason to like him or be friends with him. Minghao should hate him. Minghao should *despise* him.

But that’s not the case.

He knows that’s not the case because Minghao does things that are kind and sweet.

He treats Mingyu like a friend. He tolerates Mingyu’s childish behavior and cares about him, even if it’s just a little bit. Mingyu doesn’t want to be *that guy*; the guy that thinks that every nice gesture is just a ruse to get into someone’s pants or a spark to start a relationship. He’s sane enough to differentiate between Minghao’s kindness and his pseudo-fantasy of Minghao flirting with him. Minghao’s just not the type. Minghao abuses his body with hours of insane practices and late nights fretting over perfection. He’s dreams-first-everything-else-second. Mingyu knows that. It’s written in the way he walks, the way he’s always thinking about other places, other events, and other things.

He’s different from Mingyu.

Minghao can never be comfortable. He can never be satisfied. He can never stagnate.

It’s all because—unlike Mingyu—he chose a dream that’s indefinite and unstable. Working at Performance Studio, collaborating with companies from the city, dancing for millionaires, and meeting hundreds of new people were all just stepping stones and checkpoints. Minghao’s dream can’t be met with places or numbers because his dream isn’t something directly tangible. It’s a feeling. No matter how big or small the stage and spotlight are, Minghao will be eager to stand on it. He thrives off of having this unwritten goal.

It’s something that Mingyu can’t even imagine. It’s something that he can’t keep up with.

But without realizing it, it’s something that he’s begun to understand.
Mingyu takes Tuesday off as well.

He knows he hates being out for more than one day, but it’s not like he has any patients this Tuesday anyway. He scheduled them all on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday. A few stubborn ones insisted on keeping their Tuesday schedules, but Wonwoo quickly agreed to scoop them up before Joshua could object. It was a very kind offer. Handling more than one patient at a time was like juggling angry babies except the babies are just old people who blabber and complain because they’re lonely and have no one to talk to.

He’s feeling better than yesterday—leagues better—but he’s still not back up to a hundred percent. He’s sitting comfy at 80 or so. He’ll readily admit that his thoughts and analysis kept him up as late as the NyQuil would let him stay up which wasn’t that late since he conked out before 11. It doesn’t help that most of his memories are hazy at best, but he does remember Minghao sitting at his feet and looking up at him. Minghao’s piercing gaze is hard to forget no matter how soft it looks. If he was going to sweep the platonic kiss under the rug, then Mingyu would, too. It’s just dudes being bros, but even that doesn’t sit right. Eating the leftovers for brunch makes him feel warm; physically and metaphysically. It had to take at least a couple hours to stew and that was probably why Minghao wanted to come over later than usual. He must’ve gone home to cook.

Speaking of which, he’s not sure if he’s still set to meet with him today for their PT session. They didn’t talk about it yesterday and, today, Mingyu’s iffy on how normal he can be around him. You can’t just kiss people out of nowhere like that. Okay, okay, so it wasn’t a mouth-to-mouth kiss and it’s not like Minghao had any intention of making it romantic. Mingyu’s also kissed people on the lips for far less cause than to shut someone up. There’s a double-standard to be reviewed, but all he wants to do now is contemplate texting Minghao.

When he finally gets out of bed and patters into the kitchen to find his phone where he had left it charging last night, he sees that there are a couple new messages. Most of which are between Wonwoo and Seokmin wishing him well and Jeonghan sending him the eyeroll emoji.

The last unread text is one from Minghao, sent around midnight.

It’s a picture of cutie-patootie Cacahuate holding his leash in his mouth along with the caption ‘Mingyu, hurry up and get better so we can go on another walk! I wanna go to the park with you! 🐶! I did my research. Appreciate my efforts.’ Despite how troubled he feels, he can’t help but smile because he reads all of the text, including the last two sentences, in Cacahuate’s Elmo-like, fictional voice. He rolls over onto his couch, hugging his phone to his chest and kicking his legs in the air. How can a grown-ass man be so fucking endearing? It’s impossible, but Minghao Xu is defying all odds.

And, yes, he does appreciate Minghao’s Google Search of how to write ‘woof woof’ in Korean.

‘Are we meeting up today?’

He texts and waits, and waits, and waits.

He’s probably waited somewhere close to ten minutes, but it feels like an hour.

‘What time?’
‘How’s your throat?’ Mingyu looks at the clock. He honestly doesn’t have the patience to wait until the late afternoon to meet up. ‘Wanna do lunch?’

‘Better and sure. How’s 1?’

Mingyu sends him a bunch of thumbs up.

That’s odd.

Minghao works every day like an insane person. He should be working today as well. Then again, this is around the time that they used to meet up for PT sessions even though those were on Tuesdays, maybe Minghao has an extended lunch break or something. Whatever. Mingyu decides that he’s going to look nice. If Minghao got him all perplexed over a peck on the head, then he’s doing to stump him with his dashing good looks.

Never in a million years would Mingyu expect that he’d be going through his own first-date-in-high-school montage of trying on every outfit he has in his closet, but here he is with ten shirts piled on his bed. Since Minghao indirectly caused him to bleach his favorite pair of jeans, he’s wearing his second favorite pair. He’s going to toot his own horn; his butt looks great. However, when it comes to what shirt he should wear with it, he’s stuck shuffling through the entire rack. Twice. Do you know what’s difficult? Someone with zero notable fashion sense trying to 1 up someone who is incredibly fashion conscious. Minghao does it effortlessly, but how? How do you just wake up and decide what to wear in no-time flat? His hair usually isn’t complicated or gelled up in a special way, and if it is it’s only ever swept to the side. Mingyu’s never seen Minghao in the same thing more than once. Mingyu has—and he assumes that most normal people have—a go-to outfit and pre-planned outfits. This shirt looks good with these pants and therefore they can always be paired together. Mingyu has those and usually they’re just selected off of boutique mannequins. Minghao’s outfits are always mixed and matched. Sometimes Mingyu sees the same shirt, but it’s always paired with something else. How many clothes does Minghao even have? Maybe this is what he burns money on.

In the end, he picks a plain white dress shirt outfitted with black buttons that have silver insignias. It looks expensive and since he hasn’t worn it in a few years, it’s still pressed and creased properly. The shirt is a little tight, but Mingyu’s going to convince himself that it’s tight in the right places. But this is kind of boring, isn’t it? Minghao’s the type to dress in layers. Maybe he should try it. But Mingyu’s the minimalist type, he doesn’t care for accessories or the unnecessary things that elevate your typical outfit. That’s what his face is for. Obviously.

Regardless, he rummages.

And, unsurprisingly, comes up empty-handed. All he has is a handful of earrings from when he got his ears pierced in college. The piercings were a mistake and he let them close up almost immediately after, only wearing the studs for a few weeks before deciding they were too much trouble to keep in while he was working as a personal trainer. The only other accessory he owns is a silver necklace that he doesn’t think suits the outfit, so he tosses it back into its drawer. A coat then? A coat then.

The section of closet he has dedicated to coats isn’t extremely huge. They have pretty moderate weather in the valley. Their summers are very hot and their winters are very cold, but the rest of the time, the weather stays quite even. A black coat, a white coat, a blue coat, a red coat? He thinks about wearing the maroon peacoat again, but decides against it because he doesn’t want Minghao thinking that he only owns, like, two coats. Because he’s running low on time, he gives up. No coat. His apartment is already nice and warm since he has the heater on- okay, maybe a jacket. A simple, zip-up jacket- no. That’s way too informal to match with the shirt. Okay, maybe a suit jacket.

The real focal point should be his face, not his clothes!

Mingyu won’t admit to how much time he spent in the bathroom fixing his hair, sniffing different colognes, and plucking at stray hairs. All you need to know is that he has to dash to the door when Minghao knocks.

“You’re here! Took you long enough.”

Minghao looks at him for a moment, then looks down at the large watch on his wrist, “I see you’re still delusional from your cold.” Mingyu lets him in and glances at his own wall-clock. Minghao’s perfectly on time.

The dancer stacks the food containers on the kitchen counter after taking off his shoes. No bag today which likely means no studio. That’s peculiar. Why the change?

Mingyu struts around the counter, puffing out his chest a little bit and walking with confidence until he realizes he probably looks more like an overzealous bird than a male model. Minghao focuses on unpacking the food and doesn’t spare him a glance; it makes him deflate a little, but then he looks at what Minghao’s doing.

“Tupperware!” Mingyu tries not to sound like an excited puppy. Tonight, he’s going to try very hard to be suave and normal today; exuding clinic-Mingyu and not… Minghao’s… Mingyu. He needs a better name for it.

“Tupperware.” Minghao matches Mingyu’s enthusiasm with a sarcastic echo, even going so far as to wiggle the lid in mock-excitement before tossing it into the sink to wash later. Mingyu helps out, pulling out two bowls and two pairs of chopsticks. He’ll even use the Chinese kind today because whatever Minghao cooked smells like magic and Mingyu can humor using the too-long, slippery sticks for one meal. He sets the silverware and china up where the island stools are and where Minghao’s sliding the containers of food. It’s still pretty hot and the only thing he nukes is the rice.

Mingyu doesn’t recognize the dishes aside from bok choi so it’s a little difficult to taste things with his eyes. He patiently waits for Minghao to finish unpacking and takes a seat next to him, but right as he sits down, Minghao stands up again, forgetting a soup container that he’d brought. He microwaves it before coming back to his spot. Honestly, it looks more like dinner food than lunch food, but Mingyu isn’t going to complain. If he knew that Minghao was such a good cook, he would have asked for simple, homecooked meals to begin with.

“Let’s eat.” Minghao clacks his chopsticks on a napkin to line them up, waiting for Mingyu to take the first bite like he normally does.

“So, what’s what?” Mingyu would have just dug in, but he doesn’t know where to start. Also, he just likes listening to Minghao talk. His voice is back to normal even though he’s still speaking softly.

“What’s what? Well,” Minghao looks at the food and contemplates something for a minute before looking back at Mingyu and pointing to the first container with his chopsticks, “I don’t really know the English names for them, but this is, like,” he sighs and thinks again, “braised short ribs and pork belly in a kind of sweet-salty soy-based sauce.” He points to the next container, “Steamed egg. Really simple, it’s just beaten, strained, and steamed with green onion oil and soy sauce on top. And
this one is,” He moves to the next dish and pulls out his phone, typing a couple Chinese characters into Google Translate before furrowing his brow and just Googling it, “Mustard greens and bok choi just, like, stir-fried with onion and garlic paste.”

“What about that one? Or is that just for you?”

“Oh, no, we can share.” Minghao suddenly sounds a little… shy? “This is cháng shòu miàn.”

“What’s that?”

Minghao thinks for a minute, “Well, it translates into longevity noodles, but I don’t really know what’s in it. Jun came over and made it for me last night.” He opens the container and looks into it, “Chicken, ginger, goji berries, onion, chili pepper… I don’t really know, but it was pretty good.”

Mingyu nods and digs in so that Minghao can start eating. He doesn’t know why Minghao always waits for him to take the first bite. Maybe it’s just a manners-thing that he was brought up with or maybe he wants to make sure the food is well received.

Maybe he’s having Mingyu test for poison.
Mingyu’s worries were for nothing because the meal doesn’t disappoint.

If it was possible, it’s better than the soup yesterday. Even though Mingyu loves and enjoys the straightforward flavors of Korean cuisine, eating something that he’s unfamiliar with and that has complex flavor profiles is a humbling and heartwarming experience. He also realizes that this meal is one of those ‘recipes of old’ meals, probably handed down to Minghao from his parents or his grandparents.

“God, Minghao, who taught you to cook like this?” He’s surprised he can find room to talk between bites of food, “I’ll need to thank them.”

Minghao laughs before slurping a bite of noodles into his mouth and handing the container to Mingyu so he can take a bite, “You can thank YouTube.”

He learns the recipes himself: That’s so precious.

“You’ll have to send me a link.”

“No way, family secret.”

“You just said it was YouTube.”

“Family secret YouTube.” Minghao smiles into his next bite of food. Admittedly, the noodle soup isn’t as flavor-packed or as good as the food Minghao made, but that might just be Mingyu’s bias. It’s very clean and simple, modest and homely. Because Minghao shares it with him, he’s willing to bury the slight tickle of jealousy. If Jun can cook for Minghao, what else is he allowed to do?

The meal feels short-lived even though it spans almost an hour. All they do is eat and talk and drink tea because it’s cold outside. Mingyu finally tells Minghao about how he lit a spatula on fire over his electric stove and Minghao teaches Mingyu how to put out a grease-fire. There probably won’t be any application for it since Mingyu rarely eats fried food as it is and frying anything on your own is too much of a hassle. In return for the expert, lifesaving advice, he explains to Minghao how to make puff pastry; another impractical thing to make on your own. They discuss the premise of hot chocolate, but decide that the flavors might clash with the meal. That’s silly, though, because flavor-schmavior, they just don’t want to get up.

It’s a cold day outside, colder than the other days that week. Minghao hasn’t even taken off his coat and Mingyu thinks about turning up the thermostat before Minghao tells him that it’s fine; to leave it in favor of continuing their conversation. They talk about pets. The fact that Cacahuate is Minghao’s first pet ever is a huge surprise. The guy’s been known to love animals since forever. Mingyu has to sadly admit that his family dog is an everlasting resident of his parent’s pension in the bay since she died two summers ago and that he hasn’t felt like his living situation is permanent enough to own a long-term pet since. Minghao simply responds that pets, like people, aren’t forever; that any time is as good as any other to adopt one as long as you can afford it. He mumbles a little bit about volunteering at the animal shelter in the city and seeing Cacahuate get admitted just before he moved to town.

The man saves dogs in his spare time.
Seamlessly, they pack away the food into Mingyu’s fridge and start the exercises on comfortably full and warm stomachs. “Did you get to rest last night? You were up pretty late.” Mingyu mentions after Minghao yawns into the back of his sleeve. He’s laying on the carpet with Mingyu sitting at his feet. He nods wearily.

“Yes, I got a few hours in.” Minghao sits up, “But I wanted to cook this morning so I got up early.”

“You texted me at, like, midnight.”

Minghao gives him a tired look, “Look, mom, Jun came over and made noodles and we sat up talking with my roomie for a while. And then Cacahuate wanted a walk and I remembered that I promised you a picture.” Mingyu really hopes that the nickname of ‘mom’ doesn’t stick around because this is pretty much the third time Minghao has called him by it, “But it looks like you got enough rest. At least one of us looks nice today.” He says it so casually that Mingyu almost misses when his chest burns and his cheeks get hot, “What’s the occasion?”

“No- No occasion.”

“And why didn’t you go to work today?”

“I thought one more day off wouldn’t hurt. I’ve still got a little cough.” Mingyu pushes Minghao back down onto his back, hearing the snarky antics return to his voice, “What about you? No bag?”

Minghao sits back up, taking his turn to push Mingyu down, “Yixing told me to take today off and it’s not like I can argue with him since he’s my boss.”

“Why’d he do that?” Minghao just shrugs and resumes his exercises after Mingyu gets back up. His knee is doing loads better. He’s been following Mingyu’s advice and is wearing his knee brace as often as possible. He’s been staying off his feet and watching longingly from his room window as Seungcheol jogs Cacahuate down the block. Minghao even tried out kinetic tape for a couple days, but the main point Mingyu wants to make is that his ultimate goal is really just to stretch and do a whole lot of nothing. The healing process is that simple.

“Are you sure there isn’t an occasion on your end?” Minghao looks at him with scrutiny, “Your hair’s different and you’re wearing cologne.” Observant, isn’t he, “No job interview or anything? I won’t tell Josh.”

“No, nothing like that.” Mingyu scratches at the back of his neck. He’s suddenly self-conscious that Minghao knows his normal scent and can pick out that he’s changed perfumes, “I just thought I’d try something new.”

Minghao nods, “It looks good, but do what’s comfortable, y’know.” He smacks Mingyu’s arm before standing up and stretching.

Sure, his jacket isn’t the softest or the most practical, but it looks nice. His shirt is a little stuffy around the collar. It’s too tight and restricting for him to feel that great in it, but it looks nice. The tag is what’s been bugging him because it’s pricking at his neck and making him itchy and the buttons keep clacking on surfaces, but it looks nice, “Do I look uncomfortable?”

“A little.” Minghao gives him a sympathetic smile, “I like you better in a t-shirt and sweats.”

Minghao’s phone buzzes up on the kitchen counter. He had borrowed Mingyu’s charger since it was running out of battery; forgetting to charge it at night tends to do that. He excuses himself to
step outside for a minute and take the call. It must be important.

In his absence, Mingyu realizes that Minghao’s never seen him in sweats. Yesterday was likely his worst look and that was pajamas and mucus. He had made the comment for the sake of Mingyu’s comfort; which is kind, but not well-appreciated. He doubts that Minghao understands that he got all gussied up just to fluster him since that obviously didn’t work. It’s not that Minghao didn’t care. He commented and that likely meant that he saw Mingyu’s efforts, but they didn’t sway him in the slightest and that’s unfortunate.

“Hey, I’m sorry I’ve gotta cut it short, but I just got called into work.” Minghao quickly closes the door behind him, keeping the cold air out.

Mingyu looks up from his spot on the floor, “That’s okay. Is everything alright?”

“Yes, Yugyeom got food poisoning last night and- I’ll keep it short. He shart his pants while throwing up and went home sick so I’m taking over his 3 o’clock. I have to go in to review the choreo and make sure his studio space is ready.”

“Wow, that sucks.” Minghao coughs out a laugh at Mingyu’s simple response and slips his shoes on, “Are we on for tomorrow?”

Minghao pauses in the doorway and thinks, “If Yugyeom’s back in the studio, sure, but his classes run late on Wednesdays so if I have to cover for him again, I won’t be able to.”

He gets up to walk his guest out- let his patient go.

Mingyu opens the door for Minghao whose eyes are glued to the screen of his phone, eyebrows knitting a troubled expression. He looks so focused. For a second, Mingyu wishes he would at least look back at him. He put a lot of effort into looking nice today and Minghao affords him fewer glances than normal. In another second, he snatches the phone out of Minghao’s hands, leaving his long, slender fingers empty.

“Hey.” Mingyu exhales with a curt and short call.

His reaction isn’t annoyed or aggressive, in fact, he sounds almost amused. He looks up at Mingyu after spinning on his heel, with doe eyes and his lips slightly parted, “What?” He says it so quietly that a person in the corridor wouldn’t be able to hear him; it’s his library voice.

Mingyu forgets his words almost instantly.

He had pieced together something profound and a little flirty; something that would really show Minghao his refined culinary expertise from hours of watching Iron Chef and Chopped, but all he can blabber out now is, “You cook good.”

At least it makes Minghao giggle.

“Sorry- I mean…” he takes a deep breath, holding Minghao’s phone in his hand; his sweaty hand, “You cook really well. I never realized how much I missed eating someone else’s cooking. It was delicious, but more so than that, it tasted really sincere and really cozy.” Mingyu realizes he probably sounds like a sad sap with the vocabulary of a 3rd grader, but a worn smile makes its way onto his lips, “It reminded me of eating with my family.”

Minghao looks down at the cement lining the corridor. The wind is making his hair a little messy and a little unearthly. He blinks a few times, processing Mingyu’s compliment and nods. If the bright grey sky hadn’t washed out his complexion, Mingyu would have seen the red creeping into
the tips of his ears, “Aw, gee, thanks.” He says it in this joking, casual tone like he doesn’t believe Mingyu entirely, “It’s amazing how YouTube can inspire sometimes.” He chuckles, but he can’t lift his gaze off the floor, “See you later, Mingyu. Stay warm.”

He gives Mingyu a little push into the doorway, making the taller male take a step back into his apartment just to lazily steady his balance. It’s times like these where the greasy, cheesy, cringe-worthy side of Mingyu wants to come to surface and holler something like ‘I hate to see you leave, but I love to watch you go’, but the wiser, normal, sane Mingyu holds his tongue between his front teeth and stifles a laugh, “Oh- Minghao!” The brown-haired man turns around, walking backwards to see what he missed, “Phone.”

And he tosses the cell phone into the air, bridging the ten-foot gap between them.

This might have been a mistake.
Chapter 30

The phone hangs in the air a little longer since Mingyu lobs it a bit higher than his normal underhanded pass. He did it with the intent to give Minghao more time to ready himself for a catch but forgot to account for his sweaty hands and horrible aim because the phone falls screen-first onto the cement paving.

Minghao had reached out to catch it, but was a few inches off. It’s surprising since he’d expected Minghao’s reaction accuracy to more than make up for his own terrible hand-eye coordination. Alas, Minghao freezes in a lunge with his arm outstretched, staring down at the phone. It’s that moment of tension and suspense where they don’t know if the fragile glass screen is completely obliterated or not. “I’m so sorry. Is it okay?” Mingyu is more than okay paying for the repair or even just buying Minghao a new phone if only to save himself from the shame. It looked a little dated anyway- no, he’s not going to justify this. He’s a klutz and this is incredibly embarrassing. Way to fuck up, Mingyu.

The dancer picks up the phone with delicate fingers, holding the screen away from him as long as possible. He looks up at Mingyu, “How bad is it?” He holds up the phone and Mingyu winces. It’s pretty bad.

From the upper left corner, there’s a pretty bad fray of glass shards cut like lightning into the screen, one bold line even cracking its way down to the lower right. Minghao studies his expression for only a second before looking at it and shrugging, “Oh, it’s not that bad.” Minghao. It’s pretty bad, “I could have probably caught it if I had my glasses on.”

Mingyu should have realized sooner. They talked about it before, how Minghao’s vision isn’t the worst, but he usually has some form of corrective lens on. Some days he wears glasses, but if he comes from the studio, it’s usually contacts. Mingyu supposes that the lack of work and projected reading-of-things was enough reason not to wear his glasses. Minghao has poor night vision, but since everything is well-lit at this time of day, he probably didn’t think any sort of lens was necessary even though Mingyu would berate him for driving.

“I’ll take it to get fixed. Just pick a day.”

“It’s fine, Mingyu.” He pockets the phone after running it against his jeans, “It still works. If it isn’t broken, don’t fix it.” He raises an eyebrow and nods to make sure Mingyu understands that he doesn’t really care that much about it. Either that or he’s in a rush to get back to work and doesn’t want to waste time deciding when to arrange an appointment to fix it, “I’ll see you soon.”

“Sorry!” Mingyu calls after him as he exits the gate to the complex.

“It’s fine!” Minghao shouts over his shoulder before crossing the street and getting into his car.

It is most certainly not fine. You don’t just let someone smash the screen of your phone and get away with it! Although, Mingyu supposes that it’d be uncharacteristic of Minghao to just straight up ask him to pay for the repairs. He certainly wouldn’t have unless it was something very serious. If Minghao broke his phone, he’d probably shrug it off, too. If Wonwoo broke his phone, he’d probably make him pay just because Wonwoo makes his work-life a little miserable-

He’ll make it up to Minghao. He swears.
The afternoon progresses slowly and quietly. Mingyu eats some leftovers just half-an-hour after Minghao leaves because, *gosh*, the food was good. He meant every part of the compliment earlier. More so than being the best food he’s ever had—which it’s not—, the meal brought back some sort of nostalgic feeling to Mingyu. Maybe in a past life- Again, he doesn’t want to attribute anything astral, cosmic, or supernatural to Minghao’s existence and recent resurgence in his life. But *maybe* in a past life, just *maybe*, *maybe*, maybe, maybe, maybe he and Minghao weren’t just two professionals leading separate lives. Maybe, maybe, maybe, *maybe*, *maybe* they were something closer; like family.

Yeah, if it were an option and if by some weird change of fate things hadn’t ended like they did a decade ago, *maybe* that meal was enough to make Mingyu fall in love with him. But as it stands now, falling in love with someone over cooking seems a little cliché and outdated. Mingyu isn’t the type.

It starts drizzling outside a little after 3. It’s the perfect setting for an afternoon nap. He’s full. The apartment isn’t warm, but he can easily pull out a thick throw from the cabinet. The stuffy clothes he was wearing less than an hour ago are where they belong, in the wash and out of sight. Mingyu’s back into sweatpants and a sweater. He could flip on QVC and knock himself out on the couch. It’s just another Fall afternoon, but his apartment feels a little less empty for some reason. However, just as he settles down on the couch with hot tea in hand and swaddled in a knitted blue blanket, his phone buzzes noisely next to the remote.

The number is one he doesn’t recognize so he doesn’t pick up, but when it rings again two minutes later, he figures it isn’t a telemarketer and answers, “*You fucking moron! It’s his freaking birthday and you-*” Mingyu hangs up. He doesn’t even want to handle whatever *whoever* dialed the wrong number, but the same number calls again. He holds onto his phone and counts the rings. He doesn’t want to answer, Mingyu is a pacifist at heart and would much rather avoid trying to talk sense into someone so belligerent on the phone. He remembers picking up calls at the college recreational center. Working calls was always a nightmare even though it sculpted his manners while talking with the finicky, elderly patients he works with today. The phone rings again and Mingyu decides he’s going to say something so that he can enjoy the rest of the afternoon in peace.

“Sorry, I think you hav-”

“Did you just hang up on me, Mingyu?” The more he listens to the accusatory voice, the more it sounds familiar, “It’s Hao’s birthday and you go and smash his phone? What the actual hell. How is he supposed to fall head over h-” a loud pop is heard, “Stop that! No! I need to set things right!”

“You’re not helping.” A crackly voice says in spots.

“It’s not like Hao’s going to just tell Mingyu off. And Jun’s got a cough today so I’ve gotta do it! That’s what best friends are for! Unlike *some* idiotic assswipe that can’t even hand over a phone like a norma-”

There’s a short burst of static on the line and he can only catch fragments of sentences before the call cuts off. Mingyu keeps thinking of names and noises, but can’t quite place it until he gets another call a minute later. Wonwoo, “Ignore Soon. He’s being rude.”

“Oh, it’s you guys.” Wonwoo’s laugh makes the receiver pop, “Why are you with Soonyoung, shouldn’t you be at work?”

“I took a late lunch and came to the studio to pick him up.” There’s light chatter in the background of the call. Mingyu can’t call his bluff if there is one, “We were about to leave when
Minghao got in and he and Soon were talking. Did you really smash his phone?"

"Y-Yeah."

He laughs again, "How’d you do it? On the couch? In the kitchen?"

"Wonwoo!" Mingyu coughs, "Please tell me he’s not in the room."

"Nah, he’s teaching right now." Mingyu can hear a door shut, "So—"

"He forgot his phone and I threw it at him- threw it to him, but we missed and it shattered on the cement- It’s his birthday? He didn’t say anything."

"How boring." Wonwoo deadpans, clearly hoping that Mingyu was up to no good, "Probably not the best gift to get on your birthday, but don’t sweat it. I’m not surprised Hao didn’t say anything. He hates celebrating his birthday."

"You knew and you didn’t tell me?" That’s questionable, too. If it was important enough that Soonyoung needed to call him and Wonwoo wanted to make fun of him, why didn’t they tell him in the first place? No one remembers peer birthdays from a decade ago. He certainly wouldn’t remember Minghao’s outside the fact that it’s in November and that he’s a Scorpio.

"I thought he might tell you."

"Why would he tell me of all people?"

There’s a pause in the conversation. He can almost hear Wonwoo’s shrug through the phone, "Soonyoung is convinced that Minghao gives you special treatment." Mingyu doesn’t respond. He doesn’t know if he wants to feed Wonwoo’s active imagination with the fact that Minghao had cooked for him twice and cared for him while he was sick. He just wants to nap and think about ways to make it up to the dancer while not making it obvious that he didn’t know it was his birthday, “But he’s usually really nice, so don’t flatter yourself just yet.”

"I know, I know. Geez." Mingyu still wants to hang up even if he did miss Wonwoo’s company for the past few days.

"So, how sick are you actually? You had Minghao over, so I assume you aren’t imploding. Did I cover for you for nothing?"

"I’m almost all better. It was really bad yesterday, but I’ll be at work tomorrow." Mingyu picks at the lint that’s balled up in the soft blanket, “Wait, what do you mean for nothing? Did you only cover for me because you thought I was doing something with Minghao?"

"Yeah." Wonwoo’s straightforward answer feels like it should be expected. He doesn’t know why his friend has so much confidence in his ability to pursue Minghao. He hasn’t even admitted to having any feelings towards Minghao, so he doesn’t know why Wonwoo and Soonyoung are so driven to pressure him into it, “Oh, looks like Soon’s done wrapping up. I’ll see you at work tomorrow.”

"Have a good lunch. I hope your guac is horrible."

"Thanks, and we’re having pizza today.” Wonwoo hangs up first, right after Mingyu hears Soonyoung’s cheery voice in the background of the call, yelling for him.

Mingyu unceremoniously drops his phone onto the carpet and snuggles himself up into the
corner of his couch, curling up his legs and pulling the blanket up to his nose. The woman on QVC has started her enthusiastic drill on selling diamond earrings, but with how low the volume is, her chatter is but a quiet lull in the background. Cars are coasting by outside on the street and occasionally the wind blows a branch out of the trees and it hits the building with a little tap. The only light on in the flat is the one over the stove. Other than that, everything falls into the shadows, only lit by the grey sky outside. He’s tired. He wants to sleep just a little bit and recover to his optimal state, but he can’t.

Worry from the cellphone incident lapses in his mind and the earrings on QVC don’t look that appealing because they’re not something Mingyu would buy. They just wouldn’t suit him; Mingyu doesn’t care if it’s an amazing deal and they only have 20 pairs left. He shuts on the TV and rolls over to bury his face into the corner of the couch, now blocking out the light with the blanket over his head.

All is quiet and nothing stirs for the longest while, but it doesn’t sit right.

“Hey, mom.”

“Hi, sweetie!” It’s been a while since he’s heard his mother’s voice even over the phone. They usually text; just little hellos and check-ins every other day or so. He wouldn’t say he’s particularly close to his parents now. They were close up until the time they decided to retire in the bay and when you move several hours away, it’s hard to keep relationships up, “How have you been? How’s work?”

“Work’s good. I think I’ll get my permanent residency at the year-end review.”

“Oh! I’m so proud of you.” Of course, she is. Mingyu didn’t work tirelessly all these years just to disappoint his folks, “Are you coming over during Christmas? Thanksgiving?”

He doesn’t know and makes sure to outline that for his mom. He used to visit his parents all the time for the holidays. Right after finals, he’d have his suitcase packed and be on a plane the day of his last test. He’d get a little sleep on the flight, but every waking moment from then on would be filled with holiday joy and relatives greeting him. He’d always make time to see his family; they mean a lot to him. “I actually called to ask about a recipe. I wanna cook something.”

Her laughter is bright and airy on the other end, “Since when have you needed me to give you a recipe. Besides, your dad’s the family chef, you should’ve called him.”

“Is he not home?”

“He’s out at the docks right now. Fishing, I think.” There’s always humor in his mother’s voice. She’s such a positive person, Mingyu would like to think that he inherited a little bit of it. That’s not to say that his dad isn’t as equally radiant, if anything he’s probably more energetic, “But I’ll try my best!”

“I was wondering if we had, like, any super old family recipes or something. Maybe something that’s been passed down. I’m trying to impress here.”

“Oh, is Jungkook back in town?”

It feels like a splash of cold water; not with ice, just from the winter tap. He should have expected it. His mom doesn’t know about any of his new friends and the last one she did meet was Jungkook despite that being over a Skype videocall. She liked him immediately, she probably still
does, “No, it’s just a friend… from high school. We met up again recently. He’s really good at
cooking, like, really good and it’s his birthday, so, yeah.” If it was anyone else asking, he would
have probably lied, but when it comes to his mom, Mingyu can’t even lie about drinking milk from
the carton. He sure as hell can’t lie about something as grand as Minghao’s current impact on his
mental state. However, he can definitely hold his tongue and not go into detail.

“Aw, I miss Jungkook. Tell him to get on Facebook more often.” He still doesn’t know why
his mom was driven to add him on social media. That’s both needless and kind of creepy, but
Jungkook didn’t mind. He thought it was nice. He was also very close with his parents, so he
understood completely, “But I’m glad you’re making new friends, er, getting in contact with old
ones.” What follows are a couple basic questions about Minghao like his name, his occupation, his
interests, Mingyu’s opinion of him, and what he likes to eat. The question about his name is easy.
Everything after that is difficult.

His name is Minghao Xu. He’s a dance instructor and performer that works at a small studio in
town. He’s got a cute dog named Cacahuate and a roommate named Seungcheol. He likes
performing, he likes a lot of things, but he also dislikes a lot of things. And every opinion Mingyu
has of him is caught in between his teeth before they reach his lips. “He’s a nice guy.” He takes a
deep breath before speaking again. Maybe it’d feel better to tell someone, “I’ve been sick the last
couple days and he took care of me, so I’d like to repay the favor.” His mother seems satisfied with
that answer, saying something about how she raised such a good boy. What is he, a dog? Well,
honestly- No. No, he’s not a dog.

She’s kind enough to dig through their pantry for an old recipe book and pull out a few,
riddling of Korean titles to Mingyu as she shuffles through the sleeves of paper, “Sorry, hun, most of
them are just lists of ingredients, nothing is really measured out.”

“That’s okay.”

“Do you want me to send you pictures of them so you can pick one out yourself?”

“Sure! I’ll call you again soon.”

“Bye-bye, I hope you rest well. You sound a little under the weather.”

“Thanks, mom, bye.”

Twenty minutes later, Mingyu finds himself slipping on his coat and dropping his keys, wallet,
and phone into various pockets. He grabs a cap from the closet to cover his hair that had grown
messy from tossing and turning on the couch. Whatever, it doesn’t matter.

He’s not going to see anyone important.
Chapter 31

Thirty minutes later, Mingyu’s at the Korean grocery store in the next town over, hunting for specifics. Yes, he has to travel that far since the collective Asian market in town doesn’t have exactly what he’s used to using. He picks things up and puts them down, picks things up and puts them down. Whenever he can’t find something, he calls to ask his parents first and the internet second. His phone has Google Translate on full blast. He knows Korean—at least most of it, the casual stuff—but specific ingredient names might not have exact translations.

He cards through packages on shelves that few could reach without employee assistance and rummages through the fresh produce to only select the freshest of all the produce.

If clothes and hair couldn’t impress Minghao, then maybe his cooking would.

‘Dose Money Hot like cake? Want flavor?’ he messily texts to Wonwoo. He doesn’t care if he gets shit for it later on, he’s now back in town at Trader Joe’s pacing between cocoa powder and orange liqueur. Coconut? Almond? Those seem like unsafe choices. Most young people like chocolate; so, maybe a devil’s food cake? Maybe that’s a little too heavy after dinner. Angel food cake? No, the last time Mingyu made it, it turned out a little bitter. He doesn’t know why, but he shouldn’t risk in on such an important cake—shouldn’t risk poisoning Minghao the day after his birthday. Yeah. That.

He certainly doesn’t realize all his typos until Wonwoo points them out.

‘I don’t know if Money Hot likes cake, but he’s not a huge fan of chocolate. Or at least I’m going to guess that’s what you’re asking. I can’t believe you can’t even take the time to spellcheck. How unprofessional.’ Why is he so long winded? Mingyu just wants a simple yes or no and a cake type. It’s not that hard.

‘*Minghao’ Mingyu texts back after adding ‘Minghao’ to his phone’s dictionary, ‘stfu Won Woo’ he only regrets hitting send after he does it. He wanted Wonwoo’s name to have a funny autocorrect option, too, but he supposes that his name is composed of normal English words. Unfair.

‘Don’t buy him a cake. Soon, Yixing, and the studio guys already got him one at lunch. He’s not happy about it. He even threatened to murder them if they took him out tonight.’ Not happy about it? What? Who can be unhappy about celebration and cake? Apparently, Minghao can, with that stick up his ass and all, but if his friends survived buying him some shitty, last-minute FoodMaxx cake, then he’ll probably survive baking him one.

Mingyu’s come to understand another change in himself and it’s that if someone challenges him for doing something nice, he’ll become aggressively nice. ‘I’m making him a cake. For dimmer.’ Mingyu hits send too quickly again, trying to deter the other from teasing him about the cake, ‘*dinner’.

‘ooh, romantic’ followed by the eye emoji and a slew of hearts, an eggplant, a peach, and an ok sign.

‘no.’

‘Mango and Money Hot sitting in a tree’ lips, lips, kissy face, heart, heart, confetti.
Mingyu locks his phone and puts it away, silencing the ringer before more nonsensical texts come through. Wonwoo must be very bored at work without him. He knows that the senior PT doesn’t talk much—his chats with Joshua and Jeonghan are business casual at best—but Seokmin should be in to keep him company. The guy is a chatterbox if he’s prompted and welcomed. Mingyu likes the rare chances he’s able to eat lunch with the both of them because Seokmin can carry most of the conversation and Wonwoo can’t prod him about Minghao when he’s happily listening to a story about a cover-band burnout.

Okay, so no cocoa powder.

A lemon cake doesn’t seem suitable for the weather. Maybe he should just make something simple like a dense vanilla cake with custard and buttercream. Mingyu purses his lips in thought as he looks at a tiny jar of too-expensive vanilla pods and tosses them into his basket. The original plan was just to make him dinner to return the favor and to secretly say happy birthday without letting Minghao know that he didn’t remember. An easy way to explain it is that he wants Minghao to feel the happy birthday wishes without realizing it, but that might prove difficult with how attentive he is. Fairly, it’s not to be expected of Mingyu. Why should Mingyu know it’s his birthday in the first place? They were never close enough for him to gather that information. Plus, Wonwoo’s already told him that Minghao hates celebrating.

But if the studio guys could do it, then Mingyu should get to, too!

He grabs two containers of heavy whipping cream and some nice imported butter from the fridge section. There’ll probably be some cream left over, but he can use that for coffee or tea later on. He also grabs the smallest container of buttermilk since he only needs half a cup, but who really uses buttermilk for anything aside from pancakes? You can combine whole milk and lemon juice for the same effect, but he buys it anyway. Walking down the open freezer aisle, he grabs a couple white chocolate bars. That’s right, he’s going to be fancy. Before leaving, Mingyu passes one last glance at the fruit selection. Nah. Topping it with glazed fruit would be too much; that’s too extra. He runs back to grab strawberries as he’s being checked out.

He just wants to make it simple, clean, and delicious. The strawberries will make it fresh and a little sour. But what if he hates strawberries. Not many people hate strawberries, but Minghao’s probably one of those people that sometimes hates on good things just for the sake of being hip and happening. WHATEVER. This cake is and isn’t for him, so it doesn’t have to be tailored to his taste anyway! Fuck it, Mingyu grabs a large dark chocolate bar from the checkout’s display and slides it over to the cashier as he bags the goods.

“Let me guess, cake?” the cashier, probably in his mid-thirties, straightens up his Hawaiian shirt uniform and leans on the counter, gesturing to the card kiosk for Mingyu to proceed with payment.

He jabs the chip into the reader, “Yep.”

“Any occasion in particular?”

“It’s,” Mingyu’s attention lapses for just a second, earning him raised eyebrows and a concerned smile, “just for fun. Y’know, humpday cake for the office.”

The kiosk honks angrily at him to remove his card and he quickly grabs the bag, “Wow, wish I worked there. Have a good one!” He heads out the sliding doors with a cringe formed by his own behavior. Pay it no mind, he bakes all the time, right? Yeah!

Mingyu bakes frequently regardless of the occasion, not for Minghao, not for the office, but
for fun. Making a cake on a random Wednesday shouldn’t be a big deal.

But Minghao doesn’t know that.

Although he spent the previous night marinating meat and stacking the decadent cake with strawberries and whipped cream, he still has a bit of work to do today. Other than real work at the clinic—that he’s not looking forward to because he doesn’t want to answer to Wonwoo—he’s still got to cook the food, frost the cake, and make sure that Minghao doesn’t bring dinner over tonight. *Shit.* What if he says he can’t make it tonight? That would mark the end of Mingyu’s luck.

Normally, having this many things to do was a breeze. Mingyu’s used to multitasking even though he hasn’t really had to stress about it since university. But because these are mundane tasks surrounding Minghao, he decides to write it down on a sticky-note and paste it onto the fridge. It’s not that Minghao is some monumental distraction from his normal day-to-day life, but because he feels bad about the phone and because he feels bad about the birthday, this really has to go well. He *really* has to ensure that Minghao shows up.

“So—”

“Nope. Not talking ‘bout it.” Mingyu crosses his arms, stopping Wonwoo before he says anything.

“Talking about what?” He regrets not stopping at ‘nope’ because it grabs Jeonghan’s attention. The mega-senior PT gives Mingyu a sly look before looking over at Wonwoo, “What are we talking about?”

Wonwoo shrugs, respecting Mingyu enough to not mention he-who-shall-not-be-named, but Mingyu knows that plan won’t work because Jeonghan is the type to harp on you whenever you withhold information that he wants, “I’m just making a cake.”

“For us?” Jeonghan lights up. He knows that Jeonghan likes his baking. Jeonghan has liked every single thing that he’s ever brought in to work and he’s glad about that. The man is known for his wayward criticism, but Mingyu’s baking as never been on that end of the discussion.

“No, not for you.” Mingyu sighs, “Not for the office.” He knows he has to clarify or else Jeonghan might feel *personally attacked* and not let him hear the end of it until he personally bakes him a cake. Even after that, he’d probably make some snide remark like ‘*oh, this is so good, but I’m sure that one cake you excluded me from was better*’ because that’s just how bitter and petty Jeonghan Yoon is.

“Ooh, secret admirer Mingyu.” He singsongs while wrapping his hands around his mug, pulling his cardigan closed, and taking a sip of hot chocolate. It’s only early November, but it’s already getting very chilly in the mornings. Valley weather for you.

Wonwoo chuckles before making his usual coffee and shaking his head.

“I’m not.” He can feel the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, “It’s an apology cake.”

“For smashing a phone.” Wonwoo tags onto the end before leaving the breakroom to go to the front desk with a file in hand, likely to ask Joshua about something.

“Mingyu, we’re all adults here. Apology cakes don’t really make up for smashed phones.” Jeonghan nods mockingly, “Money does.”
“I’m aware.” He doesn’t know why he’s a little grumpy today. It could be just because he came into work with the expectation that Wonwoo would grill him, but now it’s Jeonghan and Jeonghan is much worse. Don’t get him wrong, he doesn’t dislike Jeonghan. He quite enjoys their bickering and childish games, it keeps him on his toes and makes the workday pass by in a flash, but he lacks the restraint that Wonwoo has and often doesn’t know when to stop. It’s not that he’s immature, it’s just that he gets carried away with having too much fun. Some people are just like that and it’s not like Mingyu wants to parent him and tell him to stop with a serious tone, “But he doesn’t want to fix it, so a cake is the best I can do.”

“At least get his number afterwards.”

“Already have it.”

Jeonghan sits up, “A patient’s?”

“No,” Mingyu takes a deep breath, holding onto the words for as long as possible before exhaling them into the air, “a friend.”

“A,” he knows what’s coming. He just knows. He wants to run out of the room right this instant, “boy friend?”

“Not a boyfrie- not a boy frie- is a boy that is a fr- he- he’s barely even a friend.”

“Look at you, all flustered.” Jeonghan just rolls his eyes and takes another sip of hot chocolate. It’s only a few minutes until 9. Mingyu can last. Mingyu can last. Mingyu can outsmart the most devious, cunning, sly co-worker he’s ever come in contact with, “So what you’re saying is that because he hasn’t been friendzoned, he has potential to be in the boyfriend-zone.” Jeonghan points from one space in the air to another.

“No.” Mingyu says it with intention and punctuation, but ends up explaining himself anyway, “Firstly, the friendzone is a hoax. Everyone you date should start off in the friendzone. Why would you even date someone outside the friendzone? That’s stranger danger.” His fast remarks make Jeonghan laugh genuinely. Mingyu’s not trying to be funny, but the way he’s gesticulating with his hands moving in the air probably looks silly and inflated. He’s just really good at being passive aggressive with Jeonghan, “Secondly, how do you even know if I’m looking for a boyfriend? Jumping to conclusions much? Thirdly-”

“Gyu, everyone knows you’re single right now and about as straight as cooked spaghetti, so it’s not a longshot, but continue, continue.”

Mingyu lets out a frustrated breath even though he’s smiling, bickering with Jeonghan does that to him, “Thirdly, I don’t even know if this guy is still single.” That wasn’t what his third point was going to be, but he honestly doesn’t know if some glorious bastard has come to sweep Minghao off his feet—or be swept up by him—since the last time he asked, “I don’t even know if he likes guys-” he catches himself going on a tangent already, “but that doesn’t matter because I don’t want to date him. I just want to make up for a stupid phone that he should have caught.”

“Wow, okay, someone woke up on the sassy side of the bed.” Jeonghan gets up to wash his cup in the sink and check his clothes and hair in the mirror. He has a bowtie on today which isn’t entirely out of character, but Jeonghan usually doesn’t accessorize, “Something has been eating at you since before I got back. Joshua and Seokmin say so, but I won’t pry. Yet.”

“No, don’t pry ever.”
He only laughs as he exits the breakroom, leaving Mingyu lonely with only his thoughts left to accompany him. Mr. Wilkinson usually gets in a few minutes late, he probably has time to make a phone call. It rings once, it rings twice. On the third ring, he picks up.

“Mingyu?” the sleep is so thick in Minghao’s voice that he almost feels bad for waking him. He knows that the dance instructor doesn’t usually have classes this early in the day. Jun was the early riser and—while the dance studio didn’t have shifts—he usually took over the morning classes that started at 5:30 for those who wanted to dance before school or work, “Mingyu?”

Oh, he forgot to respond, “Sorry, did I wake you?”

“Uh,” he hears a little fumbling and then a bit of static from Minghao yawning, “no, not at all, I’ve been awake for like five hours already.” Can someone even be this sarcastic when they first wake up, “What’s up? Don’t you have work?”

“I’m at work.”

“Oh, sorry.” Mingyu’s puzzled at why Minghao’s the one apologizing. He decides that sleep deprivation must do funny things to Minghao’s head and ignores the lapse in logic.

“Yeah, I just wanted to know if you were planning on coming over today.” Wonwoo reenters the breakroom, giving Mingyu one of those good ol’ pointed looks of his.

“I don’t have to. Did something come up?” Minghao probably assumes that he doesn’t need to schedule with Mingyu anymore since the only confirmations of their meetups are short text messages about what time and what Mingyu wants to eat. Minghao axed the ‘what Mingyu wants to eat’ part a few sessions ago after it was met with ‘surprise me’ every time.

“Oh, no, nothing like that.” And more importantly, they usually don’t call each other unless something comes up and Minghao can’t make it, “I just wanted to check.”

“And you couldn’t text me to check?” Minghao mutters into the phone, clearly still sleepy with the way his voice almost cracks and how he starts a lazy, delusional laugh. Mingyu admitting that he kind of just wanted to maybe- really- sorta- kinda experiment. If talking to Minghao at dinner put him in such good mood going to bed, then maybe talking to him before work would have the same effect. Saying that he wants to hear Minghao’s voice doesn’t have the chance to reach his mouth because Minghao changes the subject, “Are you still sick?”

“I’m better, all better.”

“Good, you sound better.”

“And you sound tired.” Mingyu’s attention is divided between glaring at Wonwoo until he stops smirking and responding to his patient, “Long night?”

“Huh? Yeah, kinda.” He hears another drawn-out yawn and a little cough, “The roomie wanted to have a talk and we stayed up late.” Not because it was your birthday and you were secretly partying it up with your secret friends, Minghao? “Anyway, what time? Same as usual?”

“Yeah, 6 is fine. Oh- and don’t bring dinner, I’m making dinner.” Wonwoo gives him eyebrows and he has second thoughts about throwing his coffee into his face.
“Nooo, don’t make dinner.” Is that Minghao whining? Mingyu thinks he’s forgotten how to breathe. The senior PT hides his laugh behind his mug as he watches Mingyu physically hold his breath for a second; regrouping, that’s what they call it.

The only way he can stabilize his expression is by giving a short laugh, “Why?” Wonwoo rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

“Because I’ll feel like I owe you.” Not this again. “The deal was that I bring dinner in exchange for PT sessions, wasn’t it?” Minghao doesn’t sound any more awake than he did two minutes ago, but Mingyu does have to hang up soon since his first appointment should be coming in. Wonwoo’s must’ve been cancelled on or something because he’s just sitting around with a shit-eating grin on his lips, “That was the arrangement.”

Minghao’s intonations somewhat resemble Mingyu’s when he was sick, “Then we’ll skip the PT session. I’m making dinner.”

“Noooo, that’s even worse- Why- why are you making dinner?” the childlike, accusatory tone in his voice is making Mingyu’s heart melt. He almost wishes he could record it just to play it back to him when he’s completely awake and sober. Blackmail at its finest.

“I feel bad about the phone.” Wonwoo finally leaves, “And you won’t let me fix it, so let me cook you just one meal. Then we can sweep it under the rug. Look, there’s no time to argue because I have to get to work. Just- show up at 6 without food, okay?”

Minghao exhales quite possibly the longest sigh Mingyu’s ever heard. He didn’t even expect him to have such a large lung capacity, “Fine.”

With that, Mingyu slurs a, “Good night, Minghao.” He can’t help but tease it into the phone without Wonwoo around to scrutinize him. When he looks back at it in an hour, he’ll physically cringe and slap himself in the face (twice) for the brief baby-talk. He’ll pray and plead that Minghao doesn’t remember it when he gets up for work in a couple hours.

“Good morning, Mingyu.” Minghao mumbles back at him in the same, sarcastic tone before ending the call and presumably flopping back into bed. There’s just something fresh and jovial about that phone call. Why does it feel a little different from the other ones?

It’s certainly not the first time they’ve spoken over the phone and it’s probably far from the last, but there’s something a little intimate about hearing someone’s crusty morning voice. It’s a lot less sexy than the movies and books make it out to be, but it’s much more innocent and chaste than you’re led to believe. It’s almost like all their defenses are down because your brain hasn’t built them up. It’s vulnerable and cozy. Minghao’s voice wasn’t that pretty when he croaked it out through a smashed phone, but it was beautiful all the same.

Today wasn’t going to suck.

He chooses to ignore Jeonghan and Wonwoo’s advances to pry about tonight’s dinner plans and who and what they involve. He rolls his eyes after every ‘it’s awfully chilly out at night’ because he does not want to snuggle. Mingyu hates snuggling. He totally hates wrapping his arms around someone else and breathing in their scent, feeling their hair tickle his nose until he’s a giggly mess. Yes! He absolutely despises snuggling. Luckily, Wonwoo gives it a break after the first few minutes, but Jeonghan doesn’t. He’s only saved by the bell when they have to get back in to work.
Joshua has been eating lunch at his desk these days. Sometimes it’s only a 15-minute rest in the breakroom where he shovels food into his mouth and gets back to his job at the front desk. It’s weird. When Mingyu first met Joshua, up until about a couple weeks ago, he’d spend at least an hour to eat each meal if he was afforded it. Mingyu doesn’t understand why he doesn’t just hire another person to help out or mandate a lunch break for the office so patients can’t call in and expect him to be waiting to pick up. However, Mingyu doesn’t feel like he’s in a position where he can ask. He isn’t that close to Joshua and it’s not like he can ask Wonwoo to ask either. Seokmin isn’t an option either since he started later than Mingyu did. The only one that can ask without burden is likely Jeonghan, but—as it stands—Mingyu doesn’t really want to talk to him anymore today.

“I mean, at least he’s eating.” Wonwoo sighs when Mingyu mentions his worry before they start their shift, “Maybe he just doesn’t like going out.” True, it’s not like Joshua can’t afford to hire someone else or afford all the nice food he can eat, but Mingyu’s been here long enough to know that Joshua doesn’t hate eating out. It’s really none of their business, so Mingyu chooses to ignore it in favor of mentally reviewing his to-do list for tonight’s dinner.

There’s a little bit more to do than just wash, cut, and prep. He has to time everything to be done around the same time. The soup might go bitter if it’s on the stove too long and the cake needs space in the fridge to chill after frosting. If the banchan are left out too long, they might discolor and lose their freshness. He also wants to clean a little bit and figure out drinks. Maybe he should just have Minghao bring drinks- no, he still has a whole fridge full of drinks and a whole shelf full of tea. They don’t need drinks. Right? Right. Okay, so, side-dishes, seaweed soup, soft tofu stew, rice, the cake, and spicy chicken stir-fry. Well, he’s not exactly sure how to translate dakgalbi, but maybe he’ll just tell Minghao the Korean names. Stuff gets too lost in translation sometimes.

He’ll understand the struggle.

“Good luck cooking dinner.” Wonwoo stops him in the hallway before Mingyu can reach the lobby and clock out, “Minghao has a weird palette. Don’t feel bad if he doesn’t act like you’re the world’s most amazing chef.” He knows and he’s still not convinced that bacon-crusted doughnuts belong as bread for a breakfast sandwich. ‘You’re going to eat the bacon anyway’ he said. That’s just unhealthy.

“It’s just dinner. I don’t expect him to.” He totally expects him to.

Even if it is just acting out of courtesy, Mingyu will savor and love every bit of praise he gets for the meal. Minghao’s well-mannered when he’s not at an 8 on the pain scale and isn’t dead tired, so he wholly expects some exaggerated thumbs up and OK-hands. They’ll eat, chat, have a good time, and part ways with Mingyu earning points and golden stars in Minghao’s big book of friendship. It’s unlikely that he’ll be able to top Minghao’s food from yesterday. In fact, he’ll probably savor the last of the leftovers when he gets home, but he can damn well try. He’s going to impress Minghao if it’s the last thing he does.

“Oh, and Mingyu.” Wonwoo patters up to him in an interesting half-jog, half-waddle. He pulls him close by the arm to mention something that seems secretive, “Soon says that Minghao can’t flirt for his life, but don’t be discouraged.”

“Oh?” He doesn’t want to flirt, though.

“But from my observations,” he takes a step back to give Mingyu some space, “when he’s a good kind of nervous, he starts making up words. Sometimes his English sounds like a little kid’s- he doesn’t babble or anything, but you can hear the difference. I think he’s trying to be cute. Soonyoung thinks it’s a defense mechanism. He does it when he’s trying to weasel out of sticky situations and, honestly, it’s probably a habit he picked up from Soon. It works.”
“I appreciate the words, Woo, but, again, not looking to flirt, just looking to make dinner.”

“Right- right. Just dinner.” Wonwoo pats him on the shoulder with a firm hand, “But what if it could be dinner and-”

“But, Wonwoo. Get back to work and make sure Joshua doesn’t implode.”
Chapter 33

‘Should I bring anything?’ his phone pings a little after 5 when he’s sweating over the stove. Everything is going according to plan. Rice is sitting hot in the rice cooker. The stew is bubbling away in two earthenware bowls, occupying the smallest burners. The seaweed soup is just reaching a simmer and will sit covered on the back burner for the next twenty minutes. The dakgalbi is hot and ready on the largest burner and the fifth and final burner is reserved for heating up a couple side-dishes after the very quick shower that Mingyu’s going to have because he smells like a chef.

‘Just yourself.’ Mingyu checks and doublechecks his spelling before hitting send. No flowery emoji’s needed.

He leaves the phone on the counter and takes the fastest shower he’s had in a while. The bathroom and the shower were places for meditation and quiet, but right now most of him is anxious and worried about the soup boiling over if he’s not watching it like a hawk. Mingyu slaps on a pair of average-fitting, black jeans and some random print t-shirt from his alma mater. He doesn’t want to wear a jacket yet since he’s trying not to perspire while slaving over a hot stove, but his nerves are probably what’s making him sweat.

Looking good was never trouble for Mingyu. Showing off application-worthy talents in sports and academics weren’t trouble either. He worked hard for them, too, but he never felt emotionally attached to any of those things. Failed tests could be made up with hard work. Losing the championships never looked bad on him because he wasn’t the captain or the coach. However, cooking is a little different.

Mingyu hadn’t received culinary training outside of what he learned from his parents, his grandma, and occasional Google Searches on how to cook more specific things. It wasn’t competitive, and it wasn’t super fun to clean up afterwards, but watching people consume something he created made him happy. It was a feeling that he didn’t experience up until the first time he offered cookies to Jungkook’s fraternity friends and they fell in love with his baking. It was a feeling he didn’t understand until meeting Minghao and analyzing his past. Those compliments felt substantial. It’s akin to standing on stage and receiving applause after a performance well-done and that’s the closest Mingyu can see from Minghao’s perspective on why he pursues dance instead of a more profitable career.

There’s a rapping on the door a few minutes after everything on the stove gets too hot. The soup boils over and Mingyu frantically shuts off all five burners, tossing the sautéed mushrooms into one of the eight banchan plates. The others can be filled quite quickly and only a couple more need to be warmed up. At the same time, the rice cooker pops and he shouts that he’s coming before opening the lid and fluffing the rice with the scooper.

He gets to the door, but barely, almost slipping on the tile of the entryway. Mingyu was excited and peppy before he opens the door to see Minghao in profile, looking out into the dark of a late-Fall sky. The stars haven’t shown themselves because it’s windy and the clouds are covering the moon. There’s something on his mind, trouble on his brow, and something heavy pulling down the corners of his mouth. When he hears Mingyu swing open the door, he shifts the weight on his feet and turns to him with a smile, blinking away his forlorn stare and giving Mingyu bright eyes, “Hey.”

“Hey, come in, it’s cold outside.” When Minghao passes through the threshold of the door and bends over to remove his shoes, Mingyu notices that he looks a little different. For the first time in a
while, his hair is ever-so-slightly styled. Minghao usually had his hair parted to the side, held up lightly with a little hair clay, but today it seems like the strands are meticulously moved. His earrings have changed as well. Instead of the usual studs that filled every hole, only a select few are occupied and on his left ear, there are a couple long chains that sway when he moves. He’s wearing a pretty watch that’s minimalistic, but it looks expensive. However, despite how nice Minghao looks and despite how uncomfortable Mingyu’s heart is beating at this rate, the clothing choice doesn’t… seem right.

The clothes aren’t ill-fitting, but they don’t look like articles that Minghao would have picked out himself. “It smells nice.” Minghao’s already walking over to the kitchen, “What are you making? Is there anything I can help with?”

“Nope, it’s almost done.” He’s probably not talking slowly, but Mingyu feels like it’s hard to speak. It’s exhausting. Every instance he meets Minghao feels like he has to build himself up to something, like he has to warm up their conversation before he can talk and function like a normal human being. Until then, he’s just an awkward mess of limbs, “Just take a seat and I’ll plate everything up.”

He pays no mind to the number of dishes that he’ll have to do later because everything is plated. There are at least fifteen plates up on the island counter where they’ll eat. It barely fits and Mingyu regrets not ever buying a formal dining table for the dining room he doesn’t have. Minghao watches him from his seat up at the bar, offering to help do something every time Mingyu moves to a different part of the kitchen.

“It’s almost done, I swear.”

And once it’s all plated and gorgeous, he steps back and excuses himself for taking a picture. He’ll be doing his parents proud. He knows they’ll fawn over the Instagram-worthy picture and congratulate him for finally putting a lot of effort into a meal. They’ll probably joke about how Mingyu should save some for them, but he knows that his parents are enjoying their retirement by the bay. He’s determined to make good on a promise to cook a huge meal for them next time he visits. Mingyu rarely cooks food this extensive and there’s no special occasion to warrant such a nice meal, but seeing Minghao fascinated and (dare he say) impressed by his efforts already makes up for all the stress and labor that went into it.

“This is a lot of food.” Is the only thing that Minghao declares as he holds his rice bowl in his hand, readying the chopsticks in the other. He puts the bowl down after remembering that you don’t usually pick up rice bowls during traditional Korean meals, but Mingyu tells him that it doesn’t matter. He can eat it however he wants. They’re in America and with all the little shortcuts that Mingyu took preparing it, it’s probably not as traditional as he imagines.

“Do you know what everything is?”

Minghao nods, not taking his eyes off the colorful assortment. Mingyu almost wishes he didn’t know because he wants to explain. “Jjigae?” he points to the stew. Well, soondubu jjigae if Minghao wants to be technical and use the Korean names, but sure, “Dak… dakgalbi?” Mingyu nods, “I don’t know the names of individual banchan.”

“What about that one?”

Minghao teases his bottom lip, trying to recall and coming up empty, “I know it’s seaweed soup. The roomie made some for me last night at, like, midnight. It wasn’t as nice as this though.”

“It’s called miyeok guk.”
“Miyeok guk.” He repeats after Mingyu. Normally, teaching others Korean made Mingyu cringe a little on the inside because of their poor, lackluster attempts at pronunciation, but Minghao says it in earnest. Even though the enunciation is off, and he makes the ‘k’ sounds a little too hard, he keeps repeating it quietly in the cutest way possible. Maybe he’s committing it to memory. Minghao looks at Mingyu, “Is it a Korean thing?”

“It’s Korean food, so, yeah?”

“No, I mean, like, is there something in the lunar calendar or something? Is tonight special?”

“N-no. Why?”

Minghao shrugs. Mingyu busies himself with watching the stew bubble slightly in the earthenware bowls, “Soonyoung, Yugyeom, and Jooheon were talking in Korean and kept mentioning miyeok guk last night, but I didn’t know what it was and in our sleepy stupor, I forgot to ask Cheol.”

“That’s some crazy coincidence right there.” Minghao narrows his eyes at Mingyu’s failed attempt at playing dumb. He really should stop doing that. It’s never going to work, especially on someone as keenly vigilant as Minghao Xu, “But- yeah, dig in.”

“You first.”

“No, no, no, you first.” Mingyu sets his chopsticks down, “On all the times you brought food, I ate first, so it’s your turn.”

He can’t believe that logic works because Minghao sighs and picks up the long spoon to take a sip of the stew. He swallows, pauses, and turns to stare at Mingyu until he starts eating. Mingyu takes his first bite with a chuckle.

Most of dinner is consumed while they talk about Mingyu’s laborious efforts over the supper and how it’s inconvenient that their local Asian market doesn’t have every single Asian thing from every single Asian country. They laugh about it, but it’s full of half-truths. For a town with such a sizable East-Asian population, they really ought to have more variety. Minghao admits to splurging on Amazon Fresh sometimes just so he doesn’t have to make the drive into the city, claiming that paying for the subscription cancelled out paying for the gas. Mingyu wants to make a point about Minghao’s expenses for takeout and gas for these PT sessions could cancel out going in for actual PT sessions at the clinic, but he won’t push his luck.

They’re situated closer together than normal since the plates occupy so much of their eating area. He didn’t intend for them to be nearly shoulder-to-shoulder eating dinner, but his guest doesn’t seem to mind. Mingyu takes time to explain all the banchan and what’s in each of the dishes. He explains how to cook each one because Minghao asks. Eating it and experiencing the food together was enough of a compliment. Mingyu doesn’t want to fish for more.

Minghao talks a lot tonight; asking questions and making little comments. He asks what the ingredients are and discusses flavor profiles. It’s not like they’re culinary experts, but they’ve both apparently watched enough Food Network to know key terms. Korean flavors are typically straightforward and bold. Minghao says he likes them because ‘they aren’t shy’, whatever that means. He also comments that the colors are really beautiful. Mingyu had intentionally made his banchan feature more blacks, yellows, and whites than normal because the stew and dakgalbi were already red and the seaweed soup was green and brown. He thinks he did well. It might be self-referencing criteria, but he thinks the food tastes amazing, too. Minghao was right, though, this is a lot of food and they somehow manage to down all of it over pleasant conversation and featherlight
“Thanks for the meal.” Minghao lets out a breath, putting a hand to his stomach, signaling that he is more than full. Mingyu grins ear-to-ear, satisfied with his own cooking skills and the fact that Minghao had liked it enough to overeat. The latter looks around the room, trying to land his eyes on anything but Mingyu. He stops and shoots a glance at him, “I have a question.”

“Yeah?”

“Your apartment smells less like grandmas now, but you haven’t used the candle. Did you not like it? I’ll get you a different one.” True. Mingyu had burned it just that once and never again. Sometimes he picks it up, opens the metal lid, and gives it a sniff. After holding the lighter in his hand, he promptly shuts the lid and puts it back on the shelf where it’s been collecting metaphoric dust.

“It smells fine. I’m just not really a candle kinda guy.” Mingyu fiddles with his napkin, “Y’know, I’m just really nervous about my curtains catching fire or something like that. I mean, the whole entertainment center is made out of wood.”

Minghao is kind enough to offer him a sympathetic and knowing smile before rolling his eyes. Little candle like that was in no position to burn down the flat, but Mingyu doesn’t have a more apt excuse. He feels bad that Minghao’s first and only physical gift is sitting on a shelf not being used, but he doesn’t want to think about the scent of cologne. It’s not even remotely close to the smell of whatever aroma Minghao carries around with him. It’s different. Probably. It’s not like Mingyu’s gotten a chance to cure the curiosity and sniff Minghao. That’s just- no. The candle smells like college; stuffed between the couch and the person weighing his hips above yours. His body spray is laid on with a heavy hand, it has to be with how much partying—and subsequent sweating—would follow your exchange. Mingyu’s eyes crinkle and cringe at the memory. It’s not quite regret, but it’s not something he wants to think about right now. Right now is a moment about building a better future. The candle will remain unburned.

Maybe it’s just Mingyu’s imagination, but he hears Minghao cough to clear up the silence.

All that remains is a little leftover soup that Mingyu insists that Minghao to take home if only to take his Tupperware along with him and because Mingyu’s genius is showing, Minghao barely agrees. Much to Mingyu’s chagrin, the dance instructor is still stubborn and changes the subject, deciding that if Mingyu cooked dinner, it’d only be right for him to do the dishes.

“But it’s a lot of dishes.”

“It’s fine.”

“At least let me dry them.” Mingyu whines and Minghao lets him help; even just a little.

Minghao washes the plates and bowls with meticulous precision, but also very quickly. So quickly so that Mingyu nearly has trouble keeping up since he’s not used to drying his dishes by hand. He usually lets them sit on the rack unless its glass. Today’s different because not all the tableware will fit and some has to be put away immediately to make room for the pots. Mingyu usually cleaned as he cooked, but tonight that was not the case. A lot of things are different tonight, but maybe not in a bad way. Doing dishes with Minghao makes them feel closer because it feels similar to teamwork. Even though they’re not getting goals or touchdowns or presenting about American history in front of a class with a shoddy PowerPoint, there’s some sort of quiet synergy that goes into the dishwashing.
Minghao has a rhythm; water, soap, sponge, rinse, dump, pass.

And Mingyu continues the beat as well as he can.
“Are we doing PT stuff tonight?” Mingyu asks as he’s drying the last few banchan dishes. Minghao’s wiping down the countertop. He has half a mind to wonder how experienced Minghao is at washing dishes because of how efficient he was, but it seems like a question better reserved for a different time.

“We can if you’re up to it.” He flicks the towel into the sink and washes away any stray food bits that may have been left behind before wringing it and laying it flat on the counter to dry. He pats his hands on his pants. It’s both nice and worrisome that they’ve swept the subject of the smashed phone screen away. Mingyu’s still determined to repair it in some way; make up for it in favors or money.

“Let’s do it since you’re over.”

Minghao gives him some noise of approval before picking up the Tupperware container holding the soup and opening the fridge to keep it cool since he’d be staying an extra hour or so. It’s cold enough outside that he could probably just leave it on the porch, but who’s to say that a soup thief wouldn’t swing by and steal it. Alternatively, raccoons probably wouldn’t complain about a free meal. Yeah, keeping it in the fridge isn’t the worst idea. Go ahead, Minghao, you put that soup in the fridge. When the door doesn’t close, Mingyu turns around.

**FUCK. THE CAKE.**

He completely forgot about the cake. It’s *naked* right now, he doesn’t want Minghao looking at it. *It’s improper*. Without thinking, he pulls Minghao away from the fridge by his hood and shuts the door, slamming his back against it. He knocks one of the few fridge magnets off with his elbow and makes a feeble attempt to grapple for it, but it slides away on the tile.

“What- what’s wrong?” Minghao is still holding onto his soup container. His other hand is stopping his hips from hitting the counter’s ledge. He looks more shaken than anything.

“Nothing!” Mingyu’s still holding the handles to the fridge shut behind his back, feeling the cold, brushed-metal against his spine through his thin t-shirt.

“I can’t put the soup in the fridge?”

“No- I mean- Yes, but n- here.” He offers out a hand to take the soup container. Minghao hands it over, unsure, but Mingyu just opens the left door a crack and shoves it in.

“Are you alright? What’s the big deal? It’s just a cake. If you don’t want me to touch it, I won’t. Geez.” He crosses his arms, waiting for Mingyu to regain his sanity. So, he already registered the cake.

Mingyu’s at a standstill.

What’s he supposed to do or say now? He needs to finish the cake before he can present it, but he also has to help Minghao with his exercises without telling him it’s *his* cake. The bags of buttercream frosting need to be taken out to get into a workable state which will take time. There’s a
very obvious path that this could go down, but he’s not sure if he wants to take it, “What’s with the
secrecy?”

He sighs, “I made the cake… for us to share, but I forgot about it.” That wasn’t the best
delivery, but at least he didn’t mention the word ‘birthday’ and he didn’t admit to it being Minghao’s
cake, “I figured if you were going to try my cooking, then you should try my baking, too.” He wants
to applaud himself for not sounding like a complete idiot because this excuse is pretty good and
mostly true. Also, this could be an apology cake, right?

“Oh.” Minghao blinks a few times, “Let’s just eat it after the exercises.”

“But it’s not decorated yet.”

“It’s just us, we don’t need to decorate it.” Minghao’s already in the living room, stretching out
his arms and giving a big yawn before rotating his waist, “Just blop the frosting on top and call it a
day. You’ve been laboring enough as it is.” The last sentence is little more than a mumble, but
Mingyu catches it.

He’s grinning because hearing Minghao say ‘blop’ is really cute, but he’s also having a minor
crisis because he’s a completionist and not finishing something before presenting it is one of his
peeves, “But I want to decorate it. I have to decorate it.”

“Then we’ll decorate it after the exercises.” He sounds a little impatient, probably due to the
fact that he doesn’t know why Mingyu’s getting his panties in a bunch over some unfinished pastry.
He’s aware that the cake isn’t a secret or a surprise anymore, but he’s still not sure if Minghao will be
upset if they celebrate or if he whips out the sparkling candles that are sitting under the silverware
tray (he went to three different stores to find them). With that in mind, he comes into the living room
and helps Minghao out, trying desperately to figure out what the plan of action is after they wrap up.

It all comes too soon and Minghao’s done with his usual reps. He doesn’t want to push his
luck and send him to do more. It’s not worth it. Besides, they’d have to cross the bridge eventually.
He’s one to celebrate and if it isn’t this year, then it’ll be the next. Mingyu’s already in the kitchen,
fishig out the cake to place it on its stand and begin the arduous decorating process. Minghao’s
strutting out of the bathroom; aw, he fixed his hair. Before entering the kitchen, he picks up his
cracked phone that’s sitting on the dining table to check messages and respond to a couple.

“Hey, Mingyu.” He doesn’t know what’s up Minghao’s sleeve because he’s got a big grin on
his face and mischief in his eyes. He’s already stressed enough with the prospect of the Cake
Dilemma, he doesn’t need anything more. Mingyu meets eyes with him from across the room, “You
cook good.” And he bursts into a laugh.

They both do.

They laugh until Minghao’s in the kitchen and right by Mingyu’s side; hands washed and
sleeves rolled to his elbows. Somehow, he looks better without the stuffy coat on and just his long-
sleeved shirt. He bumps Mingyu’s hip with his, knocking the man off balance and causing him to
stumble a couple steps to the left, “Shut up, it wasn’t that funny.”

“Okay, okay.” Mingyu wipes away a tear because he’s not sure why the little joke has him on
a roll. He’s likely equal parts amused and embarrassed about his poor use of the English language
that he grew up speaking. Minghao’s eternally patient, “Have you ever piped frosting before?”
“Nyep.”

“Nyep?”

“Well, I have, but it didn’t turn out well.” He picks up one of the bags, but the way he holds it makes Mingyu want to take it away from him. That’s his precious buttercream baby, “I didn’t really know how to hold the bag properly, so all the frosting came out the butt.” He moves the bag out of Mingyu’s reach when he extends a hand to take it, “But that was back in elementary. I can totally pipe frosting now, no sweat. Probably.”

“Prove it.” Mingyu holds the base of the ceramic cake stand and slides it over to Minghao’s side of the counter. It doesn’t matter if he botches his first attempt because the cake only has a crumb coat on. It’ll need an even layer of frosting before they can get to any real decorating. Minghao looks at him, looks at the cake, and takes a step forward to begin piping. The star-shaped nozzle was intended to be for the trim, cleaning up edges, propping up halved strawberries and such, but Minghao just pipes one little mound in the middle.

“There, I did it.”

“That’s just a little turd, I meant make a chain or something.” Minghao looks at him again before refocusing on the cake. If Mingyu wasn’t having so much fun teasing him, he might feel bad for causing him stress. But the dancer adapts, shakes his head once and continues. He pipes two blobs into the chain before it’s evident that he really doesn’t know how to properly hold a piping bag, so with his grace and manners, Mingyu takes his hand and stops him.

“Hey, it wasn’t that bad.” Okay, this probably wasn’t the most advantageous position to grab his hand because sometimes Mingyu forgets that the majority of people on Earth aren’t left-handed. It’s difficult to help him adjust his grip when they’re using opposite hands.

“The frosting’s going to come out the butt- Minghao, why- Here,” Mingyu briefly lets go of Minghao’s hand to whisk the bag out of his grasp. He twists the open end—the butt—shut again before standing behind him and putting the frosting bag back into his hand, guiding his fingers into the correct position with his own, “You have to hold it like this to keep the end shut.” He takes a step back, dropping any and all physical contact to see if his instructions make better sense now. Minghao’s going to be his star pupil by the end of the night.

“Okay, but how am I supposed to do anything pretty with this?” He holds up the limp bag of frosting, thumb and forefinger holding the twist so tightly that his flesh turns white.

“You use your left hand to guide the tip and turn the bag to keep tension on the twist.” He picks up the second bag of frosting to demonstrate, “Keeping the tension up here will force the frosting out steadily.” He wipes the frosting on the side of a bowl before setting the bag down and resuming his stance watching Minghao struggle.

Minghao nods and tries again, but he still seems unsure about how to maneuver. The buttercream doesn’t leak out ‘the butt’, but it’s coming out in shaky streams, “I feel like I’m just wasting frosting at this point.” He coughs a single laugh out before shaking his head.

“You’re not.” Mingyu leans to the side so he can see how Minghao’s doing. Okay, maybe he is just wasting frosting, but that’s okay, it can be flattened and Mingyu can swap out the flat tip for another star tip, “But that’s still pretty hideous.” Can anyone be this bad at doing a simple task? It seems unlikely that Minghao couldn’t pick up something so basic immediately. With how observant he is and how good he is at teaching and following motions of the body, it’s a little odd that he can’t understand how to pipe frosting.
“Help me out then.”

Minghao probably didn’t mean it like this, but if he’s really so daft, then Mingyu’s going to go out on a limb.
Chapter 35

He comes up behind Minghao, barely pressing his chest to the shorter’s back, placing his hands against Minghao’s and correcting the position. He leans over Minghao’s left shoulder to see the workspace, his chin *just* resting on him. It’s a bit of a creepy thought, but Minghao smells nice. He smells a little like that candle, but also a little warmer, like fresh laundry from the dryer; like the detergent from his childhood. He doesn’t smell like any perfume or cologne that Mingyu’s smelled in passing at JCPenny’s or like the finer scents he’d sampled in the city mall, but he just smells natural. He smells familiar and *right*.

*Right, helping, right.* “You hold it like this, and you can use your other three fingers on the right to squeeze down the bag,” they pipe a line with Mingyu providing support and pressure to the back of Minghao’s fingers. Arguably, Minghao’s hands could be bigger than his, just slightly, but he doesn’t want to think about them putting their palms together and finding out, “and guide it with the left like this.” He has to push Minghao’s left hand to the bag, pulling them closer in this weird sort of embrace. Honestly, Mingyu’s trying to touch him as little as possible with the rest of his body, but that’s proving difficult. If Minghao moves any more forward, he might bump into the cake and ruin the obviously-not-his clothes, “And then to pipe a nice chain, you hold and release, then pull up like this.” He wonders if Minghao can feel his heartbeat, “Welp, that still looks ugly even with my help, I guess you’re hopeless.”

“Hey! I resent that.” Mingyu lets go again to get back to his spot on the other side of the counter, picking up offset spatula and taking it to the cake to smooth out Minghao’s attempts, immediately missing his minuscule amount of warmth. He doesn’t expect him to jab his finger into the frosting after Mingyu has the top flat. What he expects even less is that Minghao would have the audacity to smear the buttercream on his cheek, “Whoops.” He chuckles, picking up the piping bag again and filling in the little hole left by his finger. If Mingyu wasn’t so flustered, he might have noticed that Minghao fills it in properly with ease, guiding the bag with fluidity and piping a dick into the cake while cackling, “Congratulations, it’s a boy.”

Mingyu smashes the spatula down onto the drawing and smooths it out with little sympathy. He’s glaring Minghao down even though the latter is paying him no mind and resuming his job piping buttercream on the sides. He doesn’t seem to care about the shoddy job he’s doing, so Mingyu takes the opportunity to get his revenge. Instead of doing the normal thing and getting fresh frosting from the second bag to wipe on Minghao’s face, he just grabs him by the neck and squishes their cheeks together. They both pull away, Minghao with protest and Mingyu with a laugh, “That’s what you get for dicking up my cake.”

Minghao thumbs the frosting off his cheek, sucking it off with a pop before rinsing his hand in the sink and getting back to work. Mingyu thinks he just complies because he’s so quiet, but he misses when Minghao picks up the whipped cream bag and squirts a little on his finger for a taste. He thinks it ends there and doesn’t see the mischievous glint in his eye. Before he can formulate words, he’s up in arms because Minghao plops a little dollop on his nose and pulls the spatula from his hands to finish frosting the side of the cake.

“Oh my god, what are you, four?”

“Better than being five.” Minghao’s laughing hard, but so casually that Mingyu’s stuck between savoring the moment and smacking him upside the head.

He whisks the spatula back and booty-bumps Minghao away from their workstation. The latter stumbles a bit, Mingyu instantly regretting it because he momentarily forgot about the knee, but it
looks like Minghao’s fine since he comes right back to piping whipped cream hills on the top of the cake, topping each with a strawberry and eating one himself; he’s still chuckling quietly. Mingyu wipes the cream off his nose and wipes his face and hands with a towel he keeps by the sink, “Did I push you too hard?”

Minghao looks up at him, “No, I’m good.” He actually did a pretty decent job, maybe he’s not as good as Mingyu is, but it’s still presentable!

Mingyu shaves some of the white chocolate on top of it all since he forgot to buy powdered sugar. He’d used the last of it for the macarons two months ago and hasn’t felt the need to make them since. Minghao doesn’t protest the dark chocolate, even saying that the cake looks nice with the two mixed together. They press longer, curved shavings up against the side of the cake, hands and fingers knocking together on occasion and without complaint before Mingyu decides it needs a trim and pipes it on as Minghao retrieves his phone.

He can hear Minghao take a picture of the cake before the smile deepens on his face. Mingyu washes his hands and takes his own picture.

“Okay, looks good. Let’s cut into it.”

“Not so fast.” Mingyu picks up the cake stand, swinging it away from Minghao and over to the other side of the sink where the silverware drawer is. He uses his body to block the view as he pulls out eight candles and sticks them on, two on the right and six on the left since he didn’t remember to buy specific numbers. Twenty-six.

He takes a deep breath, reminding himself that this nice night could end poorly after this decision, but regardless, he turns around with the candles lit.

It clearly catches Minghao by some sort of surprise.

His expression is unreadable and perplexing, but it doesn’t read as glee. As expected, Minghao doesn’t say anything. He’s not frowning, he’s not smiling, and he’s certainly thinking about something. The candles shoot off a couple sparks, popping every now and then like sparklers in July, but the ‘happy birthday’ cheer is stuck in Mingyu’s throat so he opts for “Make a wish.”

His words seem like they’re enough to get Minghao to snap out of whatever trance he was in. The brown-haired man looks up at him with sorry eyes before he folds his fingers together and lowers his head and his lids, wishing for something in earnest. Mingyu doesn’t yet understand why it’s such a task for him to just blow out some not-birthday candles on a not-birthday cake, but he’s patient and he waits. He’s sure if Minghao wanted the reasons publicized, he would have known by now (thanks to the snooping abilities of Wonwoo and Soonyoung), but he’ll respect Minghao’s right to privacy. Still, watching his brows knit and pinch like such a simple task is causing physical pain is wounding Mingyu’s heart with little scrapes. It’s just a birthday. It’s just a day to celebrate Minghao’s existence and Minghao’s the type of person who should be celebrated every day.

For just a moment, with the little flames giving Minghao’s face a nice glow, with little streaks of buttercream still on his cheek, with flecks of chocolate stuck under his fingernails; Mingyu naively hopes that he’s a part of that wish, too.

Minghao has never looked so mystified, even after blowing out the candles there’s something
unsettling in his expression. His cheeks distort almost like he’s wincing, and his shoulders hike up just a tad; tense. Suddenly, he turns away from Mingyu with a sharp movement. He takes a deep breath and looks up to the ceiling. *What is it, Minghao, is your spaceship here to collect you?* Mingyu waits, he waits and waits and doesn’t say anything. He’s full of worry and concern, but he doesn’t know if it’s misplaced. Maybe Minghao just needs to sneeze. Maybe he got something in his eye. Surely, he’s not overwhelmed with emotions and tearing up. It’s just a not-birthday candle on a not-birthday cake.

When he turns around again, he’s recomposed and smiling a small smile. Mingyu decides not to ask about it.

They sit back up at the bar and cut the cake. The mood seems to better itself after whatever epiphany Minghao had in looking up at the spackled ceiling. He’s excited to see that there are strawberries inside, his expression brightening when Mingyu pulls out his slice. He seems to be a fan. Mingyu almost misses the long list of compliments that Minghao gives him because his mouth is full of cake. When he finally swallows and gets a few words out, Mingyu’s not sure how to respond, “How did you know it was my birthday?”

He could tell the truth about how he found out. Honestly, he knew it was in November, he just didn’t know when. He could also lie and play it by ear. He never mentioned a birthday, maybe the candles were just a joke for fun; what’s cake without candles? But Mingyu’s never been good at lying or being witty in front of Minghao, so he settles for the truth.

“Ah, that makes sense, I guess.” He’s on his second slice and Mingyu would be happy about that if it didn’t look like Minghao was still trying to solve a huge mystery. He divides up the layers and cuts up the strawberries with his fork, ensuring that each bite had an equal amount of cake, buttercream, whipped cream, and a chunk of strawberry. He can’t help but crack a smile and hold back his laugh. He knows that Wonwoo would tease him about this if he knew.

It’s funny because Mingyu meticulously eats his cake the same way, “Why don’t you like celebrating your birthday?”

Minghao looks at him, meeting his eyes with his lips taut, “I just never celebrated growing up, so I figured why start now.” He swallows another bite and maybe some words go back down his throat along with the cake.

“You didn’t celebrate?” Minghao shrugs and shakes his head, “But why?”

“Dunno, parents just weren’t into it.” He toys with the frosting using his fork, “I mean, I get it. It’s just a birthday. There’s nothing that special about it. You’ll have them until you die, so there’s not really anything worth celebrating.”

“You’re worth celebrating.” Mingyu gives him a hard stare, “That’s why people celebrate birthdays, because they deserve to be celebrated.”

Minghao just shrugs and continues inhaling cake.

“Like not even your 2nd birthday?” Mingyu doesn’t know if the tradition is a Chinese thing, too, but he shoots in the dark.

“Nope.” Minghao holds the fork in his hand, balancing a bite of cake in the air as he thinks, “Even if they did, I don’t remember it. Times were tough, my parents had more things to worry
about than a birthday.”

“Did you visit them? They’re in town, right?”

Minghao’s gaze falls to the countertop and the clink of his fork hitting is plate is enough to tell Mingyu that he’s said something wrong, “I did.” So deflated, “I brought them food and sat with them for an hour or so.”

The room falls silent with the lack of conversation, so Mingyu breaks the silence again after several minutes have passed, “I’m sorry if you didn’t want to celebrate or if I pried. I just felt bad for hurting your phone yesterday and I wanted to make it up to you.”

“I figured.” He laughs, swaying to the side and bumping Mingyu’s shoulder gently with his. The motion lets Mingyu know he doesn’t hold it against him. The mood is already better, “I’m surprised you went through with it though. I thought Wonwoo’s horror story was enough to deter you.”

They lapse back into casual conversation late into the night as they finish up the cake. It’s a surprise that they finished so much food, but it’s easy when you’re chatting about nothing and everything at the same time. And, like before, time doesn’t exist in spaces like this. Mingyu nudges Minghao whenever he starts going off on tangents and threatens to drop cake on the floor in his absentmindedness. Minghao pushes him when Mingyu’s the one to drop a dollop of whipped cream onto the counter because he was too enthusiastic about listing off the times Old Man Perelman complained about the clinic’s AC last summer when he just got promoted and how he almost lost that promotion because he mentioned that tripping him down the stairs was probably worth it in the long run. “I would be doing the world a favor. Prison is just temporary.”

“You wouldn’t last a day in prison with a face like yours.”

“You wouldn’t either.”

The cake was small, real small; just 6 inches across, but also stacked 6 inches high. There’s only a little left over and Minghao says that he can’t take it to work lest the other instructors find out and start celebrating his birthday every year. He can’t take it home because Seungcheol will think that cakes are a birthday thing now. He’s still glad that they didn’t get him presents. That would have been far more burdensome than just receiving a cake that they could all share. Minghao even suggests that Mingyu should take the cake to work for Wonwoo if only to bribe him into secrecy.

“I could do without Soonyoung grilling me about you.”

“Me?” Mingyu sets his plate in the sink as Minghao washes them, “What’s he saying about me?” With coyness in his voice, Mingyu’s tongue is pressed on the inside of his lower lip. He’s leaning, propped up by his arm on the counter, hunched over enough so that he has to look up at Minghao who is suddenly avoiding eye contact. He’s feeling tipsy despite the absence of alcohol. Neither of them drink regularly.

“The same things Wonwoo is saying about me.”
Aside from the clink and clatter of the plates and forks finding their way into the dishrack, it’s quiet.

He should have guessed that Soonyoung and Wonwoo’s plan wasn’t as complicated and complete as they made it out to be. Everything would have fallen apart if Minghao and Mingyu so much as mentioned the prodding conversations to each other and their gross lack of secrecy concerning setting up their friends was silly. A lot of things Minghao and Mingyu end up doing are silly.

“And what do you think Wonwoo’s been saying about you?” Mingyu tests the waters, meeting Minghao’s cheeky response with his own, bumping shoulders teasingly when Minghao bottles up.

“If it’s anything like what Soon’s been saying about you, I don’t want to repeat it.” Minghao laughs, turning away embarrassed. He recovers after a second, “But I assume that Wonwoo is a little more tactful, so he’s probably just mentioned that we should go to the dinner together.”

Dinner? That’s brand new information.

“That’s brand new information.”

Minghao eyes are wide in surprise, “Then, forget I said anything.” Does he not want to invite Mingyu?

“Okay.” Mingyu doesn’t have much choice but to comply. It’s an event he’s not a part of, he can’t just invite himself.

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m thinking of not going myself.”

“Going where?” Mingyu plays along, earning a grateful smile from him and a shoulder bumping against his, “Are we on for tomorrow?”

“Yeah.” Minghao towels off his hands before turning slightly to face the physical therapist, he assumes the same, slightly hunched over pose so that they’re eye-to-eye. He leans his cheek into his palm and wrinkles his lips, blinking slowly before speaking again, “So, what do you wanna eat?”

“Surprise me.”

He gets smacked for that.

‘I can’t make it today. Sorry.’ Mingyu’s brow knits when he looks at his phone. It’s a morning text, something uncommon for Minghao who never texts good morning and usually isn’t in the mood to chat until lunch time. He has half a mind to ask why the dancer wants to cancel so suddenly. In fact, most of him is worried that something happened since he agreed to their arrangement yesterday.

‘That’s okay.’ Are they close enough for him to pry yet? Maybe. They did share a few personal stories and embarrassing moments and Minghao did mention that he liked talking to Mingyu, ‘Did something happen?’
It’s suspicious that Minghao doesn’t respond right away. If Mingyu hadn’t responded until a while later, then it wouldn’t be anything out of the ordinary, but because he responds immediately after receiving the ping, it doesn’t make sense that Minghao wouldn’t be with his phone. He isn’t teaching at this hour either, right? Mingyu squints and looks at the clock, it’s only 10:32. If anything, Minghao would probably be getting ready to teach, but he can’t be bothered about it right now, he has a 65-year-old with tennis elbow in the lobby waiting for him.

“How was the cake?” Jeonghan is the first one to ask in passing. Wonwoo’s been busy this morning.

“It was okay.”

“Something on your mind?” If there’s one thing that Mingyu both likes and hates about Jeonghan is that he’s incredibly adept at reading people. He can smell trouble a mile away and won’t hesitate to ask if he notices something off about you. He knows how to get to the roots of people’s problems which is why he makes such a good PT. He knows when patients stray from their routines immediately and he can tell when they’re uncomfortable; Mingyu isn’t a patient.

“Not really.” Jeonghan blocks his way to the breakroom door with a big step.

Well, this is new,

“What?”

“It’s Minghao Xu, right?”

It’s not to say that he’s prepared for this moment, but Mingyu has thought about the nightmarish event that Jeonghan could piece together the obscure fragments of his troubled mind and challenge him with a name; the right name, at that. Even still, he’s also not sure why associating himself with Minghao feels like such a taboo. Maybe it’s just because he hasn’t announced interest about anyone since coming back to town, only touching on past relationships when they crop up in conversation, but because Wonwoo is a little too intuitive he’s kept it under wraps.

It’d be nice if he was comfortable enough to share those worries and concerns with his only substantial office friend, but he doesn’t feel like he’s quite there yet. Joshua doesn’t have time to care about his interpersonal life. Seokmin would be happy to talk about it, but he’s barely ever in at the same time Mingyu is. Jeonghan is the real snake that he has to look out for because of instances like right now where he’s cornered up, boxed into the breakroom. He doesn’t know why the senior PT is so keen on harping on him at unique opportunities like this. It’s nothing new—and to be fair, Mingyu does the same to him sometimes—but because it’s about Minghao his prepared response is triggered on instinct alone, “Who?”

Jeonghan’s brow furrows. It looks like he might actually think that he’s wrong, “A patient you had a few weeks ago. He was supposed to come in to see me, but I left and you took him.”

“No?” Jeonghan submitting an explanation is a sign that he’s unsure himself.

The shorter man opens the door behind his back and gives him one last suspicious glare before slipping in. Mingyu continues to the bathroom where he was headed at first. He feels the need to wash his face or something. Every night has felt restless, some more than others and not all of them involve climbing mountains or hills. Some of them involve drowning in the frigid, cold ocean. Some of them involve sitting at a chess table watching flowers wilt. Some of them involve watching Minghao get ravished by his posse of hot friends—okay, that one only happened once, but Mingyu’s replayed it a couple times for posterity’s sake. The water dripping from his chin into the sink is the only noise that fills the quiet single-stall bathroom. He needs to clear his head.

Mingyu finishes another scheduled appointment before hiding himself in the breakroom. His
phone has been quiet, Minghao hasn’t responded. He hasn’t even read his message. It shouldn’t be a cause for worry. People leave messages unread all the time. That’s the point of messaging instead of calling, but Mingyu can’t help the curiosity. It just seems uncharacteristic for Minghao to not respond after an hour.

Just when Mingyu thinks that he’s afforded a moment of quiet, Wonwoo enters his peripheral and closes the breakroom door without delicacy. His expression is unreadable or outstandingly neutral, but he looks tired. There are dark circles emphasizing how sunken his eyes are with sleep deprivation.

He takes a big yawn similar to that of the MGM lion and shakes the sleep from his head as he makes his way over to the coffee pot. Unfortunately, it’s run dry, so he slaps his hands around on the counter to gather the components to craft a new brew, glasses sitting in his breast pocket.

Mingyu’s quiet for a moment, but decides to speak up when Wonwoo doesn’t acknowledge him, “Everything okay?”

Wonwoo looks over at him with his eyes narrowed to mere slits, eyebrows grumpy, “I’ve been up since 5.”

The next obvious question, “Why?” Apparently, their trip to DonutBoo’s was the earliest that Wonwoo had woken up in a long time and he went straight back to bed after delivering the goodies to Soonyoung. Waking up before the sun—both figuratively and metaphorically—is uncommon for him.

“No, it’s embarrassing.”

As much as Mingyu doesn’t want to hear about Wonwoo’s sex life, he decides to be a good friend and good person and prod at the open invitation anyway, “I didn’t peg Soonyoung for a morning-sex kind of guy.”

“Don’t worry. He’s not. The last thing we want to do in the morning is have sex. Sleep is so much more productive.” Wonwoo’s eyes are trained on the coffee machine, as if staring it down will intimidate it into brewing his cup of jet fuel at warp speed, “It’s really corny and I never thought I’d be the type.” His fingers are rapping on the countertop that he’s leaning against, “Maybe it’s just because Soon and I haven’t lived together for a long time, but I guess I recently just got used to waking up with him and sleeping with him next to me. So, when he’s not there, it’s hard to sleep.”

Mingyu sighs, “That’s gross.”

“I know, right? It’s absolutely revolting.” He pours the piping hot coffee into his mug haphazardly, spilling at least two-sips’ worth onto the counter and blotting it dry with a handful of paper towel, “But, yeah, Soon was up early. And it’s winter so our bedroom was freezing.”

“Blankets, Woo, they exist.”

“I’m well aware that blankets- you know what, you’ll understand one day. Maybe not anytime soon, but you’ll understand.” He takes a long drawn out sip that makes Mingyu gawk—just slightly—because that’s fucking lava that Wonwoo is guzzling.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Wonwoo nods vigorously before unintentionally slamming his cup down on the table and pointing a finger into Mingyu’s face, wagging it a few times with a mischievous smirk on his face. Without any more words, he slips out of the breakroom. If you ask Mingyu, it was probably to cry because there’s no way that he has a tongue anymore. On the plus-
side, it means that Wonwoo can’t speak or prod him about Minghao ever again. Unless he learns about text-to-speech. He certainly hopes that Wonwoo is as tech-illiterate as Soonyoung is. The man can’t even Google how to use Google.
Chapter 37

Mingyu’s phone pings in the middle of his next appointment.

He has the basic human decency to not answer until the end, but he also has the basic human pettiness to think that his prolonged response is revenge for Minghao not responding right away.

Still, his fingers itch to slide across the lock screen for the remainder of the appointment. Mrs. Shirley Ortiz is usually pleasant company and she often has a lot to say about a lot of things. Mingyu often humors her as she’s one of the mega-old patients that he doesn’t mind talking to. However, today her topics seem to fall flat. Today, he doesn’t care about how her neighbor, Mr. Harrison, looked extra dashing or how her birdfeeder has been rife with cute squirrels gathering food for the winter. He doesn’t care about what delicious thing her retirement home served for breakfast and he sure as hell doesn’t care that her niece is getting married for the third time. He’s lucky that her memory is terrible because she doesn’t point out that it’s out of the ordinary.

‘Nothing in particular.’ Mingyu licks his lips.

Nothing in particular? That’s all?

Okay.

Okay.

Maybe he overstepped some unspoken boundary last night, but Mingyu’s pretty socially conscious of how he’s perceived by other people. If it was up to his opinion, he’d say that they were having a really good time. He guesses that that doesn’t matter. Sometimes how you feel in the moment doesn’t matter; sometimes it’s the feelings you have a few hours later. There’s been plenty of times where Mingyu has had fun and regretted it the next morning. Maybe they said something wrong, or maybe things got out of hand. Sometimes you agree to a sequence of events and sometimes you realize that it’s only the events that had you eager and not the person.

He doesn’t want to be that one guy, but he’s going to be that one guy, ‘Did I do something wrong?’

This time, Minghao responds right away, ‘No’ no punctuation; odd. The ellipses wave at him for just a moment, ‘I’m just not really feeling up to it today’ It’s not uncommon for Minghao’s texts to be short and to the point, but something about his response feels unnatural. Maybe Mingyu’s just using his bias. It’s not fair for him to put opinions into Minghao’s texts. He’ll give him the benefit of the doubt.

‘Hope everything’s alright.’

‘Thanks’ This text chain just feels odd and misplaced. What kind of exchange is this? It doesn’t feel right. It bugs Mingyu well into lunch and well past lunch until it’s time for him to clock out and do nothing for the rest of the day. “Wonwoo.”

He shouldn’t have caught Wonwoo in between appointments, but there would have been no other opportunity to flag his attention since he’s already on his way out, “Yeah?”

“I need to ask you something.”

Yeah?” Wonwoo doesn’t mean to sound impatient, but he does right now. It’s so
uncharacteristic that Mingyu debates continuing with his inquiry and just waving a goodbye instead.

“Do you know if something happened to Mingh-”

“Augh, I don’t want to be the one telling you, but you’re my friend and I don’t want to be the one keeping secrets.” Wow, that didn’t take much. Wonwoo pockets his phone and combs a hand through his hair, pushing his bangs up and yawning, “Soonyoung got up early to supervise Jun and Minghao’s practice.”

“He’s practicing?”

“Today was the first time since your whole dramatic offer at the studio, but yes. Please don’t be mad or disappointed, Mingyu.” His weight shifts between his legs, but Wonwoo stands firm, “I took a look at Minghao’s knee myself and he seemed to be doing fine. Between the way you talk about him and the way he’s been complying with recovery, I think I miscommunicated with Soonyoung- He’s- Soonyoung’s been really down about the competition, like really down. Like he’s been skipping meals and not sleeping- So, I’ve been keeping him positive about Minghao’s recovery. I might have been overzealous now and then, but I thought it’d just encourage him to not give up. I guess he misinterpreted and invited Minghao in to run through the choreo. I didn’t think he would let Hao practice without your di-”

“He’s practicing?” Mingyu cuts off Wonwoo’s longwinded response. He can’t really process the man’s explanation right now. His brain is too busy mulling through a million other thoughts.

“It’s only two weeks until Finals.” Wonwoo puts a hand on Mingyu’s shoulder. He wasn’t aware that he was getting so worked up, “There’s little on their minds outside of that.”

“He shouldn’t be practicing. Is that why he cancelled on me?”

Wonwoo scratches behind his ear, avoiding eyes for a minute, “I… I don’t know Hao that well. You do.” And the strain in that last part temporarily silences the doubts in the back of Mingyu’s head, but he seriously doesn’t know Minghao at all, “But if I had to guess, it’s because he’s sore and he doesn’t want to show that to you. And-” He glances up at the clock, “Look, I have to get to my appointment. I’m sure things will clear up. Sorry. I’ll text you later.” And Wonwoo shoulders past him and into the equipment room without so much as a blink or a goodbye. Perhaps he’s caught in a tough position.

Mingyu doesn’t know why he’s feeling so butthurt.

It’s not like heartbreak. It’s not like sadness. It’s a mix of things and it feels so goddamn complex.

He and Minghao have put so much effort and time into his recovery, but for him to just throw it out on a whim doesn’t feel great. Mingyu feels used even though he’s the one who offered himself up for sacrifice; asking to be taken advantage of because he wanted that. He needs to speak with Minghao, but he doesn’t even want to think about him right now. What’s worse is that he’s still more concerned that he’s hurt than he’s angry in or letdown by his reckless actions. Minghao knows that he doesn’t have the greenlight to continue dancing yet. Minghao knows that there’s still some recovery to be done- he’s doing it again; reverting back to Chaotic Patient habits and Mingyu isn’t happy about that either.

It’s just a reminder that Minghao is a patient before he’s a friend or anything outside of that.
When he gets home, he makes a resolution. He’s going to burn the shit out of Minghao’s candle because he forgot to take the trash out and he’s going to vacuum and Swiffer and dust and scrub until his fingers prune. Stress cleaning. Yeah, he knows. It’s not the healthiest way to burn off steam, but it’s still productive and better than throwing back shots or sleeping while the sun’s still out. He lights the candle as he goes to trim up his plants with very snippy snaps of his scissors. Ping. He blows it out five minutes later because he really can’t deal with the smell right now. Ping. He takes out the trash and wipes down the kitchen and eats all the leftover cake. None for Wonwoo, he’s grounded. Ping. He dusts every surface and reorganizes the old stacks of CDs and DVDs that haven’t been touched since he moved in. Ping. And he flops down on the couch with his throw blanket and QVC already rolling in the background. Ping-

Okay. What is it.

Wonwoo. ‘If you want to be mad at someone, be mad at me. If it’s our first friend-fight, I don’t mind it being over something like this.’

Wonwoo. ‘Don’t be childish. Just try to understand everyone’s position right now.’


Wonwoo. ‘Mingyu.’ Bomb. Clock. ‘I know you’re upset about this. I’m going to the studio after work. Feel free to come along.’ Well, that was an hour ago. Wonwoo doesn’t get off work for another hour, so the offer still stands, but Mingyu really doesn’t want to get dressed to go out right now.

Unknown. ‘Soonyoung said that Minghao was greenlit so I called him out this morning to practice. I understand, now, that there’s probably some miscommunication. Hao’s home and resting, we put a few medicinal patches on and Seungcheol already gave me an earful. I talked to Wonwoo as well. Please don’t be mad at him. If you want to blame someone, you can blame me. I shouldn’t have called Minghao out. It’s my fault.’

Process of elimination means that it’s Jun.

Watching Wonwoo and Jun juggle who gets Mingyu’s blame doesn’t feel right and, as bitter as Mingyu can be about the situation, he’s not about to throw hands with Jun. The man’s strength was already written in the way he moved. That day in the locker room was more than enough for Mingyu to decide that he never wanted to be on the receiving end of Jun’s anger. Besides, Jun isn’t a bad guy—as Wonwoo had reminded him several times in the past weeks—he’s just a good friend—as Minghao had reminded him in passing. It’s obvious and apparent that Jun’s a good guy. Jun’s a good guy. And he’s willing to take the blame for something that he had no knowledge of. He trusts Minghao. He trusts Soonyoung. He trusts Wonwoo. But does he trust Mingyu? ‘I’m not mad. How is he?’

Jun’s response comes back immediately, not even a minute later, ‘He’s not great.’ But it looks like he’s still typing, ‘And he doesn’t want me telling you that.’

‘Why’

This time the response takes a little while longer and it isn’t the response that Mingyu wants, ‘Mingyu, if it’s alright, could you meet up with me for coffee in 30 minutes? CloverPot off of East 3rd and Mariposa.’
Mingyu sighs.

He definitely does not want to get dressed again. He doesn’t want to lace up his shoes and fix his hair and put on two jackets and brush his teeth, but he will. He’s wanted an opportunity to speak with Jun for a while. They didn’t exactly get off on the best foot the first time they met. There’s stuff left unsaid and Mingyu has a lot of questions that he’s still in no position to ask. Minghao is a statistical anomaly. His friends might shed a little light on his irregularity in Mingyu’s life.

‘Sure.’
Chapter 38

It’s windy when he pulls up into the café’s parking lot.

He’s never been to CloverPot. According to Google, it was opened a couple years ago by a small team of college kids and funded by an IndieGoGo campaign. It’s since found firm footing as evidenced by the constant stream of people coming in and out. Surprisingly, the inside is rather quaint and quiet. It’s full of wood and tiny plants, creams and light greens; everything you’d expect a sustainable, green café to look like. Maybe Mingyu should buy some indoor plants since all of his sit hanging outside his living room window. They’re kind of cute.

He looks around for Jun and doesn’t see him because he’s five minutes early.

CloverPot isn’t on the same side of town as the studio or the clinic, so the only conclusion Mingyu can draw is that the place could be near Minghao’s (and Seungcheol’s (and Cacahuates’s)) apartment and that Jun must be coming over from there. Sure enough, the model-like man comes in the door dressed in a black turtleneck and a blue jean Sherpa. His shoes are silent against the polished floorboards despite being heavy-soled. Yeah, he was probably an assassin in a past life.

“Ah, I didn’t think you’d get here before me. My apartment’s just five minutes away.” So, he didn’t come from Minghao’s place. Mingyu nods a stiff hello as they walk over to the counter to place their orders. He expects to buy his own drink, but Jun beats him to the punch, sliding his card over to the cashier who knows him by name. The atmosphere feels a little awkward and Mingyu feels out of place. While he’d like to say that warm café windows are one of his backdrop mainstays, they aren’t. He’s used to the rush-and-go of Starbucks in the afternoon and the loud chatter of college students cramming for exams. CloverPot isn’t silent. There’s the clink and clang of metal cups moving around, the running of water to wash out mugs and blenders, and the sound of steam being pulsed into milk, but compared to chain stores it’s peaceful. “Hope I didn’t keep you waiting too long.”

He doesn’t want to admit it, but he really likes Jun’s light accent. It makes him more amicable for some inexplicable reason, “Yeah, no- just got here early.”

Jun shuffles them over to a small table in the corner, offering Mingyu his choice of seat by the window or by the wall. Mingyu picks the wall. Sitting by windows always makes him feel a little too exposed, “Thank you for coming.”

“What did you want to talk about?” The barista walks their drinks over, carefully placing the white, ceramic plates down on the table with their cups sloshing piping hot liquid with a calculated balance. Jun smiles at him and makes an off comment about him getting better at carrying full cups since last week after thanking him. He must be a newer employee. Mingyu doesn’t get a chance to see his nametag, but it’s kinda laughable how flustered he got when Jun complimented him on his checkered mint bowtie. Kids these days.

Jun takes a sip of his piping hot honey tea, “I think a better question is what do you want to talk about.” Mingyu can only fiddle with the sleeve of his drink. The sound of amusement that bubbles up from Jun’s voice grabs his attention, “But I’ll answer your question first.” He puts his cup down, tapping his fingernails on the handle of the mug in such a mesmerizing rhythm that Mingyu almost misses his words, “And the answer is that I don’t really know why he doesn’t want me telling you things. I can only make so many guesses and I’m sure you’ve made a lot of them, too.

Assumptions, wishes, who knows. All I know is that he’s sore and that he doesn’t want me telling you. It was a miscommunication between, like, three different parties. Be a little forgiving. No one,
especially Minghao, intends to piss you off.” He says the last bit light-heartedly, Mingyu can tell that Jun’s already the peacemaker of his friend-group.

“I’m not mad about it.” He feels like he has to clarify that again, “But about Minghao, can I have your best guess then?”

Jun looks out the window, meeting the eyes of some strangers that’ve been whispering about him on the other side. They shy away with shuffles and giggles when he smiles awkwardly and turns back to Mingyu, “Best guess?” He raises a hand to tuck hair behind his ear, but is unsuccessful since his hair is quite short on the sides. Maybe Jun used to have long hair, “He’s embarrassed? Ashamed? I don’t know. He probably feels like he’s letting a lot of people down; you included.”

Mingyu blinks.

For some reason, it never occurred to him that Minghao might be worried about letting him down. He probably avoided that reasoning for the same reason he didn’t want to accept Minghao’s kiss as anything besides platonic. Mingyu’s past realization that he doesn’t have a strong impact on Minghao is being turned upside down and it’s as if he has to put the puzzle pieces together again. He doesn’t want to build some sort of fantasy about someone who can’t reciprocate his feelings. He’s gone down that path already and it didn’t end well, but Jun’s confirming it—or at least sharing the same hypothesis—and hearing that he means something to Minghao from a trusted source feels fulfilling somehow. It’s not enough to change his salty mood, but it’s enough to cancel out the bitterness.

“Letting people down, huh? I mean, he knows he doesn’t have the greenlight, but he still went through with it.”

Jun shrugs, “Maybe he thought that you told Soonyoung or Wonwoo, at least that’s what I assumed when I called him this morning.” His hands move to grab a sugar packet so elegantly, if Mingyu didn’t know better, he’d think that this was a choreographed routine, “Finals are in two weeks. We’re under a lot of pressure and it’s not just ourselves talking. The studio benefits a lot, too. There’s a lot riding on victory- oh, don’t look so perplexed, Mingyu.” Mingyu doesn’t expect Jun to smack him on the arm after ripping open the packet and dumping its contents into his drink, but it’s enough for him to jolt up and recompose his expression. Jun cracks a smile, eyes still pinned on the table, eyelashes casting thin shadows on his cheeks, “Knowing Minghao, he probably feels like he owes you. You’ve done so much for him and now he’s gone and botched it- I’m not going to make excuses for us—for him—, but Minghao doesn’t know his limits sometimes.”

“I’m aware.” He sighs and leans back in his chair. The convex shape of the back makes him slide down a bit clumsily and he scrambles to straighten up and not look like a complete buffoon in front of Minghao’s very cool, very pretty, very sweet best friend, “But you’d assume he’d think about stuff like that before heading to practice at 5AM and getting reckless on the dancefloor.” He says the last part with a hint of sarcasm just to ensure that Jun doesn’t take him too seriously. Minghao’s an adult. He can do what he wants with his body and with his relationships. Of course, he’ll be held accountable and face consequences, but if his heart and head prioritize winning the finals at the expense of his knee Mingyu can’t stop him. It sucks. The feeling sucks; the feeling of feeling helpless and voiceless. Minghao makes him feel a lot of things, but he didn’t think that this would be one of them. In the end, all he wants is for Minghao to be happy and dance until he’s 80. He can shuffle and breakdance with a tennis ball-footed walker and shake his brittle hips to the beat. He was sure that’s what Minghao wanted, too. He’s second guessing it now that-

“Minghao thinks… of you often.”
Mingyu’s eyes snap up to meet Jun’s even though the latter just shies away, occupying his fingers with the hem of his jacket sleeve. He looks like a kid who just got caught stealing from the cookie jar. Did he say something he wasn’t supposed to? Mingyu clears his throat, letting the words sit in the back of his mouth for a moment, scooting them aside to let a breath pass, rubbing them against his teeth to test their texture, “He… thinks of me?”

“Don’t misinterpret. Minghao thinks of everyone often,” his voice trails off, leaving Mingyu hanging by a thread. He turns to look out the window and turns his head again to look over the café before homing in on the empty packet of sugar that he’d crumpled up and put onto the plate, “but you,” he sighs and scoots his chair in just a hair, “you seem to remain as thoughts. He hates talking about you.”

Mingyu scoffs, “I’m not surpri-”

“He does this thing—and I know it’s a thing—when you’re brought up.” He does a thing like Mingyu does a thing, “He bites his lip and scowls and gets irritable. It’s actually a little annoying, but we don’t really mind because as far as we know Minghao’s never done this before and it’s fun to watch him get snappy over nothing.” Mingyu thinks that Jun’s going to start joking around, that the mood will lighten up, but his expression changes and he drops his smile, “You’re wading in dangerous waters, Mingyu Kim.”

It’s Mingyu’s turn to sit his mug down on the plate with an unintentionally loud clink, “I’m not sure what you mean.”

The dancer takes another sip of his drink, raising his brows like something should be obvious, “You really don’t know the half of it then.” He sets his cup down deftly. It shouldn’t be, but it’s intimidating, “Minghao’s been losing sleep. Weighing his dreams and ambitions. Second-guessing his decisions- I’ve never seen him so mystified and it doesn’t sit well with me.”

“And that’s my fault?” Mingyu gingerly tests the waters.

“No, of course not.” The reply is both a relief and a burden. Again, Mingyu feels like he means little to Minghao who shoots for the stars. He’d appreciate if Jun could be a little less cryptic and a little more clear, “It’s not your fault, but you’ve got a role in it just like the rest of us. As his friend, I just want Minghao to be happy and healthy. He’s been through enough these last few years-hell, sometimes it feels like the gods just want to test him. Honestly, things only started to look up since he’s moved here, but since the whole knee fiasco,” Jun doesn’t finish that sentence, “He deserves a break.”

Mingyu wants to ask. He wants to ask about what happened the last few years. He wants to know what Soonyoung and Jun know about Minghao; all his nuances, all his troubles. He wants to know that he’s not at fault for any of it- he wants to know that he is at fault for some of it. He wants to know what topics to avoid, he wants to know what he shouldn’t say; what shouldn’t be brought up. It’s not like Minghao is some delicate flower or some manic pixie dream boy. He’s a real-world human being who has endured a lot and has come out better for it, but still, Mingyu wants to help.

He can’t even begin to imagine how close Minghao and Jun are. They’ve been friends for a long time; as far as Mingyu can tell since Minghao skipped town for college. He crops up in conversation quite often ‘Jun has a habit of this’, ‘sometimes Jun does that’—Minghao obviously thinks about him a lot. Jun’s probably helped him through a lot of things. Soonyoung as well.
They’ve probably been there for Minghao when he felt like there was no one left in the world. They’ve probably drunk themselves under the table and helped each other stumble home in the dark. They’ve probably seen Minghao cry and have made him smile with hugs and bad jokes. Apparently, they’ve also fought but resolved those fights like rational people because that’s just what friends do when they love each other.

They love each other and they support each other and sometimes that alone can make you feel like you don’t need anyone else in the world. For more than a moment, Mingyu isn’t sure who he envies more, Minghao or his friends, but it doesn’t take long for him to conclude that thought.

“Thank you for taking care of him.”

*For all the years that I couldn’t.*
Chapter 39

Jun gives him a weird look, questioning his choice of words. He looks confused, like he’s missed part of the story, “Why are you thanking me?”

Mingyu shrugs as he picks up his drink again. The words had slipped out without much thought, but he really is thankful that Jun’s there for Minghao. He’s thankful that Minghao has a support group made of stable friends that can persevere and endure things with him. They stand up for him and care about him and Mingyu, who is nowhere near their ranks, can do little more than watch and feel the impact of their presence. It’s no different from high school.

“Don’t thank me.” Jun sighs into his cup, “I’m just doing my job as a friend. Unlike you, I’m good at staying on Minghao’s good-side and because of that I’d like to stay on your good-side, too, but I might be doing something selfish very soon.” He finishes his drink and places the empty cup onto the plate, dropping the crumpled sugar packet inside along with a used napkin, “It might burden you.”

It takes him a minute to process Jun’s sentence.

There’s only so many things Jun can do to burden Mingyu and the most obvious one is also the most likely; Jun wants to ask Minghao out. He should. He has every right to. Jun’s graceful and gentle, earnest and lovely. They share the same career and have similar cultural backgrounds. They’re already such good friends and they trust each other so much. He called Mingyu out just to answer a question, a question that he probably didn’t think was suited for text, “And what would that be?”

“I haven’t got the courage yet.” Jun smiles sheepishly, worrying his lip with his nail, “But you’ll find out soon.” He gets up from his seat and pushes it in, “Thank you for coming out to speak with me. I’ve wanted to talk to you for a while and it felt weird to talk about Minghao’s situation over text, but I’ve gotta get back to the studio.”


“You’ve already asked about everything that’s on your mind.” Jun gives him a firm pat on the shoulder, at least it seems like they’re on better terms than the day at the studio, “I’ll see you soon, Mingyu.”

“Yes, okay. Thanks for the tea.”

Mingyu’s minor crisis distracts him from waving goodbye to Jun who dashes out the door and into his car. Did he just give Jun his blessing? No, that can’t be. This can’t be a repeat of his last relationship letdown. He can’t let someone else beat him to the punch. He’s not going to lose Minghao to- no, wait. Back up. Don’t get so worked up. Don’t get so worked up. Maybe Jun meant something else, besides, wasn’t he supposed to be mad about Minghao tossing everything they’ve worked towards out the window? Yeah, right. He’s supposed to be upset right now. Angry, Mingyu, bitter.

But what if Jun does ask him out?

The last time Mingyu had to endure the premise of heartbreak was with Jungkook, the closest
thing he had found to another half since forever. He hadn’t even realized it until Minghao’s existence had made him analyze everything about his past. It’s something that he’d call his first and last up until this point in time, but it’s odd because he can’t compare Jungkook and Minghao at all. They’re not similar in the slightest. Their personalities, habits, quirks; it’s all vastly different. Down to the way they look at Mingyu, it’s all different. Jungkook was more like Mingyu. Books, school, success, stability; that’s why he had accepted an offer for a solid, steady relationship over whatever uncharacteristic tomfoolery he and Mingyu got up to on the weekends to relieve stress.

He doesn’t even know if Minghao becoming not-single would lead to heartbreak. He doesn’t think so. He’s not in love with Minghao, right? Unrequited love is something he’d promised himself to never be in the possession of ever again; he wouldn’t have it and he wouldn’t be handed it. Romantic love, itself, is a touchy subject. At this point, even love is a word he can’t just assign to everyone. It’s an insecurity he has yet to deal with and he doubts that he’ll cross that bridge prematurely. No rush. Sure, he’s entering the later part of his mid-twenties, but his parents have been kind enough never to ask and his friends—well, the friends he has now have been keeping him hopeful.

But at the end of the day, Mingyu returns to an empty apartment. He’d only moved back long enough to barely feel lonely and he’s lucky that Wonwoo showed up when he did. Seokmin is always busy with school. Joshua is always busy with work. Jeonghan is always busy with anything and everything that Mingyu isn’t interested in. Still, he still considers the three work-friends as legitimate-friends. Sure, he has ‘friends’ from college; people who congratulate him on LinkedIn and occasionally tag him in Facebook posts of TBTs and MCMs, but he’s long-since abandoned social media as a platform for real, human connection. He knows a lot of people thrive on it and that a lot of people find a livelihood in it, but to him, it’s just not the same as seeing people face-to-face.

There are ways to sift through posts, tell your browser to hide certain subject, but there are some things that you just can’t avoid, like Ashley posting a picture from Freshman orientation or Justin’s memorial being bumped to the top of his timeline. It’s rare that a classmate from high school would make it to the top of his notifications thanks to the site’s algorithms, but on occasion they do. It’s just easier to avoid it as a whole. He wonders if Minghao’s ever felt as haunted about lost friends and high school as he does. Sure, he’s said that high school was just an ant hill that he had to climb over, but sometimes the scars remain even though you forget about them and once you see them in your mirror or ghost over them while scratching an itch, you remember. Then they burn— and they keep you awake at night; tossing and turning in a bed that feels less and less like your own.

There needs to be a resolution.
There needs to be a means to feel less bad about it all.

“How is everything?” In the comfort of his own apartment, Mingyu feels a little more confident in confronting Minghao. Calling him wasn’t his first option, but it just so happened that he hit the ‘call’ button instead of the ‘text’ button.

“Fine.” Minghao’s voice is breathy and… sad. Mingyu’s fingers hover over the fabric of his couch, picking at the seams. He’s at a loss for words. It’s not that he has nothing to say, it’s just that he doesn’t want to say anything regrettable, “Jun said you two had a talk about what happened today and why I’m not coming over.”

“Yeah.” Mingyu’s glad that Minghao can figure things out. He’s also glad that Jun’s an open book that shares everything with Minghao. It makes Mingyu’s life easier. He doesn’t have to relay everything that was said during their coffeeshop meeting. Sure, he didn’t get to ask the most pressing
question, but he supposes that Jun’s pretty open to answering questions now that he has his number.

“I’m sorry.”

The apology clogs up the receiver.

“I accept the apology.”

That’s the only thing he can manage to say before he hangs up because the line goes silent and they sit there listening to quiet static for the next five minutes. Minghao makes him do and say bizarre things. It’s a little embarrassing; flustering. When he looks back on the stoic words ‘I accept the apology’ he wants to ram his head into the wall. What kind of response is that? He’s coming off as a weirdo. He’s coming off as someone with no awareness for social cues. He had called with the intent to control the conversation and- well, he guesses that he wanted Minghao to apologize, but not like that. Ugh.

Mingyu kicks his feet into the air and wrestles with himself for a moment before straightening out. Okay, now he’s officially a crazy person.

For the most part of the morning, Mingyu goes to work, tiptoeing around Wonwoo and not saying much. It’s the older PT that initiates conversation. As usual, it’s easy. It’s so easy to talk to Wonwoo. He doesn’t need that warm-up period like he does with Minghao, it’s just smile-and-go. They quickly dissolve any tensions about yesterday’s drama—god, Mingyu hates drama—and even wrap Seokmin and Jeonghan into a peaceful, not-Minghao-related conversation. In fact, the discussion in the breakroom seems to drift over to Wonwoo, the mystery-man, who they discover isn’t actually that mysterious; he’s just simple. Jeonghan asks about Soonyoung since Wonwoo had been rather quiet until then, but he goes on a roll. It, unfortunately, reminds Mingyu of the way Minghao talks about Jun every now and then, except Wonwoo has this star-struck look in his eyes, ‘Soonyoung likes this…’, ‘Soonyoung has always wanted to do this…’, and ‘Soonyoung has a habit of…’. Wonwoo knows so much about him.

“But there’s still so much to learn.” He laughs into the back of his hand when Jeonghan grills him about talking too much about someone who isn’t even in the room, “I can’t help it.”

“You’re in love. Of course, you can’t help it.” Jeonghan brushes his bangs out of his face, “Must be nice.”

Mingyu almost misses that Wonwoo gives Jeonghan a pointed and questioning glance before he changes the subject, ‘I’ll be taking the afternoon of the 17th off, by the way. I have an arrangement with Soonyoung and I’ve already talked with Joshua.”

“What’s the occasion?”

“We have an event to go to.” Wonwoo shrugs, “Not super excited, but he’s gotta be there and I’ve gotta be his plus-one.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fun.” Seokmin elbows him in an attempt to cheer him up. Wonwoo doesn’t need much cheering up. He doesn’t look unhappy about the situation, just outstandingly neutral.

“I’m sure. But, yeah, just wanted to give you guys a heads up so you won’t think I’ve died or something.” He gets up from his seat and rinses his cup in the sink. Seokmin and Jeonghan follow suit. Mingyu doesn’t have anywhere to go since his next appointment isn’t for another half hour, so
he sits on his butt and swivels around the breakroom on one of the chairs.

Should he invite Minghao over today?

It’s a new day, after all.

They don’t have to dwell over whatever transpired yesterday. Since Minghao is a self-proclaimed champion at Getting Over It, they should, well, *get over it*. It’s just a hiccup, it’s just a little bump in the road and even though Mingyu’s one to make mountains out of molehills, he knows that Minghao isn’t the type. Although, after he takes some time to connect the dots, it seems like Minghao was too uncomfortable with the idea of Mingyu mad at him to come and talk to him about the impromptu dance practice himself.

That’s a little endearing.
Chapter 40

His appointments roll in one at a time and he still hasn’t decided if he should invite Minghao over or if Minghao’s just going to show up by default. Mingyu has yet to receive the ever-important text confirmation of their meeting. Actually, Minghao hasn’t texted him at all which isn’t uncommon, but on most days, they’d carry out conversations between appointments and dance classes. Oh-shoot, Minghao probably doesn’t know that Mingyu’s not mad. That’s something he forgot to clear up. To save face, he did tell Jun that he wasn’t pissed off and he’d hoped that he’d relay that information to his fellow dance instructor at work the next day.

‘How are you doing?’

*Weak*. Mingyu is *weak*. He’s not so much upset that Minghao’s the one that texts first, but is a little sour because he was in the middle of typing the exact same words onto his screen before the new message appeared at the top.

‘Same as usual. How about you?’ Well, better late than never.

‘I’m alright.’

Minghao doesn’t ask if their open-ended appointments are continuing today. He leaves it up to Mingyu, rightfully so, but Mingyu doesn’t want to be the one to ask in case Minghao’s still sore. He’d rather the guy rest at home if he’s *really* hurting, but there’s still a little whisper in his chest saying that he wouldn’t mind seeing Minghao today. Maybe he’ll get to figure out if he’s still bitter.

He types the invite into the phone, but doesn’t have a chance to finish or hit send because Jeonghan comes into the breakroom, looking frustrated, “Mingyu, can you please take over for me? Mr. Luchester is driving me nuts. Let’s switch patients.”

“What is he up to now?” Mr. Luchester was a little… eccentric at times, but never did anything they haven’t seen before, but hearing Jeonghan used the P-word makes him a little more lenient.

“He keeps trying to set me up with his grandson and it’s getting on my nerves. Who do you have next, Greyson? Calvins?” Jeonghan picks up Mingyu’s patient folder from the counter and takes it over to the couch while flipping through the pages.

“Weren’t you just complaining about being single?” Mingyu’s already up and fixing up his collar in the mirror. He usually complies when Jeonghan gets testy with the patients, “Maybe you ought to give him a ch-”

“No thanks. Not looking. Not interested.” The older man flops down on the breakroom’s loveseat and crosses one leg over the other, folding his arms over his chest and pulling out his phone after tossing Mr. Calvins’ file onto the coffee table. Mingyu has half a mind to ask what made his mood go south so quickly, but he knows better than to question Jeonghan when he’s *truly* upset. Jeonghan might poke fun at everyone and roll with punches with so much ease that you’d likely punch yourself, but when he gets serious it’s better to leave him to his own devices.

Jeonghan had gotten proposals before, but as far as Mingyu can tell, he hasn’t dated since he started working at the clinic, possibly even before that. Mingyu’s used to the proposals to date children and grandchildren. It isn’t a big deal. Seokmin has his fair share, too, with how bright and cheery he is. They’re all very gentlemanly on the job, especially when they’re alone with their
patients. Jeonghan is used to brushing off such come-ons which is why Mingyu’s curious about why he’s so touchy today.

When he talks to Mr. Luchester, nothing is out of the ordinary. He mentions his grandson is the last of his grandchildren to date several times and even puts the offer up to Mingyu. Mingyu humbly declines. He doesn’t have room in his brain to juggle another person. He tries to encourage the old man with some wise words that his parents had told him but ultimately opts to change the subject of the conversation. It happens easily. They talk about exercise since Mr. Luchester is on the heavier side and losing a couple pounds would do well on his arthritis. He even gets to show him a picture of Cacahuate after mentioning that volunteering to walk shelter dogs might be a good idea.

Of course, Mr. Luchester sees Minghao in the picture and makes some comment about dogs and their owners growing to look like each other. He asks if Minghao is single and available to date his grandson to which Mingyu promptly responds, “No, he’s not. Sorry.” Sure, he might have just cock-blocked Minghao from the potential love of his life, but he’s not sorry about it. No soulmates in this household.

After work, Mingyu checks his phone for a response from Minghao, but doesn’t have one. It’s only then that he remembers that he didn’t have a chance to send the text, so he quickly hashes it out during a red light. Yes, he knows that’s unsafe, but Mingyu’s a pro at stopping at red lights, ‘Are you coming over?’

Minghao takes the entire commute to respond. He must’ve had a class, ‘Would, but the roomie has my car since he lost his keys.’ Why does Seungcheol have his car? Damn, that’s some strong trust. Mingyu could never trust someone else to drive his car without him there.

‘I can pick you up.’ Mingyu types with one hand as he unlocks the door to his apartment with the other. It’s nice and toasty since he forgot to turn off the heater before he left for work today.

‘Nah. I’ll see if Soon can drop me off after work. What do you want to eat?’

For once, Mingyu has a craving for something, but he has a better idea than asking Minghao to buy ingredients, ‘Just come over, we’ll figure something out. Tell Soonyoung I said hi.’ He hits send as he opens the cabinet under the stove to fish out a cast-iron grill-top and a portable burner. He looks through his fridge and catches a glimpse of his calendar.

Dentist. Ew. He can’t believe he forgot. Mingyu usually sets his appointments on his phone, it’s the reason he hasn’t missed a cleaning in five years, but he guesses it must’ve slipped his mind that day. Luckily, he’s not late and the cleaning shouldn’t take too long, but that means that grocery shopping will have to wait. Or he could just cancel his idea of delicious, succulent, warm barbeque on this cold day and opt for something more convenient. The prospect of going grocery shopping with Minghao makes him a little uneasy.

‘I’m not telling him you said hi.’

And probably for good reason.

Minghao shows up to at his door a little after 5, just 20 minutes after Mingyu gets home. It’s earlier than normal, but that’s just because Soonyoung had to drop him off between classes. It doesn’t seem like the guy minds since he honks his horn a couple times and enthusiastically waves to Mingyu from the street. His hair isn’t orange anymore. It isn’t red either like Wonwoo had mentioned a couple days ago. It’s purple.
“Is he aiming for the whole rainbow?” Mingyu waves back as Minghao steps inside.

“Possibly. He’s already done blue and pink. I’m pretty sure green is the only one left.” He hears Minghao take off his shoes. He turns to look at his patient. Of course, it’s evident that he’s just come from the studio, but Mingyu can tell just by looking at his clothing choice. No rings or bracelets, no long necklaces or dangling earrings; fitted clothes underneath with loose and flowy outers. It’s obvious. Once Mingyu closes the door, it feels stuffy. They’re not eating first, even though he already has the stovetop set up on the coffee table and a small grocery list written up on the fridge.

“I want to clear something up.” Mingyu doesn’t mean to, but when he takes a step closer to Minghao, it seems like he’s trying to size him up. Minghao almost gives him a challenging look before stepping in stride towards the couch and the living room, getting the hint, “Sit.” Minghao obeys with something in his eyes. Mingyu gives him an expectant look until he rolls his baggy Adidas pants up to his knee with a sigh and flops his back against the couch.

Oh. Interesting.

“How did you get hurt?”

Minghao opens his eyes slowly, “I landed incorrectly a bunch of times and scraped my knee on the ground.” Yeah, the wood burn is evident. The scabbing and bruising is consistent with that. It’s not super swollen or anything and this is very good news. This means that Minghao’s ALC issue is—or was—probably incredibly close to being resolved. This new injury, despite being a lot of black and blue, is quite superficial.

“Does it hurt?”

“Does it hurt?” Minghao echoes before sitting up, “Yeah, it hurts. I even have video of it getting hurt if you want me to prove my point.” Snappy, so it does hurt.

“Sure.”

Minghao guffaws for a moment before realizing that Mingyu’s serious and reaches to pull his phone out of his pocket and show him a short clip of him freestyling, jumping in the air, spinning, and landing with a rough crash. Mingyu winces and his chest stings when he sees that the little Minghao in the video isn’t getting up right away and when he does it’s with a struggle, getting to his hands and knees before pushing off the ground. He sees Jun rush into frame to help get him to his feet in the dim studio with the magenta sky waking up through the window above the mirrors, he can hear Soonyoung call out for them off-screen. As he limps over to shut down the recording, his face is more full of worry and panic than it is with pain. That alone is a little odd as well.

“And that was me trying to land a triple corkscrew for the tenth time and failing horribly for the tenth time.” He locks the phone and pockets it again, “It didn’t twist like last time, but it hurt like a bitch, so…”

“How do you even get that high in the air?” Mingyu mutters as he gingerly touches his knee. No wonder Minghao wore loose pants today. He’s letting it air dry. The friction burn caused by skidding on the floor so many times is scabbing over quite nicely. He clearly took care of it properly, but the bruising is of more concern. He’s not sure if it added to the preexisting damage there or if it’s completely separate, he’ll need a better look at it later.

“Momentum.” Minghao pushes his hands off and pulls his pant leg down. They lock eyes for what feels like five minutes before Minghao speaks again, “I didn’t want to come because I knew
you’d get mad, but I’m not as reckless as- I’m not- I wouldn’t have gone if I thought I was doing more damage than good. I wouldn’t have done that to you, not after all you’ve done for me.”

Mingyu doesn’t like the way this conversation is going, so he tries to change the subject, “Well, you’re probably going to be sore for a couple more days thanks to the bruising, but I think you’ll live.” But unlike Jun and Wonwoo, he doesn’t budge.

“Seriously, Mingyu.” Is Minghao asking him to *not* be sarcastic?

“Seriously, Minghao.” Too bad, he’s going to be sarcastic. Serves him right for all the turmoil he put Mingyu through the last 24 hours.

“Are you mad?”

Mingyu takes a step back to give them some air, putting his hands into the pockets of his khakis; very teacher-like if he had to say so, “No. I’m not mad.”

“Then, are you,” Minghao holds his words for as long as Mingyu holds his breath, “disappointed?”

It takes a moment for the words to sink in; their weight compressing against Mingyu’s response, “Yeah,” Minghao’s eyes click up to him before dropping to the floor along with his sullen expression, “I was.” The dancer blinks a few times. Mingyu feels like he’s scolding his son and not his patient. There’s *some amount* of *something* behind his words that normal patients aren’t afforded, “I was upset that you could have busted your knee after all the work we put into it.” Mingyu can feel the frown on his own lips and shakes his head unconsciously; displeasure that he’s not saying the exact words that he wants to say, “And after I talked to Jun, I wasn’t disappointed anymore.”

Minghao just can’t meet eyes with him.

It’s so sad that Mingyu doesn’t want him to *feel bad* about the situation anymore. Minghao’s not making good on Wonwoo’s suspicion of a cute defense mechanism. He isn’t speaking like a child and he isn’t making up adorable words; he’s wallowing in it. Mingyu wants to sweep it away, pretend it never happened, grow from it, and move on. They can’t just sit and stand in his living room forever. They have things to do, places to be, and they’re probably hungry. Okay, yes, Mingyu is quite hungry and Minghao ought to be as well.

He’s going to blame it on his grumbling stomach and slightly sore gums because the words slip out, “I was more worried that you were hurt.”
Chapter 41

He sees that Minghao’s lips briefly tighten before he looks up at Mingyu with wide and open eyes. “Worried?”

“Yes, Minghao, people tend to worry about things like this.” Mingyu puts his hands on his hips, cocking them to the side a little impatiently. People tend to worry when they care about you. It’s not unfathomable.

“You were worried about me?” Why is he saying it like it’s such a profound happening?

Yes, Mingyu was worried.

He’s only realizing it now that it was the worry that masqueraded itself as bitterness and salt. Was it so complicated? He should have understood it weeks ago that he’s already emotionally invested in Minghao to some level and in some field. Whether it’s the professional PT-patient bond where he wants to see Minghao make a full recovery or something deeper than that, he’s unsure, but he’s stuck with him on the brain nonetheless.

Mingyu shakes his head and runs his tongue over his tender gums, “If you’re done asking stupid questions, is your knee okay enough to get you through a grocery store? I’m hungry.” He’s already picking up his keys and stuffing his wallet into a pocket, his phone already in one, “C’mon, we don’t have all day.” But Minghao’s already next to him, propping one hand against the wall to keep his balance as he pulls on his sneakers again. He can tell that Minghao’s a little more careful with the left side, bending his waist more than he bends his leg, but he gets his shoes on with little trouble and waits for Mingyu to stop staring- oh, he was staring.

Mingyu leads the way out to the parking lot.

He has half a mind to open the passenger door for Minghao, but the man has working hands and can open the door himself. The drive to the grocery store isn’t that far and, in all honesty, they could have probably walked there if Minghao’s knee wasn’t beat up and if it wasn’t so chilly outside.

“Cute.” Mingyu’s at a stop sign when Minghao’s comment catches him off-guard. His eyes dart around the dashboard until they find his passenger’s. Following their path, he sees that Minghao’s looking at the little bottle of sand that’s dangling from his rearview mirror, “I didn’t think you were the type to hold onto stuff like this.”

“It’s from a coworker.” He steps on the gas again. Minghao reaches out and touches his graduation tassels and not the bottle of sand.

“From a coworker, huh?” His fingers graze the metal numbers before he cards them through the silky strings.

“The sand… thing.” He doesn’t know what to call it. The little, impractical bottle of sand doesn’t really have a household name. It’s just a souvenir, “What, you don’t keep your tassels in your car?”

Come to think of it, Mingyu doesn’t remember seeing anything hanging from Minghao’s rearview mirror, “No. My university one’s framed with my diploma and I don’t know what my mom did with my high school one.”

“Why don’t you ask her?”
“Wish I could.” He scoffs as they pull into the parking lot and get out of the car.

Because Mingyu doesn’t want to walk through the entire store toting a limping dancer on his arm, he rips the shopping list in half and sends Minghao to forage for ingredients on his own.

Visually, there’s so much contrast between them right now. Minghao is all black and red street-wear and Mingyu’s all tan and pastel blue office-wear. If anything, he probably looks like a dad taking his rebellious son out shopping. On the other hand, Mingyu will probably miss Minghao’s company in the next few minutes and hesitates before handing over the piece of paper. Minghao doesn’t seem to pay the action any special attention, snatching it away from him with a quick pluck and heading down the first aisle. Mingyu’s such a parent that he organizes his groceries by department which is a little regrettable now since they’ll be at opposite ends of the store.

He’s scanning the deli section for choice cuts of beef and pork when Minghao appears out of thin air and nudges his arm, offering him a paper cup with a cheese sample in it. Mingyu almost has a heart attack. When he turns to take the cup, he sees that the shopping cart is filled with shopping-list items already. Minghao’s efficient, “I can’t believe you’ve taken me grocery shopping on a bum knee. Merciless, Mingyu, merciless.”

Since he’s still recovering from the shock, Mingyu can’t process a witty response, “You can go sit in the car if you want.” He stuffs the cheese in his mouth, crumpling the paper to shove in his pocket, but Minghao holds his hand out for it.

“Nah, it’s fine. I’ve been sitting all day already.” Minghao takes a few, quick long strides to toss the garbage into a trashcan a few aisles down. He’s back to Mingyu’s side before he can even make a pick, “Would you believe me if I said that Soonyoung tried to duct-tape me to a chair?”

Mingyu picks a package of marbled meat up and tosses it into the cart. That should be enough for the both of them, “That seems true to his character.” He makes Minghao laugh which is a good change of pace from the down mood he was in earlier.

“I’m pretty sure there’s still glue on my shirt.” Minghao flaps his jacket off his shoulders to show Mingyu his chest. There’s a clear line where the tape was and where some of the glue still lingers. Mingyu reaches forward to pluck some lint out of it and sprinkle it onto the ground before laughing. The idea of Soonyoung holding Minghao down to a chair and running circles around him with tape in front of their students is pretty hilarious.

They’re done with the shopping lists, but they pass the freezer section on the way to the checkout. Minghao stops to look at the ice cream selection. Mingyu even backtracks with the shopping cart to see what he’s looking at so intently. Maybe he really is four, “Y’know, I haven’t had mochi since I was in the city.”

“It’s, like, 50 degrees outside. Do you really want ice cream?” But how can Mingyu say no when the tip of Minghao’s tongue is poking out between his lips as he weighs the decision. Frostbitten mochi is probably no comparison to the specialty shop kind, but Minghao already has the door swung open and he’s reaching for it. He tosses it into the cart haphazardly before pulling them along to the checkout. Before they reach the end of the aisle, Minghao takes a little stumble before straightening himself out. He lets out the most exaggerated sigh before turning around and telling Mingyu to hold the cart steady so he can use the tray underneath to prop his foot up so he won’t have to bend as much to tie his shoelace, “You’re just being ridiculous.”

Mingyu lets go of the cart, letting it slide away from Minghao the second he puts weight on it,
“Rude.” But Mingyu gives him a little push on the shoulder, forcing him to stand back up, and before he can retaliate, Mingyu’s already taking a knee and tying Minghao’s shoe for him, “This is fucking awkward, Mingyu. I can tie my own shoes.”

“No, you can’t. You’re four, remember?” Mingyu looks up at him once he’s done. His cheeky grin quickly fades when he sees the way Minghao’s looking down at him. He gets poked on the forehead.

“What kind of four-year-old can’t tie their own shoes?” Mingyu gets up with a laugh, grabbing the cart and coming back to Minghao’s side.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but most kids learn how to tie their shoes at five, AKA, me.”

“Guess I was a genius then.” Minghao keeps one hand on the cart as they walk and if Mingyu wasn’t so caught up thinking about how cute four-year-old Minghao likely was, he’d probably be more disillusioned to the fact that they’re indirectly holding hands.

Minghao threatens to fight him if he doesn’t let him pay for the groceries. Mingyu lets it slide because he’s going to be the one doing most of the cooking and it probably costs as much as a normal dinner that Minghao would buy. He also doesn’t want to fight. He’ll happily bag everything at the end of the counter while Minghao pays. When they exit, Minghao drops his change into the cup of a homeless person who is begging in the parking lot. Mingyu’s sure that he can’t hide his stupid grin that’s full of fondness. He probably looks the way Wonwoo looks when he talks about Soonyoung.

“So what are we making?” Minghao asks on their way back to Mingyu’s apartment, “I thought you said you were hungry. Cooking’s going to take a while.”

“Barbeque is pretty quick.” His passenger nods knowingly, quickly connecting the dots between the groceries and the portable stovetop.

An exaggerated gasp is heard, “Eating in the living room? Over your spotless carpet? Looks like you’re living on the edge, daredevil.”

Mingyu shrugs, “The previous tenants left stains, they’re just under the couch. Besides, I never get to use that grill.” It’s true, he doesn’t. He never has anyone over for a meal and you can’t just toss together Korean barbeque to eat alone. It’s one of the things that’s much better served in good company.

When they get out of the car, it’s Minghao who totes the groceries in. He waits for Mingyu by the door, Mingyu who takes too long to walk because he’s so enamored with how domestic this is. He’s sure that Minghao goes grocery shopping with Seungcheol. Mingyu went out like this with his roommates all the time in college. However, it feels different because roommates have their own keys. Okay, so what if that’s not the only reason? Mingyu unlocks the door and Minghao shuffles by him to kick off his shoes and set the bags on the counter. Before anything else, he tosses the box of mochi-wrapped ice creams into the freezer. Clearly, the ice cream takes priority.

Mingyu makes his way into the kitchen as well, washing his hands and rolling up his sleeves, rinsing the knife and cutting board in the sink, and plucking out all the groceries that need to be washed. Minghao essentially begs for something to do after he’s done putting the rice in the rice cooker. His sleeves are also rolled up and he’s ready with hands washed, so Mingyu puts him to work first washing produce and then plating whatever he cuts up. It’s a casual rhythm and they share a steady conversation. Minghao talks a lot about dancing today. Aware that apologizing and focusing on yesterday seems to bring the mood down, they edge towards dance jargon that Mingyu doesn’t
understand but also doesn’t mind. Minghao tries to explain their choreography and moves, but it goes in one ear and flows out the other. Mingyu just likes listening to him talk.

As they work, he asks about the other guys at the studio. There are a lot of rotational instructors since many of them leave for contract work on occasion. Certain instructors focus on certain types of dance and some of them cover general classes while others are able to teach a variety of styles. Mingyu finds out that they have a YouTube channel where Yixing sometimes uploads their original choreographies and works, but he’s not lucky enough to get a handle because Minghao doesn’t want him to see old dances. Understandable since he wouldn’t want to show Minghao a video of how he’d floundered at his PT job the first few months. He gets a refresher course about Chan, Jihoon, and Vernon.

Finally, his suspicions of Vernon and Hansol being the same person are answered. Hansol is his Korean first name, Vernon is his middle name, but he opted to use it since moving to the US. It’s peculiar, then, that Seungkwan had written Hansol on the cup instead, but he doesn’t ask Minghao about that. Chan’s trying out for a position as an instructor at the studio and he’s almost guaranteed it, but there’s some serious competition. Minghao comments that there are too many male instructors at their studio right now which will make it difficult for Chan to have his spotlight even though Yixing hires without a gender bias. Winning Finals will likely give affirmation to Chan’s skills which is another thing that adds to the pressure of competing. Jihoon is almost in the same boat. He’s been juggling a lot of different appointments especially since they’re nearing the holidays and he’s been having issues with one of the bands that he works with. Mingyu has to ask what he does over and over again because he doesn’t really comprehend what an audio engineer does. Minghao doesn’t have a good definition for him other than to think of Jihoon as an ‘audio generalist’ like he’s a ‘physical therapy generalist’; just someone who knows about a lot of things.

Mingyu will likely forget all that information by the time dinner is over. He’s not good at remembering facts about people unless he’s speaking to them face-to-face, but he’ll try to hold on tightly to Minghao’s words if only to save him from explaining it again.

“Do we need any sauces or anything?” Minghao wipes his wet hands on the dish towel before Mingyu replaces it with a clean towel.

“Sesame oil and salt not your jam?” Mingyu laughs as he digs in his fridge and the spice cabinet. He’d already cut up garlic and peppers and put them on a plate with a dish of soybean paste. He has pepper paste and pepper powder out for Minghao to mix and match with that, but he’s not sure what spice level Minghao can tolerate. The man did eat dime-sized wasabi that one time, but Korean peppers offer up a different burn.

“I’ll figure something out, let’s eat.” Minghao takes the containers from Mingyu, grabbing the sriracha in the process, and balances them with a small bowl he retrieves from the dishrack.

Mingyu already hears Minghao struggling with the burner by the time he puts the knives away and comes over with the plate of sliced meat. They both struggle with it until Mingyu figures out that he never put the fuel in, so he leaves for the utility closet to look for a new one.
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He’s only gone for two minutes, but when he returns Minghao has concocted a burning red sauce in the bowl. He’s still adding pepper flakes to it, stirring them in with the metal chopsticks before Mingyu can sit down and remind him that this might be a mistake, “You really like spicy food, don’t you.”

“Not particularly, but spicy food is fun.”

“Fun?” Mingyu crosses his legs on the floor, installing the fuel into the burner with ease and turning the knob until it clicks on. Now, they’ve just got to wait for the grill to heat up. Sure, this isn’t restaurant level, but they have all the main components. Leafy greens for wrapping, meat for grilling, sauce for dipping, pickled vegetables and rice for topping, and company for sharing. They could’ve probably added a bottle of soju for the true experience, but because Minghao is here, Mingyu’s not going to be one for tradition. He stuffs a piece of kimchi in his mouth to satiate his angry stomach.

“Yep.” Minghao scrapes off most of his questionable sauce on the side of the bowl before licking his chopsticks and setting them aside to join Mingyu in the waiting game. The latter expects him to speak again after that, but it looks like Minghao’s lips are sewn shut.

“You good?” Minghao purses his lips and nods, looking at Mingyu and gesturing for him to start first after hovering a hand over the hot grill.

Mingyu’s impatient and throws almost half the meat on the grill at once, leaving only a little room for the mushrooms and kimchi that he cut up. It’s fine, he’s hungry. He’s almost entirely sure that Minghao’s had Korean barbeque before since he’d spent so many years in the city, but he’s going to play dumb and make him a wrap because he’s the host.

Minghao’s hands are full, though, one with chopsticks trying to save the meat in the center from burning to a crisp and the other holding his bowl of rice, so Mingyu offers the wrap up to his lips. Minghao doesn’t even give him a weird look—which is great—he just opens his mouth like it’s something they’ve done a million times before. Feeding Minghao probably wouldn’t be a big deal if the tip of his fingers hadn’t grazed his lip because now those lips are on the mind. No, this was going so smoothly.

The dancer would complain if his mouth wasn’t so full. He turns away from Mingyu to chew for a minute before returning to his meat-flipping duties as Mingyu throws more meat on, “Ohmygod, stop. Why are you in such a rush?” He whines with food still in his mouth, Mingyu just laughs. He doesn’t know why he’s throwing more meat on either. Minghao’s flipping with one hand and his other is covering his mouth, still trying to swallow, “It’s going to burn.” Minghao clacks his chopsticks at Mingyu’s hands when he moves towards the meat-plate again.

“But I’m hungry and I’m not patient enough to slave over the grill all dinner.” Minghao quickly throws a wrap together and shoves it into Mingyu’s mouth to shut him up. Mingyu’s too busy laughing at the gesture and embracing the good mood to feel flustered about Minghao feeding him, too. With his stomach silenced, they can finally eat in peace. They sit at adjoining edges of the coffee table, Mingyu’s legs crossed and Minghao sitting with one outstretched and one tucked under. They aren’t touching, but they can easily feel warmth radiating from the other. Or maybe it’s just the stove. No one cares to check.

The alarmingly crimson sauce has been sitting untouched in the bowl and it looks like it’ll
remain like that until Mingyu points out that Minghao made it so he should at least use it once and Minghao accepts his challenge. His next wrap is made with a slice of garlic that’s dunked into the sauce and Mingyu can tell that Minghao hesitates just a moment before eating it. He chews. He swallows. He nods. Then he sends a challenging glace at Mingyu.

“It can’t be that bad.” Mingyu’s holding his wrap open and dunks the meat in it before shoving the whole thing into his mouth. A mistake has been made. He should have learned from the wasabi episode that Minghao has a far stronger spice tolerance than he does, but it’s not horrible. He can do it. He can muscle through Korean spiciness. He exhales a peppery breath, sticking his tongue out, “Fun.”

Minghao immediately 1ups him with a dollop of the sauce on his next bite of food, “Fun.”

Mingyu waits before countering because he wants to know if Minghao’s dying or not, but he seems to stomach it well. He can’t be beat. He can’t be trumped by Minghao Xu’s spicy sauce of death, so he follows up with the same amount. A mistake has been made. When Mingyu exhales after swallowing, he can feel the burn on his lips. He shuts his eyes and embraces the pain as Minghao laughs, “I’m not tapping out. I’m just,” he hisses, “savorin’ the flavorin’.”

“Right.” At least he’s afforded a break from the consumption of Satan’s butthole. Minghao gets up to fill two glasses with iced water before bringing them back to the table, “These are both mine.” Mingyu laughs and cries at the same time, “But I’ll spare you.” and he slides a glass over to Mingyu with the back of his hand.

“I’m not tapping out. It’s your turn.”

Minghao gives him an incredulous look before putting his own cup back on the table, the rim having only touched his lips. He hadn’t taken a sip yet, “So, this is how it ends.” He shakes his head before wrapping up another bite with at least a third of the volume being sauce, eating it with his poker face on. A grin teases at the corner of his lips before he swallows and gestures for Mingyu to take his turn.

Incredible.

Mingyu shakes his head before picking up his spoon and picking up a scant tablespoon of the sauce and shoving the whole spoon in his mouth. A mistake has been made. He wants to whine and cry and spit it out, but he’ll stay strong. This is honestly a little fun and reminds him of their stupid, boyish pride that prevents them from backing down. “Fuck.” He barely whispers out after swallowing. They’re in for a world of firepoops for the next two days. He’s sure of that much.

Minghao doesn’t see him tap out because he takes the spoon from Mingyu’s hand, scoops up a heaping tablespoon of the sauce, and wraps his lips around it. It seems like Minghao realizes the error of his ways a second too late because he swallows and starts coughing and wheezing. He drums his hands with little, rapid taps on the table while Mingyu’s guzzling sweet, succulent water for the first few hacks, but the concern grows when Minghao slams a fist on the table and runs a hand up into his hair.

“Bye, Minghao.” Mingyu waves from his corner of the table. He’ll never have to worry about Minghao Xu again because he’s just going to keel over dead on the carpet.

“Fuck off.” His eyes are red and watering as he chokes out a laugh and wipes his mouth with a napkin, trying to get any burning residue off. Merciless Mingyu has a little heart and hands him a glass of water before patting him on the shoulder. He doesn’t know when patting the coughs out of him turned into rubbing comforting circles into his back as Minghao steadies his breathing.
He sticks his tongue out after most of the burn as mellowed, panting with his lips swollen. Who needs lip plumping glosses when capsaicin does the job? Mingyu forgets that his own lips are burning off because in his head the only thing that’s outstanding is that two negatives can make a positive. He’s also glad that they finished eating most of their dinner before getting too serious with this childish competition because any appetite they had would be spoiled.

“I’m getting the ice cream.” Minghao gets up and doesn’t see that Mingyu instinctually reaches up to call him back. His hand meets air.

The dancer brings back the box of mochi from the freezer, ripping it open with his teeth because his fingertips are a little too jittery to work properly. Mingyu offers to open the plastic that wraps each little ball since he’s mostly cooled down now, but Minghao ignores him and rips it open with his teeth again.

While Mingyu eats his like a normal person, taking a small bite out of it and feeling blessed that the mango ice cream is coating his mouth, Minghao sits with the mochi ball held between his teeth, resting his lips against its coolness. That is a mistake because when he inhales, the flour shoots into the back of his throat and sends him into a second coughing fit. It takes another sip of water and Mingyu half-laughing, half-worrying for Minghao to steady himself and flop over on the couch, “Betrayed.” He holds the mochi between his fingers before taking a bite out of it.

“I thought I was gonna lose you for a second there.” Mingyu shakes his head and chuckles as he starts moving plates into the sink. If there’s one thing that they’re really good at doing together, it’s eating. There isn’t much to wash because they polished everything off.

“I thought I could see the light for a moment. It was beautiful and warm.” He likes how Minghao echoes his dry jokes and helps him clean up. He doesn’t like that Minghao has a little bit of a limp when he goes back to the coffee table to wipe it down.

“Hey,” Mingyu dries his hands, “let’s take a look at your leg tonight since you’ve been fandangling it all willy-nilly on the dancefloor.”

“Sorry, grandpa, are you speaking English right now?” Minghao immediately fixes his posture and sweeps the food scraps into his hand, walking them back to the kitchen’s bin. Mingyu’s not sure if grandpa is better than mom.

“Seriously, Minghao.”

“Seriously, Mingyu.”

But he gets Minghao to pull up his pant leg again when he’s on the couch, occupied with another mochi ball. He pushes and prods around the knee, careful to not touch the scabbed-up area before moving his leg to extend and retract. There is a little tension at certain angles, but there’s no way to tell if it’s the bruising or actual damage. His best guess is that there is a little wear and tear on the area, backtracking approximately a week in their progress, but it’s nothing major if Minghao was already pretty well healed.

“It’s not too bad.” Mingyu takes a seat next to Minghao on the couch, bumping their shoulders together when he drops his weight against the back of it and picks up another mochi. They’re a little softer now, easier to eat and enjoy.

Minghao leans forward, elbows to his knees, “So, I can-”

“No, you can’t dance yet.” He’s not sure if it’s the mochi or the food coma speaking, but he
swears that Minghao pouts before he sighs and matches Mingyu’s pose, crossing his fingers together over this stomach, “Aw, don’t look so down.” His sarcasm isn’t well received because Minghao just gives him an impatient look. Tonight was supposed to be a means to get back on a good track, to resume recovery, but it seems like Minghao has other ideas about where he is on that train. He doesn’t want to leave them on a sour note especially since yesterday was filled with gratuitous amounts of turmoil. So, without thinking he prods fingers into Minghao’s side, making him jolt up and strike back with his own hands raking at Mingyu’s ribs.

It’s nice to know that he might hold some information that Soonyoung and Jun might not; that Minghao’s ticklish.
His apartment feels so full and warm with Minghao’s starry, bubbly laughter filling the once-vacant air. Mingyu’s a hundred percent sure that this isn’t business professional, but he’s just not going to care for a minute. He’s not going to care about how Minghao’s hands feel pushing against his chest, pressed on his forearms. He’s not going to care that Minghao can probably feel his heartbeat through his shirt. He’s not going to care about the way his dry lips crack painfully when Minghao finally nails his own ribs with sharp fingers. He’s not going to care when they’re bumping and jumping around on the couch, trying to get out of each other’s reach, but staying in close enough proximity to reach out and poke at the other.

This is pure bliss.

Mingyu doesn’t remember the last time he’s felt like this.

It’s so jovial and innocent, maybe a little naïve and a little childish, but it was a feeling that he didn’t know he missed. He’s pretty sure he hasn’t felt this way since he was the shortest kid in class and that was a long time ago. For a short while, he’s afforded this gratuitous amount of joy; of happiness. He wasn’t aware that he was so starved of whatever feeling this is.

He’s come close, but it was never this prolific. Mingyu was always set on being a gentleman, being mature, being looked up to in every relationship he’s built over the years; romantic or otherwise. He’s laughed until he cried. He’s felt waves crash and roar in his heart. He’s held people close and felt their heartbeats against his own. He’s shared kisses in doorways with crickets sending them off. But those feelings were always predictable and foreseeable, wanted and anticipated.

Mingyu’s not sure how much of it was built up with social norms or conducted through manners. If someone shows you a vulnerable hand, aren’t you expected to show it back? Has Mingyu just been playing off preset motions all these years? That can’t be. No. Some of those feelings were genuine. Some of those feelings and motions were real and from the heart, but the more he thinks about them in this moment of time, the more he understands that some of them were just courtesy. Mingyu’s the type of person to live up to expectations and exceed them.

That’s why he took Taylor to prom when he was a junior. He remembers posing for pictures ease, but with a stiffness in his smile that he just couldn’t shake that night and he’s still deeply disappointed in that. He had known that Taylor had liked him for a while by now and now that they were graduating, that was the best he could do to send them off. When his own prom rolled around senior year, he’d gone with a group of friends instead of asking out one person. His popularity had grown out of control at that point and singling out one person for such an important event might bring them unwanted heat. The more he looks back on that thought alone, the more he realizes how far up his ass his head was.

Still, that entire night he just couldn’t sit still in his skin. He wanted to go with someone. He wanted to go with someone. He had wanted to go with the boy who spent more than half the night commanding the dancefloor with his teammates during upbeat songs, hyping up the crowd and making the party lively. He had wanted to go with the boy who stood on the sidelines during slow songs with sweat pilling at his temples and his tie cast off to the side and his ill-fitted suit jacket folded among others. He had wanted to go with the boy who he can barely catch glimpses of through the mass of people giving their senior year one last hurrah. Minghao’s suit was clearly a hand-me-down as were most boys’ in the hall. Mingyu was lucky enough that year that his parents had taken him shopping for a new one under the excuse that it’d see the light of day again if he had a formal event or interview to go to in college. It’s a little regrettable that he didn’t have the gusto at the
time to take ten strides across the floor and ask Minghao for a dance, but then he remembers that Minghao probably hated him.

And Mingyu forgot a lot about those feelings after his friends decided that they wanted to leave the oven-like dance hall and hang out in the Denny’s parking lot in uptown with the track kids from Riverside. Nothing like a plate of stale pancakes and underage drinking to wipe your emotional palette clean. Normally he wouldn’t have gone. Mingyu hates alcohol. It tastes like death. He still doesn’t like it, but high school Mingyu didn’t want to think about his mistakes at prom. He needed to focus on graduating and moving for college, enjoying his scholarship, doing awesome things and helping people. He’s glad that he never kept drinking as a habit even though it had helped him endure some harder nights. His parents hadn’t caught him, but even if they had, they probably wouldn’t have yelled at him too much. Knowing his character, they could have probably understood if he came clean about his reasons for doing so.

Still, high school was also filled with good memories among other things. Every pocket of time between laughter, victory, sleep, work, and praise was filled with guilt. He was always busy with practice, busy studying for his SATs, busy balancing friends and school, and busy being a model son. That didn’t leave much space for downtime to just feel, it didn’t leave much room for guilt. It’s safe to say that Mingyu didn’t really care back then. Hell, he didn’t even care until about two months ago. Mingyu wonders why he’s had to wait until he’s in the later part of his 20’s to encounter the experience again and, at that, why it has to be with Minghao.

Minghao who likely didn’t have such feelings to reflect upon. Minghao who broke two fingers doing backflips over the summer and wrote wibbly-wobbly papers for a large part of first-quarter senior year. Minghao who knew the taste of laughter, victory, sleep, work, and praise, but was never celebrated for it. That Minghao is the same one wriggling under him, making him question everything he’s worked towards, making him relive moods and feelings that he’d forgotten to catalogue years prior to high school because he was too busy focusing on success and making others proud. This is Minghao’s effect on him.

And it aches.

Minghao’s all smiles and out of breath by the time Mingyu gets kicked in the side and rolls onto the floor. He gets up with his knees and lunges for him on the couch, missing a giggle-filled apology as he resumes fighting with Minghao like they’re toddlers at daycare. The dancer pushes away from him with his right foot pressed against the side of Mingyu’s thigh until his back touches the armrest. He tries to catch his breath, but Mingyu is merciless after all and Minghao’s not the only one laughing, but it’s the only thing that Mingyu wants to hear. He likes the way his eyes crinkle and the way his nose scrunches up, how his smile-lines carve valleys under the apples of his cheeks.

“Stop, stop, stop.” Mingyu stops because he knows what stop means even if they were wrestling and Minghao’s caught his hands, locking their fingers together. The wide smile is still on his face as he’s catching is breath and meeting eyes with Mingyu who is looming over him, toes dug into the couch balancing him. Minghao seems less small than he did at the park—the last time they were in such a compromising position—like he’s somehow grown in the last two weeks.

“Promise you won’t dance until I greenlight you.” Mingyu rests both their hands on Minghao’s stomach as he sits back on his haunches, still laced together, Minghao with his fingers tight to ensure that Mingyu won’t be surprising him. Not liking the proposal, Minghao shoves his knee between them and pushes Mingyu back until he gives him enough room to sit upright. Mingyu already misses the heat of his hands, “No?”
There’s something resting behind Minghao’s curious look, his eyes are filled with mischief, “You said you never use the grill, right?” What does that have to do with anything? “Then let’s make a deal.” He puts a hand on Mingyu’s shoulder, fingers just peeking under the collar of the pastel blue button-up. He glances at the table, glances at the room, and points a finger at him, “Share your cooking with someone new this week. If you can do that, then you won’t catch me dancing. Soon as my witness.”

“Soon as your witness?” He tries to sound impressed, but Minghao’s request is oddly specific. Cooking has nothing to do with anything. Even the idea of bringing friends over and cooking for them is a little nerve-wracking, especially since it’s not something that Mingyu’s entirely confident in. Why does Minghao have to put him out on a limb like this? It’s just cruel and unusual. Baking, sure, but cooking is something he doesn’t often share. Still, the promise of Minghao not screwing around at the studio is, “Tempting.” Mingyu runs a hand through his hair. He’s sure he looks like a mess right now, “But grilling on a propane stove isn’t exactly up to Gordon Ramsay’s standard.”

“You don’t have to use the grill. Just cook for someone.” Minghao stretches out his legs, “Besides, if you claim that your baking can impress Mary Berry, then I’m sure you’d give Gordon Ramsay a run for his money.” He has to chuckle when Minghao takes the hand off his shoulder and holds out his pinky, “So, deal?” It’s such a childish thing, pinky promises, but it feels like it means a lot more than just his word. So, Mingyu hooks his pinky with Minghao’s.

“Deal.” Reaching his thumb up to complete the circuit and seal the deal, but Minghao doesn’t, “Hey.”

“What?”

“Thumb.”

“What thumb?”

“You need to touch thumbs.”

“That’s a thing?” It’s always been a thing for Mingyu. Was it not a thing for everyone? Maybe it was just something that he grew up with. This is how he’d always seal pinky promises with his cousins and family members. “Boop.” Minghao connects their thumbs, “Transfer complete. Deal initiated.”

“I can’t believe I’ve made a deal to cook.”

“Don’t sweat it.” It’s like Minghao can see right through him with those big, round eyes, “When the people you love see that you’re really passionate about what you’re doing, then they’ll like it, too.”
Mingyu gets a call in the middle of his jog and decides not to answer until he’s back in his apartment and not out of breath. It’s been a while since he’s gone on a brisk run and he’s not going to lie, the cold air stings his lungs a little bit, but he decides it’s probably best to not get any more out of shape than he already is. Since graduating, he hadn’t hit the gym. It’s not that a membership is out of his paygrade, but he just hasn’t felt the need. The only reason he can find to run outside right now isn’t about his personal health, it’s just because he wants to be able to catch Cacahuate if he ever gets off his leash again. That being said, he’s subconsciously planning to walk the dog in the future, but he and Minghao are practically friends now. Hanging out with a bro and his dog isn’t anything out of the ordinary.

However, he might have spoken too soon because he finds that the call was from Minghao. Shouldn’t he have texted? It’s bad, but Mingyu’s immediate thought is that they did something wrong last night. Tickle fights between two, single adults isn’t a very publicized thing, Mingyu doubts it’s normal. Nonetheless, he returns the call, predicting that he’ll receive something along the lines of ‘wow, you’re so weird. I don’t think we should see each other like this ever again because my name is Minghao Xu and I’ve got a million-and-one hot boys in my arsenal and none of them are as awkward as you and you’ve ruined my life since high school and I’m never going to forgive you even though I told you not to think about it and I take that back because you actually mean nothing to me.’

“Hey, Mingyu.” He can hear the heavy beats in the back of the call start to fade as the seconds pass, “I can’t come over today- No, I’m not dancing, and before you jump to conclusions, it’s because my advanced class wants to have an extended session tonight. Their winter championship is on Sunday.”

Oh. That wasn’t as bad as he thought it would be.

“Right, sure, yeah that’s fine.” Minghao’s pillowy laughter on the line makes his stuttering worth it.

“Thanks.” The background noise stops. Minghao must have stepped out to talk, “This is one of my last chances to send my kids off and Jun volunteered to help out. I think he’s just trying to earn brownie points. He said there’s something that he wants to talk to me about.” Mingyu’s heart drops a couple inches, “Do you know anything about it?”

“No clue.” So, Jun really is going to ask Minghao out.

“Oh, hmm. That’s odd. He’s usually pretty straightforward with me. Maybe he’s cashing in on one of the IOUs.”

“Maybe it’s a sensitive subject.” Mingyu drops into the conversation. He hasn’t exactly lost interest, but he wants to be careful with his words. Jun is important to Minghao; he’s above Mingyu in the friendship hierarchy, but Mingyu is important to Jun. Everyone is at equal standing because friends that he’s had for a long time have rapidly drifted away post-college, friends he had before that have stopped communicating, and friends after that haven’t solidified themselves as permanent residents in his life. If he had to guess, Minghao probably has a complicated hierarchy system where people get different ranks based on different situations. Like, Soonyoung probably has a very high rank when it comes to work and Jun probably has a very high rank when it comes to potential datemates.
“Maybe.” Still, when Minghao’s voice is so feathery light in the static-filled noise flowing into his ear, it’s hard to think about his words, “But anyway, Mingyu, what are you up to today?”

Isn’t Minghao at work? Is now really a good time to have a casual conversation—not that Mingyu will ever complain, “I went on a run, I’m going to head out to the dog shelter soon to do some volunteering. Maybe grab a bite to eat since you’re not coming over.”

“Oh! At Willow Creek? I’ve been volunteering there since last Christmas. I haven’t gone for the last month because of the knee, but it’s nice to know that those babies are in good hands with you around.” Is it even physically possible that they’ve been passing through each other the past year, just never noticing each other’s existence at the only no-kill dog shelter in this little city-town? It’s unlikely, “Has Baxter gotten adopted yet?”

But because Minghao knows the dogs’ names, he’s probably not lying, “Unfortunately, no.” Baxter’s been there for months; in as a puppy, still in as an adolescent, and probably will be until he’s well into adulthood since people have missed his squishy-puppy cute phase, “How come I’ve never seen you there?” How come this hasn’t cropped up in conversation before?

“I only have time on weekdays, so I just pop in whenever I’m free.” That makes sense, he guesses. Mingyu’s only ever free on the weekends. He reserves his occasional free Tuesday for sleeping in and ‘me time’, “But it really sucks that Baxter still doesn’t have a home. Maybe I should sponsor him for the Thanksgiving Adopt-a-Thon.” Bless Minghao’s heart because Mingyu’s is slowly stopping. How can a grown man be so precious and warm and kind and sweet? It’s official, Mingyu is Minghao’s biggest fan.

“Not if I beat you to it.” Mingyu was planning on it already. He regularly sponsors dogs that are less-likely to get adopted. Baxter, being a big, clumsy, funny looking Pitbull-Bernese mix with awkwardly long legs and a head too large for his shoulders, is one of those dogs.

“He’s so cute and goofy. Please sneak him a jerky treat for me.” Mingyu laughs. This is absolutely the good and wholesome content that he did not sign up for. He can feel the grin making his cheek muscles sore already, “And when are we walking Cacahuate again? He misses yo-” Static fills the line followed by a couple pops, like Minghao’s suddenly decided to fumble the phone.

“It’s Minghao- Minghao misses you!”

That unmistakable, direct voice can be none other than, “Soonyoung- Soonyoung! Give me back the phone- You’re going to break it. Ohmygo- Soon- Xing, zūzhītā!” Minghao’s voice can barely be heard in the background of the call.

“I’m not a part of this and shouldn’t you be teaching?” Is faintly heard in passing because Soonyoung’s breath fills up most of the line. Clever boy, thinking to catch Soonyoung off guard by asking Yixing to help him in Chinese. Although, anything along the lines of ‘stop him’ probably wouldn’t be very hard to guess in that given situation.

“You should have seen his smile- Oof.” Soonyoung sounds like he’s had the wind knocked out of him. It’s times like these that Mingyu is so glad that he is coworkers with the sane-half of this relationship. He’ll likely never have to worry about Wonwoo stealing his phone and sprinting off into the sunset, “Okayokayokayokay- Syke!” Mingyu can only assume that Soonyoung’s taken off again because he hears Minghao bark a curse at him, “You didn’t get mad at Mingyu when he destroyed the screen and now you’re hounding me just for taking it?! What happened to the good ol’ times, Hao?”

He’s patient. He waits while the line shakes and is filled with nothing but white noise for a
good part of the next two minutes. He sits on his armrest and leans back far enough that he slips and falls onto the couch, looking up at his ceiling. So, this is how Minghao has fun with his friends. In fact, he’s pretty sure that they went outside at some point because he could hear the main road, but then he hears a door slam (or maybe Soon’s head get smashed against the wall) and heavy breaths following.

“You motherfucking ass- augh!” a sound that can only be described as that of an unwanted smooch from that-one-aunt-that-no-one-wants-to-talk-about can be heard after Minghao’s winded voice.

“God, Mingyu, isn’t Minghao cute when he’s pissed off?” the cheekiness in Soonyoung’s voice tells Mingyu that he’s teasing.

“Adorable. Please give him back his phone.” Mingyu sighs into the receiver. It was entertaining while it lasted. He can’t exactly say that Minghao is adorable while he’s pissed off. During the first few meetings, where Minghao was more than prickly, he was anything but adorable. Mingyu’s reference point for a cute Minghao is probably when he’s petting his dog- Did Soonyoung kiss Minghao? The thought only catches up with him now.

He can’t say that he’s jealous, but he also can’t say that it sits well with him, “He can’t really talk right now, I’ve got him in a headlock.”

“Please release him from the headlock.” It’s probably not good for Minghao’s knee to be sprinting after Soonyoung, but Mingyu will leave that lecture for the next time he sees the not-blond.

“Aw, you’re no fun- Owowow-“

Minghao reclaims his phone, “I’m surprised pulling his hair like that didn’t make him bald. How unfortunate.” He’s still a little out of breath. Maybe they can go on runs together then. “I’ll shave him after finals.” That’s said a little louder—he’s sure that it’s so Soonyoung can hear him as he walks away.

“Is your knee okay?”

“Peachy.” Minghao laughs. There’s a pause and something that sounds dissatisfied following that, “I wanted to talk more, but I’ve got to get back to my kids.”

“That’s okay. I’ve got to go out soon.”

“But- just one more question.” Mingyu hums, a little sad that their conversation is ending so soon, “Did you figure out your end of the deal?”

Oh, right, the deal. Honestly, he’d forgotten about it. He would have probably remembered if he had to cook, but it’s nice of Minghao to remind him. He barely has time to think of a good cover, “Well, you’re sprinting around like a maniac, so I think I get a free pass here.”

“Soon as my witness, I didn’t dance.”

“He didn’t dance!” is echoed somewhere in the background.

“See, I didn’t dance.” Mingyu admires their friendship’s quick recovery time. “So, uphold your end of the deal.”

“Okay, okay. I will.” He has a couple people in mind now, “Get back to work before you get
fired. I’m sure your kids miss you.”

“I really doubt that, but okay. I’ll talk to you later. Good morning, Mingyu.”

He chuckles. Minghao’s students probably love and dread him equal amounts just like Soonyoung’s students love and dread him, “Good night, Minghao.”

He’s not sure when that started being a thing—when they stopped saying goodbye over the phone and started saying good morning and good night, but it’s something he doesn’t see himself stopping.
Chapter 45

He doesn’t know if it’s an expected move, but he figures he’d rather get it out of the way before he forgets again and has to make it up to Minghao. He’s already done grocery shopping and he’s almost done cooking. Sure, it’s not a typical Korean meal for his very-Korean friends, but steak, potatoes, and brussels sprouts sounded delicious at the time. Garlicked butter sauce sounded good, too, and that’s what Soonyoung and Wonwoo are going to eat because Mingyu went the extra-fucking-mile for. He went out and bought a whole four-seater dining table just for these two lovey-dovey assholes to have a proper dinner at. They better appreciate it with the one-man struggle Mingyu had luging it out of his car and into his apartment and assembling everything for the last two hours. There’s definitely enough space for the dining table, especially if he scoots his couch and coffee table over a foot or two, but he’s a little disappointed in himself for the color choice. It’s all wood and wood-painted-white, but he doesn’t really care about his color coordination skills because the two should be arriving any time now.

As expected, Wonwoo and Soonyoung show up a little later than expected because, “Soonyoung couldn’t decide what to wear.” even though this isn’t a formal or special event.

“But it is special. We’ve never been over before.” It’s okay, Soonyoung. Aside from Minghao, no one’s been over before aside from the landlord to fix a broken pipe.

His hair is still purple, but it’s styled nicely with half of it combed back and part of his fringe hanging in the front. His clothes are well coordinated as well; saturated and bold colors that contrast against his fair skin. He dresses in up-classed streetwear, just like Minghao does, but there’s something a little more jovial about Soonyoung’s picks. It’s probably the lack of rings, safety-pins, pointy things, and metal eyelets. In addition to that, while Minghao’s usually dresses in solid colors with nice accents, Soonyoung is anything but. His clothes exude equal amounts of confidence and I’m-lucky-and-colorblind.

Wonwoo stands in slight contrast to his partner. It’s the first time that Mingyu gets to see Wonwoo in a casual pair of jeans and shoes made of canvas. He’s a little surprised to see that he still retains the pastel color scheme, but at least his shirt isn’t tucked in and the sleeves of his outer come down to his knuckles when they usually stop at his wrists. Up until now, Mingyu’s unsure about the number of pastel button-ups Wonwoo has, but he’s counted a total of five grey cardigans; six including the oversized one he’s wearing today. He wears his glasses like he does every day, he wears his watch like he does every day. The only notable change is that he has a fire-engine red sock on one foot and a clipart-RBG blue sock on the other.

Mingyu’s a little stiff at hosting and for some reason hosting Wonwoo feels like more pressure than hosting Minghao, maybe it’s because he knows that the senior PT is a very attentive person. He adapts to environments and situations quickly and was previously open to scrutinizing the presentation of the PT room for its lack of décor. Wonwoo’s round glasses spend a lot of their time reading the apartment like a book, sharpshooting the objects on display in rapid succession but not saying anything about them. Soonyoung spends most of his time up at the bar with his chin on his palms, smiling a shit-eating grin and swinging his feet so that his toes tap rhythmically into the counter as he watches Mingyu scurry around.

Mingyu hurries to get them to break in the new dining table by setting down a bruschetta appetizer and calling them over. He had preset the table, something he never did since Minghao and he always sat at the bar and pulled out silverware as needed. It felt a little weird to have the formal table setting. Wonwoo and Soonyoung happily mosey over as he pulls the steaks out of the oven and
fluffs the potatoes on the stove before plating the sprouts along with everything else. He grabs the sauce pot and a spoon, but stops before just dumping it on because he knows that Minghao would berate him for not dropping on the plate in a pretentious, pretty swoop with the back of his spoon. Half a meal is eating with your eyes and Mingyu’s happy that he pulled the greens out at their peak vibrancy. The steak is still a lovely pink in the center when he cuts into his own, so he prays that the rest are the same.

He can’t explain why he feels nervous.

Picking Soonyoung and Wonwoo was a safe choice of people-to-serve-dinner-to. Jeonghan would have been a bad choice, maybe when Mingyu has more confidence in his cooking and less confidence in Jeonghan’s sarcasm holding half-truths. Joshua could have been a safe choice, too, but having your manager come over for dinner randomly is a little awkward. Seokmin would have been an equally safe choice—possibly safer than Wonwoo since he’s always a good conversation and full of compliments—, but it might have been a little awkward if it was just the two of them. Plus, he has something to ask these two about that Seokmin can never know about.

The nerves had gotten to him before he even texted Wonwoo and Soonyoung in a group chat to confirm their dinner plans, so he’s had this meal for lunch already. He wanted to make sure the recipe was sound and that he had all the flavors just right. He also pulled out every bottle of wine he owned to try and pick one that best-fit the meal, but every alcohol tastes the same to him. In the end, he ends up going out to BevMo and asking an employee there who picks out something very light and a little sweet. He doesn’t want them to get tipsy, just warm and friendly so he can ask the right questions unlike his café break with Jun. He’s going to pilot this conversation after he gets the two to eat, but that alone feels like an intimidating hill to climb.

It’s not like he hasn’t cooked steak before—it’s an easy and convenient meal for when he feels a little fancy—, but he’s never cooked for anyone but his parents. And Minghao. Here goes nothing. He hopes he does Alton Brown proud.

And he does!

He can pat himself on the back as Wonwoo and Soonyoung’s honest and earnest compliments roll in. Wonwoo comments on the technical things and Soonyoung compliments him by stuffing his face. He smiles to himself as he takes his first bite, “I hear you’ve been grilling Minghao about me.”

Soonyoung finally sets down his fork and opens his eyes wide in mock-shock, “Oh my god, our plan is foiled.” He leans over to Wonwoo, “What ever will we do now? Oh no.” the heavy sarcasm isn’t even the slightest bit subtle, “JK,” did he really just say ‘JK’ aloud, “our plan hella worked.”

“I’m not high-fiving you.” Wonwoo continues eating, ignoring Soonyoung’s childish antics and his mid-2000’s, suburban Californian teenager slang.

And Soonyoung ignores that Wonwoo ignored him, “And Minghao asked you to the dinner and everything is great.”

“He didn’t ask me to the dinner.”

“Everything thing is great and Minghao’s finally going to have someo- wait, he didn’t ask you to the dinner?” the revelation takes Soonyoung by some sort of surprise because both his voice and expression change in the blink of an eye. Wonwoo seems to be at some level of disbelief, too, since he also stops eating and looks between Mingyu and his boyfriend.
“No.” Mingyu stuffs a bite of potato into his mouth. Why are they so confident in this shitty plan? And why are they so convinced that they like each other? Minghao hasn’t done anything out of the ordinary and Mingyu can’t really speak for himself on that frontier, but he hasn’t made any big moves either.

Soonyoung stabs a sprout and spins it in the air before setting it down again, “Well, damn. Then the plan has failed.”

“He still has time.”

“Not much.” Soonyoung corrects Wonwoo before resuming his dinner.

“When’s the dinner?” Asking the question might be a mistake since it shows his interest, but that notion seems to fly over Soonyoung’s head because he answers with something straightforward.

“It’s next Friday, the 17th.”

“Oh, so that’s why you’re missing work.” Wonwoo nods.

“It’s in the city.” He takes a sip of the sparkling wine, “Jun and Minghao have been going together since I can remember, and they’ve never used their plus-one tickets—”

“Since they’re both single and ready to mingle.” Soonyoung interjects, but seeing that Mingyu’s suddenly shutdown, Wonwoo pats him on the head to shut him up. He earns a protest since he messes up Soonyoung’s carefully styled hair.

Wonwoo gives Mingyu a pointed look, “I don’t know why things changed this year—you’ll have to ask Hao—but there has to be a reason that they’re breaking tradition.” Not like Minghao’s one for tradition anyway.

“Well, Junnie is staying at the studio late with him tonight for ‘intensive training’, maybe there is a plan.”

Yeah, the plan is for Jun to ask Minghao out and they’ll be happy and it’ll be great and maybe Mingyu will be invited to the wedding, “Maybe they’ll take Chan, Vernon, or Jihoon?” And maybe Wonwoo’s right. Taking the other non-instructor members of the team would make a lot more sense than taking a useless, clueless person like Mingyu.

“Vernon already told us he can’t go and Chan has his own competition to go to that Friday. I think Jihoon said he might be busy, but I haven’t checked in- anyway, this isn’t about them.”

“Maybe Minghao wants to take Seungcheol as thanks fo—”

“He’s not taking Seungcheol. Don’t worry about that.” It’s Wonwoo who pushes away Mingyu’s thought of the hot roommate being a candidate with the utmost exasperation. He says it so firmly that Mingyu can’t help but feel that there’s truth to it. Wonwoo always knows something more than what he says he does. He knows more facts about Minghao than he leads on. There’s always something in the ‘clues’ he gives Mingyu. He knows Minghao’s quirks and he knows his cons. There’s got to be a lot that Wonwoo, Soonyoung, and Jun know about Minghao that he would gladly read novels and encyclopedias about even if he hasn’t read a real book in years.

The two bounce back and forth ideas about what could be transpiring between Jun and Minghao while Mingyu finishes up his food. He has dessert planned, the roll cake is sitting in the fridge, but he doesn’t want to leave the table before his guests are finished.
“That can’t be the reason. That’s dumb.”

“You’re dumb.”

“Look, guys,” Mingyu feels like he needs to stop them before they attack each other—with fists or with lips, it’s always a roulette, “If he doesn’t invite me, I can’t go. Let’s not dawdle on it, but I just really feel like I have to say something about this- I’m a little uncomfortable with all the prodding and I think Minghao’s uncomfortable with it, too. We’re fine barely being friends. I don’t want it to get awkward.”

Soonyoung and Wonwoo stop cold.

He almost feels bad about throwing a wrench into their conversation, but he feels less bad when Soonyoung immediately smiles after giving Mingyu’s words enough time to settle in, “Hao likes it- well, he humors me, at least.” More than ever, Mingyu feels out of the loop. He’d assumed that Minghao was having as rough of a time as he was, but he has to go back to the drawing board now because it seems like Minghao’s also an expert at rolling with the punches, “Don’t look so glum.” Soonyoung singsongs, “He talks about you a lot, you know. The guy is almost as creepily observant as Wonwoo is. That’s why they get along so well and that’s why we brought you this!” he turns to dig around in the bag they’d brought. Mingyu assumed it was fruit or cookies or wine, but Soonyoung pulls out a clear box holding a glass jar with a large, flat cork. From a hair-thin, clear string dangles a delicate monarch butterfly with vibrant, sunset orange wings. It’s fake, don’t worry, but it flaps and flutters around like a real one thanks to a small, battery-powered motor in the cork, “Cool, right? Wonwoo hunted downtown for an hour just to find it.”

“Well, it doesn’t seem to fit in with the color scheme of Gyu’s home.” Wonwoo looks around the living room that’s behind him, “Why did he tell us to bring something so colorful?”

It’ll fit in with time, just like the candle on the shelf.
“I’ll try my best to stop teasing you about Hao for the rest of the night. No promises, but I’ll try.” Mingyu nods as he starts cleaning up their plates. Wonwoo tries helping as well before he’s nagged back into his seat. “A professional question then?” Mingyu nods again as he turns on the sink and starts scrubbing. Doing the dishes like this makes him miss Minghao’s company for some reason. Since when have normal chores become so boring, “Since Wonwoo’s prediction was terrible, how is he?”

“Hey,” Wonwoo pipes up from the table, “he was doing well. I seriously thought he’d be ready to jump back in with how Mingyu talks about him at lunch.”

“Shut up, Wonwoo.” Mingyu rolls his eyes before setting his current plate down after rinsing it.

“He’s,” Mingyu lets out a breath that he’d been subconsciously holding, “better. He’s better, but I don’t know if he’s really better. He hasn’t gone in for new x-rays or an MRI of the area, so all I have to go off of is whatever he tells me and Wonwoo knows that when patients do that, it isn’t the most reliable reading. Minghao has a high pain tolerance and he also pulled that whole morning-practice stunt with you and Jun, but when I looked at it, I was pretty sure it was just scabs and bruising unrelated to the ACL damage. That stuff needs to heal before I can tell you about anything else, I mean, it’d be great if he would just go back in to a clinic that had equipment, but he’s so stubborn,” Mingyu’s probably rambling, but Wonwoo and Soonyoung are sitting up attentively, “he’s so fucking stubborn and he just keeps bringing over dinner and doing my dishes wrong.”

Minghao’s never done the dishes wrong, “and he never tells me what he’s thinking,” even though Mingyu’s never had the guts to ask, “and he’s always got this stupid look on his face when the conversation dies. It’s so annoying,” because it’s one of the looks that makes Mingyu’s heart wheeze, “and he can’t ever stop talking,” Mingyu can’t either, “and he-”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you like him more than he likes you.” Soonyoung’s comment stops Mingyu mid-sentence, with his mouth hanging open and soapy water dripping onto the linoleum floor from his hands because he has to turn around to know the expression that either of the two is giving him when the next words flow out.

“How much does he like me?”

Soonyoung’s eyes narrow into thin crescents as he smiles with his lips curled up coyly, making our klutzy PT realize the error of his interest. He knows he has Mingyu hooked like a starved fish, “On most days? This much.” A pinch, “On good days? This much.” An inch. Ha, ha, very funny Soonyoung Kwon.

He’s sure that Minghao likes him at least two inches on a good day.

“Well, good thing you know better.” Mingyu raises an eyebrow, giving Soonyoung a cocky and carefree look before turning back to his dishes and filing them into the dishrack with hasty hands. Hopefully, it’s enough to deter the purple-haired pain in the ass from asking any more questions, but he’s also a little cute and witty about it; enough so that Mingyu doesn’t seriously mind the provocation.

“Oh, come on, Gyu. Your place late at night, it’s cold, you’re cozy, there’s good food.” Soonyoung’s hands gesticulate in the air without Jun’s grace and without Minghao’s articulation. He’s being direct and crude for good reason, “One thing leads to another.”
He’ll stop him there, “Okay, one,” he dries his hands and points a finger up in the air. Unfortunately, it isn’t his middle one, “I don’t have a roommate. Two,” another finger, this time it is his middle one, “I don’t have a private practice. Three,” he goes over to the fridge and pulls out the cylindrical pastry, “Minghao said he hates charity cases, so food is a fair trade.” He’s glad their attention turns to the well-decorated cake when he puts it up on the counter. Mingyu points a finger at Wonwoo, “His cooking is ten out of ten, by the way. You should have told me sooner.”

“Minghao cooks? For you?” He’s not sure why Soonyoung is shouting, “Minghao cooks for you? Minghao cooks for him, Woo. I feel so betrayed.”

“We’ve only heard rumors.” Wonwoo laughs, patting the dancer on the back, trying to calm him down. Wonwoo holds him by the waist, leaving his hand at his side so casually.

“Was it good? Did you die?” Soonyoung’s fascinated look is nothing short of comedic. It’s just a meal, nothing outstandingly special about that, but part of Mingyu feels a little special that he’s received something that a friend as close as Soonyoung hasn’t.

“What?” and obviously he didn’t die except for maybe a little bit on the inside, but that tends to happen whenever he’s gifted something precious and unique or when dogs greet him first. He slices the cake, plating it with the tiny forks that he bought for Minghao’s not-birthday cake but forgot to use. Serving his guests first, he takes a bite as Soonyoung opens his mouth to speak again. He’s already used to taking the first bite at dinner thanks to Minghao.

“We always ask Hao to cook for us instead of bringing takeout to potlucks and he never ever does and he said he’ll never ever cook for us,” Soonyoung puts a hand on his chest, “and, I quote, ‘not even if you sad fucks begged on your knees’. ”

“So, did you get on your knees for him, Gyu?” Mingyu gags or chokes, he isn’t sure what happens because he’s hacking for air and there’s cake stuck in his esophagus.

It takes him a second to steady himself and he’s a little disappointed to see Soonyoung and Wonwoo just sitting at the counter with tight smirks on their faces instead of panic. They hadn’t even moved to help, how rude. Minghao would have helped, maybe, “No.” The only time he had gotten down to his knees for Minghao was in the middle of a grocery store to tie his goddamn shoes and that was post-facto.

“Anyways, if he’s better, tell me so we can practice as a group again. He’s been sitting in on practices, but I’m sure he’s explained how it’s hard to understand without doing it.” The purple-haired fiend balances a disproportionately large chunk of cake on the itty, bitty fork before flicking it into his mouth, “I’ll be listening to you instead of Wonwoo from now on.”

“You still have to listen to me since you threw out your back last night.” Mingyu purses his lips and nods into his next bite of cake, sending Wonwoo a knowing look before the gears click in his head and he corrects the situation, “At practice.” He feigns innocence. It’s not like the man in front of him wasn’t making jokes about blowjobs a minute ago.

Wonwoo eats his bite of cake with a keen glare, “How difficult is the new dance routine anyway?”

Soonyoung shovels the remaining cake into his mouth, clearly excited and ready to explain because he leaves Wonwoo and Mingyu in his sugary dust. He tells them how he and Jun had reworked from areas from last summer’s Kinetics Convention into the new routine, breaking the tradition of throwing out old choreographies for the sake of convenience. It didn’t really matter because they ended up modifying it so much that it’s entirely distinguishable from the old version.
Jihoon had blended the original third set’s song together with the old song so carefully that there was no way the judges could tell. Chan had changed the narrative with Vernon’s input. They all played a little part in changing it. Minghao also added to the alterations, but too many chefs ruin a dish, so the final call was usually left to Yixing who played the role of an unbiased judge.

According to both Wonwoo and Soonyoung, the Kinetics Convention victory was won because of their fanservice and song choice. Not their proudest victory or one that they’ll ever brag about, but it was still a victory. The trophy was secured by a team of seven instructors, meaning that Jihoon, Vernon, and Chan weren’t part of it and Mingyu already doesn’t remember their names, but he’s pretty sure he’d seen them in passing. Three of them were there when Mingyu had visited, one had left the studio by then.

As Mingyu vaguely remembers, the moves from semi-finals were pretty steamy and Wonwoo says that the Kinetics’ choreography was ‘worse’. It feels like so long ago now even though it was just a handful of days. His feelings and attentions have developed since then; evolved and grown exponentially since that day.

“I’ll even show you the modifications if Wonwoo finishes his cake.”

Wonwoo is about to eat his final bite before turning his fork and dropping the bite down onto the plate again, “Oh, no.”

“Why, ‘oh no’?” Mingyu looks at him after stacking his plate with Soonyoung’s and tossing them into the sink.

“No ‘oh no’.” Soonyoung snaps at his boyfriend.

“Yes, ‘oh no’.” Wonwoo absentmindedly smooshes the cake into the plate with the back of his fork, carving deep lines into it, “Who is your partner this time?”

Soonyoung sighs, deflating a little like he’s had this conversation a million times and it’s become exhausting, “Jihoon. Hao dances with Junnie for the first break. Now, sit over here so I can show Mingyu.”

It’s not his fault, but his mind goes blank after Wonwoo begrudgingly complies.
When Mingyu bought the chairs, he didn’t think they’d be used like this.

The dancer scurries around, fishing his phone out of his pocket, muttering something about the tangled earphones, and setting up the audio to play at half the speed. Changing the audio speed takes him the longest while because he has to use Wonwoo’s phone to call Jihoon. Even after that, he struggles to navigate the app and Jihoon hangs up on his tech-illiterate ass twice. Wonwoo shakes his head at Mingyu before helping Soonyoung untangle the earphones and wraps them neatly on the counter. The track is crackly and slow and not very pleasant to listen to because the playback speed digitizes some of the cleaner sounds, but that doesn’t really matter, it’s for demonstration, not for enjoyment.

Watching Soonyoung’s hips dip and swerve around his very uncomfortable friend is both hypnotizing and a little funny. He’s more than sure that if Soonyoung wanted the attention on him, he could command it with an iron fist, but because he’s ‘dancing’ with surgical precision, explaining every move to Mingyu, and stopping every other move, it’s a lot less sexy. Not that Mingyu minds. He’d rather not stare at his friend’s boyfriend while said friend is sitting with his arms crossed in his pristine dining chair.

He walks around the living room, stopping every couple paces to execute a dance move with the music quietly playing on his phone. He can tell that there are probably a lot of missing nuances. Some of the moves look complicated and Mingyu could never see himself remembering them, but they don’t look like they rely too much on leg strength. Soonyoung explains that when they take knees or have to land after flips, that Minghao can either switch legs or land differently. They’ll figure it out as soon as he’s back at practice and they can iron out the wrinkles as they come to find them. There is a move where Soonyoung’s straddling Wonwoo in the chair, but instead of doing anything sultry, he just squishes his boyfriend’s cheeks with his sweater-paws and pokes his grumpy nose with the tip of his finger when the song finishes. It crackles into a new song, but Wonwoo slaps his hand on the phone to stop it.

“So,” Soonyoung takes a seat on Wonwoo’s lap after he’s done with his elaborate presentation, “can he do it?”

“Well,” Mingyu puts down the mug that he’s had a death grip on. He only realizes how tight he was holding it when his fingers come back stiff. Soonyoung wasn’t even performing, but he already had all of Mingyu’s attention. Putting him on a professional stage will be dangerous, but more so than the idea of Soonyoung killing the spotlight is the thought that Minghao’s going to be dancing with Jun, “if there aren’t any big flips or anything, I don’t see why not.”

The purple-haired dancer’s eyes curve as he grins, “We cut most of the big flips from our choreo for now. Minghao said he’ll save that energy for the freestyle-”

“If you’ve got the okay, then perhaps we ought to get out of Mingyu’s hair.” There’s something acutely different about Wonwoo’s voice suddenly. It’s commanding and sluggish, unlike anything Mingyu had heard him use since meeting him.

Soonyoung doesn’t seem to pay any him any special attention, but gets up and bundles up the canvas bag he brought the glass jar in. He stuffs it into his jacket pocket, stretching it to its full capacity, “You give him the greenlight, okay?” His voice is still bright and peppy when he pokes a finger into Mingyu’s chest, right over his heart, “I think it’ll make him feel better.”
“Uh, yeah, okay.”

“Promise?” Soonyoung’s already hooked Mingyu’s pinky with his and touches their thumbs together in a smooth motion.

“Sure.” Mingyu doesn’t realize that his palms are sweaty until he rubs them against his pants. What does he mean ‘make him feel better’? Has Minghao been feeling down? It didn’t seem like that during their sessions. He understands that the recovery process is an up and down rollercoaster of being sad when you’re in pain and being happy when you have a good day, but he didn’t think that Minghao was too broken up about whatever mental stigma he was going through. Maybe he ought to reevaluate, “Why the rush?”

“Thanks for having us!” Soonyoung gives Mingyu a warm and tight hug before heading out the door. Mingyu barely has time to return it before Wonwoo replaces him in the embrace and pats Mingyu on the back a few times before letting go. It’s unsettling, how starved for human touch Mingyu is. He wants to hold them again, just reach out and hug them once more.

“I’ll see you at work on Monday.” They both seem to ignore his question, “Your cooking is great. I hope we can come over for dinner again.” Wonwoo’s smile is warm and reassuring. At least he knows that them leaving on short notice wasn’t his fault and they want to come back a second time. Maybe a third.

Mingyu lets his guests out with a confused, but happy wave. It isn’t until he sees them drive off and shuts the door behind him that he realizes that Soonyoung probably got Wonwoo riled up. In the average workday, you probably wouldn’t consider Wonwoo Jeon the jealous type based on his actions alone, but when Soonyoung comes into the conversation he sometimes goes beyond the sappy fondness he normally has for his not-spouse. Sometimes it feels like he flaunts pieces and parts of Soonyoung and how awesome he is, like a kid bragging about a Christmas present at preschool. It’s like he wants everyone to know that Soonyoung is special, limited edition, premium—and he’s the only one that gets to have him. The second anyone shows any interest, Wonwoo gets possessive. It’s never aggressive or ill-natured, and it’s even a little endearing to watch Wonwoo behave childishly on the very rare occasion.

It’s almost a funny thought to Mingyu because he knows how often Soonyoung and Wonwoo bicker like best friends do and because they’re best friends before they are boyfriends, it’s sometimes odd to see Wonwoo as anything but a passive and sweet guy. It makes Mingyu curious, too. He’s never really been the true possessive type. Possessive relationships can be stuffy. Romantic relationships were quite passive for him—sexual ones even more so—and when his partners wanted out or when he wanted to call it quits, he never put much hesitation into it if they were both level-headed.

He rarely felt jealous. He rarely felt burdened. And while he often felt wanted, he rarely felt needed.

“I upheld my side of the deal.” Mingyu announces as he swings open the door when Minghao arrives a quarter after 5. It’s getting dark so early now that eating dinner at this hour doesn’t feel unnatural. All Minghao can do is shake his head, sigh as he smiles, and hand Mingyu the bag of Tupperware. Yes. Tupperware is the best sign.

He follows Mingyu into the house, a hand still behind his back as he comes over to the counter
where Mingyu’s already eagerly opening the two, colorful bento boxes. Imagining Minghao cutting hotdogs into little octopi is probably the most paternal thing that he’s ever imagined him doing, but it’s so *gosh-diddly-darn precious* that he doesn’t even care that *Doggy Daddy* is Minghao’s current phone contact name.

“You spoil me.” He also pulls out two Ramune sodas, a special treat because the only store in town that sells them is usually out of stock and they close shop on the weekends.

“Yeah,” Minghao’s voice feels a little dreamy, “I do.” Mingyu turns around to face him because there’s something in the way he speaks that makes him curious. The corner of Minghao’s lip curves upwards before he reveals the glass-potted plant from behind is back, “Surprise, it’s a congratulations succulent.”

Mingyu can’t help but laugh as he accepts the plant with two hands, “Congratulations for what?”

“For finally getting a dining table, you’re finally a whole adult.” He’s never seen a succulent of this color before. He’s seen the green ones, the other green ones, and the *other* green ones. Sometimes they’re a dull burgundy, sometimes they have peachy tips, but this one is completely crimson with a few bright green roots in the center. It sits in a bed of white pebbles over black soil. The cubicle glass pot is layered with large rocks and charcoal at the bottom. Minghao seems to know quite a bit about plant care, “I had to Google in Lowry’s for twenty minutes and I tripped over an employee watering plants. Please don’t let it die.” Of course.

“I won’t. It’s really cool.”

“Don’t laugh about the name.” Mingyu rotates the small pot in his hand to look at the little info card with a handwritten note about how to care for the plant. Lowry’s was a little, local garden shop. They usually had a small variety of plants and he knows that the owner’s daughter picked up a passion for selectively breeding her own strains of certain fauna when they were in junior high. *Echeveria agavoides* ‘Romeo’; common name, Romeo Wax Agave.

“I’m,” Mingyu smiles ear to ear, “I’m going to laugh about the name.”

“I’m going to return it.” Minghao reaches to take the succulent from him, but Mingyu catches his hand, “I bought and potted it before I read the name, okay.”

“Thank you.” he lets Minghao take his hand back as he sets the plant in the center of his dining table, “But how did you know?”

Minghao doesn’t even pass him a glance as he pulls out chopsticks from the silverware drawer and grabs two napkins from the holder, “Soon sent me a picture.”

“Aw, so me fulfilling my end of the deal wasn’t a surprise?” Mingyu tries to sound as disappointed as he can, but Minghao’s cooking is getting the better part of his attention. Soonyoung did, indeed, send Minghao a (very unflattering) picture of Wonwoo and Mingyu at the dining table, mouths half-open eating the dinner and having a conversation. All the colors in the photo are so soft and clinic-like that it’s almost laughable how much Soonyoung’s outfit would have changed the atmosphere. So, no, the dining table wasn’t a surprise, “How’s your knee doing?”

“It’s doing good.” Minghao holds the two bento boxes up, “Table, counter, couch?”

“Anywhere is fine.” Minghao sits up at the counter by default. Mingyu walks over to take a seat next to him and he knows by now that he has to take the first bite before Minghao will even
think about digging in, “Did the swelling go down?”

“Yep.”

“Still scabby?”

“Yep.”

“Does it still hurt?”

“Not really. If you push on it sure,” he swallows his bite of rice before speaking again, “but if I’m just moving around, then no.”

“That’s good.” Mingyu wants to enjoy dinner. He wants to appreciate the cute carrot stars and cucumber hearts that Minghao punched out with a Daiso cookie cutter. He wants to enjoy the braised fish and perfectly cooked rice. He wants to tease about how Minghao’s Ramune explodes on him when he pops the marble in, but he can’t. Thinking about Soonyoung reminds him of the news he’s promised to deliver and Mingyu isn’t the type to break promises.

There’s something weighing heavy on his tongue. It pulls against his jaw and stitches his mouth shut. He knows that saying the following words will make Minghao happy, excite him about finals and winning and trophies and friends, but it will also put punctuation to their dinners and their conversations and their late-night laughs. It’ll make Minghao happy. It’ll make Minghao happy. It’ll make Minghao happy and so long as he’s not in pain, that should be the priority.

“Is everything okay? You seem kinda down tonight.” Minghao nudges him with his elbow when he notices that he’s stopped eating, letting their arms sit flush against each other when Mingyu doesn’t push back.

Mingyu swallows and nods and takes another bite. His patient has healed, “Sorry, just thinking about something.”
“Whatever you say.” Minghao hums as he stretches out his leg, propping his heel up on the bar of Mingyu’s stool. He’s on the brink of a breakthrough. He’s about to find answers to a question he didn’t know he was asking. Mingyu knows that he’s started looking for something, he just doesn’t know how and doesn’t know what he’s looking for, but Minghao feels like an arrow pointing towards a destination.

“How was practice with Jun?” Normally, Mingyu wouldn’t ask. It’s none of his business, but he feels stiff and asking lets him stretch just a little. He wants to direct the attention somewhere. He wants to hear Minghao talk. He wants to forget about what he’s supposed to do tonight.

“Oh, practice?” Minghao pauses with the tips of his chopsticks pursed between his lips, “It was alright. I bled those kids dry, but I think they’ll do well.”

“No huge love confession or anything?” he laughs as not-dryly as he can. That question was a little out of line and more-than-transparent that he’s curious about Jun’s feelings towards Minghao.

Minghao, on the other hand, doesn’t seem perturbed at all. He swallows a bite of food and smiles, “Well, I can’t say there wasn’t.” he gives the open air this incredulous look, like he’s still questioning something, “But I don’t think Jun wants me talking about it. Were you worried about him?”

“No.” Mingyu licks his lips and stuffs a large bite of rice into his mouth. This is fine. This is okay. This is actually a good thing. Minghao will dance, wow the audience, win a trophy, date Jun, marry him, adopt three kids, grow old together- his imagination gets ahead of him. Even though hearing that Jun probably revealed his feelings to Minghao takes some sort of weight or pressure off his back and clears some fog from his head, he’s still holding on to the words. He wishes that with every bite of food, he can push the words further down his throat.

He shouldn’t be selfish. He has no reason to. He can’t burn this pocket of Minghao’s time forever. It’s inevitable. It’ll make him happy. It’ll make him happy. This is healthy. This is the right thing to do. He should tell him. He should tell him. He should tell him, “You have the greenlight.” He should let him go, “Soonyoung demoed the choreography for me and said you guys axed a lot of the flips and stuff. So, I-”

“Really?” From the very bottom of his heart, he didn’t expect Minghao’s reaction to be so confusing. The tone is completely different from the one he was carrying just a minute ago. The way he says it is void of any and all emotion. It’s not accusatory, it’s not excited, it’s not bereft or questioning. Really. Maybe it’s Mingyu’s imagination, but it’s like Minghao understands that it’s putting punctuation to their meetings, too. The way he can’t turn to look at him speaks louder than his words. Maybe it’s Mingyu’s imagination, but it doesn’t sound like he wants it to happen either.

“Yep.” He returns with the plainest response he can, but feels the need to elaborate, “From what you’ve told me, it sounds like you’re feeling a lot better already. I can’t give you any solid feedback without you going in for new x-rays or an MRI, but for what it’s worth, I think you’re well enough to practice and compete. Just- Just try to take it easy when you can.”

“I will.”

Mingyu didn’t plan for them to eat in silence.
He thought that Minghao would be celebrating. He thought his spirits would be up and that would inevitably bring Mingyu’s spirits up because it’s hard for him not to smile when Minghao smiles. It’s hard for him not to laugh when Minghao laughs. His mood is contagious like that, but he supposes that based on that logic it means his mood is down as well.

Everything they’d been working towards was for this, this liberty, and even though Minghao still has a little bit of recovery to do, he can do that on his own. Mingyu has to turn him free and let him practice and resume his life as it was even if he doesn’t want to put an end to some of the nicest nights of his 26 years of life.

He’s gone to nice dinners in the city with a beautiful date on his arm. He’s climbed up hills and mountains and cliffs and watched the sunrise from their peaks. He’s been awarded certificates and grants and trophies. He’s felt fulfilled and proud; satiated. However, he’d never been so afraid to lose an experience like Minghao Xu. Because this doesn’t feel like the end of a story. This doesn’t sound like the end of a tale. There are chapters more, books more, collections more, years more of things that he wants to read about Minghao Xu and all his complexities and all his thoughts and all his feelings and that’s absolutely terrifying.

High school was one thing. High school was one thing. High school was a chapter of their lives that he can’t just overlook because it was pivotal. If not for Minghao, then it was for him. It wasn’t then, but it is now. He learned so much about himself by just looking back at all of it. That alone has helped him grow. He still needs to clear up the events that transpired, but they just aren’t close enough yet. He’s proud to say that the first image of Minghao that pops into his head when he’s mentioned is no longer the black-haired, black-hooded, scrappy Minghao in the cafeteria. It isn’t the auburn-haired, grownup Minghao who brought him soup either. It isn’t the charismatic, dedicated Minghao on the dancefloor. It isn’t the endearing, clumsy Minghao who can’t pipe frosting. It’s a cumulation of all of them. It’s Minghao smiling and giggling with his eyes crinkled up and nose scrunched and more than it is a still picture of time, it’s the feeling of their fingers laced together.

They do the dishes without any real conversation, just small talk about work, about Cacahuate, about work, about work, about the dinner last night; nothing that Mingyu wants to talk about. They don’t need to, but they stand shoulder to shoulder, washing and drying the tin bento boxes before Minghao stacks them and packs the containers away. There’s still two mochi sitting in the freezer, but no one moves to take them out. Ice cream isn’t a priority tonight.

Mingyu leads Minghao through quite possibly their last round of exercises ever.

To both his joy and chagrin, Minghao really does seem to be doing better. He’s yards better, miles better, leagues better than when they first met, even from when they first started these inconvenient and untimely private sessions. He’s healed so much faster than Mingyu could have ever hoped. Maybe he missed the progress since today’s the first day in a while that he’s actively looking for problems and reasons to withdraw his greenlight. Previously, they’d to the exercises in earnest, but Mingyu had been more focused on getting them done and, well, Minghao as a whole. He knows that he shouldn’t get attached to patients. That much has been ingrained in him since the start of his career, but it’s hard not to. Before, it used to be a bittersweet experience. He used to watching his patients recover and stop their appointments because they were better. Even though Minghao is better now, there’s still an indefinite amount of time that Mingyu wants to spend with him. He likes sharing food. He likes sharing drinks. He would like to think that Minghao does as well.

Patients just spend a couple hours a week with you, but you’ve got to write up plans for them,
learn about them and their habits and quirks for hours more than that. You have to file paperwork for them, you have to keep track of their progress, and you have to make sure you keep their facts separate from other patients. For Minghao, Mingyu never has to anything; he doesn’t need to. He just wants to. You don’t have dinner with your patients. You don’t have an opportunity to learn this much about them no matter how much they talk. More importantly, you don’t walk their dog or have tickle fights on your couch.

Mingyu walks Minghao to the door.

You don’t bake a cake for them for their not-birthday and you don’t hold hands as you frost that cake together. You aren’t delivered soup when you’re sick with a cold you got from walking them out to their car in the rain. You don’t match costumes on Halloween thanks to cosmic forces. You aren’t constantly reminded of your existence in the universe. High school was unfortunate, but he’s willing to forget and push those thoughts aside if only for a moment. He tosses the thoughts of apologies and forgiveness away for another day because right now all he wants is for Minghao to laugh and tell him funny stories about his experiences in the city. All he wants is to share more of himself.

He doesn’t expect the hug and it almost seems like Minghao doesn’t either, but the shorter man throws an arm around Mingyu’s shoulder, the other one wrapping at the small of his back, pulling their chests together with a jerk. The bag holding the bento boxes clacks noisily against the doorframe and Mingyu needs just a moment to figure out what to do with his hands because his initial response is to push Minghao off and yank him back in for a kiss.

But he doesn’t.

Even though it’s something that he wants, he bites his lower lip wishing for them to crack from involuntary laughter instead of sitting dry in whatever this stale air is, but a want is a want is a want. Mingyu has restraint, copious amounts of it for the delicate place this patient-PT relationship is teetering on. Besides, he’s not in the mood for kissing and he wouldn’t want their potential first kiss to be under such circumstances; it’s just not right. So, he returns the hug tightly. While one hand is grabbing at the back of Minghao’s thick jacket, the other is at his nape pulling the dancer’s face to his shoulder. Mingyu’s nose is buried deep into his fur hood and everything smells like Minghao. Everything smells like Minghao and for just this sliver of time, everything feels right.

His existence dissolves into Minghao’s touch.

He synergizes their warmth, greedy for it as he’s only wearing a light t-shirt and whatever jeans he pulled out from the laundry. He’s greedy for it for other reasons as well. He can feel Minghao’s streamlined and lean build, how his muscles move under his touch, how his breath hitches when Mingyu sighs into his neck. Minghao isn’t petit in the slightest, but when Mingyu holds him like this—in his arms where Mingyu is so obviously taller and broader—he feels small again. He can feel Minghao’s fingers curl into the thin fabric of his shirt, pressing into his skin and for just a bit Mingyu reaches rapture. He feels real and rooted and solid. Even though he knows all those things are true, it’s groundbreaking.

He’s not sure if it’s his heartbeat or Minghao’s tapping against his ribs.

“Thanks for dinner.”

“Thanks for everything.” Minghao breaks the embrace first. He takes a step back so he can smile at Mingyu, “I mean it.” Mingyu shakes his head subconsciously, missing his warmth more than he could miss most things, “Thank you so much.” but that smile quickly fades. He stands with his hands behind his back, looking up at Mingyu with those dolly, open eyes—with that curious
expression that Mingyu still doesn’t understand, with his lips slightly parted as if he’s anticipating something. Mingyu never knows what he’s waiting for or what he’s expected to do. This time—more so than the time in the rain, more so than the time in the park—Minghao’s stare is weak but unwavering; almost vulnerable.

Pleading.

“You don’t need to thank me,” Mingyu’s the one that can’t meet his eyes this time, “but you’re welcome. I’m glad you’re finally better. Ahead of schedule, too.” Every word drips from his lips slowly like bitter tar.

He hears Minghao hum something bright before sighing, the cloud of his breath filling the space between them, “I better go.” He turns on his heel and Mingyu has to lock his fingers behind his back just to physically prevent himself from reaching out. He knots his digits together, pressing nails into his fingertips, and leans his weight back against his doorframe for support. It shouldn’t be this hard. Since when did he have to fight himself this hard, “Good night, Mingyu.”

Because Minghao is a patient, Mingyu does the things he has to do. Because Minghao is a friend, Mingyu does the things that he wants to do.

He tries to keep his voice lively and lackadaisical, but knows that he fails the second the words leave his lips, “Goodbye, Minghao.”

But it’s taken him this long to realize that Minghao is something that he needs.
“Goodbye?” the comical and quizzical look isn’t what he expected in the somber light of his porch, “What happened to ‘good night’?”

Mingyu shies away from the doorframe for a moment, processing Minghao’s words. He’s not even at the gate yet, just stopped a short distance away—the distance of a thrown cellphone. What’s he up to now? Mingyu’s not really in the mood for jokes. He’s sad and he wants to embrace feeling sad because he hasn’t felt this way in a long time, but he guesses that staring at Minghao isn’t helping the situation. He tries to speak like he normally does with Minghao, but his memory is failing him, “Well, you’re all good and healed. You don’t need me nagging you about leg braces and stretching anymore.” He probably sounds like the grossest, most cliché, poorly-written screenplay from an indie theater.

“Just because I’m done bringing you dinner doesn’t mean that we have to stop eating dinner together.” His inflections on the last word twists itself into Mingyu’s ear.

“How?”

Minghao and his infinite patience for Mingyu, “We aren’t going to stop seeing each other, Mingyu.” He shifts the weight between his feet, “You still need to walk my dog and I’ve still got, like, two more congratulations plants to give you.”

“I’m not quite sure I get what you mean.” No, he doesn’t. Mingyu’s brain is exhausted. It stopped working about an hour ago. He feels raw, “Why do we need to do all those things?”

“Um, wow, rude. I thought we were friends.” He’s so conflicted about how he should feel after hearing the sarcasm in Minghao’s voice. He was just about ready to flop over on his couch and stew in his emotions for the next two hours, but now Minghao has him standing out on his porch as a cold breeze rips through the common area and inside his apartment. Goosebumps pepper his arms and he’s not sure if it’s from the winter wind or from the words being told to him.

“Oh.” All Mingyu can do in this situation is be awkward, “Yeah,” He should be excited about the F word, but every syllable, every letter feels like it grows vines, wrapping around his teeth, being scraped off by his tongue and spoken with dishonesty, “we’re friends.”

“Good, I was about to think that I was the only one who thought so.” He puts his hands on his hips in mock annoyance, easily masking the jittery uncertainty in his voice. If Mingyu wasn’t so preoccupied trying to sort everything out and deflating, he might have noticed how Minghao’s expression doesn’t match his voice, “If anything, putting an end to this silly dinner thing means that we can meet whenever we want. Besides, I could use a reminder to wear the leg brace every now and then.” He mutters the last sentence.

And if Mingyu wasn’t so dumbfounded over Minghao’s increduulously optimistic mood all of a sudden, he might have caught on to how Minghao knew that this arrangement and every nuance of it was silly and redundant, “Am… am I having a stroke?” He’s just feeling so many things at once. This rollercoaster is not fun. Mingyu absolutely dreads carnival rides. He just wants to pause. He just wants to stop everything for a minute and breathe and sort and review. Breathe and sort and review. What’s happening? It took all of his brain power and emotional stamina to get Minghao out of his door and off his porch and now he’s pulling this bullshit and Mingyu’s expected to return it with palpable answers.
“I certainly hope not.” Minghao shuffles backwards towards the gate again, crossing his legs over each other as he walks carefully. The wind whips his coat open and he tugs it closed with giddy hands. His laugh fills the turbulent air for the last time that night as he swings the bag and walks to his car, “I’ll see you soon, Mingyu.”

But even after he passes the gate and pulls out his keys, Mingyu remains in his doorway, eyes boring into the ground, burning holes in his welcome mat.

It should have felt like a relief.

It should have felt like a relief to hear that Minghao considers them friends and that he wants to see Mingyu again in the future and that they’ll continue seeing each other for an indefinite amount of time. That’s what Mingyu wanted to hear—thought he wanted to hear. Being considered a friend is more than he could hope for. When he thinks back to the moment of dread when he saw Minghao in the lobby of the clinic for the first time, he was sure that nothing good could have come from it. He wanted to stay professional, help Minghao heal, and never see him again. He certainly didn’t expect to memorize his work schedule and secretly meet with his best friends. It’s been fun. It’s been real and enjoyable and he doesn’t have to say goodbye to any of those things. He finally gets to be comfortable and start building relationships with new, likeable people like he’s been craving. He built a better fucking future like Wonwoo indirectly told him to do and now he gets to live it out.

It should have felt like a relief.

But something is still making him feel sick, making his stomach churn and giving him a headache. A new weight rests itself upon his shoulders, pricking at the back of his neck, and he can tell its stare follows Minghao’s minimizing form across the street. It watches him until he drives away, then turns its attention to Mingyu, raking its claws into his chest and biceps, rendering them numb and immovable.

He has to breathe once, breathe twice, before he can come to his senses and take a step back into his apartment and shut the door, locking the cold air out and turning off the lights with a swipe of his hand. When he pivots on his heel and lets muscle memory guide him through making tea, a small amount of the haziness clears. Once he’s sitting at his dining table, holding the warm mug in his hands and staring into Romeo’s eye, he finally lets out a long-held breath. This isn’t where he wants to sit. So, like many nights before, he flips on QVC, grabs a throw from the cabinet, and snuggles up on the couch. His tea is balanced precariously on the armrest as he pulls the blanket up to his nose, but nothing about this feels comfortable. It feels stuffy and crushing, so he throws off the blanket and holds his mug again, but inhaling the scent of chamomile and honey makes him grit his teeth. Oh, it’s this feeling.

Heartache.

Because he knows now.

Because he understands it just a little bit more now.

Wanting was one thing. Liking was one thing. Needing was one thing.

It’s right in front of him, staring him in the face like it’s been waiting for retribution. Forcing it into hiding under his nose for the last decade was cowardly and pathetic. Holding it at an arm’s length for the last two months was grueling. It’s untimely and horrid. What’s he supposed to do with a tragic revelation like this?

There was something impossible in his and Minghao’s words. They were wrong— he was
wrong.

Minghao can’t just be a friend in his eyes. He never could.
Chapter 50

“Woah, did you get hit by a bus or something?” Joshua stands up from his desk to give Mingyu a once over. Does he look that bad? He didn’t look in the mirror this morning. He was so exhausted after the emotional rollercoaster last night that he conked out immediately after Minghao left and didn’t bother to shower this morning. His life isn’t falling apart like he expected it to, but he also didn’t expect that Joshua—who rarely complains about his style—would stop him on his way in.

“Yeah, sure.” He can’t even compute a witty response.

Jeonghan laughs, overhearing their exchange from where he was shuffling through patient files on their neatly organized shelf. That shelving system was all thanks to Mingyu’s hard work a few months ago. Before that, the files were in drawers and out of order and nearly impossible to retrieve quickly. He and Joshua spent eight hours in silence just stacking, filing, and double checking all the folders. It irks him that Jeonghan doesn’t usually put things back in the right place, giving Joshua more work to do, but today he returns it to the correct space, “He’s not that bad.”

Maybe he really did have a stroke last night because that was the closest thing he’s gotten to a compliment from Jeonghan since he’s started working there. Joshua wriggles his lips and gives Mingyu a disapproving look, “He’s not, but there’s something different. You’re not as put together as usual.” No, Joshua isn’t wrong, that’s just the cold, plastered look of acceptance on Mingyu’s face.

“Do you want me to change or?” He keeps a spare change of clothes in the breakroom for accidents and spills. He’s clumsy. They happen.

“No, you’re fine.” Joshua sits back down with a huff, kicking off the floor to slide his wheelie-chair over to his desk, picking up a phone call as he skids by it. Mingyu won’t take personal offense. Joshua’s been a little cranky and there have been more days recently where he comes in looking worse for wear. Mingyu still hasn’t built up the courage to ask what’s wrong and he knows that Wonwoo’s been growing concerned as well, but Joshua’s older than both of them and he’s their manager. He’s been groomed to manage things, including his own life.

Wonwoo comes in five minutes late, not that Joshua ever berates him for anything. If you ask Mingyu, it’s because the two are still skirting around being casual. Wonwoo can sometimes carry an air of professionalism around with him that makes him feel intimidating and because his diplomas say he’s very certified and because he comes from a big clinic in the city, Joshua might feel like Wonwoo’s overqualified for his tiny, family clinic. That’s not the case, Mingyu knows. Wonwoo is a nice guy. Joshua is a… nice… guy. They’re just very slow to warm up.

“Did you leave my house early to bone?” Apparently, the filter on Mingyu’s mouth is nonexistent when he’s exhausted and mentally fried.

“Yep.” That’s frank, “Sorry.”

“That’s okay.” Mingyu pinches his brow—a headache, his friends (Minghao included) give him a headache, “I figured after you left in such a rush.”

“Oh, right, thanks for reminding me.” Wonwoo tosses his brown leather bag onto the counter.
where he normally keeps it and straightens out his button up before rifling through the stack of patient folders Joshua had handed him on his way in. Mingyu looks up, expectant, “Soon says he forgot his earphones on your counter. Have you see them?”

“Nope.”

“Can you please take a look when you get home today? He’s been anxious about seriously losing them.”

Mingyu almost regrets asking why because Wonwoo rambles for ten minutes about how the earphones aren’t actually of any use. They’re just broken earphones—nothing short of bits of plastic and metal tethered together with some wire—, but they’re Soonyoung’s lucky earphones and he carries them with him everywhere. He doesn’t do anything grand without them which makes Mingyu wonder why he brought them to the dinner, but he refrains from asking in fear that Wonwoo will continue on past their first appointments. The earphones were a gift from a very inspirational dance instructor he had back in grade school. Mingyu’s already forgotten his name, but Wonwoo shows him a picture of the aqua-capped earbuds. It’s a little redundant since Mingyu’s already explained that he only owns black earphones and he cleaned the counter yesterday before Minghao came over.

“How did he take the news?”

“He hasn’t talked to Soonyoung yet?”

Wonwoo coughs out a shy laugh before stacking his patient files together again and pouring himself a cup of coffee, “Well, he hasn’t had time to check his phone.”

“What do you mean he hasn’t had time to check hi- oh my god. I’m going to pretend I never heard you say that. Is that why you’re late today? You know what, don’t answer that. I don’t want to know. I don’t care.”

“No.” Wonwoo draws out, “I was late because I got a flat tire.” Mingyu can tell he’s smiling just from the way his voice sounds.

“Whatever.” Mingyu sighs when Wonwoo hands him a full mug. He proceeds to bitterly make Wonwoo’s expression sour by adding cream and sugar to it, “I haven’t talked to him since last night. I don’t know how he’s taking the ‘news’.”

Mingyu guesses that his attempt to stimulate Wonwoo for information fails because the older therapist has his eyes glued to his phone instead of his face. When he finishes reading whatever he was reading, a little tug pulls up at the corner of his lips before he relaxes and flips the screen around to show Mingyu, “Looks like you’re not the only one who didn’t sleep well.”

50% of the picture is a big-ass palm covering the screen. The other half is barely clear because Minghao is clearly slapping Soonyoung’s phone camera out of his face. He hasn’t shaved, he hasn’t showered, and he has dark rings under his eyes. Mingyu gets to go back to his apartment and sleep at 2. Minghao has work until 6 and—according to the text above the picture—Soonyoung says that they have group practice until late. He doesn’t want to be, but he’s concerned already.

“I slept perfectly fine, thanks.” No, he did not.

“You can keep telling yourself that.” Wonwoo leans against the counter, taking a drawn-out sip and blowing the steam into his face. It’s particularly cold today.

Mingyu wants to change the subject. Away from him and onto something else, “Do you need a ride home? Soon’s going to be practicing, right?”
“I’m good, but dropping me off at the mechanic’s on your way home would be well appreciated. I took it in to get the tire patched before work, but I need to pick it up. I can drive myself back to work.” Mingyu’s not awake enough to understand that Wonwoo means that his mechanic is the one in his neighborhood. There are only a handful of mechanics in town that take walk-ins, so the math wouldn’t have been that hard, but Mingyu’s brain is deflated.

“Yeah, I can do that.”

“Thanks. You’ll be rewarded handsomely.”

Mingyu does not want to be rewarded handsomely.

Out of the kindness of his exhausted and sluggish heart, he makes the sudden decision to look for Soonyoung’s broken earphones with Wonwoo before taking him to the car mechanic. He doesn’t want to search by himself and if the earphones are really that important to Soonyoung, he’s sure that he’d want them back as soon as possible. Besides, having Wonwoo over even if it’s just for a little, makes his apartment feel a little less empty.

Thanks to his luck, they find the earphones easily.

They were tucked behind his paper towel holder and against the bottle of olive oil. Wonwoo thanks him more than enough times. The earphones must really mean a lot to Soonyoung, but for him to wait a day and a half to mention losing something so important seems odd, “Well, he’s a little scatterbrained sometimes.” And for Wonwoo to not know they were missing is less odd, but also a little weird, “They’re not mine, I wouldn’t know.” As if he and Soonyoung don’t already share the same heartbeat. He should’ve known.

Wonwoo spends an uncomfortable amount of time looking at the red succulent as if he’s waiting to watch it grow.

“From Minghao?” he runs a fingertip along one of the leaves to see if it’s real. Mingyu hums a ‘yes’. Wonwoo has already deduced enough, “Really? I didn’t take him for the gardening type.” He has Mingyu’s attention, “He doesn’t even like sitting in the grass. I can’t imagine him potting a plant.”

Is that a lie? Is that a trick? Wonwoo’s bank of Minghao fun-facts is growing richer by the day.

“And I see that the butterfly has found its home.” He turns to see where Mingyu had placed the butterfly jar on the entertainment center. It looks nice over there.

The three random, saturated pops of color in his otherwise pastel and tan apartment aren’t jarring, but they don’t feel comfortable yet. He’ll need to do some redecorating before they’ll be able to blend in, “For now.” The way Wonwoo looks around is a little unsettling. If what Soonyoung said was true—that Minghao and Wonwoo are equally observant of their environments—then he wonders why Minghao’s never looked as annoyingly obvious scouring through objects and reading details about him.

“She was joking, you know.”

“About?” Was he joking about how observant Wonwoo is because he clearly doesn’t pick up on how distressed and worn Mingyu is today. Can’t he tell based on the unwashed dishes and lack of cozy heating?
“About how much Minghao likes you.” What else is new? Clearly, Mingyu has no gauge on the amount of ‘like’ he’s earned from Minghao. It could be measured in nonsensical units, like 5 snails’ worth or 18 bread. It could be 86 papercuts soaked in lemon juice, 12,403 grains of rice, 39 stepped-on Legos, 2.7 stolen bitcoins, one Nokia cellphone- It doesn’t matter. Mingyu doesn’t know what it means. His brain is still malfunctioning. He’s going to need Wonwoo to spell it out loud and clear, “If you ask me, it’s a combination of quantity in a unique category that surpasses that of anyone he’s ever met.”

“Explain. My brain is tired.” Mingyu grabs his keys to walk them back out to his car.

“Do I really have to?” Wonwoo opens his door and fastens his seatbelt before repeating himself since Mingyu didn’t hear him.

Mingyu ignores Wonwoo until he backs the car up successfully. He can only handle one task at a time today, “You don’t have to.”

Once they get back on the road, Wonwoo starts talking. Until that point, he’d been carefully rewrapping the earphones in his lap, “It’s hard to explain.” He tucks them away into his breast pocket and takes a breath, looking out the window before looking at Mingyu with sharp eyes. He’s trying to understand something himself, but ends up shaking his head, “You know how you can value people the same amount? Like a best friend can be valued as much as parents or other relatives, but those are different kinds of value.” Mingyu nods, he doesn’t get it, “For Minghao, Soon and Jun have their category. Seungcheol probably has a category. His other coworkers have a category. His parents had a category. Even I probably have a category amongst others.” Wonwoo pokes a finger into Mingyu’s shoulder, pecking at him incessantly, “And you have a category all to yourself that you don’t have to share it with anyone.”

“I know you’re simplifying things already,” Mingyu sighs as he makes the turn to get on the street of the garage, “but can you just speak in Layman’s terms?”

Wonwoo laughs as they pull into the hangar, his eyes pinned on his own car already. His laughs are always deep and steady, showing his perfect teeth in a wide smile. He shakes his head as he gets out, snubbing Mingyu as he fishes out his wallet to pay the mechanics, “Thanks for the ride.”

“Won- Wonwoo, explain.”

He shuts the door behind him and Mingyu winds down the window to yell, but is stopped by Wonwoo shouting into the air, “Money Hot likes Mango,” he spreads his arms in the air, to their full capacity, “this much!”
Mingyu doesn’t get a chance to see Wonwoo cringe and apologize for causing a ruckus because he speeds away so fast. Over-speeding is more forgivable than running his coworker over with his car. He’s going to put as much distance as he can between him and Wonwoo because that was embarrassing! You can’t just yell something like that in a business place! And what kind of drugs was Wonwoo on? That kind of behavior was so uncharacteristic of him; just when Mingyu was getting used to his snarky and easygoing personality, too.

Still, the words and actions keep replaying themselves in his head for the later part of the afternoon. If he was any more distracted, he would have probably burnt his dinner and lit another spatula on fire. At least that would have made for a good story.

Of course, Minghao isn’t coming over tonight which is why Mingyu’s just making an easy, single-serving of carbonara with extra bacon and extra cheese and extra loathing. He had texted Minghao earlier, something passive and had received a simple response. He had texted him again an hour ago to ask about practice, just to make sure that dinner plans had really come to an end and he wasn’t just having a nightmare. However, Minghao doesn’t respond. Mingyu assumes that means that he’s been practicing. It’s well past 9 already and the lack of response has him a little worried. Shouldn’t practice be over by now? It’s been 3 hours.

His late dinner was eaten over reruns of Great British Bake Off. He and Minghao are still waiting for a new season to air on Netflix. The food is good, but it doesn’t taste great. Emeril Lagasse would disown him. Honestly, he wasn’t very hungry, but he knows he has to eat if only to keep with routine. Routine. Routine. Hell. Maybe he shouldn’t eat. He ought to get used to reverting back to it though, back to his old routine before Minghao appeared, but that feels so much harder than just shoving pasta in his mouth.

At 9:30 he gives in and calls.

“Knee brace.” He has to physically hit himself on the forehead for that one. Who says that first-thing? He’s so stupid and awkward and socially stunted when it comes to him. God, why can’t he just stay level-headed and cool.

But Minghao’s laughter soothes those worries, “Yessir.” He’s out of breath, but not from Mingyu’s subpar greeting, “Hello to you, too, Mingyu.” The heavy beat of a song rumbles in the background of the call before it’s cut off, replaced by a loud scream and what can only be described as a body hitting the floor.

“Did you just murder someone?”

He can almost see Minghao turn to look over his shoulder in the way the audio changes in the call, “I mean… kinda.” He hears Soonyoung’s voice call for a five minute break as more screaming follows, “No comment.”

It’s starting to get easier—conversations with Minghao, he needs less of that trial period, the tutorial, the warmup rounds. Despite how sour the day had been going, hearing his voice on the phone feels a little like putting an icepack on a bruise, an ibuprofen for a headache, “Practice?”

“No, Mingyu, we’ve been over this.” He hears the shrill squeak of Minghao unscrewing the cap to his metal canteen, “This is murder class.” Due to the lack of Soonyoung scrambling for the phone, he supposes that Minghao’s stepped out into the hallway. It’s either that or the possibility that
Minghao seriously murdered everyone at the studio, “How was your day?”

“It’s been weird. My head’s been in a weird place.”

He expects Minghao to tease him or laugh and poke fun at his exhausted condition, but the heaviness in his words is unexpected, “Hey. Are you okay? If you need someone to talk to, I’m here for you.” His heart flutters even though he’d never openly admit it. There’s just something so gentle and caring about the way his intonations are placed; he can almost feel the hand on his shoulder.

“Thanks, but it’s fine. I’m fine.” Mingyu clears his throat, wanting to clear the atmosphere he unintentionally set, “How late are you guys practicing? It’s already past 9. Have you eaten dinner?”

Minghao finally catches his breath and his voice steady. Mingyu can hear the slosh of his water bottle before he responds, “What time is it?”

“9:33.”

“Ah, thought so.” He sighs, “Chan’s just been in for a few runs, so I think we have at least two more hours before we can call it quits for the night.”

“Aren’t you exhausted?”

“I can’t say that I am.” Minghao says it through gritted teeth, he can tell, “But you definitely sound more tired than I do.”

“Just a long day is all.” He lays down on his couch, “But really, have you eaten?”

“Not since breakfast, but don’t worry about it. I’m not hungry.” How is Mingyu supposed to not worry? It’s so late, “What did you have for dinner?”

“You really should take a break and get something to eat.”

“Dancing on a full stomach sounds like a mistake in my opinion, but if we get out before 1, we’ll probably drop by In-n-Out or something.” He laughs, but it doesn’t reach Mingyu who feels a little more troubled than when he made the phone call to start, “But we’re finally getting somewhere with the synchronicity. I’ve been going over the new steps between classes, but doing it with five other people makes it more difficult. It’s starting to look presentable.” Why are you laughing so dryly?

“You shouldn’t go from zero to a hundred overnight.” Mingyu shuts his eyes because silence fills the radio waves between their smartphones. Even though he feels bad for saying something wrong, he wishes he was there to nag him in person. Of all things that he wants to understand, it’s the logic of working yourself to the bone for just one event. There’ll be many more in the future and many that they’ve already won and placed in. Sure, this one might be the apex opportunity, but there’ll always be a bigger hill to climb, a bigger foe to grapple with.

In the background static, he hears someone call for the members to resume the practice. A faint drumroll leads into the intro and cues the end of their conversation. Someone curses, someone yells, someone tries to talk them down, someone laughs, and someone groans.

“It’s okay.” His voice sounds so tired, so hollow, “I need to make up for lost time.”

“Please text me when you get home so I know your victims don’t zombify and come back to kill you.”
“I will.” Someone calls for Minghao, but the slight infliction of agitation in their voice is already building a fire between Mingyu’s shoulder blades. But his voice smothers the embers, “Thanks for checking up on me. Good morning, Mingyu.”

Mingyu’s tongue is held between his teeth as he counts the seconds in his head. That was a short five minutes. That couldn’t have been accurate. He even looks at his wall-clock to check. Yeah, it was called thirty seconds early. Give Minghao some time to rest, he’s been working so hard recovering, “Good night, Minghao.”

Hanging up the phone is surprisingly less burdensome than he’d thought it would be. He does, however, stare at his phone’s static screen until it goes to sleep. He, himself, is not as fortunate. Mingyu hasn’t slept well in a long while and the idea of staying up to catch Minghao’s text later rakes at his attention. He knows that he doesn’t have to stay up to receive it, but he’ll feel better if he does. He knows himself that much. He’ll try to get to sleep if he can, even though he doubts it’ll happen.

Mingyu takes a hot shower, the kind that sears your back and you can’t wash your face in lest it burn the flesh right off. After he washes his hair, most of it is spent under the showerhead, flooding his scalp and body with molten lava. He knows that the hot water is bad for his skin, bad for his hair, but it feels a little meditative. When he gets out, he doesn’t bother wiping the fogged-up mirror to look at himself. He knows he’s as red as a lobster. He goes directly to slapping toner on his face and moisturizing every square inch of skin because he can already feel it tightening from being boiled.

Tonight, he’s too hot for pants and roams his apartment with boxers and a loose t-shirt. He makes some tea, reads through his mail, writes a couple checks, answers some e-mails, and files everything away neatly. He gives Romeo just a little sprinkle of water and sits at his dining table to stare at the plant. Seriously beautiful. He’s never seen a succulent so passionately red and so vibrantly green, only roses. This succulent will last years longer than a bouquet of roses ever could dream of living, maybe Minghao thought about that when he picked it out. Mingyu spins the glass vase on the table, passing it between his hands before he misses the catch and it hits his mug, sending Earl Grey spilling off its edge and onto the table. Luckily, it didn’t knock it over completely.

Okay, Romeo isn’t meant to be played with. It’s not a toy.

He debates setting it over with the collection of plants he has on his porch or hanging on his windowsill, but Romeo just has no place being with them. Most of those plants are viney and green, on the more delicate side with the need for sunlight and pampering. Romeo’s the type of plant that you only need to water a couple times a week and forget about, but Mingyu’s determined to let it flourish.

He wants to see it grow.

Mingyu’s shaken awake every time his eyes dip shut. He should just lay in bed and he does, but it seems like he’s paying for all those undeserved, sound nights of sleep in high school now. He misses being able to sleep well. He misses not dreaming. He buries himself in his plush covers, his goose-down duvet, his marshmallow pillows and curls up with the lights off, but having his phone charging on his nightstand next to his alarm clock makes it difficult to resist checking.

He sleeps for ten minutes at a time, always waking up for no reason. He tries to sleep again, but sits up a while later, frustrated that he can’t get any shuteye. Mingyu finally gives in to check his phone for new messages at—he has to squint—1:52am. No new messages.

He sighs and locks the phone, dropping it onto the carpet so that he doesn’t have to think about it anymore. It’s very likely that Minghao forgot or was too tired to send a text after he got
home. It happens all the time; Mingyu’s guilty of having done it too. With a lot of effort, he slides slowly back into the dark, into sleep just to wake up after what feels like five minutes. Scratching at his scalp, he picks up the phone, staring at it in the lightless room for a solid forty seconds before unlocking it and checking for new messages.

Of course, there aren’t any. There wasn’t a ping or any sort of noise from the device that would indicate that Minghao had messaged him while he was asleep. Well, there goes the theory that talking to Minghao directly before bed would improve his sleeping conditions. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt if he was the one to check in. He’s sure that Minghao wouldn’t *not* respond on purpose. That’s out of character. So, he finds their text thread in Messenger—not that that was very difficult, Mingyu only texts, like, four people—and starts a new message.

He doesn’t get a chance to send it because Minghao’s text pushes itself up onto the screen, ‘home.’ Mingyu looks at the time. 2:47am.

‘Welcome home.’

‘Sorry, did I wake you?’

‘No.’ Mingyu’s too tired to figure it out right now, but he doesn’t want to write words that’ll worry him, ‘I’ve been in and out of sleep.’ Still not good enough, ‘You caught me at a good time.’ Cry-laugh emoji.

‘Please go to bed.’

He’s going to elect to ignore that text, ‘How was In-n-Out?’

‘We missed it. I just got home from practice. I got home, showered, and texted you.’ The ellipses wave at him from the bottom of the screen, ‘Look at Cacahuate.’ And a picture pops up of the dog sleeping upside down on the couch, half his body sliding off and his tongue hanging out. It looks like Minghao has gone ahead and murdered his dog as well.

But Mingyu isn’t shaken that easily, ‘Please eat something.’

‘Roomie is heating up leftovers for me as we speak.’ He gets a picture of Seungcheol’s back, his hair is sticking up all over the place, but Mingyu can tell that he’s toned by the way his long-sleeved shirt stretches over his muscles as he leans his head against the microwave, waiting for it to finish, ‘He says I’m not allowed to sleep without eating a little. Otherwise, I’d have gone straight to bed.’ He’s too tired to think about jealousy. He’s more happy that someone’s getting food into Minghao’s system, ‘You know, like you should do.’ But if he had the chance, he would have probably done the same. ‘Right now.’ Except he would have heat that shit up over the stove. Only scrubs use the microwave to reheat affection-filled meals, ‘Mingyu.’ And Mingyu is no scrub when it comes to food, ‘GO TO BED.’

‘Okay, okay, I will.’ Zzz’s, more Zzz’s, more Zzz’s.

It goes quiet for almost ten minutes, but Mingyu’s awake now. There’s no sleep left in his body, he’s happy texting Minghao. He does know that there’s very little point in staying up after he said that he’d gone to bed. Minghao probably won’t text him anymore in case the pings wake him up, but Mingyu’s fine with a little waiting game. He’ll let sleep swallow him naturally, if Minghao texts him before then, then it’s good luck.

He shuts his eyes, but opens them again. There wasn’t a noise or anything like that, just a feeling. *Ping*, ‘You’re still awake, aren’t you.’
‘Nope. Sleep texting.’ Mingyu has to smile at his own terrible dad-joke.


‘I’m in bed.’ He’s in bed, ‘Are you?’

‘Getting there.’

‘I’m already asleep. Slowpoke.’ Should he? Should he? Should he? This is a little ballsy for him to do especially after how much of a weirdo he was yesterday and today. Minghao will definitely know something’s up if he sends this, but the sleep-deprived parts of his brain don’t care. Fuck it, they’re friends. This is a normal friend thing to do, ‘A picture if/when you get there because I don’t think murderers sleep that easily.’

He waits for a response.

He waits and waits and waits.

Another ten minutes pass before he gets a new message, ‘Sorry, had to murder the roommate before I could sleep peacefully.’ He hesitates to send a response right away because he’s not sure if Minghao will send a picture. Yeah, Minghao probably won’t send a picture. After two minutes, he starts typing a response, but when his fingers start the second word, Minghao sends a snapshot of him in bed. The front-camera flash lighting up his features in his pitch-black room. He looks a little impatient, laying down with his head on his palm, propped up by his elbow, his lips barely parted, his hair still damp from his shower earlier, and the top two buttons of his pajama shirt undone. He can also see Cacahuate’s black nose poke out from under the covers—something he could have probably caught first since it’s the likely focus of the photo—, but, oh sweet, cute, fluffy Cacahuate, your father is doing things to Mingyu’s sanity. He can’t help it. He misses the feeling of a dog sleeping in his bed. It was so much better than sleeping alone. It’s not that the idea of Minghao in bed sounds extra cozy or anything, but Mingyu almost misses having him in his arms, ‘In bed. Your turn. Picture required.’

Mingyu grins. He looks absolutely terrible, but if Minghao wants a picture and if that will put him to bed after a long day of work and tireless practice, then he’ll do it. He cocoons himself in his covers and sticks his arm out in the cold to take the photo. He normally doesn’t pout, but acting cute has its perks when you’re not ready to show your sultry side. ‘Proof shot. Good night, fuckboy Minghao.’

‘Good night, next victim on my hitlist.’ Mingyu’s own chuckle fills the air of his lonely bedroom, ‘I mean.’ And it starts to feel a little less lonely, ‘Good night, caterpillar Mingyu.’
Chapter 52

Mingyu still didn’t sleep great, but he slept better than other nights. When he gets in for work, he’s still tired, but that’s what he gets for staying up past 3. No one calls him out for it today because he’s sure to freshen up in the bathroom this morning. He even styled his hair today. It’s going to be a good day. He’s determined to make it a good day.

Joshua isn’t in today, so Jeonghan is taking over front desk duties until the imaging department’s manager comes in to help out like she so rarely does but so ready to do. Mingyu honestly likes working with her on occasion since she’s soft-spoken and funny without being rude. Unfortunately, the imaging department opens at 10:30, not 9, and Jeonghan has to hand his first two patients over to them; one for Mingyu, one for Wonwoo, “He’s out with a sore throat.” Jeonghan looks weary as well, but that isn’t as much of a concern as Joshua actually missing work for being sick.

“Joshua’s never sick.”

“Well, he’s sick today.” The serious side of Jeonghan seldom graces the clinic, but he seems to have turned a new leaf with his fresh responsibilities. He’s organizing the patient list and opening e-mails and answering phone calls and not having any lip from Mingyu, “So, get to it.” And sends Mingyu off with his stack of patient folders. Surprisingly, they’re all correct except for Ms. Mary-Louis Black who rescheduled for tomorrow since her kids are in town visiting.

Wonwoo seems like he’s in a good mood, giving Mingyu a look every time they pass in the hallways, but never saying anything. By lunchtime, Seokmin has also come into work and taken notice of Wonwoo’s peculiar mood.

“Is he okay?”

Mingyu’s not sure so he just shakes his head, “I have no clue. He’s been smiling like a creep all morning.”

Seokmin laughs a bright laugh. He’s a lot like Soonyoung when the dancer isn’t serious. Radiant, beaming, and full of jokes and good humor. Mingyu’s convinced that Seokmin doesn’t have a temper and that he’s more of a pacifist than anything else. Jeonghan obviously plays favorites. Seokmin’s never the butt of any joke and because Wonwoo still hasn’t completely melted into the workplace social ladder, Mingyu’s the appointed recipient.

At least now, with Seokmin taking on more hours after he dropped a for-fun elective, he spends more time at the clinic and they get to talk more. While he knows he can tell Wonwoo to stop pestering him with the idea of Minghao Xu as a significant other, Seokmin is like a breath of fresh air; a happy fool who knows nothing of Minghao Xu’s existence and he’d like to keep it that way.

“Maybe small-town fever has finally set in.” Mingyu knows that Seokmin has moved between major cities around America his whole life as his parents held some nice military positions and that he has a lot of friends in a lot of places. He’d moved to California from Texas for school and came to work at the clinic as a course requirement.

“Aren’t you from the city?”

“Well, I try to get out of town as often as I can.”
Wonwoo rounds the corner then, “Lunch?”

“No Soon today?” Wonwoo shakes his head.

“Practice.”

Mingyu doesn’t know why his eyes hit the ground when practice is mentioned. It’s like he can feel the exhaustion setting into his bones just from hearing it. Nearly eight straight hours of practice in one night, not counting the time he had between classes; that’s insane, “So, lunch?” Seokmin smiles at him as Wonwoo slaps a hand on his back.

“Lunch!” Wonwoo’s grossly energetic today.

They take the short walk across the street and settle down at some tea and quiche shop called The Tea Cart. They have a million and one types of cold-brew tea, a colorful assortment of pies and quiches line a display and are reheated when ordered, and the most uncomfortable chairs on Earth. Why would any café buy short, metal barstools like this? Mingyu’s not a huge fan of their décor theme of garage-sale chic, but he can overlook the bad seating arrangements for their drinks and will suffer through the jagged nut-and-bolt grinding into his ass-cheek for that goat cheese and spinach quiche.

He’s almost positive that Minghao would find the place interesting. Maybe he’ll invite him out here one day on a friendly not-date.

Their lunch is eaten over idle conversation. Small-talk. He appreciates that Wonwoo recognizes that Seokmin is his safety zone and Minghao isn’t mentioned at all. He has a nice time. Mingyu feels looser today, better today. The weather is nice, his skin is clear, everything just seems very peaceful. However, the lack of bad news makes him anxious. Aren’t things going too well? Seokmin convinces them to take their crumbs and feed the birds outside on the sidewalk. It’s childish, but it’s fun and Wonwoo gets five inches away from petting a pigeon. So close! But it flaps away from them and shocks Wonwoo into stumbling backwards and into their protection.

That’s how lunch ends, full of laughter and good feelings.

“Hey, I have something for you.” Oh, and here’s the bad news to ruin it all. He can feel his stomach sink. Wonwoo tugs on his sleeve when they’re about to leave the breakroom. Seokmin is outside talking to Jeonghan about something and Mingyu’s been left alone with the senior PT. He turns around slowly, looking at Wonwoo’s hand and following his arm up to his face, “C’mon, the world isn’t going to end. Calm down.”

Wonwoo reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a small, folded piece of paper. It looks like a fancy letter-fold, the kind that you use to pass notes in middle school, “What is it?” Mingyu squints before receiving it.

“From Soonyoung. I don’t know what it is.” He opens Mingyu’s hand and places the credit card-sized letter in his palm, closing his fingers around it. Somehow the middle school letter origami doesn’t stray from his character. This is one hundred percent the only way Mingyu could picture receiving any hand-written letter from Soonyoung, “I haven’t opened it.”

“He couldn’t just text me?” They hadn’t messaged much since Mingyu acquired his phone number from that one, very angry phone call on Minghao’s birthday. Their texts had been limited to hellos and short messages about their days. Soonyoung only uses three emojis with him; hearts, stars, and eyes. It’s contrary to his boyfriend’s near-exclusive use of emojis instead of words. It just stumps Mingyu that the man knows how to send multimedia messages, but has to send a letter through a
carrier pigeon named Wonwoo.

The shorter PT shrugs, “He doesn’t like texting.” Of course, he’s technologically impaired, “I think it’s thanks for finding his earphones. Read it well.” He pats Mingyu on the back before leaving for his next appointment.

Mingyu waits until he’s off work and in his car to gingerly open the folded letter. It’s kind of cute and then suddenly a lot less cute. What kind of hell-spawn puts a teaspoon of glitter in a letter. Fuck. There’s teal and silver glitter all over his lap now. Mingyu freezes, dumbfounded by the onslaught of Satan’s dandruff in his car. After regrouping for a moment, he opens the door and stands up, brushing the glitter off and watching it rain onto the ground. Absolutely disgusting. Luckily—if any part of this letter ordeal can be considered lucky anymore—, none of it gets on his upholstery. There are a few flecks on his shirt and his hands are probably never going to be free of the hell-sand, but at least it’s not in his car.

Part of him is ready for a rejection of some sort; a telephoned message from Minghao through Soonyoung about never wanting to see him again and redacting his declaration of friendship. Part of him hopes that Minghao’s not involved at all and Soonyoung can just say thank you like a normal person, but since this is a glitter-filled letter, he supposes that being normal is out of question. The last part of him expects it to be a poorly drawn dick-pick.

‘My dear friend and dingus, Mingyu.’ this is already starting off poorly, ‘Wonwoo said you’d be rewarded handsomely if you found my earphones, so this is your gift.’ Mingyu double checks that he didn’t drop anything out of it earlier. Without finding any evidence of a physical gift, he continues reading, ‘Since Hao knows everything about you from your stale and sad apartment, I thought you might like some visual insight to him as well. Here’s his Instagram @bboy_infinite.’ The handwriting gets progressively more difficult to read as the letter goes on, akin to that of when he fell asleep taking notes during college lecture halls, ‘I had to write this letter because I don’t know how to send you a link in a text message and Wonwoo’s a huge meanie and told me to Google it. But then I thought you might like receiving a letter since you probably don’t get much mail, so suck a dick Wonwoo Jeon, this is a great workaround.’ Why does reading Soonyoung’s letter feel like a double-edged sword? ‘Please don’t tell him I gave you this!’ Mingyu will hold this information as blackmail then, ‘But really, Mingyu, thank you for taking care of Minghao. I’m not going to say I owe you one because Hao’s already proving that IOUs are a bad idea with Jun, but really, thank you from the bottom of my heart. Thank you, thank you, thank you,’ they continue on for most of the page until they turn into mere scribbles and the last word is literally just a squiggly line that is dragged off the page, ‘I’m sorry I’m rambling. I’m writing this at 3am and Wonwoo’s snoring really loudly and distracting me. I’ll end it here. See you at the dinner. With love, Soon-soon.’

Okay, a pleasant surprise.

It’s not a rejection letter. It’s not a dick-pick.

Mingyu gets back into his car and reads it again before driving to his apartment at which point he reads it for a third time. There’s something uniquely adorable about Soonyoung writing a letter at his bedside while nodding off and something exceptionally evil about him having enough energy to fill it with glitter afterwards.

Despite his growing curiosity about the Instagram account, the thing that sticks out most is the little statement about the dinner. Why is Soonyoung so sure that he’ll go? No one’s mentioned anything and if he’s arranged to go, shouldn’t someone tell him so that he can make sure to clear his
day? Maybe they don’t have enough logic to do that, but Mingyu keeps his 17th free like Soonyoung told him to do before. If he doesn’t go, then at least he has the whole day to pamper himself.

Then. The Instagram account.

Mingyu hasn’t logged in to his Instagram for a long time. He never felt the need after he was done with school. He didn’t need to keep up with everyone, his tens of thousands of followers, or the hundreds of mutuals he kept but never talked to. Instagram was for sharing the high and beautiful points of your life and working at a clinic in a small town didn’t seem neat or newsworthy. He also left Instagram because it just made him feel more lonely. His high school friends would sometimes meet up. They’re doing well and getting married and starting families and travelling and seeing corners of the world that he hasn’t been to.

It’s no surprise that his follower count has dwindled since the days he was actually concerned about those numbers. No one needs to stick around for a dead account. His last post was from last winter when he went home for the holidays and shared a picture of their Christmas tree that his parents had spent at least three hours decorating. The next photo was a picture of the extravagant Christmas lights in his parent’s neighborhood. When they weren’t as well to do, they’d only put up a string of lights, but since they’d built their savings, their home was always covered from baseboard to chimney with sparkling lights. His mom would hand out candy canes to people who came to take pictures and his dad would dress up as Santa and spread seasonal joy.

Maybe he should go visit for the holidays.

He hesitates before typing Minghao’s username into the search bar. The most popular account pops up first and it’s him. ‘Minghao. Limitless. 26. Dogs. Dance instructor at Performance Studio.’ If Soonyoung was going to stick his neck out for Mingyu, then he’s going to indulge in reading everything he can. He’s careful not to hit the follow button and not to double-tap but starts scrolling through his posts.

Surprisingly, very little of it is about dance.
Minghao’s Instagram is organized.

He has more followers than Mingyu for good reason. Each photo is taken with an artistic eye. The focal points are well calculated and the colors all mesh together very nicely. It looks like he updates often, maybe not every day, but often. His single link leads to the studio’s official Instagram account where there is a mesh of everything. Trophies, group pictures, performances, and demonstrations. On the official account, there’s a link to their YouTube channel, but Mingyu will respect Minghao’s past and not look at it. Yet.

He returns to Minghao’s page. His story isn’t active. Maybe he doesn’t use it much.

4 hours ago. ‘Today seems like a nice day.’ Minghao’s picture captures the weather perfectly. The slightly swaying trees, the blue sky, the thick and heavy clouds, and Cacahuate panting with a big smile. A good day indeed.

1 day ago. ‘Let’s do this.’ A picture of him and five others in the mirror of their practice room. They’re all wearing black so it’s a difficult to tell them apart, but he can see Soonyoung’s purple hair sticking out from under his cap. The comments are mostly fire emojis.

2 days ago. ‘Ain’t life amazing like that?’ Plants. A lot of plants. It comes accompanied by a check-in at Lowry’s and the first picture in the set is some vivid macro of a sedum succulent with dew drops on its leaves. A comment mentions that the third picture is ‘super cute. I must have it.’ And Minghao responds, ‘it’s called a hawthoria! I really want one too, but every plant I touch dies. I better just leave it in the store.’ Well, that’s one thing they don’t have in common, but Mingyu doesn’t mind taking care of plants if Minghao keeps supplying them.

3 days ago. ‘Went out for ramen with Jun after a long practice. Good luck at the conference, @tfboys!’ A picture of Jun giggling on his phone, taking a picture of his own bowl of ramen is posted. It shouldn’t be a flattering angle, but he’s pretty sure that Jun can’t take a bad picture. Most of the comments consist of people wishing them good luck. The rare comment of ‘I can’t believe you two aren’t married yet’ pops up and ‘Look at my dads. JKJK @wenjunwhy is looking good. Hit a homie up, let’s go snowboarding.’ is there as well. Maybe reading comments is a mistake.

5 days ago. ‘Some nights I lay awake wondering about you and some nights I sleep well knowing that you’ve had a good day.’ Some artsy photo of his nightstand. If Minghao is anything he’s a pro at using filters and typing corny quotes. A lot of the comments tease about whoever he’s addressing in the caption. Mingyu tries not to think too much about it.

6 days ago. ‘This is unsafe. All of this. I can’t believe these fucks that I call my friends called me into work just to trick me into coming out. Yugeeom, I hope those nachos actually do give you food poisoning.’ It’s a set. The first picture is a lovely vibrant blacklight-lit room, vivid neon lights darting around with motion blur. The next photo is less aesthetically pleasing. A picture of Chan up on Soonyoung’s shoulders at a bowling alley; yes, the man is about to bowl from that height. It looks like it’s late due to the neon lights that only come on after kids are sent home. The next photo in the set is of @xheoney94 and Soonyoung screaming with Jun running away. After that is a photo of Minghao being thrown in the air by @bambam1a and @yu_gyeom. There are a few more photos; a girl putting Chan in a headlock, Yixing looking scared as Jun lifts a bowling ball over his head (he’s screaming), Yugeeom eating a fistful of over-priced nachos, and Soonyoung squishing Minghao’s face and giving him a big kiss on the cheek while his hands are occupied holding BamBam back from doing the same. Oh, this must’ve been the birthday post. They weren’t lying when they said
that Minghao didn’t like celebrating. His face looks less than enthralled. There’s no mention from anyone in the comments about his birthday and none of the pictures held any cake.

1 week ago. ‘It’s been a while since I’ve done this. Sorry for the bad pic, I don’t have much time today.’ Mingyu’s not sure how taking a picture of cooking ingredients in low lighting can be pretty, but it is. The main focus is on a bottle of wine and a small wooden bowl holding salt. Everything else is blurry and in the background of what looks to be a very clean kitchen and a black granite counter top. From the picture alone, you can’t discern that he’s cooking, but Mingyu knows. This was the day he was sick.

1 week ago. ‘I don’t like feeling uncertain, but I guess it’s inevitable sometimes. Hope everyone’s having a good night.’ Some sort of nice, full-body selfie in the studio mirror.

Mingyu scrolls through a couple posts, not really reading, just appreciating the style in which they’re taken. It’s like a visual buffet. The photos are seriously professional and from the comments, he knows that Minghao doesn’t even have an SLR camera—just his phone—, but the way they’re taken shows a steady and confident hand. They’re like catalogue images; IKEA brochures, home-keeping blogs, Pinterest porn—he’s convinced that less than half of his followers are here for dance, but just for the photos. There’s even one that catches his eye and takes him back immediately.

3 November 2023. ‘Have you ever looked up at the sky and just felt.’ Maybe Minghao has a decent camera at home because the stars come out very well. The closer Mingyu looks, the less it looks like a picture of the night sky, but more like a painting. Does Minghao paint? He decides to read the comments. Yeah, he does paint and this one isn’t his first.

And, yes.

Mingyu has looked up at the sky and just felt.

He returns to thumbnail view. More than enough of the posts are full of places and people, pretty things and pretty camerawork. Mingyu’s not really learning anything. If anything, he’s just feeling bad that he leads such an uneventful life. Minghao’s life is so full, so full of color and friends.

19 August 2023. ‘A belated celebration for someone special! Thanks for all you’ve done for me. These last two weeks have been rough on us, but we stuck it out like champs. I don’t know what I’d do without you having my back. Best roomie. 10/10 would recommend.’ Mingyu finally gets to have a good look at Seungcheol and all his exotic-looking, model-esque glory. Following a caption like that—there’s just no avoiding the bubbling envy in the pit of his stomach. The way Minghao snaps the picture so easily with Seungcheol under his arm and Cacahuate popping up between them from the bottom of the image, the way their heads are pressed together, and the way their expressions are so carefree; Mingyu wonders how well the really know each other. They seem so close.

Like Wonwoo said before, Seungcheol, like Mingyu, probably has his own category. He still doesn’t quite understand what that means, but—all the more so—it makes Seungcheol feel like a rival; more so than Jun. He shouldn’t be. He has no reason to be a rival of any sort. Minghao had never expressed interest in Seungcheol and as far as Mingyu knows, Minghao doesn’t show romantic interest in anyone. Seungcheol, as a roommate, probably doesn’t care about Minghao’s personal relationships (and only his dog). Yet, Mingyu feels burdened. Out of Minghao’s disgustingly attractive friends, Seungcheol is the only one he has yet to meet.

He knows that if he’s ever going to get closer to Minghao, he’s going to have to meet Seungcheol and that fact alone is intimidating enough. Based on looks alone, Seungcheol doesn’t
look like the type of person he’d get along with. He looks a bit like a hard-ass, a bit like a temperamental alpha-male. But shouldn’t he trust Minghao’s judgement of people by now? Every one of those attractive friends has proven that they are an upstanding friend and person. Seungkwan gave them free donuts. Jun called him out for tea and a conversation. Soonyoung wrote him a letter full of thanks (and glitter that he’s still finding flakes of). And Wonwoo is the closest thing to a good friend that he has in this desolate little college town.

Maybe Seungcheol won’t be that bad. Maybe Seungcheol is nice and sweet and funny just like all of Minghao’s other friends. It’s better not to think too much on it. Meeting him rides on Minghao and Mingyu retaining and growing their friendship after all. It’s nonsensical to think that far into the future. Back to Instagram stalking.

Maybe it’ll be easier to understand Minghao if he starts from the beginning of it all. Well, almost the beginning of it all.

The first post in his gallery is a white, brick wall. The caption reads, ‘It’s time to start anew.’

Based on the date, this was in college, the first semester after they graduated high school. The comments on that post are vague, but it’s evident that a lot of people were worried about his condition before the post with words like ‘I’m glad you’re back.’ ‘Who needs people like that. It’s better to move forward.’ ‘There’s always a brighter tomorrow.’ ‘Sometimes it’s okay to wallow in the past, but try to build a better future.’ ‘Time to build a bridge and get over it. I’ll help! Let’s go get coffee.’ It makes Mingyu curious. Minghao said that high school hadn’t been a bad time, so what could have happened between then and then and then? He has a million questions now and decides to make a mental note of them for a future time because he scrolls through the older photos quickly.

Most of them consist of casual college and university fair. People, places, things, *nouns*. There’s only one photo since the first one that sticks out from the normal aesthetic of Minghao’s professional-looking Instagram. There’s no caption, but it was taken not too long ago. A few months ago, based on the date, early August. A black background with a pink dot in the corner. When Mingyu clicks on it to look, it’s clarified that the black background is a zoomed in picture of a black suit jacket and the pink dot is a pastel pink ribbon. The comments are few. All of them are full of love, full of prayers and comfort and well wishes. Mingyu is aware enough to understand what the post is about.

Someone passed away.

He tries to gain more information from the posts surrounding it, but the post before it was taken at least two weeks before and the post after it only comes a month later. He just wants to know what not to say. Was this someone close to Minghao? Was this someone that held value? It wasn’t too long ago, so is he still hurting? There’s some kind of desperation in how fast Mingyu scrolls through the feed, looking for clues, looking for context, but coming up empty-handed. There’s nothing. The following posts are all about feeling good, about positivity, about enjoying life.

The comments aren’t helpful either.

It’s like Minghao and his cult following are all professionals at getting over things. Minghao’s told him before that he tries not to dawdle on things that can’t be changed, but Mingyu’s not convinced. He reads the entire comment section of the following post. It’s a picture of a sunrise, pink and orange with silhouetted powerlines and rooftops cutting the horizon, captioned ‘We grow. We learn. We have to keep going. I hope everyone’s day is full of light and love. Let’s make it the best one we’ve had so far.’ Following that is Seungcheol’s birthday post, after that a picture with Soonyoung. Mingyu’s sure that at least one of his followers would have made a note about the blacked-out post, but he only finds one that indirectly addresses it, ‘Your strength is admirable. A lot
has happened to you this year Hao. When you started deleting posts, I grew worried about your health, mental and physical. And I don’t want to bring it up, but I think you missed the black suit post. Sorry for mentioning it. You’ve endured so much in such a short time, my heart hurts for you.’

And it’s the only one that Minghao responds to, ‘My strength is nothing special, but I figured that it’s better to appreciate what we have while we have it. I want this account to be a positive and peaceful place for everyone that finds it. I don’t want to dwell on something like that. I posted the picture with the intent to spread awareness, not my sadness. That’s why I kept it up. I just removed a lot of the darker posts from this account. Even though they’re rare, new people who come here don’t need to see stuff like that. I’ll be deleting comments relating to them as well, I guess you’re the lucky one that gets to stay as an explanation, J. We’ll call it a healthy purge. I don’t want to look at that stuff anymore. Today, we have today. Let’s live it to its fullest.’

*Minghao.*

*Your strength is admirable.*
Mingyu doesn’t know why he’s getting teary, but he feels like crying.

Maybe he’s just a little delusional after a long day of back-to-back appointments and not enough sleep. He’s a little disappointed that shuffling through Minghao’s Instagram—something that was supposed to be sneaky fun—wound up here. There’s certainly a bit of a dark cloud looming over his head now. Mingyu’s never lost anyone close to him. Death isn’t really something that he’s had to confront head-on. Everyone’s still alive and kicking. Everyone can still smile and greet him. He can still hear them on the phone. He can still visit their homes. His grandparents are still around, his parents are still around, his friends are still around and the idea of losing any of them makes his guts churn. To wake up one morning and find that someone isn’t there anymore is no laughing matter.

He calls his mom and dad later that night just to hear their voices. They don’t talk about anything in particular and the Facetime is short, but he feels better after it. He calls his grandparents in Korea as well. He knows that it’s early for them, but they pick up and ask how he’s doing and he ends up promising that he’ll visit when summer rolls around and the clinic is less busy. He calls his cousin in New Mexico, his cousins in Oregon, his aunt in Ontario, his other aunt in Melbourne, his uncle in Hastings. They’re just quick calls, but it feels more real than sending text messages. Call it instant gratification. For the handful of friends he still has from college and high school, he shoots them texts and checks up on their Facebooks to make sure they’re well. They are. They are. They are doing fine. He’s overreacting and now he’s feeling a little better. A little better.

But he doesn’t feel all the way better. Just knowing that Minghao has someone that he can’t call anymore makes him feel unsettled. It is probably that way because it feels so recent, just two months before meeting him again. He remembers what Jun said—about Minghao having a rough few years. It’s evident in the large pockets of missing posts the more Mingyu looks through them. He usually posts every couple days, every day if it’s a good week, but there are pockets. There are pockets. Some pockets span a week, some a month and a half, and some just an irregularity of a few days. Of course, none of it can be conclusive. Mingyu’s left social media for weeks at a time, too, and as someone who feels compelled to learn as much as he can about Minghao Xu, he’s prone to overanalyzing.

Even though he’s been sitting on his couch scrolling through Minghao’s Instagram for the last two hours, his legs are tired and heavy, his chest is tight, and his arms are sore. Maybe he’s catching another cold. Maybe Minghao has destroyed his immune system. He even debates calling him to settle the score, but remembers that he shouldn’t have Minghao’s Instagram username in the first place and calling him to ask if he’s okay is irrational and will blow his cover.

Deciding, instead, that it’s time to get a snack and maybe vacuum, he stretches his thumb to exit out of Minghao’s page, but a text pops up at the top of his screen.

‘Hey. Soon just told me what he gave you. His dumb ass doesn’t know how to copy and paste in text. Can you believe that? I still don’t know how he survived college.’ Wonwoo’s not done, ‘So, how are you enjoying Hao’s photography?’ Frog. Camera. Sparkles. Sparkly heart.

‘It’s nice. I now know he can have a backup career as a photographer, but I’m not learning anything. How was this supposed to help lol’ Mingyu can afford Wonwoo some emojis. Sad face. Crystal ball. Broken heart. It’s not like he really wants to continue digging around. Despite Minghao’s Instagram being all positive comments and a healthy space, he can’t help but feel the way he does right now. It’s not like any of the already-cheery posts can, well, cheer him up.
‘Have you only been looking through his personal photos this whole time? I guess Soon’s not the only dumb one when it comes to technology.’ Smirk.

What else was he supposed to do with- oh. Mingyu hits the third icon to right. He really is an idiot when it comes to Minghao. Thanks, Wonwoo.

There’s a plethora of pictures where Minghao is tagged. Like a whole ocean and Mingyu can’t hold his curiosity back. Tagged photos probably offer more insight than his own account of incidents and photos ever could. You can learn a lot about someone based on the impression they leave on others after all; he should have done this from the start, but the visual feast of Minghao’s feed was too much.

Many of the recent posts are audience-taken photos and videos from semi-finals. Some of them are screencaps of his live videos. Mingyu recognizes Jun’s bright yellow elephant onesie. Someone even draws a very cute fanart of Jun, Soonyoung, Minghao, and several other instructors in their costumes with the comment ‘It’s a fucking zoo in this studio and no dancing got done tonight so I just drew my favorite furry instructors on the whiteboard instead. I can’t believe P’Bam came as a fucking Gucci snake. He’s trying to drink punch without his hands. Smh. I hate everyone that works here.’

A more recent upload he’s tagged in is actually from high school. A photoset of the dance team and its members in group photos. Some of them are more extreme with people doing flips and people flying in the air, but some of them are just wholesome group selfies (with everyone on the ground). Mingyu can see the commons in the background, the grass he remembers walking through to get to lunch. ‘#TBT to the best four years of school I’ve ever had. Everyone seems to hate high school to some degree, but I had all of these people who made it worthwhile. I’m even engaged to one of them ten years down the road.’ Minghao still had his baby cheeks back then and his big, brown puppy-dog eyes are unmistakably full of warmth.

Minghao actually responds to this one. It seems like he only responds to people he’s known personally, ‘Man, these pictures take me back, Denjay. Makes me miss high school a little. Remember when you and Andrew tried to parkour over the bike racks and scratched Mr. Calhoun’s orthopedic bike? Hope Queens is treating you well and congrats again to you and Siobhan. HMU if you come back to town!’ Mingyu never knew they were the reason that Mr. Calhoun—the AP Chemistry teacher—had an hour-long rant about how his special, custom bike was damaged, but to think he’s found the culprits a decade later is kind of funny.

On a different post, there’s a set of screencaps of the party’s livestream highlights from the official YouTube. The first thing that stands out to Mingyu is Minghao’s unmistakable laughter in the background. They did, in fact, end up bowling with Jun. Minghao had on the hottest costume that night and had all his students lusting after him. Soonyoung started pelting people with candy after they shoved his head into the apple-bobbing water. Yixing ran around in a unicorn onesie, handing out pastel-colored candies to everyone who stopped by. Some of the students used the cushioned floormats to build a giant fort in one of the studio’s rooms.

Another post from the party really clears the cloud above his head.

Hansol popped the giant ghost inflatable. ‘Vernon decked Ghosteve in the face and ended it all.’ ‘Good riddance.’ ‘I’m glad he hates it as much as we do lmao’ and someone also comments ‘Soonyoung made Jooheon and Minghao work for an hour to set that thing up. I swear they both
almost cried when Soonyoung ran into A2 with the carcass screaming “GHOSTEVE NOOO!” sidenote to anyone who wasn’t there: it could have been fixed, but Soonyoung smashed the fan motor on the doorframe on his way in. ‘Permadeath for Ghosteve w00t w00t!’

That much brings a smile back to Mingyu’s lips. Their students are hilarious.

Among others, there are several MCM posts. At a glance, it’s both students and other dancers that’ve met Minghao in the past. With comments like ‘@bboy_infinite is the definition of dedicationgoals’, ‘I’m never sure if I want to be Minghao Xu or his audience’, and ‘I’ve never met someone as stunning at this man right here. The only thing bigger than his stage presence is his heart. Ya’ll should follow for some A+ photography. Let’s catch up soon, @bboy_infinite.’ A sea of admirers feels like an unusual sight for Mingyu. Normal occupations don’t really warrant a fan following. He can’t say he’s met a physical therapist with followers as enthusiastic as this.

A more recent post shows a screenshot from his story, a function that Mingyu abused for many years and is glad he has no part in anymore. He almost doesn’t recognize his own back in his own kitchen because he’s distracted by the overlaid caption ‘I think today is a good day’.

He laughs at the poster’s caption because he’s a little flattered, ‘Minghao Xu, who the hell is this tall, tan, and handsome? I need answers and his number asap.’ Luckily, it’s from a less popular account and no one responds, but part of him wants to comment and write that it’s him if only to brag that he knows Minghao Xu well enough to have him over for dinner. There’s one other post from the same user a few days before that. Mingyu has to doubletake because he almost doesn’t recognize his own face. Minghao had been kind enough to crop out his eyes and keep his identity hidden, but it’s the text that really warms his heart.

‘Have you ever seen a smile so unreal’.

His heart doesn’t skip a beat, but it does a little jiggle and squeals like a squeaky toy. Minghao likes his smile.

That was when he thought Minghao was taking a picture of the cake. He wonders if all of Minghao’s story photos have cheesy captions like that. It’s not like Mingyu hasn’t been complimented on his show-stopping smile before. He’s been told he has a nice smile since he’s had teeth (maybe even before), but for some reason seeing Minghao type it out makes the statement feel special and surreal.

The poster’s comment underneath the photo is asking for his identity again with the premise of hunting him down and asking him out, but it’s one of the responses that really makes him blush.


Yeah, they wouldn’t have a chance anyway.
Chapter 55

Minghao texts him a little after 8, a little before 9. Somewhere in between. His text is open-ended and Mingyu doesn’t have to respond, but he easily returns the message.

‘I miss you, sweet baby boy.’

He’s all showered and clean. Dinner has been postponed for long enough. He’d spent the whole night on Instagram without realizing it. Not just on Minghao’s, don’t worry, but clicking through other users, browsing through tags, etcetera. He goes through Jun’s page, a little salty that the man’s feed is almost exclusively patterned posts: random location video, selfie, studio and repeats itself every three days. His description is simple as well, ‘俊辉 | GD -> Cali | Dance | Piano | Performance Studio’. Half of his selfies include other people, Minghao and Soonyoung most commonly. His first posts are messy and unorganized. Mingyu was right, his hair used to be long which probably gave rise to his habit of tucking his fringe behind his ear. He’s not surprised to see an infantile Wonwoo in some of the earlier photos as well, but wonders why they stop early on. It’s not like Wonwoo’s not part of his life anymore. They must see each other often. Maybe Wonwoo’s camera shy. He can’t tell. Soonyoung doesn’t have an Instagram.

One of Jun’s newer posts features him playing the piano and Mingyu will admit that it isn’t a surprise. With how graceful and soft Jun is, he’s more surprised that the instrument isn’t a harp or something of that nature. Most of the comments praise him, but there’s one that stands out and it’s @ljh_midi who says ‘the sound quality is terrible, but overall nice comp. better than your last one. 6/10’ and Jun responds, ‘I lost 4 points for audio quality? That’s so mean. I thought we were friends.’ To which the user responds, ‘5/10 not friends’. Everyone in the comments seems to like their banter, so Mingyu clicks through to see who @ljh_midi is.

Oh, it’s a studio guy. The one who has the occupation that Mingyu doesn’t understand.

‘WOOZI. Audio Engineer. DJ. Composer. DM for business inquiries.’ He has an accompanying link to his SoundCloud, but Mingyu doesn’t really care enough to open it. Jihoon’s photos are mostly random despite his copious amounts of followers and likes. He posts albums on occasion, but most of the images are his own works with audio snippets of lively songs. He recently posted a photo with a wide-eyed Hansol in front of his recording equipment at home. The younger man is making a funny—if not disgusted—face and it’s captioned with ‘just finished the official mix for finals. i’m going to sleep for five years. i think he’s lost his marbles or has rabies. someone save me’.

It’s cool that Minghao appears every now and then on his friends’ pages. He’s also a little envious that they’re able to keep up appearances despite their busy schedule and long workdays.

‘Haha’ Minghao pings back, ‘That’s not the response I was expecting to ‘I wanna walk my dog’, but for what it’s worth, Cacahuate misses you, too, but what about me?’

Mingyu puts his phone down on his lap, refusing to look at it for just one moment. He could be a little… he could try just a little. It worked last night with the picture, right? Maybe the luck will carry on to today as well, ‘And you?’ Mingyu types out the next message, scraping his thumb’s nail on the send button, but not hitting it yet. Minghao’s provoking him to say something, he doubts its flirting. They’re friends, Minghao said so, but asking Mingyu to admit something like ‘I miss you, too’ is a little out of the ordinary for a friendship.

He locks his phone before sending the text. Forget Instagram. Forget texting. He needs a
second to think about this, ‘Me?’ Oh, he responded. Did he take it as a question? Mingyu wasn’t trying to turn the question around, but he supposes if his texts were ever to be read incorrectly, now would be a good time because the next message makes it worth not sending his I-miss-you to Minghao, ‘Well, I want to see you soon.’

The sound that comes out of Mingyu’s mouth is something akin to a wheeze and a screech combined into one. Why is a grown man hugging his phone to his chest and rolling off his couch? Because a grown man can and this grown man feels like a million bucks. That’s, like, 70 bitcoins! It might be self-indulgent, but he likes to hear- see- read Minghao admit that he likes Mingyu even just a little bit. Petty validation at its finest. It’s a new feeling, too. Mingyu’s used to praise. He’s used to being wanted and pined after, but he never understood the feelings of the people whose affection he acknowledged. If it feels this good, he regrets not giving them more attention when he could have.

‘Practice tonight I’m guessing?’ He wants to see Minghao, too, but since yesterday’s practice took priority over dinner, he supposes today’s will follow suit.

‘Yeah’ Minghao’s texting quite slowly tonight. It’s possible that he’s only responding to texts between rounds of music and has saved longer responses for when he gets a water break. So, Mingyu waits patiently like he should. He occupies himself with making dinner. Tonight’s menu will be pan-seared salmon, wild rice, spinach, and an unhealthy amount of butter and lemon. ‘Chan can’t come in tonight and Jun and Soonyoung are choreographing for a wedding flashmob.’

He sets his plate down on the counter before he can dig into it. Does that mean that Minghao’s free for dinner? ‘Are you free for dinner?’ Mingyu feels his thumb ghosting over the send button before retracting it and backspacing his words. He worries his lip before typing the same message a second time. It’s just a friend asking another friend for dinner. Aside from Mingyu coming to terms with an important fact, nothing else has changed in their relationship. He should be able to continue as they were, so why is sending a simple message so hard? He bites the bullet and sends the text anyway.

Minghao’s response is fast.

It must be break time, ‘We’re going practice as much as we can while 5 of us are here. It’s mostly just so I can get the formations down. Jun and Soon have to leave in an hour and Jihoon just got called in for a gig. So practice will probably end when everyone has to go.’ Hello, little ellipsis, ‘But because I’ve missed so much physical practice, I’m still lacking. I’m going to stay and practice by myself.’ Mingyu starts typing out his response. That’s okay, Minghao is busy. He’s supposed to be busy. Mingyu was foolish to think that dinner with him would take precedent over sweating in a hot room for hours on end, ‘I wish I could though.’

Something reverberates in Mingyu’s chest. He’s not sure if it’s feelings or phlegm, but he hates that he’s full of self-doubt every time he thinks about Minghao. It’s getting ridiculous, ‘That’s okay. Just promise you’ll eat at a normal time tonight.’ He forks a piece of salmon into his mouth. The hands of his wall clock tell him it’s almost 9pm. It’s well past dinnertime.

‘I’ll try my best. Bye! :)’ Huh. Odd. Minghao never sends smileys or emojis or any sort of characters with his texts. Maybe his teammates really did zombify and come back to exact revenge and the first thing they’d done was hijack his phone.

After dinner, he feels tired—as most people do after eating dinner.

The rain outside is falling in heavy sheets and—after showering and brushing his teeth—it’s
the perfect lullaby for a solid night of deep sleep. He flips off all the lights in his apartment with quick hands and tosses himself into his cool sheets before bundling up and shutting his eyes.

Only to open them again in an hour.

‘Hey, text me when you get home safe. I’m going to bed.’ He types out quickly, but eats up the characters just as fast, instead sending ‘Text me when you get home.’ He immediately locks his phone and shoves it under his pillow as he tries to guide himself back to sleep. Minghao should be leaving the studio any minute now, but Mingyu doesn’t get a response for at least thirty minutes.

Is he okay? Did something happen?

‘You good?’ he texts again. That shouldn’t be too forward, right? Minghao knows that Mingyu knows that he should’ve gone home by now. It isn’t that aggressively friendly, is it? Nah, no, nope, it’s not. It’s perfectly fine.

However, another hour passes without any new messages.

Mingyu’s wide awake now, sitting up in bed and occupying himself with quick, casual phone games, trying to take his mind off calling Minghao—anything but Minghao, but that’s the problem. He can’t. Minghao’s safety is on his brain now. Is it selfish to say that he wants to know that Minghao’s okay just so he knows he gets to see him again? Probably, but Mingyu doesn’t care for this moment. He exits out of his app and goes to his recent calls, scrolling down past all the numbers of his relatives to find Minghao’s and hitting call.

It rings once, it rings twice; a third time, a fourth time. Voicemail.

Mingyu hangs up before getting to Minghao screaming at Jun. He backs up a bit before he goes over the top with worry. Maybe he left his phone in the car while getting food. Maybe he fell asleep before looking at his messages. He’s probably fine. He’s definitely fine. Mingyu lets the line go silent for another hour, but he’s tired and can’t stay awake any longer.

It rings once, it rings twice; a third time, a fourth time. Voicemail.

Maybe he should call Soonyoung. He could probably call Seungcheol to see if Minghao got home alright—ring, ring, ring.

“Sorry I missed your call. I couldn’t hear the ringtone over the music.” He’s panting, out of breath, “What’s up?”

“Are you still practicing? It’s almost midnight.”

Minghao’s still searching for air. He pauses a second before answering, likely gulping down water, “Yeah. Is it really midnight already?” It’s said as more of an afterthought than an actual question. Had Minghao really not looked at the clock this whole time?

“Alone?”

Minghao hums a ‘yes’, “The guys left at 9 and the studio closed at 10. I’ve got a key. Is everything alright, Mingyu?”

“Hm? Yeah, everything is fine. I just wanted to make sure…” you were okay.

“Make sure?”
“That you ate. Have you eaten?” Minghao chuckles nervously. A guilty man caught red-handed if he’s ever heard one, “I’ll take that as a no.” He remembers that Wonwoo once mentioned Soonyoung would skip meals if when he’s stressed. He wonders if Minghao has the same habit. The dancer is under a lot of stress, isn’t he? Finals are soon—the exact date, Mingyu doesn’t know—and there’s some sort of important dinner coming up soon as well. He knows that a lot is riding on the results of those two things.

“Why aren’t you asleep? It’s late for you, isn’t it?”

“Don’t avoid the question.” He slurs into the phone.

“No,” Minghao, defeated, “I haven’t.” He sniffles, “I’ll eat when I’m done.”

“If you say so.” Mingyu sighs.

“Go to bed. Thanks for checking up on me, Mingyu.” Something still doesn’t sit right with Mingyu. He doesn’t know when he started listening to his gut more often than his head, but it’s annoying how he can’t get to sleep without knowing that Minghao’s tucked in as well. He hopes it’ll end soon. Maybe he can just clench his teeth until the waves of his attraction ebb and tide, “I think the sooner I feel satisfied with this performance, the sooner I can get to bed and sleep soundly. We’ll chat when you wake up. Please get some rest.”

“I will, I will.”

“Good, because I,” he takes a deep breath, like he has to work to get the words to come out, “I really want to see you. Good morning, Mingyu.”

He speaks so quickly that Mingyu has trouble recognizing that it’s the phrase that puts an end to their call. It takes him a moment to respond because he’s so caught up over those words that send roses into the apples of his cheeks. It doesn’t matter if it’s just as a friend, Mingyu is wanted and that feels some way, “Good night, Minghao.” The words roll off his tongue easily, but his lips are lazy and muffle them a bit.

Terrible execution if he had to grade it, but he doesn’t mind. Minghao wants to see him. Minghao wants to see him.

Correction, Minghao really wants to see him.
Chapter 56

Is he really going to- Is he really not in bed at 12:31am on a workday?

More importantly, is he really driving across town at this hour just to stand outside in the cold with In-n-Out and clear Gatorade? Yeah, yeah, he is. For Minghao Xu’s health and safety, he is.

He only needs to call once for him to pick up now, “Mingyu? Why are you still up?” The music is still rumbling in the background. Doesn’t this guy ever take a break? “I thought I told you to go to bed. What are you-”

“Open the door. I’m here.” He had rehearsed more elegant lines on the way over from the burger joint, but it doesn’t matter anymore. That got the point across in a neat and curt manner.

“You’re… here?” he hears some fumbling and the music fades. Some static, some white noise, “Where’s ‘here’?”

‘Here ‘here’. Open the door. It’s cold.”

“Give me a minute.” And Minghao hangs up. Mingyu’s teeth are chattering, it’s definitely below freezing with a gentle breeze.

A minute feels like a long time considering Performance Studio isn’t that big. Like, seriously, what’s taking so long? It’s not like Minghao’s expected to look presentable. It’s Mingyu who is showing up out of the blue in sweatpants, a t-shirt, and a baseball cap. In fact, he looks pretty damn suspicious standing outside the dance studio with a bag of takeout and two drinks in hand.

The parking lot is mostly vacant aside from a few stray cars. He recognizes Minghao’s is parked closer to the back in a spot seemingly saved for instructors. He remembers the tale that was told to him a handful of nights ago. Apparently, Jun was always so courteous with his parking habits that he once had to park five blocks away when the department stores nearby were having their Black Friday sales. His students had waited twenty minutes in the freezing, morning air since he was the first instructor to arrive and couldn’t let them in. They’d eventually found refuge in each other’s cars, but it was a tight fit. Soonyoung and some others also met similar fates on either extremely cold or face-melting hot days. So, now they can thank department store sales for their reserved parking spaces (that their students so kindly decorated). Minghao’s spot is decorated with garish colors and a cartoon frog; definitely not his first choice of design. He still doesn’t really understand the frog comparison. Aside from being able to jump very high, Minghao looks nothing like a frog. A curious kitten or puppy, maybe, but a frog?

“Boo!” Mingyu almost drops everything when the hands slam down on his shoulders. He shouldn’t have had his back turned because Minghao almost makes his skeleton leap out of his skin. He shudders before turning around with an attempt at a smile, “What are you doing here- did I really scare you? Good.” They both laugh, “Come inside. It’s freezing.”

His pose changes. He looks a little sheepish as he leads Mingyu in through the door glass doors and shuts them again. The truth is that it’s quite cold in the lobby. The heater isn’t on. The lights are off. The only lights that are on are the ones outside the entrance and the one down the hall that leads to Minghao’s studio. Once inside the well-lit studio space, he sees that Minghao doesn’t look bad at all. His clothes are casual, the usual fare. He’s happy to see that he’s sporting his knee brace over his pants. Minghao’s wearing a hat, too, but his isn’t from his alma mater; it has piercing-like rings and a long strap in the back to hold it together. Very Minghao. “I brought you some dinner,
It takes a lot of coaxing to get Minghao to eat. A lot of coaxing.

He already knows that Minghao doesn’t like to be the only one in a party that’s eating. He doesn’t like it either, but he only bought one set. He also argues that practicing on a full stomach is just a recipe for a stomachache. In the end, Mingyu ends up sitting on the floor with Minghao, backs pressed against the largest mirrored wall, looking out into the vacant hallway, shoving soggy fries into his mouth every time the shorter male glances up from his Double-Double. Just eat, Minghao. It isn’t that hard.

It’s weird to think that this was the same room that used to be filled with so much tension exactly four weeks ago. A month ago. He really feels like time has taken a jet and launched itself out the window. Sometimes, time flies at warp-speed with Minghao. Yet, at the same time, mere seconds expand into minutes and hours. A time wizard. Minghao’s a time wizard.

Or Mingyu’s getting delusional from sleep deprivation.

“How long are you planning on staying up?” Minghao nudges his shoulder with his own, forcing Mingyu’s eyes to snap open.

He hadn’t thought about it. He didn’t even think he would go through with getting into his car and driving to In-n-Out, but one thing led to another. He’s not even sure how he’s managed to stay awake this long, “Uh, not sure. How long are you planning on practicing?”

Minghao crumples up the wrapper and pushes the tray of fries over to Mingyu as he gets up, “Not much longer. Maybe an hour or two.”

“Staying up late is bad for your health.” Mingyu pushes the tray back to him, so Minghao takes the last few fries into his mouth before throwing all of it away and wiping his mouth and hands clean.

“Yeah, it is. So why are you still up?” Minghao comes back over to him. They meet eyes, Minghao looking down, Mingyu looking up, “I really appreciate the dinner, but you should have gone to bed.”

How’s Mingyu supposed to respond? It’s not like he can tell Minghao that he’s the cause of his insomnia. He can’t readily admit that he has access to his Instagram and that he spent hours on it. At least now he has a little leverage. He smiles, beaming up to Minghao with hooded eyes—unintentionally hooded, there’s no way his eyes can open more than this with how much they want to be shut—, “Why don’t we both get up, go to our cars, and call it a night?”

Minghao sinks down to his knees before sliding his butt across the floor and scooting in next to Mingyu. Sure, there’s a whole lot of room he could have occupied that aren’t spaces in contact with Mingyu, but he’s choosing to sit with their sides flush. Maybe he’s cold, “Why don’t you do all of that and I stay here and finish practicing?” He raises a hand to hide his yawn.

“Because thinking of you dancing here all alone and in the cold seems really sad. Besides, I’m sure your roommate is worried.” He didn’t intend to bring Seungcheol into the conversation, but here he is acting a fool, “It’s past one already.”

“I told him I’d be out late.” Minghao yawns again, but Mingyu catches his wrist when he tries to cover it up. He maneuvers to sit in front of him, still holding his hand, “I’ll go home when I
exhaust all my energy.”

“And look at that. You’re exhausted.” Upon closer inspection, he sees that Minghao’s eyes are a little sunken and rimmed with magentas and blues. The creases that aren’t usually so obvious are now carved deep, “What time did you get up today?”

“Why does that matter?”

He has a little energy to argue now, “Because you can’t just stay up like this. You need to rest.” He lets go of his hand now because Minghao’s looking down at them. Was that a bad move? That was probably a bad move, “What time did you get up for work?”

Minghao takes his phone out of his pocket, unlocks and locks the screen after glancing at the time, then looks at the clock up on the wall, “7:10?”

“Well, no wonder you haven’t been picking up the moves. Your brain is fried.” It’s meant to be a joke, but he can almost see Minghao deflate against the mirror as if there was some truth to Mingyu’s words. He takes his hat off to shake out his hair before putting it back on, the strands are damp with sweat. Mingyu tries to crack a little smirk to show he’s not serious—he doesn’t know a single thing about dance, he doesn’t know if Minghao’s improving or not—, but Minghao isn’t looking at him anymore, just the clock, “Hey, what are you thinking about?”

“Nothing.” Minghao looks down at the hands in his lap, curling his fingers a couple times, “Just thinking about time.”

“Why don’t you practice, like, two more times, and then call it a night. I’ll sit here,” he scoots back in next to the dancer, settling into his spot before glancing over, “and tell you if you’re absolute trash or not.”

Minghao smiles, smacking him on his forearm and leaving his hand there. His fingers are cold, he can tell based on how white his fingertips are, “No way, it’s not ready yet.” Unlike Mingyu who has two jackets over his t-shirt, Minghao is standing around with a sleeveless tank and tapered athletic pants. A black and white flannel has been tied around his waist, so thin that it wouldn’t have provided any warmth anyway. Something like that is worn to show movement emphasis; style points, not practicality points.

“Then how ‘bout we just go home and you take a hot shower and tuck yourself into bed with Cacahuate and get some shuteye? I think that’s a swell idea. You’re nodding off already.”

“Am not.”

“You’re not?” Mingyu turns his head to look at him, not expecting their faces to be so close. Neither of them flinches.

But Minghao does sigh and back up a couple inches to thump his head against the mirror, “So what? I’m a little tired. Everyone’s tired. It’s just a little more, a little more. I don’t have time to waste sleeping.” His eyes shut for most of his rambling. He lists off nonsensical reasons for why he has to stay up, for why his teammates are probably more exhausted than he is, and for why it’s okay to push and push and push just for this one instance. Most of it is unintelligible mumbling. Mingyu gets it, he understands in theory, but seeing Minghao’s head dip and his voice dither as he nods off to sleep every couple sentences pulls at his heartstrings.

“Oh, okay.” He gets him to stop talking for a minute, “How about we just sit here for a minute in the dark,” he stretches over to hit the light switch, “and not think about anything.” And
stretches over in a different direction to grab Minghao’s thick black jacket from the bench, handing it to him, “You can just shut your eyes for a minute. I’ll set a timer.” He pulls out his phone. The battery is almost dead, but it should easily last 10 minutes.

“Oh you could go home and go to bed yourself. I see those dark circles.” Minghao points a lazy finger up to his face before dropping it back to his side, “You can’t fool me.” But the way he speaks is so slurred like he’s drunk on sleep or lack thereof.

“I’m not trying to fool you.” Sitting in a cool dark room like this feels interesting, “I’m tired, too.” It’s an unfamiliar place and it’s so hard for Mingyu to sleep anywhere aside from his own bed, but he can feel his eyelids growing heavy, “How about I set the timer and we both nap for twenty minutes?” Sleep inertia says that that’s a bad idea, that he’ll probably be more tired after that, making their drives home a little unsafe. However, Mingyu’s so tired and _cosy_ on this solid wood floor that he’s ready to say goodbye to consciousness any minute now, “Deal?”

Minghao hesitates, “Fine.” He pulls his jacket over his chest and leans against the mirror again, “Twenty minutes.”

Of course, Mingyu doesn’t expect to wake up some time later to Minghao’s head rolled over on his shoulder and his legs bent, knees bumping up against Mingyu’s thigh. It’s almost like he’s curling into Mingyu for warmth and that makes his chest seize up.

He doesn’t remember dreaming; just sleeping. It was nice, but not long enough. It’s probably been less than twenty minutes since his alarm hasn’t gone off to shake them both conscious. Mingyu takes this opportunity to graze his eyes over Minghao’s sleeping form just once since it’ll likely be the only time he gets to see him like this. His eyelashes aren’t romantically long, his skin isn’t fantastically soft, he’s not amazingly perfect; he doesn’t have to be. Minghao has his flaws, he has acne scars from high school, his lips are dry and cracking, he’s got a little stubble from not shaving, and behind those pruned eyelids rest the world’s most wonderful eyes.

If Mingyu dissolved into his touch when they _hugged_, he’s not sure what he’s doing now; evaporating, sublimating, melting? _Feeling_. He can feel the slightest movement when Minghao breathes’ the smallest amount of warm air being puffed into his jacket. He can feel his heart beating in his chest. He can feel that the sandy dust of sleep is pooling in his waterline and that he only has so many more seconds to look at Minghao like this before sleep claims him for another few minutes. He can feel that Minghao’s hands are cold despite being covered by the tent made by his thick thermal jacket. He can feel that his own hands are nice and toasty from having rested in his pockets.

He can feel that lacing their fingers together is the _right_ thing to do.

So, with the little bit of consciousness he has left, he does.
Sleep is good.

For lack of better word, that’s what it is. Tonight’s sleep is so good.

It’s peaceful and quiet, dreamless and dark and it’s spent in unsettling comfort next to someone else; unheard of. Mingyu never slept well next to anyone. Someone would always steal the covers, overheat, kick in their sleep—it didn’t matter who it was or how much he loved them. His bed was his. Sleeping slouched against a dance studio mirror is probably one of the least optimal places he’s slept and it makes him miss his bed more than most things. His lower back is sore, and his spine feels like a trash-compacted accordion, but he doesn’t mind. It’s worth it because tonight is the first time he wakes up to Minghao lying on the floor, his head resting on Mingyu’s thigh, lips slightly parted, breathing deeply; sound asleep. Their fingers are still laced together despite Minghao having changed position since earlier. He hopes he didn’t insist on holding hands while he was half asleep; not that he’s awake enough to come to the more logical answer.

What time is it? Surely, that was more than twenty minutes.

Mingyu gropes around to find his phone. Surprisingly, it’s not where he left it under his right thigh. It’s on his left, over by the mirror, almost in his coat pocket. It falls out when he turns just enough to see his face in the mirror. He doesn’t want Minghao waking up only to see a trail of drool dripping down his chin. Hm. Not too bad. His bangs are out of place and parted down the middle like he’d done in elementary, but other than that, Mingyu looks like Mingyu.

He puts a hand on Minghao’s shoulder, debating whether or not to shake him awake. His phone is dead and it’s too dark to see the wall clock. In the end, he figures that it’s better for the both of them to figure out what time it is together. He doesn’t want to be the one caught searching someone else’s pockets for a phone, but he can’t bring himself to do it just yet. He’s caught up staring at the dancer as his eyes adjust to the dark room, more of Minghao’s form coming into detail. Gosh. He could stare at him forever. He wants to stare at him forever.

But a promise is a promise is a promise.

“Minghao.” He hisses as he bends forward to whisper into his ear, “Minghao, wake up.”

He startles awake, pushing up with his hands and knocking their heads together with such velocity that he curls back up again and rolls away. The pain of his nose and mouth aside, Mingyu’s attention is on Minghao’s hunched back. He only hears him groan before he goes silent for a moment. When he sits up and rubs his eyes, his groggy voice croaks out, “Mingyu? What time is it?” He yawns, “Sorry, is your face okay?”

It makes his heart drum impatiently, “I’m fine.” Sure, morning voices aren’t as romantic or sultry as pop media shows them to be, but there’s just something really soft about a sleepy Minghao, “My phone’s dead. Where’s yours?” Minghao reaches his hands around blindly. Right, terrible night vision. Mingyu’s eyes have already had a couple minutes to adjust, so he reaches over to flick on the lights.

Why.

It’s blindingly bright. He almost has a headache. Minghao’s squinting so hard, his brows angled downward, disgruntled from being woken with blazing white lights. He puts his hat back on
after pushing his bangs back and stands up, stretching. With a sigh, he shrugs on his jacket and shuffles over to his bag to start digging, “You should go home and go to bed.” There’s no need for Minghao’s phone now that he can see the wall-clock.

“I would, but I think my butt melted into the floorboards.” He’s very stiff. Sleeping like this was a mistake, but not a regrettable one. Mingyu stretches his legs, bending the feeling back into them and double checking that they’re still attached to his body. Yeah, they’re probably still attached, “I’ve homogenized with the studio now.”

Minghao laughs after finding his phone and offers Mingyu a hand. They grab each other’s wrists and Minghao gives a firm tug, but Mingyu just slides across the floor until his legs are between Minghao’s. The latter shakes his head, takes a couple steps back, and pulls again only to drag Mingyu another few feet. Getting a little frustrated, he tosses Mingyu’s hands aside and checks on the time instead, “It’s 5:20. We better get going before Jun gets in for his morning classes and nags me for not going home.”

“Your roommate hasn’t called the police.”

“I told him I’d be out late. He’s pretty chill as long as I check in.” What is he, Minghao’s dad? It’s not 5:20, it’s something closer to 5:14, but maybe the studio clocks are slow. It’s nice to know that he rounds up so that he’ll never be late. Mingyu reaches for Minghao again, “Help me up.”

“No.”

“Help me uppp.” He pulls on Minghao’s sleeve. Mingyu doesn’t know why he’s acting like a fool. Like usual, he’ll blame it on sleep deprivation, but if he’s honest with himself, he feels well rested. Of course, he could go for a couple more hours, but Minghao’s right. They have to get moving before the morning classes start.

Minghao looks down at him, pockets his phone, and gives him one final tug. At full height, Mingyu can look down at Minghao. It’s more evident when they’re standing this close. He stumbles a little bit, legs numb and tingling. Minghao’s hands are already at his biceps to support him, but for a second or two, they’re chest-to-chest.

The dancer pushes away immediately. Not roughly or with any sort of intent other than to put some space between them. His rather shy smile might mean something else.

“I need to shower. I smell horrible.” He moves to gather his things and check that the sound system is all the way off before giving the floor a quick Swiffer. Mingyu would have offered to help if Minghao wasn’t already moving so quickly. He’s still trying to blink himself awake, “Are you okay to drive? I can call you a Lyft or something.”

“No, no, I’m good.” He shakes his head, trying to brush off the sandman’s magic, “Are you going to be okay? What time do you have to get in for work?”

“I’m fine.” He tosses the Swiffer back into the supply closet, “I’m in at 11, but if Chan has time today I’ll probably be in around 8.”

“You’re crazy.”

“And you have work in a few hours. You’re the crazy one for staying up so late.” Minghao flicks the lights off again before jogging to the lobby. He lets Mingyu out the exit first before
rummaging for the keys and locking the door. He tugs it a couple times to make sure it's secure, “Get home. Go to bed.” His hand is at Mingyu’s elbow, guiding him back to his car since it seems that Mingyu’s too tired to move on his own. Mingyu could probably walk normally if his legs weren’t so stubborn, but clearly they aren’t stubborn enough because they arrive at his car in the (very sluggish) blink of an eye, “Text me when you get up. I wanna make plans.”

“Can’t make them now?” Mingyu leans against his car door, eyes falling on Minghao’s face, following his arm down to the hand that’s still holding his coat sleeve. It seems like Minghao takes notice as he drops his hand immediately. That aside, ‘plans’? What is that supposed to mean? What tomfoolery does Minghao Xu have up his sleeve now? Other notions aside, it probably means that he wants to ‘make plans’ with Mingyu.

“Nope.” He smiles, “Peoples’ schedules are still moving around, but I’ll try to set it in stone as soon as I can. Keep your dinner slot open, okay?” He smacks Mingyu’s shoulder before turning to walk to his own car a few parking spaces over. So, he was right, dinner plans with Mingyu. Isn’t it easier just to say that he’ll show up at Mingyu’s apartment at the usual time? Oh, maybe he wants to go out for dinner. Someplace nice, perhaps? Maybe they’ll have to dress up and preen and that’s why he needs time to plan it out. Is this Minghao possibly asking him out on a- don’t be silly. Minghao’s considerably straightforward. He doesn’t think he’d beat around the bush about something like that.

“Get home safely! Text me when you get there.”

“Sure, mom.” Ah, he’s awake enough to be funny, “Thanks for napping with me.”

Mingyu grins and shakes his head. No sleep, no shame, “Let’s do it again sometime.”

“No, never. Never again. Sleeping on the floor was the worst. I should have gotten the mats out.” The ones that the students made a fort out of? Yeah, that might have been a better idea than the cold, hard ground, “My bed’s gonna feel like a cloud.”

He opens the door and sits in the driver’s seat, as does Minghao. He can’t hide that he’s a little disappointed with his response, but it should be expected. Friends don’t really seek each other out to nap, “I can guarantee that my bed’s softer than yours. You can have the clouds. I’ve got meringue.”

“Keep your meringue, the clouds are good enough for me.”

Their conversation is quickly dissolving into nonsense. It’s probably better to end it quickly before someone says something regrettable, “Drive safely.”

“I will.” He yawns, “See you later, Gyu.”

Even as Minghao slams his car door shut and starts backing out of his parking space, all Mingyu can focus on is the slip of his tongue. Was that a nickname? A nickname that wasn’t ‘mom’? Sure, it’s nothing unique or unheard of.

Most people make his default nickname, Gyu. It’s not a stretch. Take ‘Mingyu’ and cut off half the letters. Bam, nickname. His parents call him Gyu, his relatives call him Gyu. High school friends, college friends, colleagues, bosses- hell, even Wonwoo and Soonyoung call him Gyu. Minghao’s probably the only person who has gone this long without attributing the nickname to him. He’s not sure if that’s on purpose or not; he could have avoided a nickname to retain their professional relationship and now that their professionalism doesn’t have to exist anymore- No, maybe their antics have just rubbed off on Minghao, especially if they use it regularly even if he’s not there. It shouldn’t have any particular effect on him. He’s thinking about it too much.
But when Minghao says it with sleep stitched between every letter, it feels special.
Chapter 58

When Mingyu stumbles in through his door the sky is already turning a deep shade of blue. Minghao had texted him while he was still driving. At least he knows he’s home and showered and tucked in. The bonus picture of Cacahuate waiting for him by the door was cute. He doesn’t know why Minghao sometimes goes on about the pup liking Seungcheol more than him, Cacahuate is obviously attached to his owner.

‘just got ho e. food niugth.’ Close enough.

Mingyu plugs his phone in on the counter and changes his clothes before curling up in his bed. Oh, sweet meringue bed, how delectable you are on such a cold winter’s morning. He smooshes his face into the pillows, smothering himself. Perhaps he should start counting his blessings. There’s only so much good that can happen in 24 hours and sleeping with Minghao probably took a lot of karma points out of his day.

Oh, lord.

Sleeping with Minghao.

That really happened. It was totally unexpected, unplanned, and completely not the way Mingyu would have ever assumed it to go. He could have never predicted the phrase ‘I slept with Minghao’ to be used in such context. Sure, sure, having sex isn’t usually the first thing on his mind when it comes to dating, swooning, and romanticizing other people, but that’s just how things often went. When it came to Minghao—who he was first attracted to on a sexual premise—he hadn’t expected that their first night ‘together’ would have involved sleeping on the hardwood floor of a dance studio and fighting over french-fries. He could have never fathomed that the idea of Minghao leaning on his shoulder with their fingers knitted together would cause his heart to jump into his throat.

He’s surprised that the thought of tucking Minghao into his own bed just to sleep next to him by far surpasses his will and desire of doing anything else.

And now he’s surprised that he’s just lying in bed with his eyes closed, facing the ceiling. He’s embracing his thoughts. Thoughts about Minghao. Thoughts about their friends. Thoughts about work and the future and how he needs to be asleep right now if he has any hope of waking up and making it to work on time. He’s probably going to be tired regardless, but some sleep is better than no sleep.

However, when Minghao’s on the brain, there’s no fighting it. The idea of him demands Mingyu’s attention mercilessly. He has really fallen a little too hard. Fallen for what exactly? He’s still not sure what word he wants to use, but the one on the tip of his tongue scares him. Words like that can’t just be tossed around willy-nilly. More importantly, he doesn’t know how Minghao feels about him. He knows that he’s well-liked. They’re on spectacularly good, positive terms. In fact, they’re doing so well that he totally forgot about the high school incident last night. It didn’t even come to mind once. That’s progress, right?

It’s not easy to forget that kind of guilt.

Mingyu is barely on time.
The reasons for him being late? One, getting dressed and tripping over his pants in the rush. Two, texting Minghao that he’s up while leaving, thereby leaving his wallet on the counter. Three, grabbing his wallet, but forgetting his keys on the counter. Four, grabbing his keys and his wallet, but forgetting his phone on the couch. After checking his pockets five times, he finally managed to walk out the door only forgetting one thing, his water bottle. It’s not worth returning for. He’s not going to risk leaving another thing behind.

He slides past Joshua’s desk, grabbing the stack of patient folders on the way in. The manager looks a little tired, but aside from that he seems to be fine, “All better?”

His question seems to catch Joshua off guard, “What?”

“Weren’t you sick?”

“Right- sick. Yeah, sore throat.” He coughs a couple times to prove his point, “Some bug going around, I guess. Some kids were running around the lobby last week, it’s probably from them.”

Sure, Joshua Hong, sure, “Look, Josh, I shouldn’t be the one telling you this, but if you need more than a day off, you’re more than welcome to take it. Jeonghan did a pretty good job up here by himself.”

Joshua gives him a stern look before he decides it’s probably wiser to back down and get on with his work day rather than showing concern for his overworked boss. It’s still weird to think of Joshua as his boss and not just his manager, but since Dr. Hong, Joshua’s mother, and Dr. Hong, Joshua’s father, decided to leave the family clinic in the hands of their only child and open up a sister branch in the city, things haven’t really changed all that much. The pay is the same. The schedules are nearly the same. The only thing that changed is that Joshua hired Wonwoo since two of their older staff members left with the Hong’s to take up permanent residence in the city.

Mingyu shouldn’t have bothered. There’s no swaying Joshua. He knows what he’s doing, and he doesn’t want anyone to tell him how to do it.

Wonwoo actually beats him to work today. No weird looks, no creepy smile; he doesn’t know about last night. Although he’s almost a hundred percent sure that none of the studio guys will care or find out that he and Minghao napped in the studio for almost four hours, he doesn’t want to be poked or prodded about it.

“Morning.”

Wonwoo glances up from his cup of coffee, a patient folder opened in his lap, “Morning.”

“Got Mr. Peterson today?”

“Yeah, should I be worried?”

Mingyu shrugs, “He likes to talk about his cats. Like, a lot.”

“That’s okay.” Wonwoo sets his cup down and leans his elbows on the table, “I quite like cats. They make good company.” Mingyu never took him for a cat person, he generally assumes that most people like dogs more unless they’re reclusive. He doesn’t have anything against cats. They’re cute and independent, but dogs are just more his pace.

“Do you have any cats?”
“Oh, I did.” Something lights up in Wonwoo like he’s a parent about to praise their favorite child, “They were so cute! Wanna see?”

It’s not like Mingyu has a choice because Wonwoo already has his phone out and is scrolling through an entire gallery filled with two cats. One is a burly, large Maine-coon—he thinks, Mingyu doesn’t really know cat breeds—with twinkling yellow-green eyes and grey and black striped fur. It looks regal and grumpy, but Wonwoo insists that Apollo was the most gentlemanly cat he’s had. The other one is a smaller, ginger mixed-breed with amber eyes and a white chest. If Cacahuate was a cat, it would probably be this cat—incredibly photogenic and Instagram worthy. She looks so cute and sweet, but according to Wonwoo, Athena was a massive asshole and didn’t like being pet or babied. She often bullied Apollo when it came to treats or food and Wonwoo had to feed them in separate rooms.

“What happened to them?” Mingyu knows it’s a little insensitive of him to ask, but Wonwoo never explicitly said that they were dead.

He pockets his phone even though it buzzes with a text, “The person I was dating at the time was really allergic to cats so I temporarily rehomed Apollo. Around that time, Athena got out while I was at work and unfortunately got hit by a car.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s alright, it was years ago. I’ve wanted to get a new cat since Soonyoung’s fine with them, but I haven’t had the time to go look. The friend I gave Apollo to is really attached to him, so I don’t want to barge in and take him back.”

As if his guardian instincts are vibrating in his chest, Mingyu slams his hands on the table, “I know the purrfect place for you to adopt a cat.”

Before they get to their first appointments, Mingyu has listed and described most of the cats they have in the feline branch of the animal shelter he volunteers at. He never really worked with the cats, but there were plenty of volunteers there that spoke well of the unfortunate cats. Wonwoo, more to humor him than he’s actually enthusiastic, happily nods along. He coos at all the photos on the shelter’s website and comes across a little coal-grey cat that’s on the older end who he deems to be the most poetic cat he’s ever seen. Her temporary name is Halibut.

“That’s a bad name.”

“Yeah, I don’t know who comes up with these.”

But Halibut only needs to be Halibut until she finds her forever home! So, Mingyu gives Wonwoo the address and tells him to stop by on the weekend when he has time with Soonyoung. He doubts that they’ll have time this week or next because of the whole finals fiasco, but Mingyu mentions that it’s freezing at the shelter (even though the cats are all indoors) and that there are usually huge discounts and sponsorships during this season. Wonwoo agrees to go that weekend. Guilt-tripping him was too easy.

Most of his appointments go smoothly. The only bump in the road is Dr. Arnold who has been having very bad pains in her forearms from typing a huge research paper about biased statistics in economics at her university. Mingyu’s convinced it’s just carpal tunnel, but she won’t buy it and insists that something is wrong with her bones. Nonetheless, he leads her through stretches and exercises using a little stress ball. He advises acupuncture if she has time. It should help with the
circulation in the area.

Whatever. He’s not saying that Dr. Arnold isn’t a professional, but she’s not a professional in this field. Mingyu is! She should listen to him! But Mingyu just shakes his head after walking her out to the lobby, tossing her completed patient folder over to Joshua haphazardly. The manager doesn’t pay him any attention. As a matter of fact, most of his attention this morning has been pointed at his phone. That’s not unusual, but for once Joshua isn’t just playing games or browsing Amazon. He’s actively texting someone.

When Mingyu passes Jeonghan and questions him about it, Jeonghan just shrugs and says something in lieu of minding his own business. Rude, but it’s Jeonghan and Jeonghan is usually rude to him. They laugh it off regardless. Jeonghan isn’t really one for small-talk, but today he talks about the weather and mumbles something about being hungry and wanting to sleep more. Oh, yeah, Mingyu understands that frontier very well.

Seokmin isn’t in today and that’s a little unfortunate because that means that Wonwoo will have a field day. It’s not to say that Mingyu doesn’t like going out to lunch with Wonwoo alone, but now that something has developed in his fickle plot of winning Minghao’s heart, he’s less excited. He knows that the very mention of Minghao might put him up in arms and scratch Wonwoo’s itch to tease him, but he can’t help it. Minghao’s a crucial and important topic.

“So,” Oh no, already? “Have you spoken to Minghao recently?”

Yes or no, yes or no, yes or no. What should he say? Does he need to be truthful? What’s the problem with being truthful? He doesn’t want to lie to Wonwoo—there’s no need—but he knows that if he tells the truth, one thing will lead to another and he’ll end up telling him that they slept together and Wonwoo will definitely take things the wrong way. This is too much to deal with so early in the morning, “Eh, not really.”

“Really?” The surprise is bright in Wonwoo’s voice, “It’s almost Friday.”

“It’s only Wednesday, Wonwoo.” Mingyu stirs his broccoli-cheddar soup idly, “What’s the big deal about Friday?”

“You know what the big deal about Friday is.” He knows what the big deal about Friday is. It doesn’t mean he wants to talk about it- okay, he does want to ask about it, but he can’t just ask Minghao to ask him to the dinner. That’s rude and he shouldn’t even really know about the dinner and Minghao told him to forget that he ever mentioned the dinner in the first place and, now, he’ll never go to the dinner with him, “The dinner.”

No shit, Wonwoo Jeon, “Oh, that.” Yes, that, “He hasn’t talked about it. If anything, I think he’s probably going to go with Jun.”

The senior PT pokes at his salad and eventually takes a bite, “I don’t know. They both have plus-one tickets this year. It’d be a waste to go alone.” He narrows his eyes, thinking about something off in the distance. What is it Wonwoo? Are you trying to decipher braille in the spackled wall? “I’m convinced that Jun’s asking someone else.”

Mingyu shrugs, taking a bite of soup into his mouth. He’s not incredibly hungry; more tired than anything else. He’ll definitely be napping when he gets home, “Whatever. It’s not like I can just invite myself.”
“I know. That’s why Soon’s been pestering him to invite you all week. You are going to the dinner.” He takes out his phone. Soonyoung seems to be perfectly fine texting when it comes to Wonwoo. Why doesn’t he give his boyfriend glitter-filled letters, “You kept your Friday open like I told you, right?”

“Yeah?”

“Good.” Wonwoo smiles as he crunches into his salad. What kind of soulless hell-spawn eats salad in the winter? Not Wonwoo, he’s just dating one, “After all you did for him, I really thought he would have invited you last night.”

Mingyu almost chokes, “Last night?”

“Yeah,” he smirks, pocketing his phone after typing a quick response. He even sets down his fork to cross his fingers together over the table, giving Mingyu a very businesslike stare, “when you showed up at the studio.”

Mingyu clenches the spoon between his teeth. The interrogation has begun. How did Wonwoo know? He had to have found out between their chat earlier this morning and now- Soonyoung had to have told him, but how did Soonyoung find out? Minghao surely wouldn’t have told him. He didn’t want Jun to know and based on accounts, he can guarantee that Soonyoung is at least twice as bad, “What?” Not the best answer, Mingyu.

Wonwoo leans back in his chair, a knowing and coy look on his face, “Yixing installed cameras a few months ago when the studio was broken into and some expensive audio equipment was stolen. Vernon scrubs through the footage in the morning when he gets in to make sure there’s nothing suspicious happening.” He takes a drawn-out sip of his cola, “And you were a suspicious happening.”

“Well.”

“Especially since you were there for almost four hours.” Put those wiggly eyebrows away, Wonwoo, it’s not like you haven’t done anything improper at the studio, “So, what happened?”

It’s absolutely unfair. It’s absolutely unfair that Wonwoo has Soonyoung feeding him information about everything. There’s no privacy in their actions, no discretion. It’s not like they’re breaching privacy or anything like that, but Mingyu does feel a little uncomfortable. It’s like he’s caught doing something he’s not supposed to do, “It’s not like being friends with Minghao is against the law. He was practicing late and skipped dinner, so I brought him some food.”

“At 1 in the morning? Sure, okay.” A food drop-off could take an hour at most, he knows that, but he’s not about to admit that they napped on the floor of the studio for three hours. No siree.

“Wouldyoulookatthetime. Time to get back to work. Oh no.” Not smooth. Not even remotely, but Mingyu pops a lid on the soup container and takes it back to the clinic with him. Wonwoo just laughs as he pushes through the door and leaves. The cat lover doesn’t bother chasing after him. He knows he’s won today.

Still, this is an unfair game and Mingyu has no leverage.

When he gets back into the breakroom to toss his soup into the fridge, he’s surprised to find that it’s vacant. Seokmin isn’t in, he must be running late. Maybe he has a test or something. Jeonghan isn’t in either; he’s sitting out at the front desk talking to Joshua. So, until Wonwoo comes
back, he has the breakroom to himself. A little peace and quiet is always appreciated after lunch.

Ping.

Minghao, ‘Have you eaten?’

Finally, a smile creeps back onto Mingyu’s face. This man’s power over him is overwhelming, ‘Yep. Just got back from lunch.’

‘Is Wonwoo there?’ that’s a peculiar and odd question for him to ask.

‘Nope.’

And less than a minute later his phone rings. Why is Minghao calling him—right, right, he has to remember that calls are a good thing now. There’s no reason for them not to be, “Good. I’ve had just about enough of those two. I’m seriously debating murdering Soonyoung.”

“What do you mean by that?!?” Mingyu hears somewhere in the background before hearing a door slam.

“I’m hiding in the breakroom.”

“Oh,” the amusement in Minghao’s voice is charming, “me too.” And he hears a lock clack shut, “Anyways, plans.”

“Hey, Minghao,” Mingyu chews on his cheek, “before we go over the plans. How did Soonyoung find out about me showing up last night?”

“Oh, that, Vernon was going over the security footage this morning before I showed up for work. He thought it was suspicious and was worried that you were a burglar that came while I was in the studio alone, so he asked Soon and Jun if they recognized you.” he sighs, “They did.”

“That makes sense.”

“Sorry if you didn’t want to be found out.” Mingyu doesn’t like Minghao’s somber tone, “I didn’t think much about it. I knew about the cameras, but I didn’t think that Vernon would be so worried since we left at the same time.”

Honestly, Mingyu would have been worried too if someone showed up unannounced and disappeared into the studio with a friend and instructor for several hours. Minghao is precious, he could have been hurt or threatened or something, “Oh. It’s okay. Wonwoo just caught me off-guard.” That’s not a lie, “I’m guessing Soon and Jun are giving you hell.”


“Yep.” Mingyu can feel something bubbling up in his stomach. He’s giddy for no reason, “What’s up?”

“Well, my roommate has his own dinner plans in the city tonight and Chan has work and Soon and Jun are working with the bride and groom for their wedding, so I was wondering if you wanted to walk Cacahuate.” He takes a deep breath as a ruckus starts in the background, “Aaaannd, do you prefer beef or pork? Mushrooms or tofu? Rice noodles or starch noodles? Spicy or mild?”

“What?” Mingyu can’t help but laugh too. That’s a lot of questions, Minghao.
“Sorry, just trying to figure out a shopping list and Soon’s about to break down the door.”

“What are the questions again?”

“Y’know what, nevermind. I’ll figure it out.” Minghao clears his throat, “Do you wanna come over for dinner or not?”
“Come… come over?” Something isn’t adding up in Mingyu’s head, “Where?”

“To my place. I mean- You don’t have to. We can go out to eat or somethi- Soonyoung, no.” white noise fills the line as Minghao leaps into a full sprint—or at least that’s what Mingyu draws from the audio. Does this happen every time Minghao’s on the phone at work?

He waits patiently for Minghao to put the phone back up to his ear, but he’s running out of time as well. Wonwoo will be back any minute now, “What were you doing with Mingyu in the studio?” he hears Soonyoung shout, “Children dance here!”

Another bang and slam follow the accusation, “Sorry about that.” Minghao’s panting into the receiver, “But yeah, if you don’t want to come over, we can go out to eat. Did you have someplace in mind?”

“Where are you hiding?”

“Utility closet.” Mingyu laughs. The idea of Minghao bent up against a bunch of cleaning supplies with a broom bopping him in the eye is a funny image, “If you’re done laughing about my predicament…”

Wonwoo walks in and Mingyu has to wipe the grin off his face immediately. He mutters the last parts in hope that Wonwoo can’t hear him from across the room, “I’ll text you. Someone just walked in.”

“Okay.” Minghao goes silent but doesn’t hang up. Mingyu doesn’t hang up either and Wonwoo’s starting to look a little curious. He supposes that Minghao might be waiting for something to pass, “Good morning.”

“Good night.” Smart guy, leaving names out of the equation. It doesn’t really help in the end because after he manages to hang up Wonwoo still gives him a knowing look. The older man pats him on the back a few times with his free hand. The other is occupied with his phone, as usual.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Bring something for Seungcheol, too.”

Now, now, what would be a good gift for Cacahuate. Mingyu browses, looking up and down the shelves and spokes filled with dog toys and treats. He knows that Minghao’s not as strict with his dog’s dietary restrictions as he first imagined which gives him some liberty to pick whatever he wants as long as its grain-free. A giant bully stick would probably be the simplest and easiest choice, but having that stink up the home while they’re eating might not be optimal even though bully sticks are probably a rare treat. Maybe he’ll just get a small one, but what if Cacahuate eats it too fast and chokes. That wouldn’t be optimal either. He’d rather his first visit to Minghao’s place not involve him giving Heimlich to his son. In the end, Mingyu selects a medium sized one out of the box and carries it with him to the toy aisle.
Toys. Toys, toys, toys. He remembers once watching a video titled ‘Dog Toy or Sex Toy’ and that reigns true even now. Anything rubber could be questionable and even though he’s more than sure that Minghao won’t laugh or make a joke out of the gift, he decides on a stuffed toy instead. The only question now is which stuffed toy. A duck maybe? A giant snake? Is there some ancient rule about not giving people snakes? How about this 18-squeak-chamber, ultra-durable stuffed dragon. Is this a racist gift? Well, probably not. Korean dragons look the same, so it should be an okay gift. Dragon it is.

The girl at the checkout gives him a look. These are expensive gifts, “Where’s the lucky baby?”

“Oh, this is for a friend’s dog.” And he is a lucky baby.

“Wow, a very lucky baby.” She rings him up and cues him to pay at the card kiosk, “What kind of dog?”

“Spitz-Golden, I think.” Mingyu shoves his chip in and waits as it processes, “Seriously gorgeous dog.” Why do card kiosks still take so long? It’s 2023. This should be a touch-and-go kind of thing by now.

“Oh! Is it Cacahuate?” Her intuition takes Mingyu by surprise. It’s evident on his face, “Don’t freak out.” She laughs, “Cacahuate and his dads come by a lot, they’re regulars.”

Dads?

Be cool, Mingyu, be cool, it’s okay. To the untrained eye, he’s sure that two roommates walking into such a domestic shop together might come off as something more than friendly, “Oh good, then can you tell me if these are okay gifts for him?” Yes. Good job. She can’t see the panic in your eyes anymore. The kiosk asks if he wants to donate to the ASPCA, which he does, and tacks on $5 to his purchase.

“I think so. They usually just come in to buy toys, food, and training treats. I think Cacahuate will be happy to receive a special goodie like this.” The machine honks and she prints out his receipt and sends him off, “Thank you for your donation!”

At least her words are enough to ease his aching brain. The impact that Minghao has on the people around him seems to be long-lasting. Whatever. One special boy down, one to go.

Maybe it’s just habit, but it’s not like Mingyu to just show up to anyone’s home empty-handed. You just can’t do that. If someone is hosting you and providing hospitality, you have to show up with something, so he thinks and thinks and thinks, but comes to a blank. Shopping for other adults is hard since they all have jobs and they can just save up and buy whatever they want. Minghao’s no exception. However, Mingyu’s determined to find something suitable.

He does what any sane person would do, dig deep into his Instagram archives to find a clue. There was that one bubbly plant that he wanted, right? From Lowry’s? Mingyu double-checks the post just to make sure. Yeah, okay, but there’s also one new post since last time. It’s a picture of him and Jun posing with three rather handsome young men, a large trophy in the middle of the floor and one of the kids is screaming in victory. ‘Congratulations @tfbboys! We’ll go celebrate soon. I’m proud of all your hard work.’ Aw, cute, they won. But this tells Mingyu nothing. There has to be something else he can check. Nothing of use has changed in the tagged photo’s section, but his story is updated and Mingyu debates tapping on it. If Minghao’s one of those weird people that checks
who views their story, then his username will be on that list.

F**k it. You gotta risk it to get the biscuit.

The story is updated with six new items. The first of them being a full-body selfie in the dance room’s mirror. He still looks fresh, this must be from the morning or afternoon as there are some students walking around in the reflection. No caption. The second and third ones are brief captures of a complicated sequence of dance moves executed by his class; captioned ‘Class: Advanced III. Feel the energy?’ Fire emoji. Yes, Mingyu is feeling the energy. How did they do that so fast? That’s crazy. How can other humans do that? Mingyu can’t. The fourth update is simply a black screen, the timestamp logo placed on it says it’s while they were napping. Minghao had to have woken up. The fifth one is also a black screen. In the smallest font it says ‘Tonight, I don’t want to practice anymore.’

The sixth and final update is a picture of Seungcheol—or who he assumes to be Seungcheol, there’s no head in the photo— gearing up to take Cacahuate for a jog. ‘I don’t understand morning people’ with an 8:34am timestamp emblazoned over Seungcheol’s ass. Yeah, that’s too early for Minghao to be up. Mingyu knows that Minghao went back to bed after that because he said he slept in until 10 and he has no reason to lie about waking up so late in the morning.

Plant it is.

Lowry’s is nice and quiet. Mingyu hasn’t been in for a while considering his plant collection is healthy and stagnant. He ventures into the back of the store, heading out the back gate that leads into the greenhouse where all the less delicate flora is kept. He makes quick work to find the section of succulents and starts scanning them for the particular plant.

Among them, he sees variations of his Romeo aloe, but none of them are even comparatively as red. He even wonders if Minghao spray painted it, “Good afternoon, mister, can I help you find anything?”

Mingyu looks down to see an adolescent boy in a green apron carrying a potted flower, “Actually, yes.” His face lights up when Mingyu takes him seriously. He pulls out his phone and brings up the picture, “Can you help me find this?”

“Hmm.” The boy squints as he looks at the picture, “I don’t know if we have any. Lemme go ask my sister.” He runs off to put the flower in its place before turning to enter the store again. Mingyu tries his best to look for it, but it’s just not popping up. It’s such a unique plant that it should stick out immediately. The boy jogs back out, “Sorry. There aren’t any in stock right now.” He ran so fast he’s out of breath; youth is so precious, “Can I help you find anything else?”

“Thanks for looking.” Mingyu smiles, “I’m just trying to find a plant for my friend. Something casual, not too big or anything. He’s also really bad at taking care of plants, so…”

“What’s your friend like?” Mingyu’s explanation of what Minghao is like is rather short and curt. He doesn’t want to eat up this kids’ time. He probably has homework to do even though it seems like he genuinely enjoys working with plants. Plants are probably more fun than algebra at this age, “Hmm, he seems cool. Maybe get him something like a carnivorous plant. They’re kinda touchy, but I think it matches his vibes.”

“His vibes, huh?” he walks Mingyu over to a small collection of intimidating plants. Oh boy.

“I mean, these things kinda feed themselves, so he just has to water it sometimes.” Mingyu suddenly doubts this kid’s knowledge of carnivorous plants. They need upkept soil and a lot of
sunshine, “But you said he had a dog, right? Maybe getting him some display flowers might be a better idea. Sometimes these plants get kinda smelly and the dog might want to eat them.”

So, Mingyu leaves with a bouquet of table flowers; the kind that are short-lived, but pretty and vibrant. Fuchsia lilacs, yellow coreopsis, and budding baby-blue arborvitaes, peppered with white baby’s breath and chervil. Okay, so it’s not the most beautiful bouquet, but Mingyu wasn’t about to tell that aspiring florist-kid that his flower selection was less-than-amazing. After all, he did sit and listen to whatever Mingyu had to say about Minghao for the last thirty minutes and pick flowers accordingly with little explanation outside of ‘this one suits him’ or ‘I think he needs this one’.

Okay, kid.

They’re just flowers.
Chapter 60

Going over to Minghao’s house feels strange.

Maybe it’s because Mingyu stood in front of his mirror for almost an hour trying to figure out his hair and outfit, so now he’s a little stiff. Or maybe it’s because he intentionally picked his best looking comfortable clothes so he wouldn’t look so stuffy. No turtlenecks, no long, thick coats. He wonders if his cologne is on too strong—it’s the same one that we wore last week. He wears it often and Minghao said he liked the scent; it’s not very musky, quite sweet and straightforward.

Maybe it’s because Mingyu will be entering a very personal space. Letting someone into your home gives them an intimate perspective of your lifestyle; habits, peeves, everything. Sure, Minghao’s come over to his place many times. He wonders if Minghao was this nervous knocking on his door the first time. Did his heart race? Did his palms get sweaty? Did he feel light and bouncy even though it also feels like he’s run a mile? Probably not. Minghao’s cool and level-headed. You have to be to stand in front of crowds of thousands of people. Knocking on a door is nothing.

He didn’t get a gift for Seungcheol. He didn’t forget to, he just doesn’t feel like he should bring one for someone he hasn’t really met. If anything, the flowers are for the home and therefore apply to Seungcheol as well as Minghao. They haven’t wilted in the slightest even though Mingyu just kept them on the counter while he got ready. The kid had packaged them with aqua cellophane and rubber banded a packet of Flower Food to the stems. It should be enough to make the flowers last at least a week or two.

The address Minghao sent says that it is an apartment complex with several units, but because it’s just a single letter instead of numbers and letters or numbers in the 100’s, he assumes that it means there are under 26 units in the complex. His GPS says that its located in uptown. A surprise considering how broke Minghao sometimes mentions he is—why bother living in uptown? He actually has to pass by Riverside on his way there.

The newer of the two high schools in town is unsurprisingly as pristine as it was a decade ago. In fact, they have a couple new buildings and a renovated tennis court. Ah, the luxuries of living in a good neighborhood. He remembers how Oakdale still has cracked pavement and basketball hoops with no nets. The paint outlining the sports courts is barely visible and the murals on the side of the G-wing are chipping with time. Their tennis court had fallen victim to an earthquake a few years ago and no one has had the funding to patch it up. The stark visual difference between the schools is enough to explain that the students come from separate tax brackets.

Uptown’s industrial-looking hipster district is a newer development. It’s popular with college-aged residents because of its proximity to the local university, but it’s certainly on the pricier end. He’s pretty sure that these apartments cost almost double of what his is worth—seriously, how does Minghao afford to live here? It’s not that they necessarily look nicer or finer; just a different style.

When he pulls up to the complex it definitely has the modern, minimalistic architecture that he was used to seeing in the city’s developing neighborhoods. He knows that Minghao didn’t live on this side of town previously. Minghao’s not even downtown. He lived on the other side of the train tracks, near the barrios where most of their classmates lived—including Mingyu for a time. He had moved around the time Minghao transferred and they never had a chance to run into each other on their way to school. Their town was peaceful. It still is, but growing up in a disadvantaged neighborhood does things to you. It makes you stronger and resourceful; a little scrappy. To see that
Minghao’s now living in a place like this is an interesting contrast to where Mingyu had imagined him to be.

That should be expected. Minghao’s full of surprises and he’s been axing every single prejudice that Mingyu’s held up to him.

The units themselves don’t look too huge, but they’re still more spacious than Mingyu’s studio apartment. There’s a pool and what he assumes to be recreational rooms in the back along with a large fenced off area in the center. Cacahuate must like it here. Lots of space to run around.

L… M…

Mingyu spies an older couple in their late 60’s pass by and make their way to the communal garden with tea. The two women look happy, wrinkles deepening as they laugh about something. One of them excitedly points to a butterfly landing on a flower. Ah, classic grandmothers. Mingyu’s grandmas love butterflies and flowers too. Maybe he should send them some this weekend. Seeing an older couple in this complex is interesting considering it’s supposed to be in the college area.

N… O… P…

Finally, some people closer to his age pass by. A man in his mid-thirties is carrying a wooden latched case. He has an impressively large, red beard with a cute pork-pie hat and plaid flannel. His forearms are covered with intricate tattoos and his moustache is gelled to curl at the ends. Yep, hipster neighborhood. He jogs by Mingyu after smiling a friendly hello. His black apron and his worn Doc Martens are covered in little splatters of paint. Mingyu nods and smiles back. The next person to pass him is a young woman swinging a folded, clear umbrella. She, too, nods a hello to Mingyu while humming some soft song. He’s reminded of how thick the clouds are today; stacked high and grey with the promise of a thunderstorm to come. Her hair is like spun gold, curly and voluminous, it’s in beautiful contrast to her deep and warm skin tone. Hair like that must be stressful to care for in this kind of weather. He hopes she stays dry.

Q… R… S.

This should be the one.

He rings the doorbell instead of knocking. His hands are full; one with Cacahuate’s gift, one with Minghao’s friendship bouquet. Unexpectedly, he doesn’t feel as nervous as he thought it would. Maybe it’s because Minghao’s roommate isn’t home. Maybe it’s because he’s just so ready to pet that dog and eat good food. Minghao did say they could watch Food Network and a heated episode of OG Iron Chef sounds like the perfect way to end the day.

He hears the jingle of Cacahuate’s collar approach the door and a little boof from behind it. He just loves it when big dogs do little boofs. It gets him all giddy as Minghao unlocks the door from inside. The door opens wide and Minghao snaps his fingers behind his back to tell Cacahuate to back up and let Mingyu in, but the pup is just too excited and lunges for him, jumping up on his hind legs to give Mingyu a face-full of kisses. Yes! Thank you!

“Cacahuate, down.” Minghao wraps his arms around the dog’s chest and pulls him off, just holding him on two legs like a ragdoll, “Sorry about that. I swear he’s usually really good about door manners.” Cacahuate seems to calm himself after understanding that Mingyu’s here to stay for a little bit and happily trots back into the apartment out of sight.

“These are for the best floofy boy in the entire world.” He hands over the 18-chamered squeaky, red dragon and the generous bully stick, “And these are for you,” he finally pulls the
godawful bouquet from behind his back. There’s nothing romantic about horrible color choices. The chance of the kid being colorblind is slim but plausible, “and your roomie if he’s into flowers.”

But Minghao’s soft smile as he accepts the gifts and ushers him in quells his urge to toss the flowers out the window. The man can’t take his eyes off them, jumping from lilacs to coreopsis—whatever. Maybe it’s Mingyu who is colorblind or maybe it’s Minghao that can find beauty in anything. “Thanks.” He puts Cacahuates’s stuff on the glass dining table. The home smells warm and welcoming. Mingyu can tell that there’s something cooking in the kitchen, “We should have a vase somewhere.” He finally looks up at Mingyu, “Feel free to take a seat anywhere. I’ll be right back.”

As soon as Minghao disappears behind a wall, it’s his chance to explore and learn everything he can from his surroundings. Minghao can read so much about him from his place, so what can he glean about him?

Abso-fucking-lutely nothing.

Well, at least nothing directly telling of Minghao that he doesn’t already know. He has some hard facts about the residence, but nothing outstanding—that’s because everything is outstanding. Firstly, everything seems to be clean and dust-free which seems like a lot of upkeep for having so many things sitting around that can catch dust. The walls are solid greys and blacks, no spackle, no gloss. Polished cement floors cover the hallway and living area while black marble-looking tiles divide the kitchen from the rest of the open floor plan. The baseboards and trims are white. The large windows and mirrors open the space and colorful rugs make it seem brighter.

Without any of the colorful pops, this apartment would seriously be black and white all over. It makes Mingyu wonder who does the interior design; Seungcheol or Minghao. There are a lot of impractical things lining shelves and walls. The one that’s currently catching his eye is a large, cubicle bookshelf with a trail of neon army men marching up the side and into one of the cubes. He would have never thought supergluing plastic toys to a shelf could make it so appealing. It’s so pointless, but also so cool. Among other things, there are also several abstract sculptures. If he had to guess, some of them are just blown glass and others are made of ceramic. They could have picked it up at World Market or could have commissioned it from a fine artist. He hasn’t the slightest idea of what fine art is.

Okay, so the contemporary décor is a little chaotic for Mingyu’s taste (just a little), but it’s also incredibly fascinating. It’s weird enough and impractical enough to reflect in the way Minghao dresses, especially with all the monochrome and sudden pops of vivid color. He’s going to assume the large, black and gold wall clock is Seungcheol’s idea and not Minghao’s. Minghao prefers silver. The industrial feel also makes it seem a bit grungy without being dirty. While there are a lot of objects, knickknacks, and bobs and whistles, everything seems to have a place. He envies their eye for design.

Minghao really wasn’t lying when he said he kills all his plants. Upon a shelf sits a shriveled cactus and on another shelf rests a withered air plant. An airplant? Seriously, Minghao? It needs one thing; air—and maybe a spritz of water once a week. Once a week. And with how much moisture is in the air recently, the plant probably doesn’t even need to be watered. How does he manage to take care of a dog?

Mingyu feels a little nudge at his knee and looks down to see Cacahuates bumping his head against him, a purple stuffed snake in his mouth, “Do you want me to throw it?” he takes the toy out of the dog’s mouth and Cacahuates sits down patiently, his tail curving and curling as it wags slowly. His brown eyes are trained on the toy and when Mingyu tries to fake him out, he doesn’t fall for it. Such a smart boy.
He only gets two throws in before Minghao pops back into sight, “We did have a vase.” He carries the flowers in with a rectangular glass vase with indigo marbles and pearl beads settled in the bottom. It looks like a little galaxy. Undoubtedly, Minghao makes the bouquet look better than it did when Mingyu brought it in. He even positions it nicely on the glass table, “Huatito, do you want the toy that Uncle Mingyu brought for you?” Cacahuaté perks up and comes over to sit at Mingyu’s feet. Minghao rips the tag off the dragon with a pop and hands the stuffed toy to Mingyu, “Why don’t you give it to him? He’s been looking forward to you showing up all day.”

Mingyu launches the dragon across the living room, “How did he know?”

“No clue.” Minghao crosses his arms, watching fondly as his son prances after the toy, “Call it a dog’s intuition.” He then turns to Mingyu and pats him on the shoulder to call his attention, “Keep your shoes on. I’m gonna turn off the stove and we can take Cacahuaté on a…” he does a walking motion by scissoring his fingers and mouthing the word, “He still gets a little excited, so, shh.”

Minghao leaves again to supposedly find a leash and Mingyu takes a seat at the dining table. It’s only a few strides away from the entrance, so he doesn’t feel too bad trailing dirt into the home, but he’s sure not to walk too far in. Cacahuaté squeaks the dragon repeatedly until Mingyu clicks his tongue and asks him to bring it back. However, the dog just stares at him from across the living room before shaking the dragon in his mouth and slamming it into the ground, pouncing on it tirelessly. It’s a little unsettling. He tries calling him again, but the dog continues to ignore him.

“I thought you liked me.” He whines, defeated. Cacahuaté looks up. He suddenly decides to come over with the dragon, placing it in Mingyu’s lap. He looks up at Mingyu curiously, tilting his head to the side, making his ears stand akimbo. Cacahuaté’s ears are so soft. Mingyu could pet them for days. He squishes those fluffy cheeks and pushes his ears together to make him look like a rabbit. The dog is not happy, “What? Do you want me to throw it again?” No reaction, “Want me to keep petting you? Belly rub?” Cacahuaté shakes his head free of Mingyu’s touch and scratches at his jeans, “What is it? Your dad’s gonna be back in a sec.” He wishes he could understand because it really feels like Cacahuaté is trying to tell him something. Is Minghao coming back with the leash taut in his hands, getting ready to strangle him? Is Cacahuaté trying to save him from being murdered?

The golden dog circles around Mingyu’s legs, crouching to pass under the chair and come back out. He stares at Mingyu again with some sort of intent.

“I can’t follow you, I have my shoes on.”

So, Cacahuaté comes back and flops over at his feet. Belly rub it is. This dog is so weird.

Mingyu reaches Cacahuaté’s sweet spot just as Minghao comes back into the room. He has a jacket on now, and totes Cacahuaté’s black leash behind his back. The dancer stops in the entryway for a moment, just smiling at Mingyu and Cacahuaté playing, “Hey, ready to go?”

The blonde dog immediately jumps back to all-fours and goes over to sit on Minghao’s foot, “Yeah, I’m ready.” Mingyu stands to help hold Cacahuaté in place as Minghao attaches the clasp to his collar, “Let’s go.”
Chapter 61

He has a bad premonition about the results of this walk because Minghao stumbles over the door’s ledge on his way out. C’mon, Minghao, this is your home. Cacahuate, being the good boy that he is, takes a seat and waits for his owner to recover from his folly, feet restlessly shifting on the ground. He wants to go.

Minghao outlines the path they’ll take. It’s just a short lap around the block, entering into the grand children’s park down the street, and coming back. That’s not a problem. The problem is that the second they reach the children’s park their idle conversation is cut short by a roll of thunder. Up until that point, they were having a great discussion about dogs, dinner, and pet care. Plant care was included somewhere between the lines, but Minghao quickly brushed the subject away after Mingyu pointed out the two dead plants on the shelf.

“Do you think it’s going to rain?” Mingyu’s the one holding the leash and waiting for Cacahuate to finish peeing on a stop sign.

Minghao looks up to the sky. The clouds are coasting by and the wind is picking up. He wouldn’t be surprised if the next county over is on tornado warning; they usually are around this time of year, “My weather app said it would only be cloudy.” He tugs his jacket closed. Sorry, Minghao, Mingyu’s cold today too, “There’s only a 20% chance of rain. I think we can finish the walk before that 20% gets here. Besides, going back to get the umbrella will take just as long.”

“If you say so.”

It won’t take as long, but Mingyu’s too lazy to return to the home as well.

Cacahuate likes walking between them. Sometimes he tugs Mingyu to the left to sniff something on the other side of the sidewalk, causing him to bump into Minghao. This happens frequently enough that Mingyu gets flustered and Minghao asks to switch sides so that he doesn’t continue to get elbowed in the arm. Of course, Cacahuate starts to find interest in stuff on the right side of the road now, so Mingyu hands off the leash to Minghao in hopes that the owner will have better control.

He doesn’t.

It’s not like Cacahuate is tugging or pulling like some of the other dogs on the path, but he has his leash taut most of the time. He doesn’t calm down until Minghao snaps at him with a serious tone. Cacahuate turns around while they’re making their way through the back of the park and gives Minghao a big smile, making him feel bad for his accusations and earning a pat on the head.

“But, you know, sometimes you just have to face situations like that head-on.”

“Situations like sticking your arm down a dark hole in the wall of a mysterious back alley?” Mingyu is dumbfounded, “Screw that. She can get new keys. How did they even get there?”

Minghao laughs, “I told you, she was like ‘No, I’m the DD. I’m gonna drive you all home. I’m not drunk at al- bleh’” He imitates the party girl vomiting, “And her friends were like, ‘No, Katelyn, that’s such a bad idea’ and they started wrestling for the keys and I happened to pass by when they dropped it through the vent.”
“You didn’t even know them?”

“Hey, I’m a nice guy.” Mingyu wouldn’t have gone out of his way to help strangers like that even if they did cry and asked nicely, “Sometimes you have bad days and sometimes you just need a stranger to help out.”

“But you didn’t…”

“No, I didn’t give her the keys. I gave them to the sober friend.” He wonders if Minghao is cold. He’s only wearing a thin jacket over his t-shirt. His outfit is very dance studio-casual. Mingyu decided to dress quite casually as well and left his heavy outer coat on the back of the dining room chair. It’s a mistake because they’re both freezing and neither of them wants to be the first to admit it, “And I scored a coupon to Ben n’ Jerry’s. So, that was cool.”

“I’m glad that the key to impressing you is ice cream coupons.”

“It was over 110 that summer. Can you blame me? I was in college,” Minghao kicks a rock on the path, “free-anything was like gold back then.” Cacahuate startles when another drum of thunder sails across the sky. He whines and winds himself between Minghao’s legs. The dancer immediately has a hand combing through his fur, “It’s okay Huatito, it’s okay.”

Mingyu squats down to meet Cacahuate eye-to-eye. The dog looks frightened, but licks Mingyu’s palms when he comes to pet his head, “Hey, buddy, what’s wrong?”

It starts drizzling in soft, misty sheets, “Maybe we should hurry back.”

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.” Mingyu stands back up to his full height. So much for styling his hair, “We can probably make it back before it actually starts raining.”

If Minghao has control over time, then it seems like Mingyu has control over the weather because right after he finishes his sentence the rain starts pouring in buckets. In seconds their hair and shoulders are drenched. Mingyu meets Minghao’s eyes—although even that much is incredibly difficult with how heavily the water is coming down—and the shorter man bursts into laughter as he takes off across the field with Cacahuate. The air is filled with Minghao’s jovial scream; peppery, light, and excitable.

Mingyu jogs after them. He can already feel the water seeping through all his layers and plastering against his skin. His shoes and socks are soaked from mistaking a deeper puddle for a lush patch of grass. Minghao turns around to check on him when he curses, “Mingyu! There are children in this park.” There are absolutely no children in the park. Children (and their parents) are sane and inside their cars heading home already, not playing outside in the rain.

They come to hide under a large oak tree where the branches and leaves fan out to give them shelter. Minghao and Cacahuate shake out their hair; the droplets hitting Mingyu as he arrives just a second later. So much for a nice walk in the park. Flash storms aren’t common in the valley, but maybe the planets just lined up to ruin their stroll today. Minghao’s sitting on a particularly tall root, petting his dog and waiting for Mingyu to walk over to them.

“We can wait until it lightens up a bit.”

Mingyu edges on the border of the tree’s coverage to look up at the sky. He pokes his head out and shields his eyes with rain. “I haven’t seen a flash storm like this since last summer.” The clouds are tumbling over each other, heavy and dark, “It looks really pretty, though.”

“Does it?” Minghao walks over, pulling his phone out of his pocket, ready to take a picture. He
takes a look at the sky and takes a look at Mingyu, then looks down at Cacahuate, “Could you hold his leash so I can take a picture?”

Mingyu turns, “Sure.”

But Minghao just backs up after handing him the leash instead of coming forward to snap a shot at the sky, “Do you think you can face forward? Cacahuate, sit.” Cacahuate sits and glances up at Mingyu, giving him patient eyes as if telling him to comply. So, Mingyu holds the leash and turns back out to face the field and the distant playground, “And just lower your hand slightly,” he does, “slightly,” he does, “just a little more.” He does. Mingyu hears a little rustling, like Minghao’s crouching down in the fallen leaves and twigs of the oak tree.

There’s no flash. Surprising since the shade of the tree is pretty dark, “Good?”

“Good!” Minghao comes up to him, “Wanna see?” He flips his phone screen around to show Mingyu, “Do you mind if I post it? I can tag you if you have an Instagram.”

The lightning flashes behind him and Mingyu suddenly feels caught in the floodlights of an interrogation. His heartbeat increases because of the slight panic and Cacahuate seemingly understands and slaps his tail against Mingyu’s calf to snap him out of it. There’s no way Minghao knows, “Ah, I don’t use mine anymore. You don’t need to tag me.” He could also do with that one fan of Minghao’s not knowing his identity.

“Okay.”

Mingyu finally gets to take a look at the photo after Minghao does all his pretty adjustments and balances the lighting. He’s really got an eye for stuff like this. He managed to take such a nice picture on the first try. The sky looks vast and open, the overbearing clouds have silver linings surrounding them with halos of light. The field appears massive, too, and the children’s playground offsets Mingyu and Cacahuate who are silhouetted on the left side of the image.

Mingyu knows he looks good, especially his face, but this picture doesn’t even have any of that showing. He’s just a cutout. Cacahuate, the Instagram star, sets up a perfect leading line from the ground up to his leash, leading to Mingyu’s arm that directs attention to his head. He was looking up at the clouds- the overall composition is gallery worthy. He’s never seen himself captured in such a powerful way. He looks strong, like he’s ready to support the weight of the world.

“You know, you should really consider photography as a career.”

“Nah.”

Minghao’s fast and curt answer sends questions into Mingyu’s brain, “Why not?”

He shrugs, “I don’t have a very good impression of photographers is all.” He takes his phone back and slips it into his jeans’ pocket, “Especially photography that’s super staged. It’s just not my jam.”

“Didn’t you just stage me and Cacahuate?”

“ Barely. But I meant like portraits and stuff like that. Career-wise it just doesn’t sound enjoyable.” Are careers, by definition, supposed to be enjoyable, “And you suck at posing, so there was nothing that artificial about the picture.”

“Um, excuse you?” Mingyu guffaws, raising his eyebrows. He’s not an easy man, not a free model. What are you saying, Minghao Xu, “I’m perfectly good at posing.”
“You’re perfectly terrible at not holding still. Did you see the motion blur?” No, he didn’t notice.

“And you’re good at it?”

“I’m a dancer, of course I’m good at it.”

“You wanna go?” he can feel the smile on his lips already.

“Yeah, I wanna go.” Minghao gives him a silly, bring-it-on gesture. He takes Cacahuate’s leash from Mingyu and tosses it to the side. Looks like he’s confident the baby won’t run off, “First one to break composure admits that they’re a trash model.”

“Deal.” Mingyu would have never guessed that their afternoon stroll in the park would end with him locking eyes with Minghao in the shelter of a giant oak tree, but here they are. He bites his lips together, determined not to smile or move after he says, “3, 2, 1, go.”

He can barely hold his composure when Minghao looks up at him innocently, but Minghao glaring at him like this is making his nerves go haywire. His arms and chest feel tingly and itchy, like they’re being sprinkled with hot embers. What is this? Is this foul play? How can someone go from cute to scary in under a second? Minghao, on the other hand, doesn’t look shaken in the slightest. He even inches closer in his determination to win. The arms crossed over his chest make it look like he actually wants to fight.

Really, how did Soonyoung last in a fight with Minghao if he’s staring at him like that?

“Give up yet?”

“Nope.”

The rain is still pouring from the sky. It’s the only sound that fills the air until he hears Cacahuate’s collar jingle. Minghao seems assured that he won’t run off, but Mingyu finds it very difficult to fight the urge to check on him.

He should have followed his instinct because Cacahuate bounds up to him and pushes him out into the rain. Mingyu stumbles over his own long legs before scurrying back under the tree. Minghao’s already doubled over in laughter, “Ha! I win.” And Cacahuate it panting at his legs. If Mingyu didn’t know better, he’d say that the dog was laughing at him, too.

“Unfair.”

“All is fair in love and w-” but Mingyu already has his arms around Minghao’s middle, swinging him out into the rain. The dancer’s hands are quick to wrap around his wrists, trying to get free with a little yelp. He could seriously suplex Minghao right now if he wanted, but alas, throwing him out to get soaked is equally as satisfying. But the action spins Minghao around so quickly that he slips in the wet grass and gets his shins all muddy when he skids. While he is definitely laughing at Minghao more than anything else, he’s helping him up at the same time. Multitasking at its best.

“Oh, and since when did you care abo- nononono, Cacahuate?” Mingyu scrambles to grab the leash before the dog can find the huge mud puddle, but it’s too late.

His true Golden Retriever nature comes out.

For at least five seconds, he and Minghao stand still just watching as Cacahuate bounds towards the swampy ground. They debate for a moment what to do; how to fish him out without
getting muddy themselves, but in the end, there’s no denying that one of them will have to get wet since he’s not responding to their calls.

Minghao makes the first move. It’s his dog after all. He takes off his socks and shoes, setting them to the side before rolling up his pants and sinking into the water up to his ankles. Cacahuate is as carefree as ever, splashing around. He assumes play position when Minghao calls for him again. For once, Mingyu wishes that Seungcheol was here to wrangle the pup so they wouldn’t have to be completely drenched. Because it looks like Cacahuate is about to sprint off in the other direction when Minghao takes a step forward, Mingyu tries to corner him on the other side. This is starting to look like a game of Pong with two men and a dog.

In the end, Mingyu ends up having to enter the water as well, leaving his shoes by Minghao’s in the safety of the oak, but it’s Minghao who really gets sopping wet. He had grabbed Cacahuate by the collar, unable to see his leash in the murky waters and long grass, but the dog had struggled against him. In order to get a better grip, Minghao had wrapped his arms around the dog’s chest and gone down to a knee, soaking him all the way up to his thighs, but at least he has the leash in hand now.

Dog wrangled and absolutely freezing, Minghao grabs his socks and shoes and decides that they should just head back quickly since they’re already dripping. Mingyu agrees. He’d rather not catch another cold despite the idea of Minghao taking care of him being incredibly persuasive. However, it somehow feels like Cacahuate pays no mind to their disposition because he’s very much so still up to some shenanigans.

Apparently, said dog isn’t satisfied with seeing his father and uncle shivering with blue lips because he’s pulling and tugging on the leash as they try to cross the wet grass with their shoes off. Everything is slippery. Even when Mingyu offers to hold the leash, he’s having trouble not making a fool of himself.

The compromise?

Minghao takes Mingyu’s hand for support.
Chapter 62

Holding hands with Minghao for the first time isn’t as soft or pleasant as he’d expected. None of it is constant as they’re both continuously adjusting their grip strength as Cacahuaté pulls them through the slick grass and they’re both freezing and waterlogged. Minghao’s already having a hard enough time holding his shoes with Cacahuaté’s leash looped around his wrist, Mingyu can tell that there’s no intent behind initiating the contact. Still, when Minghao lets go when they reach the end of the field and return to the sidewalk, he can’t help but long for the touch.

He already misses the slight callouses formed on his palms from the wear and tear of his occupation, the old raised scar on the underside of his thumb that he got from performing a sliding handstand across a rickety stage. He liked the ways Minghao’s thin fingers easily carded between his thicker ones—how his defined knuckles locked them in place—and for the first time in a long while, he doesn’t feel self-conscious of his stubby phalanges. He fancies the hands’ bony structure, the way his tendons and veins were so pronounced over his metacarpals. Minghao has a strong grip and big palms. He has sturdy nails that dug into the anterior of Mingyu’s hand when he tried to balance himself. It didn’t hurt, but now Mingyu can’t take his mind off the idea of Minghao digging his nails into other parts of him. He hopes that his palms weren’t very sweaty, but how can they be when it’s probably below freezing.

Their hands were so cold that there was no warmth between their fingers, but who needs fire when you have electricity.

Minghao and Mingyu try to figure out the best method to get Cacahuaté into the apartment while they themselves are soaked to the bone, creating a large puddle over the welcome mat. Minghao looks at the dog and heaves a deep sigh. His fur is completely covered in mud, “Can you hold him here for a minute?”

“Sure.” He hands the leash to Mingyu and ducks inside first. Cacahuaté looks up at Mingyu with a happy face, clearly satisfied with his adventure into Shrek’s swamp. Minghao is not so thrilled, “Don’t give your dad a hard time.” Cacahuaté stops his content panting and closes his mouth. He rolls over at Mingyu’s bare feet, “No belly rubs. You were a bad boy.”

“The absolute worst boy.” Minghao wraps a big navy towel around Mingyu and pushes him inside the apartment as he takes the leash, “I’m going to hose him off over by the pool. I’ll be back in a sec.”

“Do you need help?” he ought to still be cold.

“I’m good. Get inside before you catch a cold.” He sounds so tired that Mingyu doesn’t want to argue otherwise he would have accompanied him. All he can do is watch as Minghao jogs with Cacahuaté a couple buildings over and uses a garden hose to rinse off all the mud. He’s not clean, but it’s better than tracking so much dirt into the home.

Speaking of, Mingyu still hasn’t learned much about Minghao from the living space. He blames it on the fact that Seungcheol lives there as well and there’s no way of differentiating their belongings since the area looks so integrated. He’s not one to snoop around. However, one thing he is curious about is how he’s going to get dry. He doesn’t have spare clothes in his car. He’d have to drive back to his apartment to change and that would involve getting his seats wet. Washer-dryer combos weren’t very common for apartments; he just can’t stand the idea of putting his underwear
into a communal one which is why he bought his own. Despite this place being bigger than his own, he
doesn’t know if their complex has a communal one or if they have their own. Minghao must go
through a lot of clothes, right?

He hears the door open and turns around, “Oh, good, you’re not a human icicle yet.”

“I’m surprised you still have jokes to spill while your teeth are chattering.” Minghao is
somehow more saturated with water than he was before.

He shuffles past Mingyu to flap the hallway rug out of the way and take Cacahuate to the
bathroom. They’re so lucky they don’t have carpet. Minghao leaves Cacahuate in the bathroom and
comes back to him, “So, I’m going to move Cacahuate and wash him in the roomie’s en-suite, but
you can take a shower in this one. There’s a clean robe behind the door.” This is starting to feel
uncannily like the night Minghao showed up in the rain with hair dripping wet, “You can just leave
your clothes outside the door before you shower. I’ll toss them in the wash before I shower. Then we
can eat.”

It’s a little endearing how tired Minghao sounds. He probably thought that today would go
smoothly, but now he seems a little stressed. Mingyu tries his best to follow his lead, “Okay.” He
reaches forward with the towel in his hands, still around his shoulders, and rubs Minghao’s hair,
holding his cheeks and patting his temples dry, “Cheer up. At least Cacahuate had fun.”

Minghao scoffs out a little laugh, avoiding eye contact and taking a step back, “You’re right,
you’re right.” He pulls the towel closed around Mingyu, “Let’s get a move on then. I’m hungry.”

The bathroom is clean. Well, it is Minghao’s bathroom and Minghao is an organized and clean
person. Since he said that Seungcheol had an en-suite, he can assume this bathroom is Minghao’s
even though it’s attached to the hallway instead of his bedroom, but it doesn’t scream ‘I’m
Minghao’s bathroom’. Aside from being nicely decorated with a few items that match the living and
dining rooms, there isn’t much. He can appreciate the ceramic dinosaur soap dispenser and he can
appreciate the two framed canvasses on the wall opposite the sink. Said bathrobe-behind-the-door is
a beautifully plush black fabric; very Minghao. The shower has a sliding door with a red towel on
the handle, but he’s pretty sure that he shouldn’t be using it. Should he just use the towel he has with
him right now? It’s a little dirty from drying off his legs-

“There are clean towels under the sink.” Minghao’s voice is muffled through the door. It
sounds like he’s on his way somewhere, “Seriously, throw your clothes out asap so I can get them
dry. I don’t think I have anything your size.”

“Kay, thanks.” Mingyu finds the towels under the sink and picks the creamy peach one. As he
strips and queues up the water, he finally realizes that if Minghao doesn’t wash and dry his clothes in
time, he’ll be sitting at the dinner table in only a bathrobe. Because the chairs have cushioned seats,
he assumes that means he can’t be wearing wet underwear lest it seeps through the robe- he’s going
to be 100% naked under this robe in Minghao’s presence. He’s going to be 100% naked under this robe in Minghao’s presence.

Mingyu doesn’t need to look in the mirror to know that his cheeks are redder than apples.

At this moment, he has to weigh which is less embarrassing; letting Minghao wash his undies
or leaving a wet butt impression on the ivory seats. It also means that he must decide which is the
least comfortable option; sitting naked under a robe that isn’t his or sitting in wet boxer-briefs for the
next two hours. Friends wash their friends’ underwear, right? That’s not totally out of line. Maybe if
he buries it between his jacket, shirt, and jeans, Minghao won’t even see it.

He’s not even sure why he’s so flustered over a pair of underwear and people have seen him naked before. This isn’t anything new and this is Minghao we’re talking about. Minghao doesn’t care. He’s a champion at getting over things.

Mingyu shyly drops his clothes outside the door bundled up in the navy towel and jumps into the shower. He doesn’t dare look into the mirror. Being completely nude in front of someone else’s mirror makes it feel like they’re looking at you and Mingyu’s just not ready for that. Minghao’s shampoo and conditioner isn’t anything special or huge. He has two shampoos, one conditioner, one body wash, and one unopened hair mask treatment. All of them are balanced on the windowsill above the tiled wall and from different brands. Based on how empty they are, they were either purchased at different times or maybe Minghao just doesn’t use much conditioner. It doesn’t matter because they all smell amazing. There is also a little shower steamer bomb sitting on the edge of the tub that’s already foaming and releasing a nice eucalyptus scent into the room. He feels bad that he activated it without knowing because those are probably saved for a special day, but it’s too late.

Sure, Mingyu hasn’t had the blessing to smell a freshly-washed Minghao—that sounded a lot less creepy before the voice in his head repeated it—, but if he smells like this, then Mingyu’s really missing out. The real choice now is fresh apple and grape or grapefruit and mint. Since he’s already experiencing a bunch of new things today, why not just mix the shampoos. It smells excellent.

His hair already feels soft enough without the addition of conditioner, so he decides to skip out. He doesn’t want to overuse. Mingyu gets dried quickly with his back turned to the mirror. Again, mirrors in an unfamiliar bathroom just feels like a pair of stranger’s eyes on you. It’s uncomfortable. The plush robe makes him forget those worries. God. This thing is so soft that Mingyu spends almost a minute hugging himself. It even comes with a hood. He’s silently giggling to himself. It’s a mix of nerves, joy, and awkwardness that sparks his laughter. What has he gotten himself into?

When he peeks his head out—robe tied tightly around his waist—he sees that his clothes are gone and in their place is a pair of house slippers. Minghao must’ve swung by, but he doubts the man can wash and dry a dog and himself that fast. Should he wait here or in the living room? It’d be a little strange if Minghao came out to see him lounging on the couch, wouldn’t it? He decides to spend the next few minutes trying to dry and style his hair without any products, just a towel. It’s ultimately a failure. Thick hair doesn’t care what technique you use, if you don’t have product, it’s not staying up.

A knocking comes at his door, “Hey, are you done? I put Cacahuate in his crate for a bit.”

“Yeah, I’m done.” Mingyu swings open the door, feeling bad that he didn’t wipe down the mirror. The steam was heavy.

Minghao’s hair is still damp, little droplets sprinkling onto his shirt when he turns his head to look at Mingyu. His clothes have changed, he’s probably showered despite not looking quite fresh and awake. He’s fast. How did he wash and dry a dog as big as Cacahuate in less than fifteen minutes, “Cool. I’m going to get the soup boiling. Are you cold? Do you want a blanket?”

“I’m good.” Looks like he will be sitting at dinner with no clothes on after all.

Minghao heads to the kitchen with Mingyu in tow.

He recognizes the countertop and cupboards from Minghao’s Instagram, but he didn’t think the kitchen would be this nice. For someone who doesn’t cook that often, Mingyu’s surprised that
the kitchen is outfitted with two ovens and a five-burner propane stovetop. This is a full house kitchen, not something he’s used to seeing in apartments. The sink and dishwasher are both stainless steel and Minghao’s knife block has some exquisite residents.

“What are we having tonight, Chef Xu?”

The burner clicks on. Minghao bends down to dig for something in a cabinet and pulls out a portable stovetop and something akin to a large saucepan or steel bowl, “Hotpot.”

Hotpot sounds suitable for the weather. Mingyu’s only had it a couple times during his time in college. He didn’t have many Chinese friends and the two places he went didn’t taste as authentic as he’d imagined, but they were still good. Minghao’s sure to cook up something better, he can tell by how creamy the soup is after being boiled for hours with bone marrow. But where are all the fixins? It can’t be just soup.

“Nope, I’m good.” Minghao scoots past him to put the hotpot’s vessel on the dining table and turn it on. Mingyu feels bad. Minghao usually helps him out when they eat at his place. He doesn’t like sitting on his hands and watching other people do things, but because Minghao seems a little frustrated at how the evening has been progressing, he decides not to push his luck.

So, instead, Mingyu shifts the topic of conversation, “This robe is so soft.” Smooth transition, Mingyu.

“Like it?” Minghao reenters the room, “My mom gave it to me when I left for college. I never used it much.”

This is an open opportunity to ask about his parents. As far as Mingyu knows, he has a mother and father, both of which are removed from his life in one way or another, but something scratches in the back of his brain that it might not be a good idea to pry. He weighs his options and decides against asking. Tonight’s been stressful enough on Minghao, “You met Soonyoung in college, right?”

He opens the fridge to take out two plates of meat and a platter of cleaned vegetables. At a glance, Mingyu gleans that there are some fun-looking mushrooms, baby bok choi, leafy greens, maybe some zucchini, “Yeah, Jun introduced us.”

“So, you’ve also known Wonwoo since college?”

“Yep.” A buzzer in a backroom calls Minghao’s attention and he hands the plates to Mingyu, “Can you take these to the table, I’m going to put your clothes in the dryer.”

“Sure.”

But Mingyu was just about to get to the bottom of Wonwoo’s blatant lies. He’s definitely close to Minghao if they’ve known each other this long. There’s no reason they shouldn’t be friends since they’re both likable and kind. He has to know why Wonwoo and Minghao acted like they didn’t know each other at the clinic and why Wonwoo keeps denying that they’re close!

That’s his goal by the end of the night.
However, he doesn’t really get a chance to pick up his question where they left off because Minghao comes back and immediately gets to work putting together the rest of the plates and adding the veggies that take longer to cook to the soup boat on the dining table along with half the broth he made. He also adds a couple slices of ginger and cranks up the heat so that they can steep before they actually start eating. The center ring of the hotpot vessel is filled with broth as well as five very small, very dangerous looking peppers soaked in a neon orange oil. He’s just cast a spell for a deathwish. Luckily, most of the soup is uncontaminated with the potential mistake.

Minghao and his sauces. Minghao and his sauces.

Mingyu has half a mind to stop him from brewing up some regretful slurry of spices, but it looks like the condiment enthusiast is taking it easy tonight. Mingyu cocks a hip and leans against the dishwasher as Minghao mixes and pours a couple different bottles of brown liquid into one glass bowl. He can’t read the labels, but it’s cool that Minghao can.

He grabs a lemon from the fruit bowl and squeezes it into the concoction, adding a drizzle of sesame oil over it. He makes the same mixture again in a second bowl, but replaces the sesame oil with chili oil and—there it is—the jalapeño. Of course, the spice of life. After he tosses the jalapeño in, he stirs them both and takes a taste of the mild version.

“How is it, Chef Xu?”

Minghao shrugs, “It’s okay. Want a taste?”

“Sure.”

But instead of giving Mingyu his own spoon, he grabs a clean one from the drawer and dips it into the sauce, holding it up to Mingyu’s lips nonchalantly, offering him a sample. From the smell alone, Mingyu can tell that there’s probably soy sauce in it. Maybe vinegar. Cooking wine? He’s not sure, “How is it?”

“Sour?” Mingyu smacks his lips together as Minghao tosses the spoon into the sink. There are some underlying flavors that stand out. Sweetness, a little warmth, and some low earthy tones, “But good. Did you put ponzu in it?”

“No, but there’s like the smallest bit of hoisin with lemon and soy sauce. Should I water it down? Does it need more sugar?”

Mingyu gives Minghao a clueless look, “You’re the chef.”

“We’re both chefs. It’s hotpot.”

The buzzer sounds again, calling Minghao’s attention just as he finishes setting the table and arranging everything to look nice. He shuffles off to fish the clothes out of the dryer. Thirty minutes is a pretty efficient drying time. Then again, there are only, like, four pieces of clothing (including Mingyu’s underwear). The dry-time shouldn’t be too long.

Minghao releases Cacahuate from his crated timeout.

He’s more than happy to see Mingyu again and is winding himself between his legs which wouldn’t be a problem if he had pants on, but now he’s struggling to keep the robe closed,
“Cacahuate, please.” Minghao laughs as he follows in after his dog, Mingyu’s clothes stacked and folded in a neat pile in his hands.

“Here you go, fresh and toasty. Your jacket’s still wet, so give it a few more minutes.” Mingyu would be more relieved to receive the clothes if Cacahuate wasn’t still trying to hide under him and the fluffy bathrobe, “Cacahuate, qù shuìjiào.” The dog hesitates before looking up at his owner, “Shuìjiào.” and complying, sauntering over to the living room and flopping down on a dog bed in the corner created by the two couches. Minghao’s attention turns back to Mingyu after he’s not floundering to keep the robe shut, “What are you waiting for? Go change so we can eat.”

Of course, Chef Xu.

The clothes are still warm and cozy from the dryer. They smell heavily of detergent and softener sheets. It feels like a full body hug and Mingyu feels revitalized. He doesn’t really understand why, but the idea of Minghao cooking him dinner and washing his clothes makes him feel a certain way. He still can’t define it, but that’s okay. He’ll just embrace the feeling as he tries, once more, to fix his hair. It’s hopeless. Then again, maybe his hair doesn’t need styling. Minghao’s hair isn’t styled. Any sort of proper presentation or grace that they tried to uphold was destroyed when they entered the water, so might as well forget the formalities. Minghao’s already seen him at his worst.

When he emerges like a laundromat butterfly from the bathroom, Minghao’s got the table set and the soup filled up to the rim of the pot. There’s the introduction of clear noodles on the side along with three more sauces. Minghao is truly the sauce master. Cacahuate is rolling with glee since he was given the bully stick after promising not to bother them while they ate.

“Okay, let’s eat.” Why the rush, Minghao? Mingyu laughs as he takes a seat. The chef doesn’t wait for him to start before throwing a bunch of the raw ingredients into the boiling broth and waiting with his hands in his lap.

“Go on.” But Minghao just gives him an expectant look.

Right, right, Mingyu still has to take the first bite. Minus the backsplash of half a daikon flying out of his grasp, it goes pretty smoothly. Minghao is far more coordinated than he is, even offering to bring out Korean chopsticks—right, Seungcheol is Korean—, but Mingyu is determined to survive the night with these chunky Chinese chopsticks even if it means that he’ll only be half as efficient. It’s a learning curve and if he and Minghao are going to be eating meals together into the foreseeable future, he’s gonna have to learn eventually.

“So, Minghao.” Minghao looks up from his bowl, “Wonwoo keeps saying that you two aren’t close, but he knows so much about you that I wanna get to the bottom of it and call him out for his blatant lies.” He says it with a little sarcasm just so Minghao knows that he’s allowed to back out of the question if he wants to or respond with an equal amount of sarcasm.

But the dancer sets his bowl and chopsticks down, “Well,” he glances to the side like he’s trying to figure something out, “We aren’t. I mean, we’ve known each other for a few years. You’re not wrong, I just don’t know if I’d call him a friend.”

“Do you not-”

“I don’t dislike Wonwoo.” He pokes the tip of his chopsticks into his mouth after eating a slice of beef, “And I don’t think he dislikes me either. We just didn’t get off to a great start.”

“What happened?” Minghao sighs, “We don’t have to talk about it. I’m just curious. He
speaks well of you and-"

“No, it’s fine.” He smiles, “Maybe you can help us clear the air a bit. This has gone on long enough.”

So, Mingyu sits and listens to the brief history of Minghao Xu after high school (while stuffing his face because Minghao’s food is always top notch).

He had left town and wound up at some community college near the coast, started up a dance team with a couple of his old members, and rightfully became captain of that team. They held open auditions and that’s how he met Jun. Things had gone well for a while and Jun had joined the team of fifteen-and-growing as one of the more experienced dancers. That was the start of their friendship. Pure and simple. They just clicked very well and at the time Jun had just moved to the U.S. a couple years prior and his English wasn’t great. He had to rely on Minghao for a lot of paperwork and applications.

Then, one day, Jun starts bringing some quiet bookworm to their practices and meetings. This is Wonwoo. He was still trying to figure out what he wanted to study in the long-run, only completing his first year of GE courses with one more to go before he really had to set his plans in stone. Of course, being Jun’s friend, Minghao knew the side of the story that Wonwoo didn’t and that was that Jun really liked him. He lists off all the reasons why Jun and Wonwoo would have been a good match; how Jun’s so soft-spoken and quiet that he needs to be with someone who is very considerate and observational was among the more outstanding reasons. Minghao even goes so far as to say that maybe in a different universe, in a different timeline, Wonwoo and Jun would have ended up together and they would have both been happy, but in this universe, this Wonwoo doesn’t belong to this Jun.

But as things were, they continued for another year until Minghao had to transfer out of the two-year college into a university. Jun and Minghao had grown closer and—to a point—Minghao had been open to accepting Wonwoo as a friend, but because Minghao didn’t attend the same university as Wonwoo, he didn’t really have opportunities to meet him outside of practice and practice was usually all business like it’s always been. When it came time to file their transfer paperwork, Minghao had decided on a nearby university.

Jun, on the other hand, was caught between transferring to Wonwoo’s college or Minghao’s. But bros before hoes.” Mingyu whines as he laughs into a bite of hot noodles.

“I know, right?” Minghao laughs along. He’s glad the mood is still up, “But I couldn’t tell him that. You should have seen the way he looked at Wonwoo. Puppy love, you know.”

In the end, Jun had applied to both, but—as fate would hold it—only got accepted to Minghao’s university. It wasn’t the end of the world, it was just going to be more difficult for him to see Wonwoo. However, it was also around that time that Jun had met Soonyoung at a dance convention in Los Angeles and found out that he also lived nearby. Despite declining the invitation to join Minghao’s dance team since he already was leading his own back at his school, Soonyoung did become quick friends with them. Offhandedly, Minghao mentions that Soonyoung had just broken up a very casual and short-term relationship with Jihoon and that they’re very much so still good friends. Mingyu appreciated being clued in. The pieces are starting to add up.

However, a little heartbroken and lonely, Soonyoung had started taking a fancy to Minghao. He could tell. Everyone could tell. Whenever Soonyoung showed up to their practices for fun or to
share notes, he had doted on the younger dancer and followed him around like a puppy. At the time, and since then, Minghao hadn’t been interested and made that clear to Soonyoung. They kept on good terms, though. It was easy.

“Doesn’t that make having this dance team a little complicated?”

Minghao nods, “We’re all adults here. Those feelings were left in the past and we’ve moved on—at least I have, but sometimes we run into rough patches. I think it makes our synergy better since we know each other so well.”

And of course, not everything as simple as Minghao makes it out to be.

It would be inevitable that Wonwoo and Soonyoung would meet just like how the universe has a weird way of placing them in the same college. Of course, the two had never crossed paths. They were studying different things. Soonyoung was studying theater with a minor in astrology and Wonwoo was torn between literature, physical therapy, and biology. The only thing that united them was, ironically and unfortunately, Jun.

“And Jun decided to study performing arts at our university. He’s always loved acting and film and he often goes to auditions in the city—still hasn’t landed one, but he’s trying,” Minghao’s done eating, but Mingyu’s glad that he continued to eat comfortably while telling the long-winded tale. It means that he wasn’t super uncomfortable with it, “But around the end of our sophomore year, there was large production held at a venue between our schools.”

A lot of the cast members were professionals already and only a few students were able to pass auditions to get in. Jun and Soonyoung had both passed; Jun as the main character’s understudy and Soonyoung as one of the main dancers. Minghao says he doesn’t know why Jun didn’t audition for dance, it had really been a surprise when he showed up for the play to support both his friends. But the main actor had been fine, there was no need for an understudy, so Jun spent most of his night behind the curtain, only coming on stage when they needed extras.

That wasn’t the heartbreaking part.

“Jun had come over to my apartment that weekend and cried his eyes out.” Minghao shakes his head, “And it’s not Wonwoo’s fault that Soonyoung had all his attention on that stage. Things just didn’t add up the way they could have. But when your best friend shows up at your doorstep at midnight needing a hug and ice cream… well, it was hard for me to look at Wonwoo the same way.” He crosses his arms, taking a defensive position, “Jun never revealed his feelings, but it didn’t take much to figure it out. Wonwoo knew, he definitely knew—and his way of turning down Jun’s advances was to go and date our best friend? That method just doesn’t sit well with me.” He decides to eat a little more, maybe to calm the fire in his chest, “I was really mad, Mingyu.”

“I understand, but-”

“Wonwoo’s nice. Wonwoo’s observational and quiet and kind and he’s really good at reading people.”

“He is and-”

“But Jun is soft and sweet and he’s so goddamn selfless. He might not have intended to, but the way Wonwoo hurt him is inexcusable.” His eyes bore into Mingyu’s, “He loved him. And Wonwoo went and asked out Soonyoung out of the blue, right before a big competition and we lost that competition and Jun blamed himself.” Minghao closes his eyes slowly, calming himself down, “I…” he takes a deep breath, “I really wanted to give Wonwoo a piece of my mind, but Jun swore
me to secrecy like an idiot. So, the best I could do as a friend was burn my bridge with Wonwoo.”

Clearly, it didn’t mean that he burnt his bridge with Soonyoung. Soonyoung is still included as one of the best friends to this day and it doesn’t look like their friendship has ever dipped out of line. Soonyoung was just a third-party bystander. He had no say over whether or not Wonwoo liked him and Mingyu’s sure that Soonyoung wouldn’t have agreed to it on a spur of the moment basis, even after having asked Jun for permission before agreeing. If he did—and if they did—get into a fight at the time, it means that they’ve gone above and beyond repairing the bridge between them over the years, “Is it still burnt?”

He shrugs, “It doesn’t need to be. It was so long ago. We aren’t mean to each other, there aren’t any hard feelings and Jun’s finally found interest in someone new. It’s hard to explain.” More so than looking upset or unhappy about the conversation, it looks like Minghao’s earnestly trying to sort out his words and feelings regarding Wonwoo’s situation, “We just don’t talk or hang out, like, Jun talks to him more than I do.”

“Maybe it’s time that you two talked.” It would be nice if these two friends could get along, “You’ll be seeing him at the dinner, won’t you?”

Minghao perks up at the mention of the dinner like he’s suddenly remembered something, “Oh, the dinner. Yeah, um.” Why are you so flustered? Are you going to ask? “About that. Before I forget, Mingyu, is your Friday open?”

“Yeah, it is, why?” Just say it, Minghao. Ask Mingyu to the dinner. He has the audacity to look surprised, like he doesn’t know what’s coming, as if Wonwoo hadn’t been reminding him about this event every single day since it’s first come up.

“Do you want to go to the dinner,” yes? Yes, yes, yes, “with Jun?”

What?
“Uh, I mean- okay? But-”

“Cool, anyways, back to Wonwoo,” No, Minghao. We need to get back to this whole dinner thing. Don’t just sweep it under the rug, “I’d like to make up with him, but it’s probably easier said than d-”

“Minghao.” Mingyu can’t stand it, he’s not just going to go along with this. What’s with the sudden change in plans? Jun can’t possibly be the one asking him to the dinner, but then again, Minghao did say that he’s moved on to someone new, “Why is Jun asking me to the dinner?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it.” Minghao gathers his bowl and silverware, hustling to take them over to the sink and Mingyu tails him with his own dishes. He remembers to turn off the portable stove.

“But I want to talk about it.” Mingyu blocks the exit to the kitchen. No escape this time, Minghao, “Don’t I have the right to know?”

“You’re being a little dramatic.” Minghao leans against the counter and crosses his arms, stopping his advances, “Simply put, Jun doesn’t know that he’s asking you to the dinner.”

“Minghao, you’re not making sense anymore.” He whines with all his might. What’s even happening? There’s a big piece of the puzzle that Mingyu’s missing, “What did you guys even discuss during that ‘important talk’ a few nights ago?”

Even mentioning the ‘talk’ seems to give Minghao a headache, “I didn’t even want to go.” He rubs his temples before looking up at Mingyu, “And so he wouldn’t have to go alone, I convinced Jun to invite Jihoon who he’s had googly, sparkly eyes for during the past, like, year and a half.” Minghao pushes Mingyu back out into the hallway with a hand on his shoulder. He glides past him to remove the soup and pour it back into the large pot on the stove, “That dingus fumbled it and told Jihoon I invited him. And instead of clarifying the situation, Jun whipped out his IOU and told me to invite someone for him.”

“And you picked me?”

“Yeah. You and Jun seem to be on good terms with your café date and all,” That’s a simple reason. Minghao balls up the dish rag and wrings it out under the sink, rolling it and snapping it at Mingyu’s thigh to get him to move out of the way again, “and if I have to suffer through some formal dinner, I’d much rather suffer through it with you.”

That’s a better reason.

Even though Minghao says it with sarcasm, Mingyu can feel his cheeks flush a bit. The room suddenly gets hot and stuffy, so he patters out to the living room where Cacahuate perks up and brings the dragon over to him. Mingyu doesn’t toss it until the dog scratches at his jeans. He lob it into the hallway and hears Cacahuate’s collar jingle to retrieve it, but his eyes are fixated on Minghao who is wiping down the table and loading dishes into the dishwasher.

“What’s the dinner for again?”

“It’s a biannual conference for North State dance companies hosted by the CDEA. Yixing always goes and sometimes we tag along if we can get tickets, but since he’s getting some big award
this year, all our instructors were invited and each ticket comes with a plus-one, so we’re supposed to
bring… dates- It’s- It’s a nice dinner and they like to spice it up with ice-breaker games—the kind
you play at summer camps and freshman orientation. It’s not actually that horrible, but it’s a two hour
drive, though.”

“I don’t mind driving.” Minghao leaves the kitchen and comes back with Mingyu’s jacket,
tossing it over the island counter and hurling it into the living room where Mingyu stumbles to catch
it and put it on.

“We’ll talk more about the details once I tell Jun I invited you tomorrow,” he laughs, “We
usually carpool.”

“I can drive.”

“Sure, eager beaver.” Now Mingyu’s a little more excited. It doesn’t sound like he’ll be stuck
with Jun all night and the prospect of him winding up as Minghao’s not-date sounds a little better. He
likes spending time with Minghao.

He likes the way Minghao combs his bangs back with his fingers every time they get in the
way. He likes the way Minghao slides his feet across the floor with his socks instead of walking like
a normal person. He likes the way Minghao’s ears are just slightly redder than the rest of him. He
likes the way Minghao gives his dog a pat on the head before he comes into the living room and
kneels by the TV.

“Wanna play a game?”

“Are you gonna murder me?” Mingyu shuffles over and crouches down to look at the game
selection. It’s an extensive collection, “I never took you for the gaming type.”

“I’m not. These are all the roomie’s, but I have free reign when he’s not around. So, what’ll it
be?”

At first, he selects something on the Vive. He never had the chance to try VR. Despite it
sounding really cool, he gets motion sickness easily and hadn’t seized opportunities to try it lest he be
laughed at. But with Minghao, he wants to be laughed with. Nothing bad could ever come from
Minghao’s bubbly, soda-filled laughter. However, he doesn’t account for the fact that the motion
controls and headset are stupidly hard to set up. Minghao can’t get the room trackers to turn on and
he doesn’t know where he’s supposed to plug in the headset on the PC tower. Mingyu even takes a
look, but he doesn’t have any clue either. Computers weren’t his forte.

In the end, Mingyu picks Mario Kart so he and Minghao have at least one reason to hate each
other. Unsurprisingly, they’re both terrible at it and playing on the old Switch remotes feels clumsy
for their big man-hands, but sitting on the couch yelling at the TV and shoving Minghao whenever
he takes the lead feels jovial and fun. Minghao’s always quick to push him back when he’s
overtaken and every race they finish ends in 11th and 12th place.

“You’re cheating.”

“I’m not. You’re the one cheating.”

“One final race before we move onto something else. Winner takes all.” Takes all of what? No
one knows, but they sound like 10-year-olds arguing, “We can incapacitate the other. This is a battle
of strength.”
“You’re on.”

Mingyu’s never been so energetic or hyped up without the help of alcohol, but here he is kicking and screaming in Minghao’s living room with a cola on the coffee table and Minghao flailing in his lap, trying to get free of his arms. They’re barely past the first lap when Minghao pulls a reversal and puts him in a headlock. Of course, Mingyu’s still conscious of the condition of Minghao’s knee. He doesn’t want to have him fall incorrectly or anything, but he does elbow the inside of his right knee and set him off balance and into the couch cushions. Minghao rolls off the couch and takes the lead from his position on the ground.

When the final lap stars, Mingyu moves to the ground as well, sitting in front of where Minghao’s laying to block his view of the screen. He tries to push Mingyu, but Mingyu’s an immovable object, with his ass firmly rooted into the rug. But then, Minghao’s an unstoppable force. In the final stretch, he comes to a knee and lunges for Mingyu, pushing him down to an elbow. Cacahuate gets excited and hops on top of Minghao, adding weight to Mingyu’s legs.

While he’s more focused on winning (placing 11th) than anything else, a solid 49% of his attention is on Minghao’s body pinning him down, how he’s essentially hugging Mingyu’s waist with his hands behind his back fiddling with the tiny controller. It’s safe to say it’s incredibly difficult to focus on the TV. The thought and feeling of Minghao and his dog on his legs just feels familiar and cozy like it’s something that’s supposed to be.

Minghao places 11th, rightfully.

Mingyu finishes in 12th.

“A valiant attempt, Mingyu.” His lap misses Minghao’s warmth already. The latter is already getting up to turn off the Switch and turn on Netflix, “Great British Bake Off?”

“Sure.” Mingyu doesn’t know why he feels out of breath like his chest is tight.

He throws Mingyu the remote to finish set up as he goes into the kitchen and rummages in the freezer. He seems like he’s in a bit of a rush, but Mingyu brushes it off as his nerves speaking. He pushes himself back up to the couch and takes a seat as he tries to figure out the very complicated looking TV remote. C’mon. It can’t be that hard, but suddenly everything looks like an alien language to him and all his attention is hyper-focused on whatever Minghao is up to in the kitchen.

“Do you want any tea?” Minghao calls to him.

“What kind do you have?”

“What kind do you want?”

Mingyu smacks his lips together, “Surprise me.” Honestly, anything is fine with him.

“Toilet water it is.”

Minghao comes back into the living room with two cups of loose leaf tea, it looks fancy. He places them both on the coffee table and hustles back into the kitchen. The leaves are slowly unfurling with the addition of hot water and at the bottom of each cup a small pink flower blooms. Mingyu’s no tea connoisseur, so he’s never seen a tea quite like this, but it’s beautiful and looks like it’s saved for special occasions.
“Don’t say anything if it’s terrible.” He hands Mingyu something cold wrapped in a napkin and takes the remote, easily navigating it and queueing up the show, “I don’t bake and it was my first time making them from scratch so…”

But Mingyu’s speechless even though they aren’t terrible. His cookies are arguably better, but chocolate chip and vanilla ice cream sandwiches are hard to mess up and homemade cookies make them infinitely better. He can taste freshly grated nutmeg and scraped vanilla bean, even the chocolate seems like a high-grade dark chocolate. It gives a great balance to the cool and sweet ice cream—no, gelato between them, “What are you so worried about? These are good.” Mingyu scoots over so Minghao can take a seat next to him. He doesn’t respond to Mingyu verbally, but the small smile on his lips is enough to say that he heard the compliment, “I mean Selasi could probably bake you under the table, but-”

That earns an elbow to the side, “Selasi’s a sore subject. He deserved to win the first episode.”

“But Andrew.”

He appreciates how easily they melt into casual banter while polishing off their gelato sandwiches; yelling at the judges for bad calls and pleading that no one underproofs their bread. Despite how enthused they are about the show, they’re both full of food and warm with tea. Mingyu feels Minghao’s weight slowly lean into his side, not that he’s complaining. He’s probably leaning into the contact an equal amount.

“One more episode and I’ll head out.”

“Kay.” Minghao lazily slurs after his statement. He reaches over to grab a soft throw blanket before reclining again. Covering himself before looking at Mingyu and holding the flap open, “Cold?”

And that’s how Mingyu and Minghao ended up snuggled together under the medium-sized throw, Cacahuate over his lap, snoring softly. Everyone knows that if a dog falls asleep on you, it’s illegal to move, so Mingyu holds as still as possible, running fingers through his fur and playing with his ears and squishing his cheeks. He’s comfortable. It’d be ridiculous not to be. There’s a very cute dog on his lap and a very cute man pressed up against his side, their forearms flush under the blanket.

One more episode won’t hurt anyone.

And Mingyu doesn’t remember what happens because he drifts off to sleep, leaned far back in the cushions with his feet up on the ottoman. Minghao’s curled up at his side—head resting on him—and Cacahuate sprawled on his legs. He doesn’t remember looping his arm around Minghao’s shoulder, pulling him even closer. He doesn’t remember leaning his head on top of Minghao’s and smelling his hair. It smelled like a sweet ocean breeze.

However, Mingyu does remember waking up to Minghao shaking his thigh, trying to bring him back to consciousness. The sleep is still thick in his eyes, as they’re mostly still pinched and closed, shying away from the light of the TV where Netflix asks if they’re still watching. Mingyu yawns and looks for the clock on the wall, it’s almost midnight, but that’s not the reason Minghao woke him up.

Mingyu hears keys jingle in the kitchen and someone sigh before walking down the hallway. Cacahuate follows him. Minghao’s expression says that he’s thinking about something, but Mingyu speaks first, “I should go. It’s late.”

And for a moment, it looks like Minghao wants to object, but when Mingyu retracts his arm
from his shoulder, he shuts his mouth, “Yeah, you have to wake up for work in the morning.”

“Do you have practice tomorrow?” He hums something like a ‘yes’, yet he doesn’t sound as enthused, “If you have time, text me.” He stands up, not realizing how unsteady his legs are and Minghao catches his arm before he teeters back down to the couch, “I want to make plans.”

“With me?” his hands are tugging the sides of Mingyu’s jacket shut over his chest, trying to keep him warm with the absence of the blanket, but his eyes open slowly to look into Mingyu’s. He didn’t realize how close they were and how easy it would have been to close the gap between their mouths. Who needs air?

Mingyu’s eyes search his face, hesitating and looking for a cue. Is this his ‘kiss me’ face? Or is this just the way he always looks? “Yeah, with you.”

But someone clears his throat from the kitchen. Normally, Mingyu wouldn’t be so perturbed by someone coughing, but this cough sounds annoyed and impatient. It’s a bit of a surprise. Despite not knowing Seungcheol and considering him competition for Minghao’s affection, he never considered Seungcheol to be a bad or burdensome man. His opinions have changed.

Horrible timing.

If Mingyu wasn’t so frantic about the thought of kissing Minghao, he would have noticed Minghao’s annoyed face, pointed at his roommate. Atmosphere ruined and mood destroyed, Minghao walks Mingyu to the door. He waits for him to put on his shoes and hands him his coat before seeing him out, “Text me when you get home.”

“I will.” Mingyu tries to smile despite the crippling amounts of disappointment, “Thanks for dinner. Sleep well.”

“Sleep well.” Minghao echoes as he leans in the doorway, watching Mingyu go.

It’s settled.

Because he’s a little salty, it’s settled. He’s definitely going to kiss Minghao in front of his roommate one of these days.
'home ♡' he backspaces, ‘home :)’ and hits send.

Although he’s beyond tired, Mingyu doesn’t feel drained enough to collapse into his bed. Instead, he makes a cup of cocoa and sits in his lonely little living room with all the lights off and only the moonlight pouring in through the back window. It’s stony and cold in stark contrast to how comforting Minghao’s (literal) cement and industrial home was.

*Ping.* ‘thanks for coming over today’ but Minghao is still typing. He types for almost twenty seconds before the ellipses disappear. Odd- then starts typing again. This must be a long-winded message, so Mingyu waits patiently, locking his phone and setting it under his thigh.

In his brain is scrawled a list of questions that stretches from one end of the room to the other.

He should have asked them when he could, but he’s sure that there’ll be more opportunities in the future. When he revisits the events of that night, one fact can’t help but stand out. Minghao said that Wonwoo and Jun were just friends, but Wonwoo had told Mingyu that his ex was allergic to pet dander. Those two things don’t add up. There’s the possibility that Jun isn’t the ex that was mentioned, but he wants to get to the bottom of it. Maybe that’s the little bit of information that is preventing them from working out their troubles and ironing over this wrinkle in their relationship as friends. Regardless, Mingyu’s still surprised that the Wonwoo he knows now was capable of hurting someone as deeply as he had hurt Jun. He shouldn’t be, but he’s slightly disappointed in his friend’s past actions.

Was this how Wonwoo felt when Mingyu told him he botched Minghao’s high school experience based on a flimsy rumor? Probably.

Secondly, what kind of unlucky situation is it that all these people who have a messy relationship with each other all ended up in the same town and on the same dance team? How unhealthy is that? Then again, maybe it is healthy. Jihoon and Soonyoung seem to have moved past their original relationship troubles. The possibility of Soonyoung still harboring a small crush on Minghao kind of makes Mingyu uncomfortable, though. Soonyoung has open access to Minghao all the time. He gets to put his hands on him and rough him up and even kiss him whenever he wants and Minghao doesn’t care. Maybe that’s yet another snag in Wonwoo and Minghao’s relationship.

Poor Jun. He’s caught in the middle of everything.

It’s like he said. Mingyu has a role in it just like the rest of them, especially now that he’s been roped into attending this event where he’ll inevitably be in a room with Minghao, Soonyoung, and Wonwoo. It’s going to be absolute hell. He prays and hopes that Jun and Jihoon won’t be as much of a pain.

Part of him feels like he has to map it out on a giant piece of paper—everyone’s relationship to each other—just so he doesn’t say something wrong or mixes people up on accident. But the rational side of him says that his friends won’t care. They don’t even know that he has this information. It’ll be okay. He can forget his social anxiety for just a little while because he can count on Minghao to buffer for him. He’s also ready to endure whatever tortuous pain this dinner might bring just to spend a little more time with the man.

If he had to rate the probability of Minghao liking him on a scale of 1 to 10, it’d be at a solid 7.5 right now. It would be another .5 if he didn’t make a fool of himself tonight by being so
intimidated by the arrival of the hot roommate that he couldn’t even look at him. Seriously, what is he going to do about Seungcheol? Why does he already feel disliked without basis? It’s starting to feel like Seungcheol is Minghao’s really strict dad, but wasn’t the man supposed to be out on a nice date in the city? Why did he come back at such a crucial, albeit reasonable, time? Totally unfair. He was that close to having his first kiss in years! How is he supposed to build up that kind of sleepy-headed confidence again?

It’ll probably be impossible.

It’s just so hard to read Minghao sometimes, but when Mingyu thinks back to it, he’s almost 71% sure that was a ‘you can kiss me now’ look. Goddamn. He’s probably never going to get one of those looks anytime soon. One of these days, one of these days. He’s going to win Minghao’s heart and be the one to give him gross morning-breath kisses and smooch him in front of his father-roommate. Maybe not at the same time- probably not at the same time. That would involve Seungcheol being in the room where they’re sleeping together. Oh, sleeping together. He wouldn’t mind doing that again. Sleeping with Minghao is nice and he can bring Cacahuate and they can buy out a truckload of pillows from Target and build a fort with fairy lights and make s’mores in the toaster. That would be so comfortable in the winter- okay, it’s the sleep deprivation talking now, he’s sure of that much.

He ought to get to bed before he has any more weird revelations. Besides, he has work in, like, 7 hours. Ugh. He never thought that he’d grow to dread going to work, but work has been sounding more and more dry these days. He’s been doing this for months, almost a whole year, but now it feels different. It feels less exciting especially compared to Minghao’s fast-paced eventful life full of people and color-

Ping.

‘sweet dreams’ Did it really take him ten minutes to type that? Mingyu’s already done with his hot chocolate, ‘♡’.

A heart.

A heart?

A heart!

It feels like he’s playing Spades and the suit has just been broken. Does this mean that he’s allowed to send hearts now? His mind goes blank. What is he supposed to say, how does he respond to that? Maybe a simple approach is best.

‘♡’.

Admittedly, he doesn’t sleep as well without Minghao by his side, but he feels adequately rested for the day. He feels adequately rested enough to question the shit out of Wonwoo when he gets in for work. The said man is early because he and Soonyoung went out for breakfast for once. Soonyoung’s been waking up early to accommodate morning practices for the championship, but that also means Minghao has to get up with the sun and be in the studio. He must be tired.

“Yeah, Jun and I used to be together. Why?” He smiles a nervous and sad smile.

Mingyu’s brain is full of facts today. He seems to be more observational than usual, because last night’s conversation still sits vividly in his brain, “Then why doesn’t Minghao know that? He
said you and Jun were just friends. Did you lie to him?"

That causes Wonwoo’s smile to disappear immediately. He’s been caught, Mingyu’s caught him red handed with the blood from Jun’s heart all over them, “Are you really grilling me for something that happened over 6 years ago?” he doesn’t sound mad about it, but the inflections in his voice say that he’s uncomfortable with the interrogation.

Mingyu even has second thoughts about proceeding, but if he’s going to help Wonwoo and Minghao be friends, then he’s going to need to get to bottom of things and clear the air, “Yeah, I am.”

“Well,” he leans back into the counter—Ping—raising his eyebrows and putting his mug down, “I’m glad that you learned a little bit more about Minghao then. Regretfully, I guess some of our past got dug up as well. I hope you don’t think less of me for it.” Wonwoo clears his throat and stands up properly, “But, no, I didn’t lie to Minghao.”

“I don’t think less of you. People can change and grow and I don’t think the you now would do that to Jun, but I thought Minghao and Jun were good friends. Why wouldn’t he know?” Mingyu tries his best to make this feel and sound like a normal conversation as opposed to an interrogation. He doesn’t want to antagonize Wonwoo.

“They are. They are. There’s no doubt about it.” He shifts uneasily, “Jun and I had agreed to not tell anyone about it back then. We thought it was for the best in case we broke up—which happened like we knew it would. We just weren’t a good match and things just didn’t work out well. He probably thought that if Minghao knew, I might get lectured or something.” His awkward chuckle doesn’t improve the situation, “It might sound corny, but I think Jun did it to protect me.” That’s probably not all there is to the story. Minghao made it sound like Jun was really, really in love with Wonwoo. It’s weird that he’s playing it off so casually, but Mingyu’s not going to draw conclusions without both sides of the story, “We didn’t date for long and above all else, I think Jun wasn’t really in love with me. I think he was just lonely. He’d been in the States for a couple years, but he had left all his friends and family behind. I didn’t mind keeping him company- We’re still friends- We both knew going into it that it wasn’t made to last.”

“Like Soonyoung and Jihoon?”

Oh.

Looks like Mingyu’s touched a sore subject.

“Yeah,” That’s clearly a frown, “Like Soonyoung and Jihoon.”

Great.

Now the air is filled with tension.

He can even hear the clock tick on the wall and the heater whir behind the east wall of the breakroom. These seconds are ticking by too slowly. C’mon, Mingyu, diffuse the situation.

But Wonwoo speaks first, checking his phone just as an excuse to move and shake out the stiffness in his limbs, “Jun said he was okay with us breaking up. He said it was okay for me to ask Soonyoung out. Overall, he didn’t seem very broken up about it, but I think I was probably disillusioned at the time.” Yeah, you probably were, “I don’t know how to explain it to you in a way that’ll save face even though it was so long ago. We’re still friends. We’ve moved on. We’ve built a-”
“Better future. I know.” Mingyu sighs and nudges his friend, “I didn’t come to work today to lecture you. I just wanted to know what transpired. Minghao wants to be friends with you and I thought that learning about your past might make for an easier car ride to the dinner.”

“He finally invited you?”

“Well, sort of.”

“Oh! Right, Jun invited you.”

“You’re always one step ahead of me and that’s incredibly unfair.” Wonwoo’s so good at changing subjects and that’s sometimes a relief, “Speaking of which-”

“We’re carpooling and you don’t want me to make it awkward? Sure, I can do that.”

“Hey-”

“But until then,” Wonwoo loops an arm around his neck, easing back into his coy voice, “did you and Minghao sleep well last night?”

Wonwoo Jeon is a dead man.
Chapter 66

He is saved by the bell.

Joshua swings the breakroom door open and reminds Wonwoo that he has a 9:00 appointment who is very impatiently waiting in the lobby. They’re early, but there’s no telling the elderly that they’ve wasted their time. Wonwoo smiles sheepishly before vanishing outside with Joshua following close behind. The manager looks a little worn, like he didn’t get enough sleep. That’s what you get for being addicted to your phone and texting for hours on end.

Jeonghan, on the other hand, has just come in. He looks more than well-rested—his hair is neatly styled, and his eyes are bright and alert—, but he also lacks a certain energy he normally carries. Banter doesn’t seem to be part of his vocabulary this morning because Mingyu’s dry joke about being replaced by a robot falls on deaf ears.

“Are you good?”

“Perfectly peachy.” That was a cheery response for someone who has declared themselves as an anti-morning person for the last six months. Mingyu’s seriously starting to have doubts about Jeonghan’s identity now. This has to be some sort of replacement, “And yourself?”

He even has to glance around the room to make sure that he’s the one Jeonghan is talking to, “Me?” the older PT nods as he brings a hot cup of tea to his lips, “I’m good.”

“Good-”

“Jeonghan, why are you acting so normal today?” Mingyu’s going to continue with this trend of actually asking questions when he has them. He’s not going to sit around being clueless like he has been for the last few months. Questions warrant answers and answers are what he wants!

Jeonghan stretches his neck and shrugs, eyes searching the ceiling for words, “Aren’t I normally like this?”

“No,” he puts his cup down on the counter, “you’re normally a sarcastic asshole with very little patience, but I’ll admit I like the spice you bring to the workplace. So, what’s up?”

“Nothing, nothing.” Jeonghan smiles and it’s somehow eerier than it should be. Maybe it wasn’t a robot. Maybe it was demonic possession, “Just- something really nice happened last night that I won’t disclose, but I finally got some peace of mind.” He stirs a glop of honey into his tea. He doesn’t know why Jeonghan bothers drinking tea if all he does is make it taste like sugar water. It’s just a waste of tea and Joshua usually buys pretty nice tea for the office, “The world isn’t ending, so my cynicism can wait another day. Let me rest, Mingyu. I could do without a day of thinking about witty remarks.”

“If you say so.” Mingyu rolls his eyes, deciding to brush it off. It’s not worth his energy getting to the bottom of this. There are only two outcomes; one, Jeonghan has turned a new leaf and is now some normal-SpongeBob, hive-mind worker bee, or two, Jeonghan is plotting some elaborate and stupid prank. Wow, what a knee-slapper. He doesn’t know which option he’d prefer, but Jeonghan was their only discrete way to ask about Joshua’s situation—whatever that may be.

For now, he’ll call it a dead end. Joshua’s still walking and breathing. It can wait.
Lunch rolls around and Mingyu should have kept his big mouth shut about Jeonghan acting weird because Seokmin has volunteered to do some prying in private and has decided to stay behind to go out to lunch with the senior PT. If his heart wasn’t so pure and simple, he might have laughed it off and tried to stop him, but Seokmin’s warm irises and toothy smile are so genuine that he can’t help but agree. Thus, our hero is stuck with Wonwoo who has regained the mischievous gleam in his eye.

“You know, I somehow doubt that Minghao would willingly tell Soonyoung that we slept together.”

“He didn’t, that was just a shot in the dark, but now that you’ve admitted it—” he chuckles, “I mean, congrats.” Somehow his food seems a lot less attractive than it was two minutes ago. Mingyu freezes with the carne asada burrito halfway to his mouth and puts it down, “Minghao might tell Soonyoung a lot of things, but he doesn’t tell him everything. He has manners.”

“I know what you’re thinking,” He doesn’t know why he’s trying to save it. Wonwoo probably won’t believe him anyway, “and it’s not that.”

“Right.” He seems to be enjoying his pozole, taking gratuitous mouthfuls of it between words. Mingyu hopes he chokes on the excess lime he squirted in, “Well, whatever it may have been, I hope you had a good time. Be gentle on his knee, he still needs it in a week.”

“Wonwoo, we didn’t sleep together, we just slept together. On the couch. Pants on, clothes on.”

“Oh.” Wonwoo gives him a look of mock disbelief. He’s not buying the story entirely, but decides to leave it, “Then was the apartment cool? Soonyoung says it’s really awesome, like, they have VR set up and their kitchen is huge and that there are bookshelves everywhere.”

“So, you knew I went over.”

“Yeah.”

Mingyu pinches his brow.

He understands that Soonyoung is feeding Wonwoo all the information through text which is why he gets anxious every time the man checks his phone in the middle of their conversations, but he’s not so thrilled about it because Wonwoo always catches him off-guard with Fun Facts about his time spent with Minghao. It annoys him a bit, but there’s not much he can do since part of him is begrudgingly proud that Minghao’s sharing their experience with his friends. What’s worse is that he’s starting to enjoy the teasing from Wonwoo—just a little—because the idea of him dating Minghao isn’t such a cryptic idea anymore, “It’s pretty cool. You’re missing out.” He laughs, defeated. At least his food looks appetizing again.

“I’ve heard that Minghao’s room is a magical place, but that’s coming from Soon and he still thinks that collapsible vegetable steamers are magical.”

He never had the chance to see Minghao’s room. They kept their entire dinner between the living room and kitchen. It makes him curious, “What makes it so magical?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t been over.”

“We can change that.”

“Can you?” the doubt is clear in the way he runs his tongue over his teeth and purses his lips
before they fall into a flat line.

Mingyu sits back in his seat, thinking for a minute, “Yeah, we can. You and Minghao are both easy to talk to, easy going and nice. Weren’t you friends before the whole fiasco with Soonyoung?”

“More like acquaintances. I wouldn’t say Minghao and I have ever had a close bond or anything of the sort. I can’t read him very well.” Wonwoo sips on his water, “He just has his guard up around me most of the time- maybe it’s not his guard, but it’s like he puts up a wall. We act like we don’t know each other—like when he came into the clinic at first. We nod hellos, nod goodbyes, but I think I’m a little like you when you first met him. You thought there was a barrier because of something you did a decade ago and because of that, it was difficult to work around your relationship.” He pops a tortilla chip in his mouth, “But even though I know that Minghao and I have grown from what happened in the past, I still don’t feel like I’ve been forgiven. I think I’m the only one still a little hung up on it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Soon and Jun don’t care- don’t mind it anymore. It’s almost a running joke now, really, it is.” He rubs his fingers into a napkin, “But with Minghao—I don’t know—it’s like he’s waiting…”

“For a cue.” Some sort of gear starts turning in Mingyu’s head.

“Yes, a cue.” Wonwoo humors him, “And I just can’t give him that. Minghao’s just been through obstacle after obstacle these past few years. Things have finally started to get better the past few months; like the stars have aligned over your reunion or something.” He scratches at his jaw and eats another chip, “I don’t want to bring up the past and ruin that right now.”

“What happened to building a better future that you don’t have to apologize for, Woo?”

“Sometimes it’s easier to give advice than take it.”

The two sit in silence for the next few minutes, eating their food and stewing over their thoughts. Mingyu knows that Wonwoo’s thinking. He’s never heard someone think so loudly before, but it’s like he’s giving an entire lecture with whatever’s going through his head. Geez. He knows that Wonwoo and Minghao are alike in the way that they’re usually more in their thoughts than they are in their words, but if there’s one big difference between them, it’s that Wonwoo thinks with a megaphone superglued to his forehead and Minghao thinks with radio silence.

When Mingyu watches Minghao think, it’s like the silence extends past his presence. It pushes acoustic foam against his ears and gives him tunnel vision. All he ends up being able to focus on are the details of Minghao’s face, his neck, his hands, his clothes; as a whole. Maybe that’s a lie or a half-truth because he knows that Minghao’s thinking all the time and, because of that, his attention never leaves him.

He certainly hopes that his attention does leave Minghao sometimes. He doesn’t want to know that he’s been staring creepily at the man for the past two months for several hours at a time.

However, even if that was the case, it doesn’t seem like Minghao minds. He seems to sit well under his gaze. Right, Minghao, Minghao, Minghao, and what Minghao wants and what Minghao wants is to be on better terms with Wonwoo. He didn’t intend for it, but Mingyu feels like he’s ought to help them resolve their issue now.

“We’re carpooling, right?”

“We don’t have to. The dinner isn’t that far away, less than two hours. It’s a pretty short trip.”
“We’re carpooling. You said so earlier.”

“So? Plans can change.”

“No, Minghao told Soonyoung that we’re carpooling.” Mingyu crosses his arms, “Doesn’t that mean that he wants to sit in a car with you for two hours?” He’s asking more for himself than he is for Wonwoo. Hearing his own theories out loud makes them easier to comprehend and debunk, but this one seems pretty solid. Why else would Minghao tell Soonyoung? Yeah, that has to be it! Finally, he’s a step ahead of Wonwoo.

“I guess.” he shrugs and finishes off his stew, “Honestly, it’s probably better with you and Soon in the car, but don’t say I didn’t warn you. Things get kind of crazy when you put Soonyoung in a box and tell him not to move for several hours.”

“Does he turn rabid or something?” Mingyu pulls out his wallet to leave a tip and waits for Wonwoo by the door as he takes one final slurp of his water before courtesy-jogging over to him.

“Not quite rabid,” he laughs, “but he gets antsy. Usually, it’s just me and him and fifteen reststops, but maybe he’ll be better behaved if there are more people in the car to keep him occupied.”

He’ll make note of that: keep Soonyoung occupied.

Minghao’s text comes late in the afternoon, closer to 4 than it is to 3.

At that, it’s a text asking if he can call, so Mingyu calls him first, “Hey, what’s up?”

“Hey, I was just wondering what plans you had in mind because I’m trying to organize my time.” Aw, is he trying to organize his time around Mingyu? From Wonwoo, he knows that Minghao’s been in the studio with Soonyoung since 8 and that they’ll likely be there together until everyone else goes home. He did mention that now-lavender-haired dancer has to take his car in for maintenance and that Chan had a late shift at work, so the prospect of having dinner with Minghao seems pretty high.

“Dinner? At, like, 6-ish?”

Minghao hums over the line, “Can I take a raincheck?”

No, “Why’s that?”

“The roomie had a rough night out,” that’s a long sigh, “and he’s really stressed about something. He didn’t want to talk last night and he has a long work day today, so I was going to get him fed and make sure he’s okay.” There is a surprising lack of disturbance in the call for once. Maybe everyone else is busy.

“We don’t have to do dinner.” Do you still want to see me?

“That’s true and I do need to talk about the carpooling, but I don’t want to put you out. You were over pretty late last night.” At the mention of last night, Mingyu’s tongue and heart both seize up. Last night, last night, last night he was that close to throwing caution to the wind and making Minghao gasp for air. Maybe it was a good thing that Seungcheol came home and interrupted them. While he knows that Minghao was annoyed at his roommate’s untimely appearance, he’s more curious about why Minghao’s trying to take care of him now. Something bad must’ve happened. It
sounds very much like Minghao to try and help out, but something in the pit of his stomach says that he’s a little jealous. Or envious. He hasn’t decided yet.

“I’m not tired.” Not anymore, at least, “Come over.”

“Don’t you even want to know what time Cheol’s done with work before you make offers like that? He could be done at midnight.” Minghao chuckles into the receiver, making it pop a bit. He goes quiet for a moment. Is Soonyoung there to pester him? Though it was a little annoying at first, Mingyu kind of likes to hear Minghao get flustered, “Do you want to see me that bad?”

There he goes again with that little bit of sarcasm behind every syllable, “Oh, I always want to see you this bad.” He almost gags at his own corny line and probably would have if he hadn’t said it with equal amounts of mockery and half-heartedness.

“He’s off at 6:30. Maybe we can grab dessert or something before I have to head back to the studio.” Still? That’s going to be awfully late, but at least he’ll have a little pocket of time to make sure that Minghao has eaten and is hydrated.

“When do you have to be back in?”

He hears nothing which means Minghao’s thinking, “Jihoon said he’d meet me at 9:45 to fix the audio and I have to be on time since I’ve got the key.”

Mingyu’s already calculating things in his head, bake times and wait times, weights and measurements, ingredients, “Okay. Come over when your roommate’s good.”

“Do I need to bring anything?”

“Nope. Just yourself.”

“Kay, I’ll see you soon.” He will probably end up bringing something anyway. He never shows up empty-handed.

“Good night, Minghao.”

“Good morning, Mingyu.”
Chapter 67

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mingyu certainly doesn’t need any more plants, but when Minghao delivers them with such a bright and victorious smile on his face, he can’t help but cradle them in his palms and find them a home somewhere in his flat. These flowers are gorgeous and the little name tag that comes with it says that it’s a Sunrise Begonia, something uniquely bred at Lowry’s. However, Mingyu doesn’t remember seeing these in the store at all when he went yesterday.

“Oh, Seungcheol found them actually.” Minghao follows him through the door, “I took him to Lowry’s after we got dinner and asked him to help me find something yellow or pink, but he was very excited to find this.” Well, it’s the best of both worlds; yellow in the center, gradating into a vibrant pink blush towards the rim of the petals, “Apparently, you can use them for cooking and it’s pretty durable.”

“Did you Google that on your way over?” Mingyu grins, maybe it’s an apology plant from Seungcheol.

Minghao snorts, “No.” he takes off his shoes and his thick outer coat, “I Googled it while I was in the store.” He’s cute.

“How is he?” Mingyu doesn’t care a significant amount, but if someone’s important to Minghao, then by association, he supposes that they’d be a little important to him too.

“Better. I didn’t really ask what happened, but, y’know, sometimes just having a friend there helps.” He checks on Romeo who is sitting pretty on the dining table, “That and, like, a pound of mashed potatoes, a whole medium pizza, and an unhealthy amount of buffalo wings.”

“Well, comfort food may be bad for your body, but it’s good for the soul.”

“Exactly.” Minghao spins the glass vase on the table at such a velocity that some of the pebbles spill out. He carefully puts them back in one at a time, “I tucked him in with Cacahuate and came over, so what do you wanna do for dessert? You ate, right?”

“I ate.” Mingyu puts the begonia on the coffee table. It’ll be the tentative home until he can find a better place, “Did you?”

“Maybe.” He comes over to the dining table and takes a seat opposite to Minghao, whisking the plant out of his grasp. If the man seriously does have a brown thumb, he doesn’t want him rubbing up on Romeo. He gives Minghao a hard stare, “I did, I did. I ate a bit with the roomie, but I’m not really hungry. I had a big lunch.”

They spend the next while passing the plant back and forth. Mingyu is asked to confirm that he’s alright with driving everyone to the dinner; Jun, Minghao, Soonyoung, and Wonwoo. To which he agrees. He forgot that Jun would have to go with them since he’s technically this date, but that’s okay. He’s more curious about where Jihoon will be placed. Minghao reminds him that Jihoon has a gig that day and will drive over to the venue himself.

He’s glad that there’s no formal dress code. Trying to coordinate outfits with a date is a nightmare especially when he has to be on par with someone as delicately beautiful as Jun is. The only requirement is that he dress considerably nicely—a blazer at least—and that he wears company
colors. However, that’s the main issue because Mingyu owns very little red and black and even less silver. He guesses he’ll have to go shopping, but it’s not like he has much time to prepare (and Minghao apologizes continuously for that), but they literally leave for the dinner tomorrow at 4:00 in front of the studio so that they can get there on time for the opening announcements.

The dinner will be served at 6:30, not giving any margin of error for delays or heavy traffic. The award ceremony will follow that and the night will be capped off with prize-winning games and music. They should be able to leave around 9:30 and get home before midnight. It’s a full itinerary, but it’s been a long while since Mingyu’s been able to go out and have fun with people he can consider friends.

“The prizes are pretty good. Last year, Soonyoung won a 40” flat-screen and someone else walked off with an expensive camera.” That’s not a surprise considering how competitive Soonyoung sounds, “The games are little cringe-worthy, but if you really want to win something, I’m sure Jun will be more than fine helping you out since you’re doing him a big favor by going.”

Of course, you have to participate with your date. It’s then that Mingyu learns that you’re given matching wrist ribbons when you enter the venue. The reason is none other than people abandoning their dates in order to win harder prizes. It makes him wonder what strange contest Soonyoung and Wonwoo would both be good at in order to win the big prize.

“Jun says you can wear whatever you want, but he’ll text you a photo of his outfit when he gets home tonight.”

“What are you wearing?”

Minghao shrugs, “Jihoon says he’s going to show up in all black because he’s coming straight from work, so I guess I’ll figure something out. Wearing all black seems kind of boring, though.” Indeed, for Minghao that’s boring. Minghao always dresses coolly with a little piece of color in one place or another, but Mingyu’s sure that finding black clothes won’t be trouble for him.

He’ll figure something out regarding the outfit after Jun texts him. For now, his attention is dedicated to the man in front of him.

“Why are you doing this to me?” Minghao whines, “I’m terrible at baking. Couldn’t we make something easy like peanut butter cookies or crepes? Meringue even.”

“Nope.” Mingyu ties the apron around Minghao’s waist. Normally, he wouldn’t bother with aprons, but Minghao’s wearing all black and sometimes the powdered sugar and almond flour get messy when you sieve them, “But I’ll make note of you wanting crepes.” This was more or less an excuse to have physical contact with him, “And macarons aren’t that hard. You’ve just got to be careful.”

He carefully measures out the ingredients as Minghao sieves them into a large bowl. The cloud of sugar makes the air taste sweet when he smacks his lips together. Mingyu quickly whips the eggs as Minghao prepares a piping bag. Unfortunately, his arm quickly grows tired. Beating eggs into stiff peaks isn’t as easy without a hand-mixer. He should invest in one, but his whisk has yet to let him down. Minghao offers to switch positions, whisking with such fervor that he worries the bowl might crack. It doesn’t, but Mingyu has broken bowls while he was overenthusiastically baking before. At least Minghao has some form of self-control.

As thanks for whipping the eggs, Mingyu combines the meringue with the almond flour and
powdered sugar. It’s this part that people usually get caught up on—a part that he mastered years ago. He doesn’t mind. It means that their macarons will turn out well. After dividing their batter into two bags, they start piping methodically onto the two baking trays.

“Then you have to smack it.”

“Smack it?” Minghao holds his tray in his hands. He had piped mostly classic circles until Mingyu encouraged him to try some fun shapes. Although he was expecting dicks and butts, Mingyu’s pleasantly surprised to see Minghao try out a heart, a fish, and a bunny among other simple shapes. These aren’t for a bakery or anything. They’re for fun and that means they don’t have to be perfect, just enjoyable.

“On the counter like-” And Mingyu slams his tray on the surface. The loud noise makes Minghao jolt suddenly, tilting his tray to the point where the parchment paper with all the batter almost slides off, “Sorry, did I spook you.”

Minghao just laughs nervously, “A little.” But he follows suit anyway. They go through and meticulously fix and pop any of the bubbles that come to surface before letting them rest while they make ganache.

Chocolate ganache is easy and while Mingyu was just planning on whacking some heavy cream in the microwave, Minghao insists that double-boiling the chocolate is the more legitimate way to do things. Of course, Mingyu complies. They have time to burn, a little less than an hour-and-a-half before Minghao has to speed across town to meet with Jihoon. He doesn’t mind that Minghao sticks the tip of his finger into the hot ganache to sample it, looking a little dissatisfied when his fingertip leaves his lips.

“Needs salt.”

“Minghao, it’s supposed to be sweet.”

“Needs salt.” He shuffles over to Mingyu’s spice cabinet. He taps on the glass and plastic containers until he finds the salt grinder. He twists it a couple times onto a small plate that he pulls from the dishwasher, then returns to the spice cabinet and starts digging.

“What are you up to?” Minghao pulls down the chili grinder, the cardamom, and nutmeg, asking for the zester. He doesn’t add much to the plate, just a little pinch of each, and he asks for Mingyu’s permission before dumping it all into the ganache, “Are you sure about this?”

Unhappy that Mingyu is doubting him, Minghao grabs a spoon from the silverware drawer and mixes up the ganache to ensure even distribution of the spices. He gives it a sniff and nod before holding up the spoon to Mingyu’s mouth. Unsure and a little hesitant, Mingyu parts his lips and prepares for the worst considering Minghao doesn’t bake normally.

He shouldn’t have been surprised that it tastes good. The chili flakes provide a bit of warmth after he swallows and the salt balances out the sourness from the dark chocolate. The other two spices are very subtle and a little aromatic. It makes him doubt that Minghao doesn’t often bake, but it’s possible that his love of mismatched foods had led him to add chocolate to a savory dish. How daring.

Mingyu and Minghao talk about random things while the macarons are baking. He mentions that Soonyoung can’t keep still in the car and Minghao says that he’s wrong.
“Soonyoung isn’t five.” He laughs, “I’ll figure out a way to keep him quiet though.”

He anticipates Minghao’s solution. He makes it sound easy which probably comes with the experience of working with Soonyoung for so many years. He’s probably travelled with him more than Wonwoo has between all the dance conferences and competitions. Among other things, he also talks about the couple’s weekend adventure to the animal shelter and how he was so driven to get Halibut adopted that he made Wonwoo swear to visit him. He is careful about how much he says, treading carefully around the subject of cats, but it sounds like Minghao knew about the cats and knew that Wonwoo rehomed Apollo. The reason why he rehomed the cat is still unknown, but Minghao does remember that Athena was hit by a car and that Wonwoo was really sad about that.

Ding.

Baking, done!

Time to cool.

Minghao has no patience and pulls the sheet of parchment onto the counter and tosses the sheet tray into the sink. Smart. They’ll definitely cool faster against the cold counter tile. Mingyu doesn’t know why he’s always followed instructions and let them sit in the pan to cool. Within seconds they’re peeleable and he uses an offset spatula to scrape a whole line of them off at once.

The only disappointing thing is that one of his bunnies lost an ear, but that cookie is easily eaten and forgotten about. All of them have feet and nice shiny tops. A successful batch if he had to say so himself. Mingyu fans his tray for a couple more seconds before starting the peeling process. He’s aiming for no breaks, no cracks; a perfect 100% score which often doesn’t happen when Minghao is around. And he does! He does a little jiggle when they all come off seamlessly and without any toasted color.

“Ganache time?”

Mingyu puts his hands on his hips victoriously, “Ganache time.” But then he suddenly feels worried. He wonders if Minghao remembers how to pipe. Maybe he should have just kept the ganache in a bowl and they could have applied it with a spoon because Minghao’s past experience with piping was less than clean.

However, the man picks up the piping bag and one of the cookies, flipping it over to its flat side, and piping a perfect swirl of chocolate in the center, finishing it off with a flick of his wrist. Has he been practicing in his free time? Minghao sandwiches the chocolate between another shell and puts it to the side. With mechanical precision, he finishes another four by the time gears in Mingyu’s head start turning.

“You’re suddenly so good at piping?” he leans against the counter, bumping his shoulder against Minghao’s teasingly, “Last week you couldn’t even pipe a straight line and now it looks like you’ve worked at a patisserie. I can’t believe you’ve made time in your busy schedule to practice piping.”

The latter freezes, stops what he’s doing, and holds his breath for just a moment. Radio silence. His eyes dart around the kitchen with a stiff smile creeping onto his lips, but just as quickly he readjusts his grip on the piping bag, twisting it tighter and piping another pretty rosette on the macaron with an expert motion, “No, you buffoon, I’ve known how to pipe all along.”

Mingyu laughs at the remark for a second before he realizes something. He stops laughing immediately, heat and redness running into his cheeks. If Minghao knew how to pipe all along, then
could his stunt last week- was it really just to get Mingyu’s attention?

“You were complete rubbish at this last week though.” He tests the water with a cautious sentence.

“Nope.” His mind goes blank. He was wrong. Minghao’s much more sly than he makes himself out to be. He’s been played. He’s been played and made a fool and Minghao is on his twelfth macaron already, just piping and stacking and piping and stacking; perfect rosettes each time with a neat little point in the center from how he flicks his wrist. He doesn’t even need two hands to guide the bag, his fingers and large palms are dexterous enough to do it all with one hand, “I’ve known how to pipe for years.” he pipes a small dollop onto his finger and wipes it on the tip of Mingyu’s nose, “You just look really good when you’re teaching people how to do things.”

He’s not sure what’s louder, his nervous laughter or his heartbeat that drums impatiently with the same fervor as yesterday’s thunder, “Guess you don’t need my help today then.” Mingyu’s glad that the semi-witty words even tumble out of his mouth because he can’t even feel his tongue as he towels the chocolate off his face.

Minghao rolls his eyes, “Oh no.” in such a sarcastic tone that both of them break out into laughter when his wrist goes slack and the piping bag clumsily rolls onto the counter, “I seem to have forgotten how to use my hands.” The words come out in a purposeful stiff awkwardness that makes the infomercial-like demonstration almost cute, “If only there were some expert baker in this kitchen that could save these macarons from meeting their untimely death.” He leans his back against the counter and stuffs one of the cookies into his mouth, filling out his cheeks.

Mingyu takes the piping bag and shakes his head, “I’ll fix your hands, but I need to cast a magic spell on them first. The magic of bakers past.” He takes Minghao’s hand away from him, spreading his fingers open with his own and flattening the phalanges. While Minghao is occupied picking out another unsuspecting victim to devour, he quickly pipes something into his palm. Such an expansive canvas, plenty of space to work.

A scoff, “Really?”

“Are you healed?”

And they spend the next few minutes wrestling in the kitchen because Minghao is determined to wipe the ‘GFY:)’ onto Mingyu and Mingyu is determined to stay clean.

He’s glad he doesn’t have a roommate.

Seungcheol would not approve of whatever is happening in this kitchen.

Chapter End Notes

I know ya'll gon' ask about what flower seungcheol picked out so here it is

and here are the shitty meanings behind it:
- warnings about future misfortunes or challenges
- dark and unpleasant thoughts that distract you from your happiness and joy
- being cautious about new situations
- harmonious communication between friends
- and gratitude and giving thanks for a favor from someone else

whereas the pink means romance and the yellow means happiness.

what a complicated boy. he can communicate so much with one flower (he's probably trying to 1up mingyu's need for an entire bouquet)

can anyone guess what's going to happen in tomorrow's chapter since i didn't leave you on a cliffy today? ;)

Sure.

Sure, yeah, sure.

Mingyu’s heart is uncomfortable. No big deal.

They start dividing up the macarons fifty-fifty; half will go to work with Mingyu, half will go to work with Minghao. He insists that they ought to eat all of the ones in funny and cute shapes because those aren’t business professional. Whatever, Minghao, just admit that they taste good.

“I’m telling them that you made them.”

“Why? We both made them.” Mingyu’s mouth is full with half a cat’s head and he has to put a hand up to stop food from flying everywhere.

“Because,” Minghao shuts the Tupperware box and puts it in the fridge, taking his apron off and folding it neatly to set on the counter by the sink. He’s glad that Minghao’s the type to clean as he cooks. They match well with their kitchen habits, “if I start cooking for them now, they’ll expect it in the future.”

“What’s so bad about that?”

He makes a little hop to sit up on the counter, something Mingyu normally wouldn’t approve of, but having Minghao look down at him with half-lidded eyes is an enthralling experience. He can’t say no to that, “Nothing, but Soon’s been asking me to cook since we’ve met.”

“Have you had his baking?”

“Unfortunately.” He giggles into a deformed heart, snapping it in half with his front teeth and licking the crumbs from the corner of his mouth, “And, you see, if no one ever agrees to bring homemade food in, I’ll never be obligated to eat his sticks of charcoal ever again.”

“Oh, I got discs, not sticks.” He experiments, putting a hand on the counter on either side of Minghao’s thighs, trapping him there.

But even though it’s Mingyu trying to pull a move, Minghao rolls with his (affectionate) punches and rests his free forearm on Mingyu’s shoulder, the other hand still carrying the macaron. He’s doing it so casually, too, like this is just second nature for them, “Biscotti isn’t his forte. I’m pretty sure the only thing he can make is Easy Mac in the microwave.”

“That’s too bad.” Now, acutely aware of every minute movement Minghao makes, Mingyu can feel his own breath growing slightly shaky. His confidence is buckling and for some reason, a fight or flight reaction is kicking in, but he holds in nerves in as steady as he can. Instead of moving, the only thing he can think to do is speak, “Wonwoo must be starving.”

Minghao hums.

At this proximity, Mingyu can almost feel the vibrations, “I doubt that. They eat out almost every night and Wonwoo takes Soonyoung out on special fancy dates every other weekend.” He likes the way Minghao’s fingers are idly picking at the tag-seam under his collar, smoothing the crisp creases down when he realizes Mingyu’s taken notice, “They get all dressed up. Buy each other
flowers. Empty out their schedules.” But he leaves his hand at Mingyu’s shoulder. Seems like the cookie has been forgotten, “It’s so romantic that it’s a little gross.”

“Are you not one for romance?” His cookie has certainly been forgotten. A lot of things have been forgotten. Mingyu, luckily, has enough sense to check himself before he wrecks anything. He sighs a short breath and shifts the weight on his feet. If he wanted, he could probably heft Minghao and his tootight ripped jeans off the counter and carry him off to godknowswhere.

“I can’t say I’ve ever really-”

Buzz. Ping.

What’s with the horrible timing?

Both their phones go off at the same time and during the second it takes both their attentions to falter, the heavy mood suddenly lifts from whatever force was keeping them rooted to their spots. Minghao raises his eyebrows, coughs out a short laugh, and pops the rest of his macaron in his mouth before sliding off the counter and shuffling over to the dining table to check his phone. Mingyu silently curses whoever just texted him because he has no choice but to go and check his own.

Jun. ‘Hey. I thought it might be a good idea to get a group chat going. It’ll make it easier to communicate. Thanks again for going along with this, Mingyu!’ a string of smileys and hearts follows.

“Was it Jun for you, too?” Minghao calls over his shoulder.

Mingyu redacts the curse he put on Jun, “Yeah.” And quickly texts a ‘Hello!’ with an equal number of smileys. He hears Minghao’s phone buzz again from the dining table.

‘I told Hao to tell you I’d send my outfit to you, so here it is! I look good, right?’ Yes, Jun looks good. The following picture is just him in full black. Black jeans, black button up, shiny black belt with a silver buckle, and over his shoulder is slung a deep red suit jacket with black, satin lapels. Even though the reflection of his phone in the mirror is covering his face and his black hair is unstyled, he knows that Jun looks good.

Mingyu sends back an ok-hand sign and a thumbs-up followed by a string of fire emojis.

‘Thanks! We don’t need to match, but Best Dressed couple can also get a prize.’

“Is there really a prize for that?” Mingyu doesn’t look up from his phone.

“Yeah, we never win though. It’s usually the guys from up-state that win- Wait,” a pause, “I take that back, Yixing and his date won last summer and got some expensive bracelets or something like that.”

‘I’ll try my best! I need to find something red and black asap. Guess it’s time to go shopping!’ Mingyu knows he sounds a little too enthused in the text, but he tends to do that especially since he and Jun aren’t really that close. He wants to make a good impression on him and maintain that reputation. He’s not lying, he’s excited about the dinner. He’s ready for some good food and to let loose and have a little fun out of town.

Minghao sends a thumbs-up into the group chat along with ‘You look nice. Mingyu’s been staring at your picture for three minutes’. Jun goes quiet for a little bit. Mingyu certainly hopes that Minghao’s comment didn’t scare him off. He doesn’t have eyes for Jun! He was just appreciating the
art! It’s not every day that someone that good looking just sends him a selfie unprompted.

‘I’ll take that as a compliment. @Mingyu, please and thank you!’ He doesn’t know what that last part means, but Minghao’s collection of hot friends is incredibly formidable and intimidating and Mingyu has to be able to fit in with their ranks. There’s just such a unique charm behind each of their good looks that makes them good people. It makes it difficult for him to figure out how to situate himself between them.

“I think Jun’s lost his mind.”

“Why’s that?” Mingyu puts his phone down and looks up at Minghao who is walking over to him again.

“Just something we were talking about in the dance chat.” He tosses the phone onto the counter, having it slide dangerously close to the opposing edge. Well, the screen is already shattered, so he hasn’t got much to lose if it were to fall off, “I need to ask a favor of you.” he sighs and rolls his eyes, “Better put, Jun is asking me to ask another favor of you using an IOU.”

“And what would that be?” and how many more of those IOUs does the man have left?

Minghao flops his arms onto the counter, “So, during the choreography, there’s a lot of acting involved; facial expressions- whatever. Jun’s really good at acting, but he needs some… reference. Chan mentioned that his and Jihoon’s expressions weren’t up to standard yet. I know, sounds harsh, but it’s just for this cut and- yeah.” Minghao picks up his phone a centimeter or two and drops it back onto the counter a couple times. He does it rhythmically, like he’s worried about something, “Would you mind me filming you,” his words are slow and drag on like they’re a huge strain on his lungs, “reacting to the dance- looklooklook, you don’t need to do anything, just react like you’re a part of the audience. It’s only, like, a couple minutes long.”

“Part of the audience?” Mingyu didn’t think his acting debut would come so soon, but he’s been wanting to see this dance for a while even if this is just a fraction of the entire performance, “I mean, sure. I don’t mind, but I can’t dance and I have no rhythm.”

“That’s okay.” His voice is small and quiet, “You don’t need to. Just- Give me a second to set things up.”

Minghao jogs out to his car and comes back in a matter of seconds with a GorillaPod and wireless speaker in hand. With familiarity in his fingers, he sets them up on the dining table and moves one of the chairs out to the side. At first, Mingyu thought that it was just to have a better look at the living room, but when the Minghao scrubs through the song and finds the first few notes of the right piece, he realizes that this is that choreography. It’s hard to tell, but the unique sound is unmistakable even though the audio is much clearer on a professional speaker.

Soonyoung’s rendition was not shoddy, but it was all words and demonstrations. Whatever he just agreed to is going to be a performance.

“So,” now it’s Mingyu’s turn to have a weak voice as he starts building up a stronger resolve, “why exactly do you need to film me?”

“Your reaction will be genuine.” The man even turns down the lights to match stage lighting. The only light that’s on now is the one in the kitchen, “I won’t do any of the more complicated moves, this is more for your facial expressions. Just be natural and if you’ve ever been mad at me, now’s the time to show it.” He checks the view from his phone’s screen one more time before correcting the lighting a little bit. This already looks questionable.
“Sure, but—”

It’s too late.

Minghao’s already pulled him into the living room under the eye of the camera and checks the view again before cueing up the music, “Let’s just get this over with quickly, okay?” he smacks Mingyu on the arm with a laugh and a smile before he turns around. Mingyu’s left awkwardly keeping his own company as the last few notes of the previous song end.

What sounds like a fan flapping in the air and batting against a surface cues up the dance. Then a sharp twang from a stringed instrument reverberates in the air, Asiatic in nature; something old and grand. The notes continue and he sees Minghao’s forefinger and middle finger tapping counts against his thigh, sometimes sliding them in small circles or across the denim in intricate patterns. If he had to guess, he’d say Minghao was mapping out the choreography of absent dancers up until the backtrack crescendos into a loud roar and falls silent.

He whips around then, turning to face Mingyu, the drawstrings from his hood following behind him, almost whapping him in the face. Mingyu almost laughs because he thought Minghao would break his composure, but the man’s eyes are sharp and dark. Like a predator after prey. This wasn’t part of what Soonyoung demonstrated. This is new. He can’t see any reflection of what Soonyoung showed him in Minghao’s body language. While Wonwoo had warned about the nature of the choreography, Soonyoung’s dance wasn’t anything particularly stimulating or showy. Minghao, on the other hand, has flipped a switch in his aura. None of it is a sheepish explanation or little laughs. None of it is nervous or shaky. None of it is shy or playful.

This is complete dominance.

Minghao reaches a hand out to take Mingyu’s, carding their fingers together. It’s like they’d done before, but everything feels so different. Mingyu can’t feel much of anything, but what he can feel is unfamiliar territory.

For the first few beats, Minghao’s in tempo with the violin, with the cello; stepping with the thump of a low drum, but it’s his eyes that make the music fall silent. He knows he’s not supposed to move much, so he lets Minghao move him, bringing his knuckles up to his lips, but not quite touching them. He roughly pushes their hands to the side before slowing down again with his signature quick-to-slow dance style. Mingyu can already feel the hairs on his arms stand at attention when Minghao leaves his touch to perform several elaborate moves around him. Finally, the music comes back to his ears. He can hear the snare, but low bass, and some amazing piano that’s playing feverishly in the background.

He’s coherent enough to remember that he’s supposed to look mad at Minghao and tries to put a scowl on his face without looking too forced. He feels Minghao’s fingers ghost over his arms and his sides but doesn’t actually feel his touch. The dancer only comes back into his line of sight when he makes a very slow and fluid cartwheel, sweeping his legs on the ground when he lands and supporting himself with his arms, feet off the ground. When he’s finally at his full height again, his back is facing Mingyu who is naïve enough to think that the dance is over. He’s not sure how much more he can handle.
The music is low and sultry.

Eyes glazed over, Mingyu can feel the piece building up anticipation. Minghao takes a big step back, diving low and only coming back up when he’s facing Mingyu chest-to-chest. He hadn’t realized how glad he was to have a break from those piercing eyes. He licks his lips and shoves Mingyu back with a firm push. If he wasn’t so hypnotized, he would have flailed before hitting the ground, but his butt meets the chair Minghao had pulled out earlier. The contact startles him and his eyes open wide a moment before he scrambles to regain his composure, but that’s a lost cause.

Minghao runs his hands down Mingyu’s arms, pulling them up by the wrist and placing his hands on his hips. While he can’t keep track of everything that’s happening, he’s sure to keep his bottom lip firmly clenched between his teeth lest his jaw hit the floor. The way Minghao moves under his touch is sensual and skilled. He can feel the precision in the way his muscles flex and tense through his thin shirt. But just as he’s starting to enjoy the show, Minghao bashes his hands off him and slams his own hands into the back of the chair, effectively pinning Mingyu to it and getting up in his face.

That was a little scary, but based on the music, Minghao’s supposed to seem scary.

Minghao disappears from sight again and Mingyu just needs this one little moment to recover. Is his heart still beating? Is he alive? He can’t feel his face. He can’t feel his legs or his toes. He can hear that Minghao’s feet are moving on the carpet with the way his socked feet are patting against it. He’s probably doing something cool and all Mingyu can do is ride the beat and try to stay on the surface.

But, all too soon, Minghao is back to pull him underwater again. He feels drained. Who is this succubus he let into his apartment and what did he do with the cute and professional dancer that was eating macarons on the counter ten minutes ago?

This time, Minghao is straddling his lap, running his hands through his own hair, tucking the fringe behind his ear, and cracking a cocky and crooked smile. This man is dangerous. Mingyu’s hands are back at Minghao’s hips, this time unprompted because he couldn’t resist the invitation, sliding up his thighs and hooking his thumbs into the loops of his jeans. He might get scolded later, but the way they dip and sway with the muffled music in the background is enticing. It’s totally different from Soonyoung and he’s in a totally different mind-space from Wonwoo.

He’s pretty sure playing music was pointless because he can’t hear any of it after Minghao ghosts fingers up his neck and snakes a hand into his locks. You know that ecstatic feeling you get at the salon, multiply that by the number of times Mingyu has mentally said that he can die happy after this lap dance. He can feel Minghao’s breath hot on the other side of his neck, near his throat. It sends his senses soaring as his eyes flutter shut and he holds his own breath. He only opens them again when a particularly generous grind is felt over his lap and, at that, the first thing he sees is Minghao coming in for an open-mouthed kiss.

His mind goes more than blank, it goes black. It goes black like the deepest ocean trench, yet warm and transparent like tropical waters. It’s silent, like he’s suspended in space with all the stars falling out of focus. Mingyu instinctually leans forward to meet Minghao halfway—breaching the surface of the water and gasping for air—, but the dancer yanks him back roughly by a fistful of hair, tugging on his nape and plunging him back into the deep.

It leaves Mingyu yearning.

In his haze of confusion clashed with longing, he fights forward for just a second, teeth barely raking the skin of Minghao’s plump bottom lip as the dancer pulls away and slips out of his grasp. It
wasn’t rejection, it’s just Minghao following the choreography. If Mingyu wasn’t still so out of it, he would have seen Minghao slip up on the last portion and make less-than-smooth recoveries until the music reaches its end.

By the time Mingyu fully comes to his senses, Minghao has already shut the camera and music off. He finds that his pants feel a bit tighter than they did a few minutes ago and crosses one leg over the other in an attempt to hide whatever deviance his dick might be getting up to. His hands are sweating profusely and he tries to dry them on his thighs by rubbing them into his pants, but it doesn’t seem to be helping.

“Good job.” Minghao flicks the lights back on, causing Mingyu to squint until his eyes adjust. The brightness is back; real Minghao is back. What just happened? Did he actually do a good job? As regrettable as it may be, Mingyu’s a little frantic because he can barely recall any of anything that just happened. Did Minghao dance well? Did he react the right way?

“Did I?” he can tell his voice is jittery just like his bones, he doesn't even know where that question was headed. 'Did he' what?

Minghao walks over to him with a soft smile, “How was it?”

Mingyu doesn’t know. He doesn’t know how to respond to that other than stuttering into, “You’re going to dance that with Jun?” his throat is dry, his mouth is dry, but why?

“Yep.”

“Isn’t it a little… hot,” Mingyu clears his throat, “between friends?”

The dancer just shrugs, leaning against the back of another dining chair, “We’ve done steamier things for smaller titles. I think it’s fine.” But then his eyes click over to Mingyu whose eyes have only left Minghao’s face to blink. He takes a step forward until he’s by Mingyu’s side, looking down at him with wide, innocent eyes and slightly pursed lips, “Why? Was it too much for you?”

Mingyu can only whine and laugh before he crosses his arms over his chest and admits defeat, “Yeah, a little.”

“Sorry,” Why is he apologizing? “if I made you uncomfortable.” He slings an arm over Mingyu’s shoulder and pats him comfortingly, giving him a bit of a side hug. Just as Mingyu turns to complete the hug, Minghao gets up to send the video off. He scrubs through it once before chuckling and shaking his head. He also wheezes a sort of complaint out before locking his phone and pocketing it.

“What is it? Did I look stupid?”

“No, nothing like that.” Minghao pulls the chair out to sit next to Mingyu, leaning one elbow on the table to prop his head upon his palm, “I just didn’t expect you to lean forward then.”

“What? When?”

A mischievous smirk wrinkles his lip, “You’ll find out when you watch Jun on stage.”

The two sit facing each other without speaking, suddenly overcome with a bashful veil that’s difficult to see through. Their only forms of communication are smiles, blinks, and eyebrows which is fun and interesting, but Mingyu’s curiosity is getting the better of him. The dance started off with
skill and technique, and now all he has is the burning desire to kiss Minghao as hard as he can. Things aren’t that simple, though. The atmosphere is a little odd for that right now; awkward. If Mingyu knows one thing, it’s that talking is a good solution to breaking an awkward spell.

As if on cue, Minghao’s phone rings just as Mingyu opens his mouth to speak.

“Hello?” Minghao stands up and tosses the camera stand and speaker into his bag, “You’re already at the studio?” he makes a sharp turn to look at the clock, Mingyu’s eyes follow suit. Oh, fuck, “Sorry, I’m on my way over. I just had to go over something with Mingyu and-” he takes a breath, listening to whatever Jihoon has to say and nodding even though the audio engineer can’t see him, “Yeah, yeah, I’m on my way. Okay, okay, okay.”

To be fair, Jihoon is five minutes early.

To be less fair, the studio is at least ten minutes away.

Knowingly, Mingyu makes his way over to the kitchen to pull out Minghao’s share of macarons and hands him the box as he sees Minghao out the door. It seems like Jihoon is a little long-winded when it comes to punctuality. He can hear him chatter when Minghao holds the phone with his shoulder so he can stuff the Tupperware into his bag as well.

Shouldering his bag and taking a couple steps back and forth—like he’s trying to make a decision or take a leap—he comes back to Mingyu, opening his arms wide for a hug. Mingyu masks his shyness with a laugh and returns the very friendly hug, burying his nose into Minghao’s neck as he lifts him a few inches off the ground.

He would have yelled a farewell as Minghao disappeared into the dark of the street, but the man is still on the phone. Instead, Mingyu waves until he’s out of sight, ending the night a little differently than they normally do. No goodbyes. No so-long’s. No lingering touches or anything like that because Minghao was speed-walking and Jihoon must be a force to fear.

That’s okay. He understands the urgency. They have to practice. They have to get ready for the dinner.

And Mingyu still has to give Minghao a kiss.
Chapter 69

Mingyu lies awake, eyelids and lashlines creeping closer and closer together, but he worries that if he falls asleep, then he’ll wake up only to find that all of tonight’s events had simply been a dream.

It feels foggy enough.

The amount of contact, of shared warmth—just the idea that Minghao had somewhat willingly done that to him with him. Oh, that’s enough to make his heartbeat quicken. The way he seemed to move in slow motion while dancing to an upbeat song was captivating. It was a totally different aura from the Minghao who led the dance team in the center of their echo-filled gym a decade ago. He’s more refined, polishing his skills like he’d been buffing a diamond for ten years. Mingyu still couldn’t look away, it’s probably impossible with how far gone he knows he is.

He might have stared at him afterwards, but all that looking wasn’t really looking. There’s probably no way he can look Minghao in the eye come the afternoon. Yes, it’s long after midnight. Taking the world’s hottest shower didn’t help wash away the remnants of Minghao’s performance in his brain. They’re as vivid as they can be behind a layer of steam. Most of Mingyu’s accounts are few, though precise. It’s the exact moment of contact, the specific tangents where Minghao’s fingers slid against his neck, the hair roots on the back of his head that still feel tense. His thighs can almost still feel the weight against them.

It’s warm, those spaces.

He doesn’t know how to describe it; lingering, perhaps, but not quite. They’re less intense than the feeling of holding Minghao’s hands, but they’re still completely troublesome for keeping him awake at this hour. There’s no sense in staying up. His eyes are tired, his brain is tired. He should just give in to sweet, sweet sleep, but maybe more than he fears waking to a dream, he fears dreaming of something unfortunate.

His room is as it was when he wakes.

Half his covers are off the bed, meaning he likely had a nightmare. He doesn’t remember, so that’s good at least. He rubs his face, hands hot and cramping, maybe from gripping his sheets too tightly. It’s better than having stressful images embedded in his mind.

He gets up, slides his slippers on, gets dressed for work, and comes out to the main room to eat some breakfast, but he stops midway to the kitchen. The scene of the chairs left as they reignite the deep scratches left in his brain. God, Minghao. Why did he have to listen to Jun?

Digging into his steaming porridge, Mingyu checks his e-mails, farms some pixelated crops, and makes sure that all his adult things are taken care of, but if he’s honest, it’s more difficult to focus on it today compared to other days.

He has to stay on task. There’s a lot to do.

He has to put together a nice outfit for the dinner and take his car to get cleaned before 4. No, his car isn’t dirty or gross, but it’s not dealership-new. Don’t think poorly of him, but it does have a slight mildew-like smell from him tracking wet shoes into it since the ground hasn’t had the
opportunity to dry. Luckily, there’s a place on the northern end of town that doesn’t need an appointment. He can take it there and go shopping across the street in the meantime. What a good plan.

When he gets into the clinic, it’s quiet.

Joshua’s there, the door is unlocked, but no one else seems to be around. Even the custodial staff aren’t combing the halls. When he approaches the front desk, the manager looks better than he has the last week and a half. Barely, but noticeable. His dark circles are lighter and his lips aren’t cracked anymore. The color has returned to his face and it looks like he’s clean-shaven and well-rested. Well, not totally well-rested, but more rested.

“Morning.” He leans over the counter like most patients do.

Joshua glances up from his computer, “Morning, Mingyu.” And looks back down at it, typing out a reply to an e-mail.

“You look good today.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Mingyu smiles, that’s good. His snarky mannerisms have returned a little.

“Just that you look good today.”

“Whatever.” He gets Joshua to scoff and chuckle and that’s more than most of them have been able to do for the last few days. Maybe Seokmin got somewhere with the one-on-one lunch plan, “You’re so damn awkward sometimes. I don’t know why people keep requesting to see you.”

“Hey, I have a great personality.” Mingyu knows it’s because of his good looks. He wouldn’t put up with himself either, “And where is everyone? We open in, like, thirty minutes.”

“No clue.” Joshua singsongs into the air. You could hear a pin drop in this lobby. It feels vacant and empty (because it is). Showing up to work with just the two of them hasn’t happened since summertime when there was a bug going around.

Mingyu decides to not push his luck with Joshua—who still seems to be running on limited patience—since he takes a phone call and shoos him away. Wonwoo shows up in the breakroom a few minutes later in his normal pastel and khaki. Today’s cardigan is a warm and deep grey, one that Mingyu hasn’t seen before. He officially has seven grey cardigans now. The man looks excited, a characteristic that he normally doesn’t carry this early in the morning, but then Mingyu remembers that they have a highly anticipated dinner to attend to tonight.

Wonwoo socks soft punches into Mingyu’s shoulder playfully, “What?”

“The dinner, that’s what.”

He blinks, “I would be more excited if I had my outfit ready. I don’t know what to wear.” He only now realizes that he sounds like a fucking teenager. There are only so many things he can wear and he’s sure that Mingh-Jun won’t care what he ends up wearing as long as he doesn’t wear sweats.

“Don’t worry about it too much. Black, red, and sil-” Wonwoo is interrupted by Mingyu’s phone sending a shrill ring through the air. He really ought to change his default ringtone to
something not disgustingly generic, but he has a habit of changing the ringtones of people who call him. All others don’t matter.

Since the caller is unknown and he’s on the clock, he elects to ignore it, hanging up with his finger hitting the lock button, “As you were saying.”

“The colors aren’t difficult to coordinate and I’m sure you’ve realized it by now, but with a face as handsome as yours, I’m sure you could skirt by wearing a spandex Deadpool costume and still get compliments.” Somehow it doesn’t feel like a compliment, but Mingyu will roll with it. He’s glad they’re talking about something other than Minghao’s dance last night. At least he’ll savor the moment until Jun spills the beans and Soonyoung telephones the message to Wonwoo.

“I still have to go shopping. I’ll need to match with Jun and I don’t have a red blazer.”

“You don’t have to wear a blazer. Soon’s not. They don’t actually care.” Wonwoo takes a sip of his coffee, “You don’t even have to wear studio colors, you can wear whatever. Yixing won’t kill you, they just think it’s nice when the whole studio looks a little uniform.” He thinks for a moment, “Then again, most studios have black as their main color. It’s not worth getting stressed over. The dinner is supposed to be fun and you’ll get to have a good time with Mi-” Wonwoo is interrupted again by the same person calling again. Mingyu ignores the call again. It must be a telemarketer or something. He tries to think back to all the weird things he’s signed up for in the past and which one of those companies probably sold his information, “You’ll get to have a good time with Jun and everyone, so don’t sweat it.”

Even if Wonwoo tells him not to worry, it’s not that simple or easy. He wants to dress to impress and even though he’s not bad at dressing himself, his fashion isn’t in tune with the crowd he’s aiming to swoon. Dancers always had such unique and hip styles; a little edgy and very cool. Mingyu’s accustomed to dressing preppy and professional.

Envisioning different outfits carries on throughout the day. He blocks the number that called him after the fourth time they ring. He doesn’t need more stress. Thankfully, his appointments go rather smoothly and lunch offers an opportunity to ask Wonwoo and Seokmin what they think he should wear.

They sit down at a pizzeria off the corner of 4th and Mingyu takes a mouthful of his ziti before Wonwoo and Seokmin return with their food. To fill the awkward option of sitting completely alone, he pulls out his phone and checks his messages. Only one new one and it isn’t from a number he recognizes.

‘Sorry about this, but I need to speak with you today.’
Chapter 70

Mingyu looks at the numbers and words on his screen, hovering his fingers over the keys before quickly typing out, ‘New phone, who is this?’ Perfect. Foolproof. Even if it’s someone that he knew previously, he could easily skirt by with the excuse that he didn’t transfer his contacts over. Which he didn’t. He got a new phone when he moved back to town and only transferred over the contact cards of people who he talked to regularly.

Unsurprisingly, the person calls again.

He sends it straight to voicemail, silencing the ringer as Seokmin comes over with a calzone bigger than his face. But the caller is persistent, that’s a fact. One call after another until Mingyu excuses himself to go outside and check. He leaves before Wonwoo gets back and Seokmin claims that he’ll steal one of Mingyu’s meatballs if he takes longer than ten minutes, but that’s a risk he’s willing to take. What if someone really needs him? What if Minghao’s in trouble? What if his parents are in trouble?

Once outside, Mingyu sees that he’s been left a voicemail. So, instead of calling back right away, he decides to give it a listen, “Hey, it’s Nick.” And his heart drops, “Remember me? Nicky.” A cough and a sniffle, “Nicky DeGarmo.”

He’d gone out with Nicky before he met Jungkook. Nicky was his go-to friend during freshman year and they ended up sharing a lot of general education classes that first Fall and, in turn, spent a lot of time together; lunches on the quad, late nights in the library. Nicky was a mistake if he’d ever met one, “I’m in Florence right now, stranded at some pub and the music is too loud.” Indeed. Nicky was never one to take root in one place, having left to study abroad their sophomore year and inevitably broke off communications with Mingyu aside from the occasional Facebook message checking up on him, “I just really miss you,” are those sobs? “And all the fun we had together.” Probably not, just hiccups.

Nicky was an adventure, that was for sure.

He remembers a lot of things about Nicky, the majority of which involved half-sober, late-night, lazy sex where no one was ever completely satisfied. Well, at least Mingyu wasn’t. There’s just something empty and void in the experience when you’re not all the way there to remember it, “Remember when we used to go bar hopping?” Unfortunately, “And smoke joints behind Big Al’s when we ran out of money for booze?”

Mingyu didn’t smoke, Nicky did. Mingyu didn’t run out of money, Nicky did. Nicky didn’t want a relationship, Mingyu did. It’s the reason they got together and, ultimately, the reason why they didn’t work out. Again, Nicky isn’t the type to stay in one place and Mingyu isn’t the type to do long-distance. He wasn’t about to go out of his way to accompany someone who he didn’t have equal footing with. They just weren’t compatible. Mingyu wasn’t crazy, Nicky was. The first and only time Mingyu had ever had an encounter with law enforcement (and ran) was with Nicky and their ragtag ‘friends’ composed of utter hooligans.

“You’d start singing offkey after midnight.” Yeah, he did. He let loose a bit freshman year. “Your voice was terrible,” Mingyu doesn’t think his voice was that bad, “but everyone had a good laugh.” It was experimentation; no holds barred. After being uptight about grades and applications all of his last year in high school, he needed a breather once he escaped the loving arms of his parents and moved to San Francisco. He’d grown used to leadership positions while preparing for college applications and while he worked hard for those titles, he easily welcomed someone else to take the
lead, “And you’d run up to dog owners,” a familiar laugh, “asking if you could borrow their pets for extended periods of time.” Mingyu doesn’t hold his liquor especially well, but he’s also not a mess. There were half-truths in how much he wanted those dogs and Nicky always made fun of him for it.

All in all, there were a lot of things that didn’t work out with Nicky because of their sarcastic and passive aggressive attitude— it’s not even that, it’s just that Nicky never let Mingyu live or have wholesome fun.

Every good ‘date’ was spent somewhere loud and crazy. Every ‘great’ night was poured from the neck of cheap corner-store wine. It’s not to say that there aren’t any good memories with Nicky. There are. There are, “I miss you. I miss you.” He liked going to the library together, shoulders touching in their individual cubicles. He liked the way Nicky could make boring situations entertaining, even if that was derived from making fun of the people involved. He liked finally having a friend in an unfamiliar place that he couldn’t call home. He liked and hated the way Nicky never took anything to heart; the definition of easy-going. Making out in the private study rooms was exciting thanks to the premise of getting caught. Barhopping with fake ID’s was fun as well, but ultimately, “I miss having fun.”

Mingyu missed having fun, too, but not Nicky’s common version of fun.

Because Minghao redefined fun.

Who knew that talking about food for hours at a time could be fun? Eating spicy food and crying doesn’t sound like fun. Walking a (cute) dog in the rain doesn’t sound like fun. Ruining your clothes in the mud when you spent hours getting ready doesn’t sound like fun. Tickling a grown man on the couch and getting kneed in the chin and biting your tongue doesn’t sound like fun. Holding hands while you’re worried that your sweaty palms are disgusting the other person doesn’t sound like fun.

Because Minghao redefined fun.

Minghao makes him feel fulfilled and warm and whole and everything that every past relationship couldn’t live up to—not Arielle, not Eunbi, and certainly not Nicky. He doesn’t know what the criteria are exactly and every relationship he’s been in has been a great learning experience with an equally tedious learning curve, but Minghao even made learning fun. Minghao isn’t easy. Minghao wasn’t easy to get along with and it’s chopped off a good chunk of his lifespan to get this far into their friendship with him, but if you asked Mingyu to do it again, he wouldn’t hesitate.

With the way Minghao makes him feel—

With the way Minghao lets him feel—

Simply put, everyone else dulls in comparison.

Nicky especially.

“Those were good times.” For one of us, “And, hey, I’m going to be passing through Cali next weekend on a business trip to Tijuana.” He still doesn’t know how Nicky managed to scrap their life together and build those crusty remains up to an MBA in management, the same as valedictorian, good-boy Jungkook, but they somehow did and it seems like they’re doing rather well, “Do you want to meet up?” No, he doesn’t, “You work at that one clinic, right? The one listed on your Facebook? I can swing by and we can grab lunch or dinner or something.” That’s not a good idea.

It’s not that he feels anything for Nicky. Nicky is a piece of the past that he’ll gladly leave
behind; a relationship full of regrets and new experiences that he could live without, such as streaking through campus on one particularly daring night with all of Nick’s friends. If there’s one thing that Jungkook and his fraternity friends saved Mingyu from, it was Nicky, “I really want to see you, Mingyu.”

It makes him want to gag.

Nicky doesn’t want to see him. Nicky’s drunk in a bar. Nicky just wants a booty-call and is willing to pay international calling fees to find that booty-call. Nicky was a toxic person. Nicky is not wanted. Nicky is not needed. And while he can’t say he dislikes or holds much against them, Mingyu can say that he’d just rather live a life where he never has to see Nicky ever again.

He ends the voicemail and texts back.

‘I think you have the wrong number.’

Immediately, ‘This isn’t Mingyu Kim from UCSF?’

And he doesn’t know why his patience is running thin, but he just wants to get back inside and eat his pasta while it’s still warm. He wants to get back to his wholesome and tangible friends. He wants to go back to being pestered about Minghao’s existence because it’s not like he doesn’t have him on the brain 24/7 anyway- ‘Nope, sorry.’

‘No, it’s okay. Sorry for bothering you. That was kind of embarrassing.’

Instead of comforting Nicky or saying something friendly, Mingyu signs off without another thought, ‘bye, stranger.’

The him now would be a stranger to Nicky. So much of him has changed since they were together. So much of him is better now. He has clear morals. He has a clear conscious. He isn’t lonely anymore.

‘bye.’

That was more difficult than it had to be.

“That was good?” and for some reason, he’s never been happier to hear Seokmin’s bright voice call out to him, calzone half eaten with marinara extending the corners of his mouth. Wonwoo is idly poking at his chicken risotto and his phone is screen-down on the table. He and Seokmin had been talking before Mingyu got back in and they easily melt back into conversation when he sits down.

Mingyu knows that today’s lunch is nothing special or out of the ordinary, but he suddenly feels all fuzzy inside. The saying goes something like ‘you don’t know what you have until it’s gone’, but in his case, it’s something more like ‘you don’t appreciate the great friends you have until a terrible relationship from the past calls you in the middle of the work day’. But he won’t let Nicky’s call trip him up. Nicky is a part of the past, significant, but not enough to be brought up or thought about as anything more than a not-too-bad-but-not-too-good memory. He has what he has now. He has Wonwoo and Seokmin and Soonyoung and Jun. And Minghao.

“Yep, all good.”

He has Minghao.
Mingyu is overjoyed to realize that his 1:00 appointment has cancelled, ending his day early. Normally, he’d be a little upset since his days are usually full of errands and boring activities until Minghao’s free, but now he gets to tackle is stressful errands and worry himself mad in front of the JCPenny’s dressing room mirror for an hour.

He makes it out to his car and gets all settled in. He starts the ignition and is about to back out when he receives a call from an unknown number. Again. Just when the whole headache was done and over with. Part of him panics that Nicky has grown obsessed and is just using burner phones to try and contact him and hunt him down in the comfort of his hometown, and part of him thinks that it might just be a telemarketer, but when he sees that the area code is the one for this county, his county, his worries lower slightly.

This might actually be someone that knows him.

“Hello?” he’s already counting down the seconds for this call to turn into a mistake.

“Hey, is this Mingyu?” the voice is low. Soft and peppery. He doesn’t recognize it at all.

And after having to relive his regrettable freshman year during lunch, he’s not ready to openly disclose his identity to unknown numbers, “It honestly depends on who’s asking right now.”

A scoff, rude, but Mingyu supposes that he’s sounding quite rude as well, “I’m asking out of courtesy.” He’s not used to hearing such a standoffish demeanor during an introductory phone call, “I got your number from Junhui because I need to have a word with you. I’d much rather do it in person, but we’re both working adults, so…”

“Who is this?” If they know Jun, then it might not be a far stretch that Mingyu knows them.

And he should have seen it coming—that today’s just not a day that’ll pan out smoothly,—, but up until the last syllable, he hopes that the person on the line is announcing that he won the lottery he didn’t enter.

“I’m Minghao’s roommate, Seungcheol.”
Chapter 71

“Oh.”

Seungcheol.

He knew that the day would come. He would have to confront- fight- argue- no, he would have to *talk* to Seungcheol, he just didn’t think the day would literally come two days after he made that resolve. It seems like Seungcheol doesn’t really know what to say either. This is kind of painful. Mingyu isn’t scared, but the hairs on the back of his neck are coming to attention. His hands feel clammy and numb. There’s a little ball stuck in his throat.

“Are you working right now?”

“I’m-” does he make an excuse, or does he tell the truth. Why should he have to lie? “I just got out.”

“Good.” Seungcheol’s voice is punctual and firm, “I wanted to talk with you in person before the banquet.”

Since when was ‘the dinner’ a ‘banquet’ those are two very different things. Calling it a banquet makes it sound so formal and prestigious. The way Minghao made it out to sound seemed like it was much more casual, “I’m actually kind of busy-”

“I know. Make time.”

Wow. This man’s audacity. It’s actually getting on Mingyu’s nerves. He doesn’t have time to waste going toe-to-toe with Minghao’s hot roommate. Not today, Seungcheol. Not. Today, “Y’know, I would, but I really can’t today. I have a lot of things to do before the dinner and-”

“Mingyu.” Oh no, it’s that accusatory parental tone, “If I honestly and seriously tell Minghao not to go,” is this a threat, “he won’t go.” It *was* a threat. That’s low, Seungcheol, that’s *real* low, “I don’t want to resort to that.”

And Mingyu doesn’t want him to have to resort to that either.

Begrudgingly, he agrees to meet with Seungcheol after taking his car to the cleaners. Scrubby’s, the car cleaning business, is as busy as he expected it to be. It should only be an hour wait time for him to get in and out and in the meantime, he’ll have a chat with Seungcheol and go shopping for something moderately appropriate to wear. If he’s on a time crunch, he only needs to purchase a red button-up, but he’d rather have something new and stylish especially in front of Minghao and all his well-dressed peers.

Seungcheol pulls up into the vast and vacant parking lot in his shiny, black BMW and motions for him to get in. Mingyu doesn’t know why he agrees without question, but without anywhere else to go he slides into the passenger seat and shuts the door, “Suit shopping?” he pulls out of the parking space and heads for the main road. Mingyu’s head turns as JCPenny’s coasts by his window and he stops nodding, “You seem tense, Mingyu.”

This is pathetic.
He shakes out his shoulders and relaxes into the seat. Seungcheol isn’t going to take him out to pasture and put a bullet in his head, right? Probably not. There’s only so much he can do to Mingyu, but it’s been a long-ass day and all Mingyu wants to do is curl up in bed for a couple hours. He’s exhausted with all the surprises and internal conflict, “You’ve essentially kidnapped me, so, yeah.” Real smooth, Mingyu.

It’s not that Seungcheol is actually that scary, but he has this dominant aura around him. His unique looks are one thing, but everything from the way he speaks to the way he drives screams ‘alpha male’ and Mingyu’s not too excited about that. He doesn’t like people who act all brave and macho and didn’t think that Seungcheol would be the type, “Yeah, I have. So, where were you planning to go? Cavalier’s Showroom is a pretty good place for formal wear, but Undone has a better tie and accessory selection.”

“I just wanted to go to JCPenny’s and-”

“JCPenny’s is for chumps. You’re not going to find anything that’ll impress at JCPenny’s.” If he tried really hard he could have probably found something to impress at JCPenny’s. Seungcheol’s already driving through uptown, a place where his car fits in. It still bugs him that Seungcheol seems like he’s very well to do, comes from money, has a stable career and grownup hobby, but still wants to have a scrappy roommate like Minghao. It doesn’t make sense, “Let’s go to Valentino Wednesday.” That sounds like a terrible porno name, “Their suits are usually pretty straightforward.”

“Sure, whatever, I have less than an hour.” If it was anyone else, he’d be nice and thankful for the ride, but he doesn’t want to see Seungcheol under these circumstances. He’d much rather Minghao be there- be here for their first meeting.

Seungcheol pulls into a parking space outside of the posh and prim storefront, opening his door, getting out, and waiting for Mingyu to follow before he locks the car with the remote in his pocket. The inside of the store is minimalist and bright. A crystal chandelier hangs from the ceiling, several bare lightbulbs dangle around the store for additional lighting. He doesn’t know how to feel about the combination of wicker baskets and cement vases, but he supposes they aren’t selling interior design, they’re selling suits.

“How can I help you gentlemen?” the showroom worker smiles at them. Her hair is tied in a neat ponytail and her suit looks very nice. The collar clips are shaped like two, rose-gold angel wings, “Special occasion? Wedding? Party?”

Seungcheol speaks up for him, “Banquet. The dress code is black, red, and silver. He wants to look nice.” He wants to turn around and look annoyed and tell Seungcheol he can speak for himself, but when he turns and sees how warm his smile is towards the store clerk, he holds his tongue. It shouldn’t be legal to look that good and be such an asshole, but he has to remember that this is Minghao’s roommate—and friend—and so far Minghao’s been a very good judge of people. However, with how cold Seungcheol’s been treating him, he’s second guessing it.

“Ooh, banquet. Fancy.” She laughs a bright laugh, clearly tickled by Seungcheol’s attention, “We have several suits that fit that color criterion, but were you looking for anything in specific.”

“Mostly black, only a little red.” Why? Why only a little red? Jun’s wearing a lot of red. Minghao’s not wearing any. Wasn’t the idea to match with their dates? “Do you have a black belt with a silver buckle?” It takes Mingyu a moment to realize that the question is for him and he nods slowly, too distracted by the puzzle in front of him, “Yeah, mostly black. No velvet. No vest needed. Matte Italian or Australian wool with satin or silk lining.”

She nods. Mingyu doesn’t even know what those words mean. There’s more than one type of
wool? The woman asks for a moment to prepare a display and excuses herself after jotting down Seungcheol’s criteria.

“So, Mingyu,” stop talking, please, “tell me about yourself.”

“Uh...”

“You’re right, you don’t need to tell me much.” He holds his hands behind his back, taking a few steps over to look into a glass box with colorful cufflinks on display in rows of five. How much does Seungcheol know and—more importantly—what does he want to know, “So, let’s start easy. Just tell me what Minghao doesn’t know.”

“That’s not really any of your business.” Mingyu’s feeling bold. On one hand, he knows that Seungcheol probably means well. On the other hand, anything between him and Minghao should be private and everyone else (namely two enthusiastic friends of theirs) should keep their noses out of it. It’s not great timing that he’s choosing now to put his foot down, but he supposes it’s as good a time as any.

“Humor me.” His eyelashes cast long, thick shadows over his eyes, emphasizing them in such a way that Mingyu can’t quite put his finger on, “What was your graduating GPA?”

What does his GPA have to do with anything? “3.87.” is that high enough? Seungcheol shakes his head and chuckles in disbelief, but why?

“Your degree?”

“Doctor’s in Physical Therapy from UC San Francisco.”

Seungcheol nods a couple times, still not looking at him, “And what do your parents do?”

“My mom does management for a pharmaceutical company and my dad’s retired, but he did business marketing for many years.”

“And did they treat you well?”

He thinks that question is supposed to raise some color of flag, “Yes. They’re doting, but kind and respected my opinions growing up. They just wanted what was best for me.”

And Seungcheol continues nodding and humming. Mingyu doesn’t like to be judged. He doesn’t like to be under inspection or scrutinized, “My parents were the same.” Is that some shitty attempt to find common ground? It’s not working.

“What’s the real reason you wanted to speak with me, Seungcheol?”

He instantly feels something shift in the mood, like he’s set off an alarm in the back of his head telling him to run, that this was a mistake, and that he should abort mission. He refuses to. For Minghao, he refuses to. Seungcheol’s tongue pokes into his gums and he picks his words carefully, “Who are you to think that you can date Minghao Xu?”

He doesn’t expect the following words to come out of his mouth, but he’s had enough strenuous mind games, “Well, who are you to tell me I can’t?”

He does expect a lot of things to follow that remark; Seungcheol pulling out a switchblade and shiving him in the gut or for the older man to lunge at him and snap his neck in the blink of an eye with his super-secret ninja training, just to name a few. But Seungcheol just cracks a smile, like he’s
accepting a challenge, “I’m not saying you can’t.” he stretches out his neck and cracks his knuckles, maybe he really will punch Mingyu in the face, “I’m just a roommate trying to look out for him.” It’s starting to sound like he’s the one that wants to date Minghao.

“Right, well, you’re not the only one who is allowed to do that.”

The store clerk comes back then with a pep in her step. Mingyu and Seungcheol both turn their attention towards her, clearly sensing that she had come back at a tense moment, “Right this way.”

After walking them into the back of the shop where the fitting rooms and mirrors are, she introduces them to a number of suits that all fall into the category of black and expensive. They aren’t wedding-suit or high-end business expensive, but they’re still a good chunk of his monthly paycheck expensive and he isn’t so sure he’s willing to shell out that amount for a suit he’s probably only going to wear once. She explains them in detail, but Mingyu’s attention is on other things. It seems like Seungcheol’s listening, or at least he’s very convincing at bobbing his head along to her words. Leaving them to try on the suits and to help another customer that just walked in, Mingyu’s stranded with Seungcheol again.

He tries his best to ignore the man’s overbearing physical presence and try on the outfits as quickly as he can. Time waits for no one and he still has to get back to his apartment and style his hair. If Seungcheol wants to talk amongst himself, then fine, but Mingyu has his own set of stressors today and there’s no space for a grumpy, possessive roommate.

“Hey, look, Mingyu.” Suddenly deciding to speak to him while he’s halfway into a pair of slacks is not opportune even if he’s hiding behind a curtain, “I’m sorry if I came off a little brash, but I really am just looking out for Minghao. Try to understand.” Mingyu’s not in the mood, “I just want him to be okay and I never really know if he’s truly okay or if he’s just a really good liar.” This suit is a little too tight under the armpits and he doesn’t have time to get it tailored. Time for the next one. He comes out to grab it and hang the ill-fitting one back up. Maybe strutting in front of Seungcheol in his boxers will be enough to show him how much Mingyu doesn’t care, “Just seeing you suddenly become a crucial part of his daily routine makes me antsy.”

“And why is that?”

Seungcheol sighs from outside the curtain, “We had a funeral to attend to in early August.” Mingyu stops after pulling the jacket on, freezing in the dressing room to better hear his words and connect the dots from Minghao’s Instagram to real life, “His mother passed away. They weren’t particularly close, but it was still stressful and Minghao shouldered so much during the months leading up to that point.” And he hates that his heart aches because of Seungcheol’s words. To lose someone like a mother must have been hard even if they weren’t close. It would also explain Minghao’s lock-jawed behavior when they first met. Pain makes people cranky, pain in the heart makes people irrational, “Her passing wasn’t welcomed, but it also felt like relief—one less thing he had to stress over. I’m sure you’ve heard it from the others as well, but the last few years have been rough on Minghao. It’s never just one thing, one event, one bad day, but he’s never been very lucky. Regretfully, I had to leave for a preplanned trip right after that, but Cacahuate, Jun, and Soonyoung were enough support for him. I thought it would be okay.” He hears Seungcheol rustle around, “But when I got back from my trip, he started talking about you a lot. He seemed brighter, happier…”

“What’s the problem with that?” He understands it a bit better now, Seungcheol’s defensive behavior. He’s a protector before he is a roommate; a guardian and gatekeeper.

A substitute.
“Because Minghao isn’t the type to just move on from things. He stews and overanalyzes and thinks and thinks and thinks, but when it came to you he never really did much thinking until after he’d spoken. You just appeared out of thin air, out of the blue, and that’s why I’m interrogating you.” there’s a soft thud when Seungcheol leans his head against the wall, “I just want to make sure that your relationship or whatever this is… I just want to make sure that it’s in earnest from both ends and not just formed out of convenience because someone’s trying to fill an emotional void.” Mingyu fiddles with the button between his fingers, carving into its grooves with his trimmed fingernails. He feels like Seungcheol’s words should have given him a lot to think about, and maybe it’s his stubbornness speaking, but none of his words deter him. His feelings towards Minghao are genuine. He knows that much. Minghao’s feeling towards him- no, they aren’t fake either. He’s sure of that much, “And stop trying to steal our dog.”

“Cacahuate loves you more than Minghao and I combined.” He appreciated Seungcheol’s effort to try and lighten the mood, so he plays along, “I don’t have a chance.” He’d rather not fight with him.

The air falls quiet and awkward; stiff and stuffy. Mingyu emerges from the fitting room to give himself a onceover in the mirror. He doesn’t look half bad. The interior lining is a paisley pattern printed on red silk, luxurious and soft. It’s like it was made just for him, “It looks good.” Mingyu fixes the collar and straightens up the lapels. It’s somehow strange to see himself in a black suit with his pastel, clinic button-up underneath. At least he knows he has a clean, pressed black one at home. He doesn’t know why Seungcheol looks so conflicted in his reflection. Only half his attention is on Mingyu, the other half is off thinking about something else.

In the end, Mingyu returns to the drawing board. He’s going to try on a couple more suits before picking just one, plus he has a little time left. Seungcheol excuses himself to take a call or something, Mingyu doesn’t really care.

So, now what?

He’s received another piece of the puzzle that is Minghao Xu and this was a deep, heavy, lead-filled piece. So why haven’t his opinions changed? His outlook hasn’t changed. Nothing has changed despite what he guesses was Seungcheol’s attempt at showing him a potential setback before it happened. So what if Minghao’s all shattered and broken inside? His jagged, pokey glass shards haven’t decommissioned him yet. It doesn’t matter if Mingyu will eventually have to carefully pick those pieces up and glue them back together, dicing up his fingers, embedding in them fragments that will eventually scab over.

He has an equal number of invisible wounds that Minghao has somehow bandaged without him realizing.

Their history is written, but their futures are blank slates. The past is meant to fade, it has to fade in order to give the spotlight to new mornings filled with the smell of coffee and dewy grass and nights spent with their fingers curled together. It’s riddled with conversations about food and culture and friends and fun. It’s where Mingyu wants to be right now; not shopping for a suit, not styling his hair, not waiting for some minimum-wage warrior to vacuum every last fleck of glitter out of his car. It’s next to Minghao.

When he goes to the checkout, having selected the suit he knew he would pick from the second he tried it on, Seungcheol’s already waiting at the door. He winces a little bit when he inserts his card into the chip reader. It might not be a huge amount, but he’s not used to spending so much. It
makes him want to know what kind of upbringing Seungcheol had in order for him to frequent shops like this and request from their preexisting selection like he was ordering off a restaurant’s menu.

They meander slowly back to Seungcheol’s car, Mingyu with his new suit folded over in his lap, almost like a barrier between him and the driver’s keen gaze. They barely converse on the way back to Scrubby’s. He supposes it’s because Seungcheol has delivered his warning and has promptly run out of dialogue options, but he’s not about to let his guard down. They talk a little about Cacahuate, a little about Jun and Soonyoung, but not about any information that he didn’t already know.

When Minghao is brought up again, it seems like a little spice has returned to Seungcheol’s words. Instead of it being centered around how undeserving Mingyu is of Minghao, it’s praise so Mingyu can devalue himself on his own. He’s pretty sure that’s not the intent, but listening to all of Minghao’s extensive acts of selflessness throughout the years is a little eye-opening. He thought it just ended at volunteering at the animal shelter and giving money to the homeless, but Minghao’s organized soup kitchens and worked with Big Brothers Big Sisters of America in the past. He’s sold photographs and paintings for charity and finished out his last year of university with a 4.0, graduating with an overall GPA of, you guessed it, 3.87.

And once they’re sitting in the parking lot of Scrubby’s and Mingyu has thanked Seungcheol for the ride and company, despite being less thrilled about the latter, he gains the confidence to ask about the living arrangement. To satisfy his curiosity, Seungcheol explains that he knew about Minghao back in high school since he was president of Riverside’s performing arts club and captain of their tennis team, but they hadn’t officially met until Jun introduced them when Minghao moved back to town.

Seungcheol’s parents owned the apartment complex in uptown and when they passed, he inherited all of it and because he felt so lonely, he thought it would be unsafe for him to live alone—whatever that meant. So, he offered the second bedroom to Minghao for an incredibly low rent—really just utilities—and the rest was history. Wonwoo wasn’t wrong about Seungcheol’s emotional dependence on Minghao, that’s for sure.

“He has my loyalty, he has my trust, and if you want me to summarize, he has my unconditional love.” Seungcheol rubs his hands together, probably not expecting those words to come out of his own mouth just then, “And I know he’s not a child, but if he needs a parent, I’m going to be the one to stand up for him and make sure he’s okay.”

“Yeah, but you can’t monopolize that position.” Sure, fighting might make him want to cry, but it’s not like Mingyu’s taking Minghao away from Seungcheol. Minghao’s attention isn’t a pie. It’s then that he comes to a new revelation; since when did he feel worthy of it? When did he go from thinking that Minghao would never want to see him to knowing that Minghao thinks of him often and goes out of his way to not involve Mingyu in his messy past? To the Minghao who has suffered a lot and to the Mingyu who wishes he could have been there, these words aren’t easy to say, “If you think that you’re the only one who can cherish him, then I’m sorry, but I’ll have to challenge you on that.”

He doesn’t expect Seungcheol to smile afterwards.

He nods knowingly, wisely like he’s timeless before gesturing for Mingyu to get out of the car, but before he shuts the door, Seungcheol calls him back to an open window. At that point, Mingyu expects an earful, a rant, anything but the little, rectangular box he’s presented with.

“Thank you for taking care of him.”
Chapter 72

Mingyu is proud to announce that he did *not* spend over an hour mussing up his hair.

Of course, he didn’t really *have* an hour to play with his hair even though he got out of work early. Seungcheol ate up a lot of his time. By the time he got home, it was already 3:00. He still had to shower and change before taking the drive across town to the studio, but now that he’s here, he’s suddenly full of nerves. Why does it feel so nostalgic?

Even though he’s sat outside in his car, he can see a lot of things. The parking spaces for the permanent instructors are vacant while the rotational ones are filled. Sure, he’s early, but he’s not *that* early. Wonwoo and Soonyoung texted saying they were on their way five minutes ago and Jun said he was only ten minutes away, but there’s no news from Minghao. He must not have his phone with him. Mingyu could have afforded another few minutes fixing himself up nicely, but he’ll spend the last few minutes making sure that his car is definitely spic and span.

Seungcheol’s gift sits unopened in his cup holder. He ought to put it in the glove compartment; it’s rude to have gifts around when you have guests. On a whim, he opens it to peek at the contents. The original plan was to wait until after the dinner when he had time to write a predisposed thank you text, but he supposes that the man had intention giving him the box then and there. Inside, nestled in a black velvet pillow sits a sterling silver chain bracelet with a very thin red ribbon braided through the links. On the clasp sits encrusted a princess-cut, red topaz—or at least that’s what it says on the information card tucked inside. A short note from Seungcheol is written on the back:

‘In return for the flowers.’

Cryptic much? In Mingyu’s head, the flowers don’t warrant a gift as extravagant as this. Maybe Seungcheol just wants to bury him in debt. Regardless, Mingyu puts it on. Like the suit, it fits perfectly. It’s not a ton of red, but it pops against the black. However, he knows that his jacket sleeve will probably hide it from sight. In case Jun has something to say about his lack of matchy-matchy red, he managed to find a red button-up in the back of his closet, unworn and purchased for a Christmas plan that fell through several years ago.

The first car to pull up is Jun’s. He looks the same as he did in the photo, staying true to what he said he would wear. The red suit jacket is folded over his arm. He has a neat and intricate collar clip that lays thin chains over his tie. Jun’s hair is styled up and away from his forehead, framing his features nicely.

Mingyu gets out of the car as he approaches the entrance, stopping him before he goes in.

“Well, look who cleans up nicely.” Jun gives him a onceover before ushering him into the studio and out of the cold. The students who are around pay him compliments and Vernon gives him a thumbs-up from the front desk, mentioning something about Yixing having already left several hours ago. The plan is to sit around for a bit before everyone arrives and by everyone he means three more people.

Idle conversation with Jun is nice. The first couple sentences are Jun apologizing for giving Seungcheol Mingyu’s number unannounced. He hadn’t thought too much about it at the time, but the man seemed very serious, so Jun thought it was an emergency or something and handed the number over without question. He laughs when Mingyu tells him about what transpired during the last few hours.
“That definitely sounds like something Seungcheol would do in which case I forgive you for not having a full-body red suit.” Jun’s laughter is contagious, or maybe it’s just because Soonyoung pushes both the glass doors open with such gusto that they clang against the windows and everyone in the hallway collectively yells at him.

He’s platinum blond.

And not wearing a suit.

Soonyoung is wearing something closer to ‘biker-chic’ than he is to ‘banquet-classic’. Over a black-on-black block-fabric shirt, is a bright red leather jacket with more clasps and zippers than Mingyu cares to count. He can’t even tell what kind of fabric his pants are made out of, but his legs look great. A long earring dangles from his left lobe and several rings band across his fingers, but they’re all quite simple. Aside from his classy shoes, the rest of him looks more ready to go on stage than he is to sit at a formal event.

His date, on the other hand, appears to be on his way to a business meeting.

Wonwoo stuck with the dress code. Black suit, deep red button-up. If Mingyu went to change, they could match quite well, but when Wonwoo steps into the angled spotlights of the lobby, they give slight reflection to the stripes on his jacket. The stripes give off a silvery, glittery light when hit correctly, complimenting the sheen of his polished shoes. His pants are standard slacks, quite possibly the same ones he wore for Halloween because he’s picking at little strands of leftover fur. Mingyu’s more surprised that he and Soonyoung aren’t wearing the exact same thing.

One of the younger students screams at Soonyoung and runs to tackle him on his way out to his car. Soonyoung, in turn, puts the kid in a headlock and pushes him out the door, almost hitting Wonwoo in the process, “You’re lucky you’re hot!” he hollers before shaking a fist and sprinting through the parking lot. Several other students flow out of the hallway, a class must’ve just gotten out.

The man Mingyu recognizes as Yugyeom tails the teens out into the lobby and waves them off. He hobbles over to the front desk and gives an exaggerated flop over the counter. Vernon moves his DonutBoo coffee out of the way before it’s knocked over, “What’s the next class?”

Vernon looks at the schedule book on his desk, “Minghao’s 4:30. Intermediate.”

Yugyeom lets out the biggest moan before slinking away with his arms swinging wildly in the air. From somewhere behind the wall, Mingyu hears, “BamBam, I’ll pay you $50 to take the 4:30.”

His thoughts are interrupted by a hard hand slapping him on the butt, “Lookin’ good, Mango!” Soonyoung is grinning from ear-to-ear, cheeks pushing up the curve of his eyes.

“Thanks.” That actually hurt. Soonyoung is strong, “Not so bad yourself, but I thought this was a formal event.”

“I’ll change my shirt when I get there.” Soonyoung looks excited, he can’t stop moving his feet.

Wonwoo throws an arm around his shoulder, trying to hold him still, “Soon thinks button-ups are too stuffy for car rides.”

“They’re the worst. I don’t know how you guys wear them to work every day.” He pulls Jun over from his position watching their antics from the sidelines, “You look comfortable though.”
Jun shrugs, “I used to dress like this a lot when I had recitals back home.” Sometimes Mingyu forgets about Jun’s pretty accent and being reminded is such a welcome experience, “I kind of miss wearing formal clothes. I’m surprised this stuff still fits.” He’s likely filled out a little bit since then as his shirt gets pulled taut over his chest when he moves his arms.

“Where’s Minghao? We’re going to be late.” The question Wonwoo asks is directed at Mingyu because for some reason it is expected that Mingyu should know his whereabouts.

“I don’t know. He hasn’t messaged me.”

“He went home to change around 3.” Soonyoung glances between them, “And he usually doesn’t take that long.”

“Maybe Seungcheol’s talking his ear off, too.” Jun snickers, elbowing Mingyu in the side and earning an inquisitive look from the couple, “I’ll tell him to hurry up.”

As Jun excuses himself to go outside and make the call, Mingyu decides that he’s going to use the bathroom before they have to leave and reminds Wonwoo and Soonyoung to relieve themselves as well. They probably won’t have time to make pit stops on the way there. The two brush him off.

“I’m a big boy. I went to the bathroom before we left home.”

Yeah, okay, Soonyoung. Just don’t piss your pants when we’re on the highway.

Mingyu stands in front of the bathroom mirror, suddenly aware of all the little flaws in his skin and the couple white hairs that are making their debut on the crown of his head. Maybe it’s just the studio’s lighting that’s bringing out those imperfections or maybe it’s his nerves. Everyone has said that he looks nice, even Seungcheol, but the one person who hasn’t seen him yet might not think so—Minghao will say he looks nice because he has good manners. He’ll probably mean it, too, but Mingyu can’t stop fiddling with his fringe, pushing it up and combing it into place with shaky fingers. What is this, prom?

When he comes out of the restroom, his eyes are pointed at the ground. He’s mentally going over the agenda for the night. He’s counting how many hours he has to make a fool of himself. And he’s coming to realize that there are four pairs of black shoes in front of him. Mingyu looks up, following the newest addition’s shoes, up his black-slacked legs, over his high-waisted belt, past his tucked in and baggy pinstriped dress shirt, and to his very cute and handsome face. He’s positively radiant.

“Oh, hey, Minghao.”

Upon hearing his name, Minghao’s attention snaps to Mingyu’s face. His mouth opens to speak, but no words come out. He just looks at him with his lips slightly parted and his suit jacket bundled up in his hands until Wonwoo and Soonyoung burst into laughter, Soonyoung bumping Minghao off balance with his hip. He finally blinks and cracks a sly smile, “Hey, Mingyu. Sorry I’m late. I got caught up in traffic.”

Is it humanly possible to look this nice in such simple clothes?

Mingyu doesn’t know why he stopped at Minghao’s face, but he only notices that his hair is vibrantly yellow now. When Minghao sees that Mingyu has noticed, he takes a step away and self-consciously combs a hand through it. He’ll later find out that Minghao’s trying to lighten it for full-dye in preparation for the final competition and that his cheesy blond is just the first step.
“I wanted to wear a hat, but the roomie told me I wasn’t allowed to leave the house if I did.”

“Don’t worry about it, Hao.” Soonyoung sings into the air as he starts guiding everyone out of the building, “It looks good! And now we match!”

“Oh god, it *does* look horrible.” He teases and earns a shove.

As he pulls up the rear of their little pack of friends, Mingyu just can’t take his eyes off of him.

Minghao just looks *that* nice tonight.
Chapter 73

Seeing all of their friends usher Minghao into the front seat even though it’s Wonwoo that gets carsick and Jun who is his date is a little endearing.

It’s a unanimous decision that the pinstriped dancer will be his copilot with the shoddy excuse that ‘Minghao’s been there a bunch of times’ even though everyone knows that Minghao has been there fewer times than the rest of them. Mingyu wanted Minghao and Wonwoo to sit together to break the icy and thin wall between them, but he supposes that the diagonal distance from the passenger seat to the seat behind him isn’t that far. Soonyoung takes the middle while Jun takes the seat right-most seat with his arm propped up on the windowsill as they quickly get onto the freeway. The car is filled with the low hum of the radio, set quiet as to keep the floor open for conversation, but now it’s only serving as white noise.

Wonwoo wasn’t lying when he said that Soonyoung wouldn’t keep still.

The grand smile hasn’t left his face for a second ever since Mingyu saw him in the lobby and, despite the awkward silence in the car, it’s apparent that most of their attentions are on the blond and his vigilance once they’ve left their city. His eyes are darting around outside, looking at other cars and street signs until they get on the highway. Suddenly, he rapidly drums on the back of Minghao’s headrest making both him and a dozing-off Jun jump, “Guys, look! Cows!” Mingyu can almost hear the heart emojis in his voice.

Jun opens his eyes and nods sleepily, following tour-guide Soonyoung’s hand pointed at a green meadow. Minghao echoes quietly, “Wow, cows.” But he’s not upset or bothered by his friend’s energy. A soft smile plays on his lips when he looks outside. He sits up, “There’s a baby one-”

“Where?”

“Over there.” He pokes a finger into the glass. Mingyu has to fight the urge to look, “The little brown one over by the shed.” Wonwoo and Jun squint. Mingyu knows Jun needs glasses and regularly wears contacts to work, but Wonwoo isn’t wearing glasses today. While it isn’t his first time seeing the man without his rounded spectacles, he would also hope that he’s using contacts. Eventually, the two find the calf and help Soonyoung pinpoint it in the wide field of cows before they curve away from them.

It only takes another few minutes for Soonyoung’s attention to transfer to something else (it’s sheep) and excitedly coo about it. Mingyu appreciates that he’s working hard to fill the stiff air in the car, but he would also like Minghao and Wonwoo to talk. So far, the two that have talked the most to each other directly are Wonwoo and Jun and that’s just chatter about what might be on the menu tonight. Usually, it’s an open snack station and bar while everyone gets acquainted and says their welcomes. Dinner is served a bit after that, and towards the end of the three-course meal, they announce the award recipients. Everyone is free to hang out and mingle afterwards as the venue always hires a live DJ and the dancers inevitably have to show off.

“Can you talk about something else, Minghao and I haven’t eaten yet.” Soonyoung whines and smacks both his hands onto Jun and Wonwoo’s thighs.

“I told you to eat a snack before we left, but no.” Wonwoo rolls his eyes and Jun shakes his head, sighing.
“Why haven’t you eaten yet?” Mingyu asks. He doesn’t like it when people skip meals.

“We moved up a few of our classes today to ease the load on the other instructors who are covering for us.” Minghao is quick to explain, knowing that Mingyu might give them an earful before letting it go, “We’ve been teaching since 7,” he covers his mouth to yawn, “and we did eat. You had, like, five of Mingyu’s macarons, remember? And Vernon and Seungkwan brought us donuts and hoddeok and you demolished those.”

It’s not the healthiest breakfast and that barely counts as a meal in Mingyu’s book, but it’s better than not eating a single thing all day. Soonyoung whines a little bit, muttering something about being an active person who needs a lot of fuel. Luckily, Mingyu is always prepared and reaches over to the glove compartment to dig for his box of emergency granola bars, but it’s proving difficult since he’s starting to hit traffic. Minghao pulls his hand out of the way, holding it in the air for a second as he plucks out the shiny, green wrapper and tosses it to Soonyoung after warning him about crumbs. Mingyu retracts his hand back to the steering wheel. He has a feeling that if the other three weren’t in the car, he would be predisposed to holding Minghao’s hand the whole way there.

Wonwoo literally cups his hands together under Soonyoung’s chin as he inhales one of the two bars, offering the second to Minghao and Jun who both decline. Jun had eaten when he went home after his morning classes were said and done with and had a meal of plain toast because he forgot to buy any sort of spread. Who lives in a home completely void of condiments? No jam? No peanut butter? No butter? Still, it isn’t an ideal meal especially since it was just white bread. Mingyu feels the itch to feed his friends immediately, but they’re at least 40 minutes away from the next rest stop, so it’ll have to wait.

“What do I do with these crumbs?”

‘Eat them.’

“No thanks.”

“Launch them.” Wonwoo listens to Jun and winds down his window to sprinkle the oats out to treat the birds. It’d be unfortunate if those birds turned into roadkill. Mingyu would feel a little responsible for their demise.

Eventually, silence befalls the caravan again. Aside from occasional giggles in the backseat, no one is talking.

“Let Minghao put on some jams.” Soonyoung requests as he drums his hands on his knees restlessly. Wonwoo puts his hands over Soonyoung’s, stopping the incessant taps and linking their fingers together instead.

Minghao turns around in his seat to give the senior dance instructor a hard stare, “No.”

“Aww, c’mon, Hao.” Jun pats his hands on Minghao’s shoulders, straightening out his spine and facing him forward again, “Jams.”

“No.”

Mingyu glances in his rearview mirror, catching Wonwoo’s sorry gaze and nods towards Minghao in an encouraging way, “I’m sure you have good taste.” Wonwoo’s voice is a mumble at best, but Minghao hears him, dropping his eyes into his lap where his phone is sitting. It looks like he deliberates sharing his tunes, but Mingyu pulls over and helps connect his phone to the car’s Bluetooth. The only surprise seems to be coming from the backseat where Soonyoung tells Wonwoo
he owes him $20, the bet being that Minghao would have already registered his phone into Mingyu’s car by now.

Minghao’s music library is one of those things that Mingyu could have never predicted.

He associates Minghao with upbeat music with bass drops and a lot of synth, but here he is blasting some corny rock jingles from the early 2000’s. Of course, in between them sits a hodgepodge of unfamiliar songs in different languages, some classical music, some epic movie scores, some anime openings, some chillstep, some house, some 8-bit remixes; a little bit of everything. He can tell that with every old-school track that comes on shuffle, Minghao withholds his desire to skip it because while they are slightly embarrassing, Soonyoung is having the time of his life.

Mingyu finds himself smiling along with the cheese-ball lyrics and they finally get somewhere when he, Minghao, and Soonyoung start belting out lyrics to BBMak’s Back Here. Jun doesn’t know the words, but he hums along and Wonwoo bobs his head in rhythm with the beat. Mingyu knows his voice cracks during the high notes, but he’s rather impressed with how steady Soonyoung’s vocals are holding out. Minghao sings quietly; he’s not trying and a little shy with his volume, but his voice is crisp and clear. Very much karaoke and very much something Mingyu wants to hear in private.

When Toxic comes on, he hears a sigh, “We should have choreographed to this.” Soonyoung is wiggling his fingers in his lap akin to the way Minghao had done last night. Oh, last night. Let’s not think about that right now. Mingyu needs to be a safe driver.

“I did choreograph to this.” Jun crosses his arms.

“Yeah, last summer for a bunch of 10-year-olds. And you used the Britney version. I’m talkin’ the Blowsight cover.” Mingyu has no clue what he’s talking about, but Minghao turns down his volume as the others start talking.

“Won’t that be a little heavy on the rock?” Wonwoo asks.

Soonyoung just shrugs, “I’m sure Jihoon can remaster it. He’s got a surprising skillset, that kid.”

Sensing that this might bring them into hairy territory, Mingyu opts to divert the direction of the current topic, “Is there anything you guys can’t dance to?”

Something lights up in the backseat, “Well, one time, Minghao and I-”

“Here we go.” His copilot covers his eyes with his right hand.

“Don’t interrupt me.” Soonyoung smacks Minghao’s shoulder, “As I was saying, one time in college, Minghao and I thought that we could incorporate a basketball hoop into our choreo. I think at that time Minghao was thin enough to fit through one, so I went out of my way to get one from the thrift shop.” He’s already giggling. “We were doing several different pass ideas, but when it came time to actually run through it, Minghao got stuck. Jun had to get bolt cutters and we spent an hour trying to free him. They missed their afternoon classes.”

Mingyu laughs at the image of Minghao getting bent out of shape in the confines of a rusty basketball hoop. Noting the latter’s obvious pout, he tries to hide his smile and focus on driving again, but it’s Jun that picks up where Soonyoung left off, “One time, Minghao and I went to the corner store and we were arguing about a certain move for our beginning students. He was picking
out a drink and I was in another aisle getting chips, but he demoed why his dance move was superior and punched a granny in the face.”

“Are we really doing this right now?” Minghao turns around again, straining the seatbelt over his chest. Mingyu’s struggling to stifle his laughter, but he likes knowing that not everything Minghao does is perfect. It makes him more human, more relatable.

“Yes.” Soonyoung answers curtly, “One time Minghao thought he could kickflip parkour off of the studio’s old roof, but he slipped and broke the aircon unit.”

“And the wall.” Jun tags on to the end. Minghao’s already burying his head in shame, ears red as beets.

“And busted open his knee.” Even Wonwoo is adding to it now, that’s how Mingyu knows it’s safe. His coworker’s sensitivity to other people’s limits is what backs that, Wonwoo knows Minghao well, albeit from afar, and if they were entering the danger zone, he’d be the first to pull out.

“Were you okay?” he turns for just a second to look at Minghao who is doubled over in embarrassment. He reaches his right hand over to ruffle the back of Minghao’s hair that’s free of product and labor. It’s surprisingly soft considering that he’s bleached it this light. Expensive conditioner does wonders.

“Yeah.” His answer is short and unenthused, “Band-Aids and Neosporin for a week-”

“One time, Minghao saw a dog and waved to it so enthusiastically the dog owner thought he was waving to him. Later he got super bitter that Minghao wasn’t paying him any attention—he even offered his number!” Jun tickles Minghao’s sides from behind his seat and receives Minghao’s claws digging into his wrists in return, “Hao just sat there obliviously petting the dog. The guy held his hand out with his number for at least two minutes before he just shuffled the piece of paper back into his pocket and stormed away with his dog.”

“Minghao’s gotten asked out by our students. It was so awkward, but also very precious. They made him a big poster and everything.” Soonyoung pinches his cheek, freeing Jun and getting a sharp stare. A little less than half of Mingyu’s heart feels pity for his regret-filled passenger, but the majority of it feels giddy and happy hearing their friends spill the beans on these lighthearted fractions of Minghao’s past.

“You have, too.” His rebuttal lacks bite, filled only with vexation.

“You all have.” Wonwoo’s deep voice is somehow airy and light; he’s amused. He’s playing along. This is good! This is a step towards actually talking. Although, Mingyu’s not very sure if Minghao will want to talk much after all this teasing.

Soonyoung’s face must be tired from smiling this whole time, “One of our students tried to ask out Wonwoo, too- Oh my god, completely unrelated, but,” Jun perks up when Soonyoung hits him, “you should tell Mingyu the lake story.”

“What’s the lake story?” Mingyu’s curious because Wonwoo’s nose is already scrunched up in silent laughter; he’s having a howl, hands clutching at the metal rods of Mingyu’s headrest. He can tell that Minghao rues the idea of adding his friends to this carpool in the way his whole body deflates after giving Mingyu a tired gaze.

“Not the lake story.”
Minghao is probably about to combust with loathing, but the lake story isn’t all that bad.

Mingyu’s certainly heard of more embarrassing things, but the lake story is surely towards the more dreadful end of the spectrum. Jun tells the story like he’s rehearsed it a hundred times. It’s hard to believe that very few ears have heard this tale, “One time, Minghao and I went fishing with Vernon’s uncle out on this little rowboat in the middle of their family lake.” It was mid-September three years ago before anyone knew Vernon very well, but Seungkwan had invited them. Out on the boggy lake and cruising through the copious amounts of mosquitos, Jun mentions that it was the first time he ever went fishing and that everyone was having a good time.

Based on the subsequent ‘headache’ that Minghao’s starting to complain about, Mingyu can tell that the day did not end as bright and beautiful as it had started.

“Minghao was so frikken excited because he was the only one who hadn’t gotten a bite all day, so he stood up to try and get some leverage on his line since he finally caught something. Meanwhile, Seungkwan, Vernon, and I are trying to spread out and stop the boat from teetering, but the fish was so strong it pulled him overboard.” Jun has a hard time telling the punchline because his throat is full of giggles, so much so that even Soonyoung tries to calm him down by choking him, “He grabbed for anything to stabilize himself and ended up pulling down Vernon’s pants on his way into the water-”

“And guess who wasn’t wearing underwear that day.” Soonyoung interjects, knowing that Jun is too far gone.

“I swear,” the draws in a deep breath to try and stop his laughter, “he almost cried because Seungkwan was mortified.”

“And Minghao couldn’t get back into the boat, so he had to swim all the way back to shore with a fishing rod in hand.” The platinum blond pats Minghao on the back, “When he got back to the bank, Vernon’s uncle was already there laughing at them, but Minghao tried to explain what happened and his fishing rod swatted the uncle’s prized bucket hat into the lake.”

Minghao slaps Soonyoung’s hand away. For a moment, Mingyu thinks that he’s mad, but when he sneaks a peep, the man has a wide smile on his face, “Why y’all gotta do me dirty? What did I do to deserve this?”

Jun finally catches his breath to conclude the story, “So, Minghao felt so bad that he bought everyone dinner. The end.”

“I’ve always meant to ask,” Wonwoo pipes up, “Did you ever get the fish?”

“Yes,” the black-haired man points a finger matter-of-factly, answering for Minghao, “amazingly enough, he held onto the rod the whole time and got a fish the size of my forearm.”

Minghao looks Mingyu in the eyes, distracting him from the road for just a second, “One time, I tricked Soonyoung into eating a jalapeño and he cried.” Mingyu chuckles as he turns back to the road, but Minghao grabs his right forearm for emphasis as if his straight face wasn’t enough, “A jalapeño, Mingyu, not even a bird’s eye or a ghost pepper. A jalapeño. Seeded. Deveined-”

“Hey, one time, Minghao realized that I have so many more embarrassing stories about him than he does about me, so he decided to give up while he still had a chance.” He crosses his arms
over his chest, flopping back into his seat, knocking into both Jun and Wonwoo with his shoulders, “And I’ll admit that I cried. I can’t eat spicy food. And I, for one, relish in my embarrassment.”

“Hey, kids, no fighting.” His boyfriend hums, teeth still showing in his grin.

Because Minghao rolls his eyes and resumes staring out the window, it’s Jun that takes the initiative to speak up against the chief blackmail holder, “One time, our studio went out to a wildlife reserve in Canada to study animal movements for a big preservation campaign we were participating in. This deer kept following Soonyoung to the point where he could reach out and pet it. He was so excited that he legitimately believed he could talk to animals since it tailed him everywhere.” Soonyoung puts Jun in a headlock and his next words are choked out, “It turns out the deer just wanted the almonds in his butt pocket.”

Wonwoo tries to pry Jun free, “A giant bird pooped on him later that day.”

“And a goose attacked him for existing.”

“And, one time, Junhui Wen learned how to shut his fucking mouth.” He pushes both of the taller men off, “And I can totally talk to animals, thank you very much.”

“Ooh,” Jun taunts, “onto full names now, are we?”

Mingyu decides to intervene before all his passengers murder each other. He needs to level the playing field, “Tell us an embarrassing story about Wonwoo.”

Wonwoo gives him the most betrayed face he’s ever seen. He’s pretty sure if he wasn’t driving that the senior PT would have strangled him with a hidden cord like they do in the movies, wrapping it tight around his throat and choking him against his headrest. Soonyoung lets Jun go and meets Mingyu’s eyes in the rearview mirror, “One time, Wonwoo and I were in a geology lecture hall and we were taking a test—"

“Don’t you dare—"

“and he really had to sneeze, but it was dead quiet.” Soonyoung’s eyes say mischief, “And I’m over here panicking because I’m getting C for every other answer since all these rocks look like rocks and all of a sudden, Wonwoo honks a giant grandpa sneeze and rips a fart at the same time.” Everyone’s laughing. Minghao’s tearing up. Jun’s clapping like a seal. Mingyu can barely see the road. Wonwoo’s hiding his face in shame.

“I want a divorce.”

“We’re not even married yet.”

“Well, one time, Soonyoung got incredibly intoxicated during a party senior year and took a piss at a children’s park during Sunday school hours. He’s lucky he only got written up for public indecency.”

“Oh, as if that doesn’t happen to everyone.”

“No, Soon, it doesn’t happen to everyone.”

The two start arguing, bickering, poking at each other, “Hey- hey, don’t make me turn this car around.” Minghao shushes him, putting a warm hand on his shoulder, telling him they should just let the two murder each other so they won’t have to worry about any more embarrassing tales escaping the confines of this car, “I quite like hearing funny tales about you.” Mingyu playfully pinches at
Minghao’s neck, making him scrunch up his shoulders and shirk away, hands grasping for his digits to stop them. If he had to pick, he’d say that Minghao’s laughter is his favorite.

“How about an embarrassing story about you, then?” Oh, he didn’t think that Minghao would be bitter, “It’s only fair. They know the least about you, so spill us some tea, oh perfect Mingyu.” That’s enough to call Soonyoung and Wonwoo’s attention back to the front and pull them away from their sissy-slapping fight.

“Yes, perfect Mingyu.” He leans forward to rest his arms on their seats, “Spill us some fucking tea.” He doesn’t know how someone can curse so cutely, but if anyone can do it, it’s Soonyoung.

He seriously has to think.

This takes more thinking than the time Minghao asked him about weird food combinations because Mingyu isn’t the type to do embarrassing things. He’s generally very careful and the only times he ever feels flustered or embarrassed are when he does something silly or clumsy in front of people he likes. He has to dig. Minghao wants a good story, he’s going to have to delve into repressed memories, “One time,” it’s like the whole car collectively leans in to hear his words, “I was up really late writing an essay for my GE lit class. It was due before 8am, so, naturally, I forgot about it until, like 2am. And my friend keeps coming in and out of my room with stale KFC and beer—don’t ask, it was a Tuesday—and he kept asking me to drink. So, I did, but I forgot that I was taking antibiotics for an ear infection and got really bad nausea by the time it was 5am. In the end, I rushed through my paper and submitted it online without proofreading it.”

“Oh, wow. How embarrassing.” Minghao’s monotone voice says he’s not impressed.

“You didn’t let me finish,” Mingyu shoves him gently, “I crashed after that and skipped my morning classes, but I woke up around noon and reread the paper. It was fine, but I never changed the filename or any of my placeholders. So, I sent my professor, Dr. St Marcos a paper with his name written in as ‘Dr. StaleMemes’, titled as ‘I’d Rather Stick My Dick In The Garbage Disposal’, and the file named ‘assKAJHSFgdkjal_Kim_Mingyu’.”

“That’s pretty bad for a nerd like you.” Minghao’s not laughing, but he is smiling and shaking his head and that’s good enough. Soonyoung nods and gives him the seal of approval. Jun and Wonwoo agree that his story was the most cringe-worthy of all of them more so than it was hilarious, “What score did you get?”

“69.” He gets slapped so quickly, he doesn’t know who hit him, but it wasn’t hard, “No, I got a 94.”

“Lame.”

“Extra lame.” Minghao crosses his arms, “I would have given you an F.”

Mingyu jabs his fingers under Minghao’s ribs, making him jump and shuffle closer to his door, trying to avoid the hands before grabbing his wrist and slamming it into the console. He’s not going to just give up. Minghao’s so damn ticklish, he’s going to expose him, but Minghao doesn’t go down without a fight and he knows there’s only one way to stop Mingyu. He pins his hand to the console, palm flush against the back of Mingyu’s hand, but Mingyu struggles and pulls free, ready to fight until Minghao has to use both hands to hold him down.

“Just hold hands already, geez.” Jun rolls his eyes and shakes his head. As if on instinct, Minghao and Mingyu’s hands snap back to their original positions; Mingyu’s on the wheel and
Minghao’s in his lap.

They drive on for a while in rigid positions, making sure that they stay confined to their bubbles of proper car etiquette. Keeping their hands to themselves, eyes tagging along. Eventually, the giggles and babble from the backseat die down and Soonyoung conks out on Wonwoo’s shoulder with Jun leaning on his, eyes busy on his phone. Minghao turns around to toss his jacket onto the other blond’s lap to keep him warm.

“You can nap. We still have, like, thirty minutes before we get there.” They’re backed up in slow traffic now. They won’t be late, but the tedious wait is making them all tired. Mingyu’s using this precious time to look at all the little details of Minghao’s outfit. Wearing a silver-pinstriped dress shirt over a black turtleneck must be keeping him warm, but he usually dresses in layers anyway.

Minghao shakes his head, “I’ll keep you company.” He yawns and rubs his eyes and rolls up his sleeves to his elbows. That’s when Mingyu catches a glimpse of silver chain around Minghao’s left wrist. Through it runs a thin red ribbon, on the clasp sits nestled a red gem, “Soon usually doesn’t sleep in the car, but I guess spilling gallons of beans is extra exhausting, isn’t it?” Mingyu catches the aforementioned man sneak a small smile in the mirror.

“Nice bracelet.”

His fingers tease at the metal, “Thanks. The roomie gave it to me a couple days ago. It was kind of random since we usually don’t do gifts,” Mingyu decides to keep his hidden for now, “and he insisted on dropping me off today, hence why I was late. What’s the point of having a sports car if you’re going to perpetually drive under the speed limit?”

“Maybe he only drives slow when he’s got precious cargo.”

“What am I? A newborn?” Minghao shakes his head, but Mingyu doesn’t recall Seungcheol driving particularly slow during their impromptu excursion earlier in the day, “Cacahuate wasn’t even in the car - oh, and he lint-rolled me, head-to-toe.”

“Aw, no Huatito hair for good luck?” He’ll admit it, he’s not-so-discretely sneaking glances. Everything from Minghao’s earrings, to the bands over his fingers, to his belt buckle looks meticulously chosen.

“Do I need luck today? I’m not planning on bringing home any trophies. As long as my hair doesn’t catch on fire, I think we’re in the clear.” He tucks his fringe behind his ear, combing it into place using his faint reflection in the window, before turning back to look at Mingyu, “Are you ready to suffer for three hours?”

“It can’t be that bad.” The worst part so far has been the snail-paced traffic every time they pass through a town since it’s rush hour, “Besides, you’re keeping me company, aren’t you?” Minghao hums some sort of agreement as Mingyu can feel Wonwoo’s knees bump into his back. The man shakes his head with an amused smirk.

There’s a lot of smiling going on today.

A pretty song strums in from Minghao’s music library. It’s so well composed and interesting that Mingyu asks for the artist. He’d been having Minghao make note of nice songs as they’ve ventured down the highway, planning to download them himself when he gets home, “Oh, this is one of Jihoon’s songs. I’ll send you the link to his Bandcamp.”

“It’s called Midnight and it’s only on his SoundCloud.” Jun leans forward to poke his head
between the front seats and look at Minghao’s phone screen, “He wrote it last winter.”

“Fanboy.” Soonyoung snickers, poking a finger into Jun’s cheek. It’s not well-received because Jun doesn’t react at all, “If you like him, just tell him.” There are several flags flying up in Mingyu’s head, but he stays silent.

“Anyways,” Jun just brushes him off and takes Minghao’s phone to start scrolling, “if you liked that one, you’ll probably like this one, too.” He switches the track to something similar, but a little more complex.

The piano is grand and beautiful, filling the car with some gorgeous notes and low undertones from some string instrument that Mingyu can’t really pick out. He’s surprised to hear a mix of windchimes and guitar melt into it followed by some wood-blocks and synthetic maracas. What is this mess and how does it sound so good?

“Was it you on the piano?” Minghao asks as he takes his phone back.

Jun shakes his head and sits back in his seat, “No. Jihoon played all of it, but he asked me to write the piano parts.” That’s a big deal, the whole melody is carried on the piano.

“What’s the song called?”

“The Moon.”
Chapter 75

The venue they arrive at is as Minghao had described.

Big enough to fit a circus tent, but not a football field. Small enough to not cost the CDEA an arm and a leg, but press tickets and guest tickets were still pricey. They were lucky they got them for free. Its structure says it’s earthquake resistant with a domed roof made for good acoustics. According to Soonyoung, it used to be a church before a fire ruined most of the structure and the city reclaimed it as an Elks Lodge. After that ownership fell through, the building was repurposed for recreational use by the parks and rec district.

The building looks quite modern even with its exposed brick and wooden slats. There are windows that reach from floor to ceiling and the queue for the entrance is quite long. Soonyoung decided to kick everyone out of the car so that he could change in peace and Minghao said he was going to find Jihoon who had parked on the opposite end of the parking lot. A photographer comes by and snaps a picture of the three remaining riders before interviewing Jun and giving him a solo shot. The way Jun routinely poses casually at a flattering angle says that he’s done this many times already. After he acquires a business card and information about when and where the article will be published, Jun waves the man off.

“Aw, I wanted to be in the photo, too.” Soonyoung groans as he steps out of the car. All his buttons are one off and Wonwoo shoves him back in the car to try again before Mingyu can even get a good look at him.

Many other guests are still arriving. They’re definitely not late, but there’s some sense of urgency in the air. He’s not sure what it is. He’s honestly looking forward to a night of festivities, food, and fun, but he also wants to hurry along and get inside. Mingyu’s a little anxious and he doesn’t know why; there’s just something foreboding about the way the night is unfolding already.

“So I’m good now?” he hears the car door close and turns around to give Soonyoung a look. For someone who hates dressing up formally, he sure looks good doing it. His silver collar-tip clips give some sense of finesse to the otherwise simple outfit and break up what else is strictly black.

Wonwoo helps him tuck in the back of his shirt without the large wrinkle and comes to the front to give his date a scan, “Good.”

“Your hair, though.” Jun chuckles before reaching up to smooth down the chicken butt that had formed out of Soonyoung’s near-white locks, “You should part it asymmetrically. It looks better like that.”

“I don’t know how you expect me to be able to see you when you’re covered from head to toe in black in a dark parking lot.” Oh, Minghao and his terrible night vision. He comes back with Jihoon in tow. Said man looks completely different from what Mingyu remembers of him from his day at the studio, he even looks different from his Instagram posts. His now-black hair is styled up in a neat pompadour and his fur-lined leather jacket is zipped up to his nose.

It is a little nippy tonight, “You told me to wear black.”

“I didn’t expect you to dye your hair black.”

“Hey, guys.” Minghao and Jihoon’s eyes move up to the group. He can tell the audio technician is carefully looking over everyone’s outfit, “Let’s go inside so I can take off this jacket. I
feel underdressed.”

After some quick preliminary greetings on their way in, their party of six is seated at a large rectangular table for eight, covered with a white tablecloth and decorated with simple glass vases and spray-painted branches. The Pinterest-worthy décor looks surprisingly elegant and casual over the polished, dark walnut floorboards. All the tables are slightly angled towards the front end of the large ballroom where a small raised platform sits with an acrylic podium and microphone stand. Mingyu wonders where Yixing and his date are as the two seats at the end of the opposite side are still vacant despite the place-setting been disturbed by curious hands.

Mingyu takes his seat between Jun and Soonyoung, across from Jihoon. Their table setting stays semiformal, so it isn’t exactly a black-tie banquet and Mingyu doesn’t have to feel underdressed anymore. He can appreciate the care taken to adorn each plate with a folded napkin and embossed name card—his says ‘The Date of Junhui Wen’ in cursive with ‘Yixing Zhang | Performance Studio’ printed above it. Underneath it sits his half of a raffle ticket stub with his unique number-letter combo stamped onto it. Over their heads dangle warm, wrought-iron light fixtures. He wouldn’t call them chandeliers because of their geometric design, as if someone had punched out the glass windows of a Michael’s terrarium and strung it up with fake candles. It looks nice.

Jun nudges him in the side, “We can switch seats if you want.”

It’s not like Mingyu doesn’t want to sit in front of Minghao, but at the same time, sitting between everyone feels more comfortable since he’s in an unfamiliar place, “Sure.” If they switch, then Jun can sit in front of Jihoon. In his head, there’s some sort of plan—well, maybe not a plan, but there are goals to achieve by the end of the night.

First, get Minghao and Wonwoo to talk. This has been going pretty well so far.

Second, avoid any possible awkwardness regarding Wonwoo and Jihoon. He doesn’t know why there’s tension there, but there’s no denying that it exists even though Soonyoung and Minghao have paid it no mind. Maybe it’s just something they’re used to by now.

Third, have Jun and Jihoon make sparks fly. He never thought he’d be on the annoying end of the I-need-my-friends-to-hook-up spectrum, but here he is trying his best to be a good wingman while barely knowing anything about the mysterious musician.

Fourth and finally, kinda, sorta, maybe kissMinghaobeforethenightsover. Or, you know, just make sure no one catches on fire because there are tea candles peppering this table and Minghao did mention that he would prefer to stay unignited.

Several people come up to the table in passing to say their hellos and Soonyoung has already excused himself to tackle the snack bar. Jun has been whisked away by two gorgeous ladies who sound like they’ve been friends for a very long time. Minghao is the same, pulled off by a small group of old friends who call him over to chat at the next table. Wonwoo, feeling awkward by himself at the end of the table, has left to check on his boyfriend (who has cheese cubes packed into his cheeks). Even with the table nearly empty, Mingyu can’t help but feel like his fixation on Minghao is not going unnoticed, but it’s been difficult to remove his eyes from the blond.

“Your eyes are going to get stuck like that if you keep staring.” Jihoon hums as he takes off his leather jacket and hangs it behind his chair. Somehow, Mingyu’s not surprised to see that the man’s all black outfit has been adorned with an adorable, red bowtie. What happened to wearing all black?

Mingyu clears his throat, tearing his eyes away from Minghao for just a moment, “I don’t think I’ve gotten a chance to introduce myself—”
“Mingyu.” Jihoon’s eyes slide over to him from somewhere across the room, he doesn’t look like he has much patience, “You’re all Soonyoung ever talks about during breaks at practice these days. I swear Chan’s going to murder him by the end of the weekend.”

“Sorry?”

“Don’t apologize.” Mingyu doesn’t know why he apologized, but Jihoon looks more intimidating than he recalls, especially when looks like he’s been dipped in obsidian. His appearance has matured since his days of fluffy, blue hair, “I’m sure Seungcheol has already given you an earful, you must’ve had a long day.”

“You know about Seungcheol?”

Jihoon’s eyes are pointed at his wrist even though his sleeves are covering the bracelet, “I’m not one to pry, but Cheol did ask if you’ve stopped by the studio recently.” His voice sounds more amused than it does malicious, “And I’m surprised that Jun invited you out tonight.” Mingyu thinks about speaking but weighs his words carefully. Should he expose Jun’s mistake for what it was, or should he play along for now, “I can connect the dots. Isn’t it obvious that you’re on the wrong side of the table?”

In a panic, he decides to play dumb, “What do you mean?”

Jihoon shakes his head and chuckles, “Whatever, I’ll play along.” He rolls his shoulders, sits up straight, and crosses his fingers over the table, “I’m Jihoon, by the way. I do freelance audio engineering.” This introduction feels belated and repetitive since Mingyu already knows who he is and what he does for a living, “Be gentle with Jun, he has a lot on his mind.”

Woah, wait.

Was that a warning?

“He might seem simple, but his heart is soft and people like to take advantage of that. And I don’t know if you’re the type who likes to have fun messing around, but the last time someone threw a wrench into our team dynamic before a big competition it ended rather poorly.” Jihoon, you’re reading this all wrong. You can stop playing along if you’re going to look so scary doing it, “So mind yourself, Mingyu. If you’re here as someone’s date, don’t go having eyes for someone else.”

Soonyoung takes a seat and hands a Sprite to Jihoon before Wonwoo joins with his Coke, “Whatcha talkin’ about?” he’s bright and peppy with a plate full of crackers, salami, and cheese.

“Just introducing myself.” Jihoon thanks him for the soda and pops it open to take a sip, “Where’s the boss?”

“Xing’s over by the punch bowl.”

Jun also returns to the table, slapping a hand down on Mingyu’s shoulder as he sits down with a wide and open smile. He seems excited and happy, but Mingyu’s at a loss for words. Just when he thought he was in the clear from one parental friend, here comes another one and even though Jihoon’s a little petite, he looks like he could do some serious damage whether it’d be with his words or his fists, “You seem tense.”

The concern in Jun’s voice is so genuine that Mingyu has to recollect himself for a second before responding, “I’m- I’m good.”

“Yeah?” Jun gives him a reassuring pat on the arm before looking across the table to Jihoon,
“How’s the new track going?”

“It’s going well. I haven’t had much time to work on it, but I think I’ll get more time after finals.” His nails pick at the pop-top, creating a little beat subconsciously, “They’re announcing the team we’re up against tonight, aren’t they?”

“Who cares who we’re up against,” Soonyoung leans into Jun’s side, “I have confidence in us. Besides, it’s too late to change the choreo any more than we already have.”

Mingyu tunes out after that. He doesn’t really understand what they’re talking about. Dance is cool, but he’d much rather watch the magic happen than pick apart its nuances. He can see other people off to the side sharing stories and simple dance moves, some are even showing videos to their colleagues, but Minghao has disappeared from sight. He decides to text Jun under the table, fingers hesitant. He doesn’t want to get off on the wrong foot with Jihoon especially since the plan is to get these two to have a good time.

At first, Mingyu doesn’t recognize either of the two men that escort Minghao back to the table as an official takes her spot at the podium. Yixing looks unreal. As does his date. They look like royalty with their hair styled up and their clothes so well-fitted. The small jewels stitched into Yixing’s red, satin dress-shirt look like diamond raindrops. His date has soft features, but there’s something undeniably strong about his build. His outfit seems quite straightforward, black on black on black with a crimson scarf tucked under the lapels of his suit jacket, but upon closer inspection, his button up is sheer and slightly see through. Judging by the people who come up to talk to him, it seems like Yixing’s date is also a well-respected professional in this industry.

Geez, Minghao and his collection of hot friends even extends to his boss.

Jun types his own message into his lap after passing a questioning glance to Mingyu, ‘Please don’t tell Jihoon. I’ll talk to him after dinner is served. Sorry. :'( ’ Okay, okay, that’s okay. He can last an hour or so without gawking at the man in front of him.

The way his eyes linger on Mingyu for just a few extra moments every time he passes his line of sight to look somewhere else or talk with Jihoon makes it feel like the entirety of their conversation tonight will be nonverbal and there are only so many things that Mingyu feels comfortable saying without words.

No problem.

Not with his stunning smile, shining eyes, eye-catching hair, delectable outfit choice-

Not a problem at all, Jun.
Chapter 76

Among other awards, several stand out because they sound fake and stupid.

‘Most Students on Stage at Any Given Time’ is presented to a company from Siskiyou. Humboldt gets a trophy for having the ‘Most Confetti Caught After a Performance’. Ridiculous. However, some of these awards hold weight and are certainly things to be awarded for; ‘Biggest Outreach’, ‘Most Hours in Community Service’, and ‘Highest Earning Fundraiser’ land in that category. The last award of the night is obviously the most important. The title, however, is the simplest.

‘Award in Excellence’.

Jun explains that it’s a title given to the studio that captured the very essence of the dance community; teamwork, support, mentorship—a lot of things to that effect. That studio has to be a place of synchronization between an infinite number of individuals and every individual should feel welcome and be able to better themselves there. The name-brand of the studio is important, too, having won walls of competitions and using their recreational time to better the community around them. Mingyu’s surprised to learn a lot of those plaques and crystalline tablets are thanks from the community and special organizations for all the hours the instructors and their students contributed to help the less fortunate. Jun mentions that 80% of their proceeds from the Winter Showcase are donated to a variety of charities and that they usually run canned food and spare jacket drives around Thanksgiving and Christmas time.

When Yixing goes up to get his award, he makes a point to thank his instructors as well as his gorgeous date and husband, Minseok, for helping him create such a harmonic learning environment for children of all ages. He pauses for a moment, understanding something, and goes to make a point that even adults are still the children of their parents and that time cannot change that. He gets a roll of laughter from the audience and shyly grips the sparkling keepsake, giving it a hard look. It seems like he gets a little caught up over his words even though he’s used to being on stage in front of hundreds and thousands.

“Yes, this award means so much to me and my Performance Studio family.” He gestures towards their table. Mingyu doesn’t know why, but the image of Yixing accepting a big award just seems so natural, “They’ve worked incredibly hard to create this environment that fosters teamwork and, while we push for self-discipline, we’ve also ensured that our students understand that self-love and preservation are just as important. For us,” because Mingyu is an outsider, he gets a free pass to look around. Everyone’s eyes are pinned on the kindhearted studio owner—Minghao, Soonyoung, and Jun’s hands are held together in their laps, ready to give applause, “dance isn’t just a means of performance. We’ve had students and instructors come from all over the globe, sometimes with language barriers, sometimes with social anxieties, sometimes with other obstacles outside of their control that you would think could really make or break a team.”

He coughs out a little laugh, “You know, we keep this huge whiteboard behind the wall of our lobby and I constantly have to buy new markers for it. Really, like a Costco pack of Expo markers every other month and they can vouch for me, it shows up in our budget.” Another blanket of courtesy laughter, “But I don’t mind. You should see how full that whiteboard is at the end of each day. Every Saturday, I take a picture of the whole thing before I clean it and I have all of those photos archived. You should see the little notes and drawings everyone leaves each other on that board. Among notes on formations, studio song requests, and homework answers, you can find messages of encouragement, little drawings and doodles of each other, and what they love.
Sometimes it’s just a mess of scribbles when they’re stressed. Sometimes it’s full of hearts or stars. It’s all so wholesome.” A lot of people nod, “So, for us, dance is more than a means of performance, it’s a tool for communication- and Julia is telling me to hurry this speech along because we’re short on time and everyone wants dessert. So, just, thank you again for this award. It means a lot to us.”

The amount of applause that Yixing gets is comparable to the length of his speech. He shuffle-jogs back to the table, burying his face in Minseok’s shoulder and letting out a long-held wheeze. Minseok’s only response is to smile, shake his head, and kiss him on the crown of his hair, “You did fine, relax.” His friends follow with their own compliments. The man is so flustered and shy, Mingyu almost wishes he knew Yixing well enough to pay his own. He seems like a swell guy.

“Thank you, Yixing.” Julia, the coordinator and main host for the night comes back up to her podium in her pretty, navy dress and cues someone off to the side, “Before we get into the first raffle, on behalf of the CDEA, I would like to congratulate your instructors on making it to the international finals and representing the NorCal dance community.” A round of applause, “We put together a little video to cheer you guys on.”

The lights go dark and a short video starts playing on the screen behind her. It highlights the choreographies from the preliminaries up until semifinals, nothing super special until it goes a reel of each of the members dancing in their own styles and what they’re more well-known for. There are some murmurs in the crowd about how two of the six dancers aren’t even professional dancers. The comments are split between how crazy talented Vernon and Jihoon must be and how ridiculous it is for non-professionals to be on such a strong team. Jihoon doesn’t seem to pay any of the negative comments any mind, but Soonyoung and Jun do, visibly looking a little agitated now with their smiles gone and brows furrowed.

After the video finishes, the screen goes black and there’s a short applause before the music cuts back in. Mingyu understands why everyone’s wearing an expression like they’ve just seen a ghost. The team they’re going to be up against looks terrifying, especially with their stats. The first man on screen is some white-haired Adonis; it’s obvious that he’s the leader of the following team. There is a lot of chatter when their names come up one-by-one along with clips of their expertise. Under their names and titles, comes the name of their studio and that part seems odd. None of them are from the same studio; Underground Vancouver, Broadway Dance Center, Zaha Club/PURESOUL Dance Studio, Zeal Studio Japan, Bangkok Dance Academy, and 1Million Dance Studio. Based on the chatter floating around him, he can infer that these guys are a force to be reckoned with especially since they’re united under BDC’s Taeyong Lee, a man noted for having been one of the youngest Broadway choreographers.

“Hello, Performance Studio.” he speaks into the camera with the other five men crowding around him. It feels like a corny home-video from the later 90’s and that makes it difficult to take them seriously. “We’re coming at you from New York’s Contemporary Taproom and we’re very excited to see you at finals next week. Good luck.” Even though it sounds friendly and all six of them are waving into the camera with big, happy smiles, the promise of a challenge makes its way through the screen.

When the lights come back on and Julia resumes her speech, it’s plain to see that Soonyoung’s expression is a lot darker than it was earlier. What happened to not caring about who they’d be up against? It looks like he’s having a lot of doubts right now. This isn’t the peppy, carefree Soonyoung anymore, this is the Soonyoung from the dancefloor. Jihoon reaches across the table and smacks the space in front of him, snapping him out of his thoughts. Jun and Minghao are looking at him, too.

Thankfully, Jun seems to pick up on Mingyu wanting some context clues, “Taeyong is from
Yixing and Minseok’s original studio. He’s strong and he wasn’t even on our radar because he didn’t have a team, but to think that he went and gathered an international team of accredited performers just for this competition- well, it’s unexpected.” He does that thing where he tucks nonexistent hair behind his ear, “It can’t be helped. We especially didn’t think they’d join under a new name like NYCT instead of their original studios.” Jun raps his fingers on the table, “We expected that the final team would be strong—it’s finals after all—but to think that we’re going to be facing off against some big-name team from notable dance studios overseas is a little overwhelming.” He sighs and forces the smile back out onto his face.

“We’re really feeling the pressure now.”
Chapter 77

“We’ve been under pressure since the start.” Minghao speaks up quietly from his end of the table. Everyone turns their heads, taking a break from Soonyoung’s rambling and Jun’s worried critique, “We knew that any opponent we would have faced would have been a challenge. We’re prepared.”

“Minghao’s right.” Yixing leans back in his seat as the mousse cake and ice cream arrive on square plates, “You guys have been practicing tirelessly. Even with the little hiccup with Minghao’s knee, Vernon getting sick, and Chan and Jihoon’s heavy work schedules, you’ve been able to create a set that’ll definitely impress.” He jabs a fork into the cake, peeling away a chunk of white chocolate mousse and using it to point at each of them, “You have one more week to perfect it—to find the perfect balance between all your personalities—and I’ll be supporting you guys every step of the way.”

“You really don’t have to, you’ve been busy, too, Yixing.” Jun lowers his head and averts his eyes, “You don’t need to waste your ti-”

“Nonsense, I insist.” He points again, but this time his mousse plops onto his plate, eliciting a round of snickers. He’s the type of person who can laugh at himself. With a big smile on his face, he speaks again, “Really, guys. You kids are like family to me. I’ve watched you grow up so much even before we all came to work as a studio. I want to see your hard work be rewarded.”

Soonyoung nods, at a loss for words. Wonwoo rubs his shoulder and stuffs a bite of dessert into his mouth—well, his nose since he missed. He earns a slap to the chest and the two laugh. Minghao carries on conversing with Yixing and Minseok about the next potential charity event. It’s going to be around New Years and he has big plans to make it flow flawlessly.

Jun seems to be stewing over something, thinking quietly as he spoons mouse-sized bites between his lips. He’s only able to focus on the untouched wineglass in front of him while making the robotic motion. Something is on his mind, obviously, and as a date and a friend, Mingyu’s sorry that he doesn’t know what to say to make him budge. In fact, he’s surprised that Soonyoung and Minghao aren’t saying anything.

However, there is Jihoon.

Jihoon.

Jihoon is doing that thing that Wonwoo does.

He’s just mushing together all his food, but keeping the cake and ice cream separated, each melting into its own little slurry of vanilla and chocolate with the raspberry compote marbling it like blood in water. Okay, that metaphor is a little corny and dark, but it’s not too far from the truth. His eyes are pinned on Jun. It’s not aggressive or angry, but there’s something behind his stare that makes Mingyu curious. It’s odd, but it doesn’t look like he wants to talk.

Despite looking nice, the dessert is too sweet, and he doesn’t blame Jihoon for wasting it.

If he wasn’t such a stickler for food waste, he probably would have stopped eating as well. The main course was enough to make him slip into the start of a foodcoma with all the bread and potatoes, but he’s hanging on tightly for the raffle and games. Again, Mingyu’s main motivation for coming out tonight—other than seeing Minghao and their friends get all gussied up—was to have fun
and he’s not going to let Jun and Jihoon’s angsty-teen romance get in the way of that.

But Jihoon’s eyes snap over to him when he clears his throat and it immediately feels like a hunter has just trained a gun on him. It finally looks like Jihoon wants to say something, but he just looks down at Mingyu’s wrist, back up to his face, and sighs before scooping up some of the sugary soup. He only needs to give it a little taste and smack his lips a couple times before he gives up on it.

C’mon, Jihoon.

What do you want to say?

“I hope everyone’s enjoying their dessert!” Julia is back at the podium, casually carrying a cookie up with her. Clearly, she also did not like the dessert, “We’re going to draw the first raffle ticket of the night and like usual, the prize will be blindly selected by the winner.” It’s almost as if the entire ballroom collectively drops their forks, “The first winner is, drumroll please,” and all these grown-ass adults drum their fingers and hands on the table. Mingyu does, too, just to fit in, not like he believes it’ll bring him extra luck or anything. The guy sitting behind him is going ham; he can hear his plates jump and clank together, “A41208. A41208.”

The avid drummer shoots out of his seat and screeches in victory. Someone has had a little too much to drink tonight. His studio-mates try and quiet him down, saying some joke like ‘you only won because you drummed so hard’. He sprints up to the stage, almost tripping over a speaker cable before safely reaching his intended destination. Julia directs him to pick out one of several cards laid out on the podium. After a few moments of deliberation, he picks out the number 7 and raises it in the air victoriously.

Across the room in a pile of butcher paper-wrapped gifts, sits a corresponding box with a giant ‘7’ on it. He’s quick to open it after doing a teetering jog across the floor with his navy blue tie flapping into his face as Julia continues her announcements, “Congratulations to Cobalt Studio Collective’s Mitchel Winters! Anna, please, make sure he doesn’t hurt himself.” His entire table laughs nervously, his date telling him to watch his step. Like clockwork, he trips on the rug lining the end of the room and Mingyu can almost feel his table facepalm in embarrassment, “And that brings us to our first game of the night, the three-legged race!” Some whoop, some groan, but Mingyu can tell that Soonyoung and Minghao are ready to compete against each other, “We’ll be going three or four tables at a time starting with KINE Dance, NorCal Salsa Club, and Piñata’s Over Party. Anyone can participate, just partner up with someone from the same table. Maybe your date, Raquel.” She winks at the dancer in a fitted purple pantsuit whose face looks redder than her date’s curly fuchsia hair. Raquel seems a bit bashful with her flustered hands suddenly covering her face when the whole room looks at her and cheers her on.

The said tables send out their instructors and they line up on the east side of the hall. There’s plenty of space between the dining tables and the stage and it looks like this area will be where all the games for the night will take place. Event volunteers help them tie their legs together with a couple rounds of a resistance band, making sure they’re tightly bound all from their ankles to midway up their calves.

“My money is on NSC,” Jun mumbles to him out of the blue. He feels a little relieved that his mind is off of whatever it was on a few minutes ago, “Salsa dancers know how to lunge.”

He’s not wrong.

Someone from NSC wins. It’s not Raquel and her date, but it means that their studio will move on to the next round in the three-legged tournament. The next four studios line up and, as Jun called it, Allegra Movement steals the win. He calls it stealing since the competitors from the other three
studios all trip over each other and the winning team’s couple had one person essentially carry the other the whole way.

It’s their turn and Minghao is cutely drumming on Jihoon’s shoulder asking him to, “Please play so we can crush Soonyoung.” Jihoon doesn’t look annoyed, he just looks unwilling, holding on to the back of his seat as Minghao tries to pry him away from it.

“Oh, please, Minghao.” Soonyoung flamboyantly flips his hair, “Look at my man’s legs and look at my thighs. You can’t beat this.”

“Let’s go.” Now it’s Jihoon who pulls Minghao to his feet and slogs him over to the end of the floor where he crosses his arms as a volunteer binds him to Minghao with a blue band. Looks like he’s got a competitive spirit as well, even going over counts with Minghao before they start.

Mingyu looks at Jun who in turn passes him a shy smile and stays seated. It doesn’t look like Minseok and Yixing are going anywhere, calmly reclined in their seats, watching their boys line up. Doesn’t Jun want to play? He seemed so excited about watching the others have a go at it, Mingyu wonders where all his spunk went, “Are we not going?”

“We don’t have to.” Jun shakes his head, “I feel like I’ve already burdened you enough, dragging you out here tonight.”

“Do you want to play?”

“No, no, it’s fine.”

“Let’s go. I want to play.” Mingyu stands up, pulling Jun up with him. If he’s already Jun’s date, he might as well act like it for a little and Mingyu knows how to be a generic good-date.

“We probably won’t win. I’m really bad at these things.” Jun hesitates, uncomfortably steadying himself on Mingyu’s shoulder as the volunteer straps them in. Minghao looks over at them, giving them both a challenging smirk before refocusing on Jihoon.

“Who cares about winning?” Mingyu bends over to adjust the band a little bit, moving the knot against his shin instead of between them where it can get caught and trip them up, “It’s about having fun. Right, Minghao?”

“Yes!” he pats Mingyu on the shoulder, “Have fun eating our dust.”

With less time to prepare than the other 8 teams, Mingyu’s more than surprised that he and Jun win. They didn’t have the longest leg-span. They didn’t have any verbal communication. They barely landed in sync, but, still, they placed first, followed by Soonyoung and Wonwoo who spent the whole race yelling at the top of their lungs. Their victory wasn’t a steal either. He took Jun’s hand to steady their bodies and, in a flurry of limbs, they sprinted across the finish line.

Even though the two aren’t dead last, Mingyu’s glad that they aren’t rushing—or, more accurately—that Jihoon isn’t rushing, “But we have to win!”

Minghao struggles to step ahead, but Jihoon’s holding him back by his arm, “No, you idiot. Stop. Your fucking leg is going to snap in half.” And probably something else like ‘if the band doesn’t do it, I will’, but at least Minghao slows down. Mingyu appreciates that Jihoon’s careful because Minghao’s left leg is strapped to his right and even though he gave him the greenlight, it’s probably best to be as careful with it as he can.
The other studios finish between them and Minghao and Jihoon come in second to last.

“Good game.” Mingyu slaps a hand down on Minghao’s back as Jihoon unties the resistance band and hands it back to the volunteer. Mingyu is still tethered to Jun.

“Oh, shut up.” Minghao laughs as he pushes Mingyu away, causing Jun to stumble and balance them both. “If Jihoon didn’t have such a big heart we could have won.” Jihoon just rolls his eyes as he bends down to untie Jun from Mingyu. Jun tries to squat and beat him to it, but they end up knocking their heads together and it’s Minghao who has to free him.

Mingyu and Jun return after the last three studios run. As long as Jun’s fine with it, Mingyu’s competitive edge is coming to surface and he’s determined to win something by the end of the night. After twenty minutes of running and not running, hobbling and not hobbling, the two are getting a little sweaty. Jihoon offers to take the jackets that they willingly hand over. He probably thinks that Mingyu doesn’t notice that he hands the black blazer to Minghao who waits on the sidelines next to Wonwoo and Soonyoung as Jihoon takes a seat.

However, they don’t win overall.

They won all the races up until the final one where they were beaten by the dancers at NSC. Seriously, Mingyu should have practiced his lunges ahead of time. There isn’t even a consolation prize! The two girls from the salsa club pick box 2, a smaller box, but they decided not to open it yet in case someone wants to trade at the end. Mingyu pins their fair victory on their extra leg-span thanks to their heels, but just to see someone win a three-legged race in heels is a feat in itself.

“I hope this wasn’t some bad omen about finals.” Jun laughs nervously, but Mingyu can hear the half-truths in his voice, “We’ve won everything up until now.”

“It’s just a game, Jun.” he releases Jun from his captivity. Mingyu will try his best not to drag him into anything he doesn’t want to do and hopefully, he will come clean with Jihoon soon so that they can switch dates. Switch dates. Switch dates. Switch dates. He’s excited about that prospect.

“You’re right.” He sighs and gives him an affirming smile as he goes back to the table, “At least it was fun while it lasted.” Mingyu can’t help but hear the chagrin in his voice. It’s not the end of the world, Jun, it’s just one little game.

His worry for Jun is replaced with his chest rumbling, not too quickly, he’s not heartless, but slowly and refreshingly. Minghao is standing with his silk-lined jacket folded over his arm and when he sees Mingyu approaching, he holds it out for him. He’s sure if he wasn’t so sweaty, that Minghao would have probably helped him into said jacket, but alas, he could really go for a cup of water. He’s sure to tug his sleeve down over his wrists before accepting the jacket.

Minghao leans in close, “Thanks for cheering Jun up.” Mingyu looks at him as he reaches a hand up to fix Mingyu’s bangs and comb a few stray strands into place. He backs up, gives Mingyu a onceover, and starts heading back to their table.

Mingyu follows a couple steps behind.
“Is your leg okay?”

“I’m good.” Minghao turns around and walks backwards, “Why?”

“Jihoon was worried about it, wasn’t he?”

His arms are clasped behind his back, he seems to be in a good mood, “Yeah, but Jihoon likes to worry about a lot of things.”

“Alright, but just give me the word,” maybe the little bit of exercise has gotten Mingyu into a runner’s high. He’ll blame that for his cheesy line, “and I’ll come sweep you off your feet.” Minghao just shakes his head as he bursts into laughter. He’s glad that he injected it with their usual heavy sarcasm otherwise he might have ruined the mood.

“Not if I do it first.”

The next game of the night is probably the easiest to win a prize in considering each table will have one winner. Musical chairs were never his strong suit, but by golly, he’s going to try. The reward for winning? A $20 Starbucks giftcard. It’s not the most exciting thing, but it’s something that has a higher chance of attainment compared to all the big-dollar prizes at the back of the room. Playing musical chairs with eight people in a sea of about fifty people on the ballroom floor seems a little unsafe, but Mingyu’s throwing caution to the wind. He’s going to get the giftcard if it’s the only thing he wins tonight; it was a goal he added to his checklist since Mitchel drunkenly ran to his prize. He’s going to get a prize and not make a fool of himself.

It starts off rather casually, Jun getting tossed out first by Soonyoung. Wonwoo follows him the next round, also shoved out of the way by Soonyoung. Even though Mingyu has no rhythm and hates the ice cream truck-like jingle they have to squat to, his reaction time is still pretty intense. There’s six of them left with four chairs and he barely scrapes Jihoon out of the chair with his butt, making him bounce onto the floor. He almost hears a little squeaky toy noise when the petit man falls in such an animated manner and he probably would have chuckled if he wasn’t met with such an icy cold stare. Terrifying.

Minseok is the one to pick Soonyoung up around his waist and steals his chair. After a slew of protests and curses, the blond just rolls over, defeated, at Wonwoo and Jun’s feet. Several nearby tables laugh at him as they cheer on their favorite coworkers. Four people left, three chairs, no more jacket nonsense. They all throw their blazers onto their dining chairs before returning to the warzone. He can’t believe that Minseok and his smaller stature are able to scoop Yixing up and heft him away from the chair, plopping him in his lap as he takes a victorious seat. Yixing berates him with a laugh because he almost kicked Minghao in the face. Mingyu would have berated him, too, if the man’s biceps weren’t nearly the same size as his head. He can tell by the way his dress shirt shows off his bulk.

“Go, Minghao!” Jun shouts.

“Go, Mingyu. Kick Minghao’s ass!” Soonyoung really needs to decide if he’s Minghao’s rival or best friend.

“Go easy on them, Min, they’re just kids!” Yixing, we are not kids.
The music starts up again. He can hear yelling from the other tables as people steal chairs and 
crab-walk in a circle. He’s debating who he has to look out for, Minseok or Minghao. Minseok has 
strength while Minghao has agility, but he knows that he has a better chance of beating Minghao 
because he can booty-bump him out of the chair. So, when the music stops, he watches Minseok’s 
feet and goes for the other seat. In his head, he applauds his own reflexes, but in reality, he just 
wishes he had gone toe-to-toe with Minseok.

Minghao is in his lap.

They’d both gone for the same chair and now their legs are staggered together and his first 
reaction was to loop his arms around his waist to stop him from falling or twisting anything. They 
meet eyes for just a couple seconds when Minghao gives him a half-hearted, narrow-eyed glare and 
promptly wiggles out of his grasp to go and stand with their friends.

“Cheap tactics.” He mutters under his breath. He didn’t have anything to say when Minseok 
did the exact same thing less than a minute ago.

Of course, Mingyu loses to Minseok and his thunder thighs. There’s no beating legs that 
strong.

He doesn’t really appreciate the suggestive elbow Soonyoung pokes into his side or the 
pointed look Jun gives him as they return to their seats. He really wanted that giftcard, damn it, and 
now he has to return to the probability of 1/120-something. Minseok jogs back to their table and 
hands the card over to Yixing, saying something like, “For all the coffees I can’t make you in the 
morning.”

There was a time that Mingyu might have found those words a little disgusting; couples and 
their nuances, but today he can only find sugary sweetness in the words. He doesn’t know how the 
two manage to uphold such a strong long-distance relationship, living over 7 hours away from each 
other. Jun says they’ve been together for years and Minseok asked for Yixing’s hand two Springs 
ago when they made a trip to Japan. They honeymooned in Italy.

“Hey, Jun, when are you going to…” he nods his head towards the other side of the table 
when he knows Minghao and Jihoon aren’t paying attention.

“Soon, soon, soon. Really.” He fiddles with the hem of the tablecloth, “After the next game.”

Mingyu now understands what Minghao meant by ‘ice-breaker games’ because he’s standing 
with his arms up with Soonyoung trapped on the ground between his legs, trying to wiggle out the 
other end and untangle their group of eight. The whole premise of ‘stand in a circle, link hands with 
two opposite to you, untangle yourselves in five minutes, go’ seemed simple enough except the fact 
that this group has no clear leader. Minghao and Soonyoung are constantly trying to talk over each 
other since they have different vantage points and in the end, it’s Jihoon who puts his foot down and 
tells everyone to shut up and listen to Yixing.

Unfortunately, Yixing is the merry, happy-go-lucky type of leader and tells someone else to 
take the lead.

“Okay, it’s me. I’ll take the lead.” Wonwoo barks from his position strangled between 
Minghao and Jun, “Jihoon, duck under Minseok’s arm and go over Mingyu.” Mingyu seriously has 
to crouch down to avoid getting elbowed, “Jun and Minseok move over me and then Soon will step 
through your arms and- yeah, okay.” This seems to be going quite smoothly and they might actually
have a chance of winning something, “Soon, left arm over Jihoon and Minghao go under Jun’s arms.”

Somehow, it ends up with Minghao standing with his back pressed against Mingyu’s chest as the knot of human limbs suddenly grows tighter. Wonwoo made a bad call and is working on reversing the harm done, but that involves Yixing pulling Mingyu’s left arm over Minghao’s side in an unintentional hug. He’s pretty sure that that the AC needs to be turned on even if it is winter. He doesn’t know if Minghao’s suddenly seen Medusa, but he’s frozen in place, not moving a hair until he leans back and ducks under an arm before he gets hit. No one is fairing well, it’s a shitstorm. Jun is bent over backwards, unable to see anything. Wonwoo, himself, is in an equally compromising position. Jihoon is backed up against Soonyoung and his hair tickles his nose when he turns around to argue with Wonwoo.

But before anyone can get any arguing done, Soonyoung lets out a long-held sneeze.

He’s courteous enough to turn his head and not blow snot into Jihoon’s gelled hair, but under his restrictions, the only place he can sneeze is directly at Minghao and Mingyu. Luckily, Mingyu catches most of the spray with his hand, but it’s still absolutely repulsive. Based on Minghao’s expression and the way his eyes are shut in such annoyance, it seems like he’s been sprayed in the face. Mingyu briefly lets go of Yixing to wipe his misted hand on Soonyoung’s sleeve.

“Can- can we give up?” he still hasn’t opened his eyes.

“Sorry-”

“I want to go wash my face.”

“Sorry-”

“No, don’t apologize.” He’s waiting for Minghao to blow up, “Just… let me go to the restroom. We’ll win the next game.”

They forfeit which isn’t a big deal because a studio across the room wins less than 10 seconds after Minghao lets go of everyone. Mingyu follows close behind. He can almost feel the germs on his hand seep into his skin. He shivers at the thought. Although, getting another cold could mean Minghao making him soup again. And kissing him on the head again. Maybe he should ask Soonyoung to sneeze on him once more for good measure.

The restroom is quiet and hollow, echo-filled thanks to its vaulted ceilings and skylight. Who puts a skylight in a restroom? Minghao is running his hands under the water and splashing his face repeatedly as Mingyu washes his hands and grabs enough paper towels for them both. His fringe is a little damp now, sticking to his forehead like it did in the rain.

“Here.” Mingyu hands a thin stack over after pulling his sleeves back down. Minghao thanks him before shoving the fistful of paper into his face and blotting away all the water and sneeze remnants. Humans are gross little things, full of germs and weird fluids, “Hold still.” Mingyu combs his fingers through Minghao’s fringe and scrunches it up with the paper towel in an attempt to return it to its former glory.

It’s not working.

Minghao removes his hands gently and just tosses his hair with his wet fingers, destroying what was nicely sculpted earlier and moving his bangs to flop over his forehead. It doesn’t look bad (as if Minghao could ever look bad), but it’s not as formal. He just looks a lot cozier, “Which prize
are you aiming for?” he asks as he twists the ends with his fingers, trying to style it just a little. He’s still wearing formal wear.

Mingyu shrugs. He’s not aiming for anything in particular, just to complete his task list for the night, “Maybe 6, you?”

“I thought that 2 probably had something cool in it until the NSC girls picked it up and decided not to open it. It might be a box full of confetti or something.”

“Should I assume that they’ve done that before?” he backs up to let Minghao pass him.

The latter peeks around the corner to make sure the coast is clear before he bends over and puts his head under the hand-dryer, slapping the button on his way down. He looks ridiculous, “Yeah,” he shouts over the whir, “they have. One time, there was a box the size of your car and it was full of bubble wrap.” He stands up to check himself out in the mirror, “Julia and Frank are ‘the journey is more important than the destination’ kinda people. Thankfully, Oziel makes sure that the budget is spent on a few good prizes.”

Mingyu has to resist the urge to play with Minghao’s now-fluffy hair. The frizziness from the bleach gives it extra volume and it bounces a little when he jumps a couple times, laughing at himself before exiting the restroom. “Hey, Minghao.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you think Jun will actually tell Jihoon that he wants them to be here together?”

Minghao hums as they walk down the barren hallway. The moon is big and bright in the sky with a faint halo surrounding it through the clouds, “Honestly, I don’t know. Since the whole Wonwoo episode, Jun hasn’t really had the nerve to ask anyone out. He always just keeps thinking that he’s a waste of time.” He can tell that Minghao’s speaking with his tongue in his cheek, “He only started actively mentioning Jihoon to me romantically after you showed up.”

“Yo, I’m like a cupid.”

“More like a coincidence.” Minghao opens the door to the ballroom again, “The night you showed up to heroically fail at breaking up a fight, we stopped early and Jihoon’s usual lift wasn’t done with work yet so he had to hitch a ride with Jun. It was downhill from there.”

“Aw, that’s a little disappointing.”

Minghao elbows him, “We can still try to be cupids though. The night’s still young even though it’s usually the job of the two stooges over there, but because it involves Jihoon, I don’t think Wonwoo will actively participate.”

“What’s their beef anyway?”

The table is already in sight. It sounds like they just ran the second raffle, “No clue—”

“Minghao!” they look up to see Soonyoung waving at them, “Minghao, what was your raffle number?”

“A007438.” He fishes the ticket out of his pocket to show Soonyoung.

“Dude, that fucking sucks.”
“Why?”

“They just called out that number, but when no one showed up, they drew another one. They thought it was one of the guests that left.” Wow, that’s unlucky.

“Wow, that’s unlucky.” Minghao rips his ticket in half and puts it into his empty wineglass. Now, Mingyu feels more determined to win two things and give one to Minghao.

A victory is a victory even if someone else has to win it for you.
Chapter 79

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The subsequent game flies by.

Thanks to limited resources, only one pair per table is allowed to participate, so, Mingyu drags Jun up with him. The faster he gets this over with, the faster Jun will talk to Jihoon. He would rather not have to pop balloons between them, more worried that he’s grabbing Jun too hard than he is about winning. He almost wishes that Jun would be a little sneaky and use his nails to pop the balloons like the other teams are doing, but he’s the honest type. He’s the honest type.

KINE Dance takes home the victory and their boss picks the box with a giant 9 on it. They also decide to keep their box shut until the very end, shrouding it in mystery when one of the instructors exclaims that the laptop-sized box jingles like it’s full of coins. The next raffle winner takes box 1, the smallest box that’s only the size of a giftcard and, therefore, should obviously be a giftcard. They also decide to not open it.

The next game is simple, well-rounded fun. Pass the orange.

The goal is to pass three oranges around the table without using their hands or arms, the first team to finish wins. Simple. Simple. He has to pass to Minghao. Not so simple. He’d played the game during high school rallies and during club introductions in college, so the concept of passing the citrus fruit around using his shoulder, chest, and neck isn’t foreign.

Yixing tells them to space out evenly at the back of the table so the distance is as close as possible. Surprisingly, it’s not even real oranges, but orange foam balls from their rec room closet. Mingyu is slightly grossed out at the idea. How many children have touched these balls, rolled them on the floor, spat on their hands then- ew. It’s okay. It’s okay. It’s for the prize; for the honor. Jun holds the ball between his ear and his shoulder and Mingyu has a hard time receiving it. In the end, it’s clamped between his chin and his chest—the intended compromising position—and he waddles over to Minghao who nearly loses the ball when their cheeks bump together and a cold earring rakes against Mingyu’s cheek.

Through some miracle, Minghao catches the ball between his knees, quickly instructing Jihoon to take it in the same fashion by putting one leg through his and holding it between his own knees. After Yixing pulls some witchcraft out of his ass and kicks the ball up in the air, catching it with his neck and shoulder, Minseok easily scores them the first point.

The second ball is passed along in the same way with the fumble being Mingyu’s fault this time and Minghao getting on his knees to catch it with his ear and shoulder. He smacks Mingyu’s arm afterwards, telling him to stop. Mingyu shoves him back and tells him to stop dropping it. On their third ball, they overhear that the table next to them is just about to finish. In desperation, Minghao sucks it up and bites the foam ball with his teeth, passing it to Jihoon who whines before doing the same. Yixing is about to follow suit before Minseok stops him because he’s seen that the next table has already won.

The two look like they’re about to gag with their tongues sticking out of their mouths. Jihoon is trying to clean it on his napkin while Minghao is swishing his with water. They’re definitely a couple steps away from vomiting and all for naught because box 6 isn’t theirs. Mingyu decides that the numbers and content don’t matter anymore, they just have to win one.
“Jun,” he sighs as Minghao and Jihoon go and ask for more water, “Jun, you need to talk to Jihoon.” More so than he wants to be considered Minghao’s date, he just knows that if he and Minghao work together they will definitely take home a prize. They’re both competitive and out of all the people around this table, Mingyu’s the most comfortable with him; getting up in his space isn’t as stuffy as it used to be- unless they want it to be.

“I know, I know, just one more game.” He’s about to ram his head into the table. Why does Jun have to keep dragging this on? Another raffle is drawn, another box is won, “And I just don’t think Jihoon wants to talk. He seems kind of grumpy tonight, don’t you think?”

“I think he’s fine. Maybe he just has a resting bitch face.” Those words don’t sound very encouraging. He knows that asking Soonyoung and Wonwoo for help might not be a good idea. The two seem to steer clear of Jun and Jihoon’s situation with each other and with only two more mysterious games left on the agenda, there’s only so much time left to get to the bottom of Mingyu’s task list.

The first task can wait for their car ride home. Definitely. They’re talking a little bit and he can feel that the tension there has dissolved almost completely. Now’s just a matter of finding a good topic and having a solid conversation. The second task of avoiding awkward situations between Wonwoo and Jihoon- well, they haven’t sat in awkwardness, so he’s going to tick that off as a success for now. Three, four, and five are still incomplete and he knows if he leaves tonight with a score under 50% he’ll lose sleep. Arguably, Minghao hasn’t caught on fire which means it’s been a success up until this point, but he won’t count his blessings just yet because the next announcement makes his stomach churn.

“Alright! Everyone, we’re going to take a little break. Feel free to help yourself to refreshments. In the meantime, we’re going to come around to each table and record everyone’s results for the biscuit eating game.” Is that just a euphemism for the pocky game, because that’s what it sounds like. Just tell it like it is. For the first time, he hopes that the ‘biscuit eating game’ is literally what it sounds like and he’ll just have to inhale an entire sleeve of shortbread cookies, but based on the cheers and screams from the other end of the hall it’s unquestionably the pocky game. He’s going to have to play with Jun if he doesn’t hurry up and tell Jihoon.

Minghao looks at him from across the table, lips a straight line. He raps his fingers on the neck of his water glass before taking a sip and mouthing something to him and swaying his head towards Jihoon. Mingyu has no clue what he said, but he’s waiting for a cue, so he just shrugs.

If they switch dates, won’t that mean he has to play with Minghao? Is that a good thing or a bad thing right now? And why does Minghao look so conflicted? The blond taps Jihoon on the shoulder, interrupting his conversation with Soonyoung to ask him something and Mingyu watches them walk over to the fondue fountain near the snack bar. Whoops, looks like he gave Minghao the wrong cue.

“Where are they going?” Jun nudges Mingyu’s arm with his.

“Honestly? No idea.” He watches as the two just stand over there, eat crackers and chocolate, and talk every couple bites. Didn’t they just eat dinner? “But you should probably talk to him before the next game.”

“I can’t do that,” he whines, “Then it’ll really sound like I just wanted to,” he lowers his voice and looks around, “kiss him.”

“Do you not?” Mingyu’s a little baffled that Jun can’t come forward with his feelings; he’s such a hypocrite.
“Well- I mean- it’s not that simple!” Mingyu almost feels bad for giving Jun a hard time. He can see the pinch of panic behind his wide eyes and crestfallen expression, “I just- We’re just-,” he wheezes into his hands, “Jihoon is really precious to me, like I’m in the audience looking up to a celebrity on stage. He’s so cool and he’s managed to do so much- He’s like Superman and I’m just a citizen.”

Whoa there.

Mingyu’s never been good at giving serious talks like this, but he understands Jun a little bit. It’s hard not to dull in comparison to a star on stage, but Jun’s the one who finds curtain call as his homepage. He knows that Jihoon composes, that he has a sizeable following for what he does as a hobby, and that he works with a few big names in their area, but he didn’t think that Jun was a serious fanboy. That shouldn’t matter. On this sort of level, it doesn’t matter if you’re a fan or a superstar, you’re both still people, “Hey, you’ve done plenty as well. You’ve worked really hard to come as far as you have.”

“Sometimes your most just isn’t enough, y’know.” He reclines in his chair and plays with the silver cufflinks, “Someone like Jihoon is just in a league of his own.”

Mingyu huffs. Talking sense into Jun is stressing him out. It shouldn’t, but he doesn’t have much expertise in this area. Most of his friends over the years have been confident people; often humble, but sometimes cocky. They usually could stand up for themselves and confront their feelings head-on. Jun didn’t feel this way when he spoke with him at the café. Jun didn’t feel his way the first time they met either; when he squared Mingyu up in the locker room. However, today Jun feels like a glass flower, beautiful and delicate and small; easy to wither and shatter. He feels anxious as if one wrong word might bring his night and his date crashing down into a pool of nerves. “But I’ll talk to him when Minghao gets back.” He mumbles, “Sorry. I’m sure tonight isn’t what you signed up for.” A sheepish smile runs along his thin lips.

He puts a hand on Jun’s shoulder, shaking his frustrations into him playfully, “Minghao said he’d only invite me so I could suffer, so, no, I’m not getting what I signed up for. Where is my suffering?” as he’d hoped, the dancer chuckles at his words and pushes Mingyu off with his arm.

“I don’t think you’ll suffer much.” Jun slurs, propping his chin on his palm, “Minghao is your happy place, isn’t he?”

“Hm?”

“We kinda figured it out.” Figured what out? “You know that feeling,” his brow furrows trying to piece together the words, “when you’re in a decent sized room and there are a lot of people talking, chatting, having fun, being loud—sometimes you can play along, ride the waves—, but sometimes it gets overwhelming. Sometimes the world is just too much for one person to constantly face, so in this room-” he sighs, “Why are words so hard? Why don’t you speak Chinese? This would be easier to explain in Chinese.”

“Sorry.” Mingyu smiles, honestly trying to interpret everything that Jun’s saying the way he intends.

“Whatever, anyways, in this room sometimes you can’t handle mingling and standing in the center.” He outlines to walls of the ‘room’ with his hands, his full wineglass in the middle, “So, you go to the corner for a break, but it’s more than a break. It’s like relief, a breath of fresh air, peace, quiet, a place where no one has their eyes on you or- yeah.” He rotates the glass between his fingers and turns to look him in the eyes, “You’re Minghao’s corner.”
“Oh.” Is all Mingyu can manage to say because his chest and heart- his back and shoulders- his throat and his head— they all feel so warm and fuzzy. He feels absolutely elated, eyes tracing antilines of people until he reaches Minghao who is caught between a cookie, Jihoon, and two other people who are actively chatting with him about choreography. Feeling Mingyu’s gaze resting on him, Minghao glances over, shooting him a wide-eyed smile before shifting the weight on his feet and returning to the conversation.

“His mind jumps to you when he’s stressed out or if he’s had a rough day and—if I’m really honest—between you and me, I think to some level, you’re what’s keeping him going; keeping him afloat.” Jun asks for his attention, “He probably won’t tell you himself, but you mean a lot to him.”

Mingyu can’t help but look back at Minghao in his pinstriped dress shirt, with silvery, glittery accessories, and that red string around his wrist. Subconsciously, he picks at his own, “I know.”

“So why are you sitting here? Why aren’t you smoochin’ my best friend already?”

“Did someone say smoochin’!” Soonyoung leans over Jun’s lap to get a good look at both of them, face beaming with energy. He props both his elbows up on the table and squishes his cheeks between his palms, “Well? Smoochin’, yes? Continue as you were.”

“Uh.” Mingyu doesn’t know what to say, ears red and embarrassed. Wonwoo pulls on Soonyoung’s belt and gets him to sit back down in his seat, holding him there with his thumb through the back beltloop, “You’re one to talk about smoochies.”

“We’re not talking about smoochies.” Jun crosses his arms and looks away.

“What is this about smoothies?” Minghao, we’re not talking about smoothies, “I want a smoothie.” Let’s talk about smoothies.

“We should get smoothies on our way home.” Mingyu puts forward the idea in order to break the idea of anyone at the table kissing, “Do you know a place?”

“Penguin Shop!” Soonyoung yells.

Minghao looks over at him, acknowledging his choice, “Yeah, Penguin Shop.”

“Aaaannnd”, hello, Performance Studio.” Julia is carrying a cup of red pocky sticks, “Is everyone playing?”

“Yep!” Yixing, no.

“Okay! We’ll start here.” She hands a stick to Mingyu who is closest to her with Frank standing behind her with a ruler, “Whenever you’re ready.” Gingerly, Mingyu takes the strawberry-dipped biscuit between his fingers. He looks at Jihoon, then at Minghao who gives him an expectant look, before turning to Jun and shrugging. Holding the pocky carefully between his teeth, Jun leans in and makes a clean bite, none of that slow-munching bullshit. He’s clearly uncomfortable with it, too.

The result is an inch-and-a-half remaining which surprisingly places them within the top 10, but nowhere near number one. Scooting behind them, Julia hands a stick to Yixing and Minseok. Of course, being a real couple, they meet in the middle, snapping off a clean break, leaving nothing left, “Nothing to measure? Disqualified!” her voice is cheery. Ah, so that’s the trick. No wonder why not many people got onto the scoreboard.

Wonwoo and Soonyoung are next, but Soonyoung’s a little too excited and Wonwoo’s a little
too aggressive and because the blond holds the stick so tightly, when Wonwoo goes in thinking that they’ll meet halfway, he ends up getting jabbed in the back of the throat and gaggs. He snaps his mouth shut to turn to the side and cough, breaking the pocky prematurely and leaving almost a third of it intact. Soonyoung hits him on the chest, “Why?! We could have totally won that one.”

“Well excuse me for making this a team effort.” And the two start bickering. Ah, they really are married, aren’t they. Mingyu would have intervened, but it’s Minghao’s turn and he’s using his lips to hold the stick instead of his teeth, probably expecting that they won’t get very far. Jihoon gives Jun and Mingyu both a pointed look before he blinks slowly and locks his eyes onto Minghao. What’s he thinking about?

It starts as it’s supposed to.

Jihoon nibbling away, inching closer and Minghao holding as still as he can. When they’re close enough that their noses can touch, he sees the blond’s jaw clench as his eyes look up to the ceiling, avoiding contact with Jihoon. Mingyu’s sure he’s about to chew his bottom lip off watching those two, but he sees Minghao start leaning away. He’s uneasy.

He didn’t expect Jihoon to grab his collar and pull him closer and hold him in place until Minghao has to resort to holding the stick between his teeth to avoid having their lips touch. He can see the flesh of Minghao’s pink tongue poke out between his pearly whites as he uses it to push the cookie out as far as possible which isn’t that far considering that if Jihoon and Minghao had relaxed their mouths, it would be a full on-

The audio engineer breaks them apart, letting go of Minghao’s shirt, and Minghao spits out the itty-bitty piece of pocky for Frank to measure. Mingyu half-expects them to high-five and whoop, but they don’t. Jihoon coughs and gives Mingyu a vengeful smirk before his expression falls flat and he puts his hands in his pockets to wait for the results. Minghao, on the other hand, looks a little timid and guilty, shoulders shirked up a bit and his eyes drawing lines on the tablecloth.

It’s okay, Minghao, it’s just a game.

They’re currently in first place.

A game that they could possibly win!

Chapter End Notes

as per requested, the outfits.
But, of course, the table after them beats them by half a millimeter which is total bullshit because Mingyu’s pretty sure that the crumb fell on the floor and how do you measure half a millimeter accurately without the use of calipers? You can’t. Simple science says that you can’t. There are not enough significant figures to determine that the other team won and that Jihoon and Minghao didn’t- they were robbed.

With Jihoon unmotivated and Minghao sulky, there’s nothing else to do but wait for the next raffle and final game. Apparently, they do better at the summer dinner because it’s held up at Mount Lassen National Park and southern Oregonian dance companies join as well. According to Jun, it’s a more ‘wholesome’ experience and Mingyu believes him because running through inflatable obstacle courses, trust falls, and ziplines all sound more wholesome than this.

“Ugh.” Soonyoung stretches his arms on the table and pops his back, “When can I get out of this shirt and into some sweats?”

Wonwoo just chuckles and rubs his back. Soonyoung’s shirt doesn’t look uncomfortable, but it isn’t a t-shirt and it seems like Soonyoung only wants to be in t-shirts. He can’t comprehend how the two get dressed up every other weekend to go out on fancy dates with pressed shirts and flowers. Wonwoo must have to drag Soonyoung out kicking and screaming.

“Just one more game,” Yixing looks over, “and the social party if you’re staying for that.”

“Yeah,” he grumbles, “we’ll stay for some of that. I have some people to talk to, but Minghao and I have morning lessons to teach tomorrow.”

The raffle winner is called and claims box 5. That leaves one box, box 4, which Minghao and Jun claim is a bad omen if they get it. Mingyu softly kicks the blond under the table to get his attention and makes eyes towards Jun and Jihoon who are looking anywhere but at each other. Minghao sits up and shrugs, shaking his head and twiddling his thumbs over the tablecloth. Mingyu just kicks him again.

“What? Are you suffering yet?”

Mingyu leans forward, elbows on the table, and whispers, “Absolutely.”

“Good.” He shakes out his bangs and combs them out of his eyes with his hand, “That makes two of us.” He looks bored and probably a little too warm with a turtleneck and a dress shirt on. The whole room feels like it goes quiet, which is probably just Mingyu’s imagination since he’s getting lost in Minghao’s features. Screw Jihoon, he’s going to have eyes all he wants while Minghao isn’t watching him. How many chances will he get to see Minghao dressed up this nicely before their lives happen to pull them apart? Well, he certainly hopes he can make that number increase, “I hope the next game is something we’re good at. It’d be a shame to try so hard and not go home with anything.”

“Hey, Minghao.” He looks up at him, eyelids heavy. The studio guys are looking a little tired and they have work in the morning, too. Maybe they shouldn’t have come to this dinner party even if Mingyu is having the slightest bit of fun. Being with Minghao is fun. Skirting around Jihoon and Jun is a little fun, too. Maybe it’s hard to understand his take on the word, but Mingyu’s not having a bad time. He looks nice and he’s been complimented in passing. He was able to play games and get competitive without feeling like a massive disappointment if he lost; he supposes that the word for it
isn’t so much ‘fun’ as it is ‘recreational’, but with Minghao, it’s fun, “we should switch dates.”

An exaggerated gasp and mock surprised, “Wow. What a great idea. How come we didn’t think about that before. It’s almost like that should have been the plan from the get-go.” Now he knows that Jun and Jihoon are just ignoring them in favor of different conversations; Jihoon with Soonyoung and Yixing and Jun with his phone. He’s not even texting anyone, he’s just playing Bubble Mania. This is stupid. They’re all adults here! Just come out and say it, “Man, I sure hope no one suddenly decides to admit to some crazy misunderstanding.” Jazz-hands for good measure. Thanks, Minghao, they probably get the point, “It’d be totally horrible if someone were to intervene and free me of Jiho-Ow?”

Minghao’s eyes snap towards Jun who is sitting with his eyes pointed down at his locked screen. He’s sitting low in his chair, with his legs far enough under the table to give Minghao a solid kick to the shin, “Hey, he’s only a few days out of recovery.” Mingyu chides him.

“It’s fine, I went for the ankles.” He sits back up.

Julia taps her microphone at the podium, calling their attention, “I hope everyone’s having a good time. We’re going to start wrapping up the night. The bar is still open, but we’re cleaning up the snack station in the back, so grab some mozzarella balls while you can.” Ah, the wave of courtesy laughs, “Our last game of the night will start now. Every table please send your four closest guests up because we’re going to play a paper passing game.”

“Oh, fuck yeah.” Soonyoung stands up. Somehow, among the sea of tipsy drinkers and loudmouthed dancers, he doesn’t call any attention to himself, “We got this in the bag. Minghao, Jun, Jihoon. Up, up, up. Let’s do this.” Does he need to sound so militant?

“Do I really have to play?” Minghao shrinks back into his seat. Likewise, Jihoon visibly grips his in defiance.

“Yes, duh. We’re going to win one thing, just one, and it’s going to be this one.” Soonyoung is already over on their side of the table, pulling the two out of their seats and dragging them out onto the ballroom floor. If they weren’t so competitive, he might actually have to carry them, “Jun, you too.” Mingyu’s date cautiously stands up to follow. As he passes the table, he sends a helpless glance over his shoulder at Wonwoo and Mingyu. Yixing’s just all smiles watching his kids waddle off.

Mingyu stands up when Wonwoo does, if you ask him, it looks like the senior PT has entered ‘protective boyfriend mode’ and he follows him to the ballroom floor just to make sure no one fights. The audience watches from the perimeter, where Mingyu and Wonwoo wait with Jun, Minghao, Soonyoung, and Jihoon lined up in front of them in that order. Jihoon is fanning himself with the paper plate. Jun’s carding his fingers through a stack of cellophane hearts, giving each one a disgusted look before giving them another pleading look.

Maybe they should just save him.

They turn to listen to Julia’s rules up on the stage, but Soonyoung is looking directly at Mingyu and when he catches his attention he gives him finger-guns and a wink. What’s that for? Take that back, Soonyoung Kwon. The toot of an airhorn signals them to start and, oh, start they do.

Mingyu doesn’t think he’s ever seen four people not-kiss with such fervor. Jihoon receives every sheet with a robotic movement, pecking them off of Soonyoung’s lips and wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve right afterwards before receiving another.

Minghao, on the other hand, has his attention spread between two people. With Jun’s hand
grabbing his neck and Soonyoung’s hands balling fists into his shirt, the only expression Mingyu can read on his face is ‘yikes’. Even though Jun didn’t want to participate, it seems like he’s given up on that resolve and has decided that he might as well go all-out and get it over with because he’s crushing those hearts into Minghao’s lips with bruising amounts of strength. It’s Soonyoung that’s making Mingyu a little uneasy because while his grip is solid, his mouth movements are so soft.

Can... he not?

He knows they’re just friends and Soonyoung’s boyfriend is literally standing shoulder to shoulder with him right now, but geez, “Calm down, he just likes to put on a show.” Wonwoo sighs. Mingyu would calm down if Soonyoung didn’t look at him every time he not-kisses Minghao. Then again, maybe Wonwoo’s talking to himself more than he’s talking to Mingyu. Maybe it’s Mingyu that needs to keep Wonwoo calm since Soonyoung’s mouth always lingers for an extra half-second more than necessary.

They’re only fifty seconds into the two-minute contest when Minghao pushes Soonyoung off for a breath of air. When Julia says that there’s only a minute left, Soonyoung cues Jun to continue, jumping in his spot because he knows that the competition is going to be close. Mingyu didn’t think that they could go any faster, but at this breakneck pace, he’s more surprised that Minghao and Soonyoung’s necks haven’t snapped off especially with how roughly they’re manhandling each other. Minghao’s trying to pry Soonyoung’s hands from his shirt lest he rip it, but his other arm is trying to balance himself with Jun’s shoulder because he’s getting pushed and pulled so much.

It’s a relief when the airhorn toots again.

Minghao balls up his sleeves and wipes his mouth for no reason in particular, not like he has anyone’s spit on his lips like Soonyoung and Jihoon do, but the gesture is probably more mental than anything else. A volunteer comes by to count their slips and says the number into a walkie-talkie before continuing on to the next group. The four stand idly, looking around and chatting with other groups, Soonyoung’s arms slung around Jihoon and Minghao’s shoulders, balancing himself on one foot as they anxiously await the results.

“I’m going to the bathroom.” Wonwoo announces quietly before he slips through the crowd and out of the main room. Mingyu only watches him for a moment because once he closes the door, there’s an announcement to be made.

“And our winner of box 4, the last winners of the night—drumroll please,” and the hall collectively drums their hands and feet, “Performance Studio.”

Seeming to forget their distaste about playing the game, the four all jump in the air and cheer before fellow contestants swarm around and swallow them up, cheering as well.

“Have a good night everyone! DJ SweetStuff will be up here and she’s open to song requests. We’ll be shutting down at midnight, but feel free to party it up until then! And, once more, congrats to Performance Studio for making it to finals and representing Northern California!” she honks the airhorn a couple more times in celebration before hobbling off stage.

As the crowd dissolves into itself, covering the floor with conversations and laughter, out of the sea of bodies pops Minghao, running up to Mingyu, arms open for a big hug that Mingyu instinctually sweeps him up into, lifting him off the ground and swinging him in a circle once before setting him back on his feet, “You won!”

“We won!” the blond does a little jig as the music starts; unskilled, a little silly, high on victory—a grandpa dance if he’s ever seen one. Minghao’s so cute when he’s excited. Ah, Mingyu could
kiss him right here, right now with this big smiley face and his eyes sparkling like a kid in a candy store. He already has a hand at his waist, he could just pull him in-

Someone else in the crowd calls Minghao’s attention. Someone from somewhere else that Mingyu doesn’t recognize and Minghao hesitates before welcoming the greetings. Of course, Minghao is a busy person and he’s sure that he needs to talk dance and talk business.

That’s okay. Mingyu licks his dry lips, that’s okay.

Over the noise it’s hard to hear, so he pulls Minghao close by his arm and yells into his ear, “Where are Jun and Jihoon?”

Minghao’s breath tickles and he knows he shouldn’t get turned on by such casual things, but here he is, cheeks flushed, with the dancer’s lips so close, impossibly close, “Jun’s talking to some girls over at the Salsa Club and Jihoon went to the bar!”

“Okay! I’m going to go look for him.” If Mingyu can’t check off item number four off of his list of things to do by the end of the night, he’s at least going to get Jihoon and Jun to talk to each other. It might help to have a little more insight and all hope of finding Soonyoung is lost in the ocean of people. Damn his friends for being popular. The last resort is Wonwoo, then.

“Good luck! I’m going to talk to the guys over at Electric Dance,” Mingyu excuses himself to go, but Minghao pulls him back by his hand, briefly linking their fingers together. The whole room fades away. His ears tune out the music and the crowd, the lenses of his eyes turn until the only thing in focus is Minghao and his floppy, cheesy hair, “But after you find them, come find me. Okay?”

Mingyu debates—heavily debates—giving Minghao a peck on the cheek as a goodbye, but he can’t bring himself to do it. He just can’t. It’s not the right time, it’s not the right atmosphere. He’s short on time. He can see Jun talking to the Salsa girls over in the back of the room and it looks like their conversation is ending. Jun will probably return to the table soon.

Jihoon, if he is by the bar, would be harder to find than Wonwoo. Because Wonwoo is in the bathroom, he’ll be easy to locate, but he might be less than helpful. His brain is probably wired with Soonyoung and whatever beef he has with Jihoon. Who knows. Maybe it’s wiser to just go to the source, maybe he should just ask Minghao, but while he’s still tethered to his hand, Minghao’s already been forced into another conversation with people who are begging for his attention.

Alas, Mingyu gives Minghao’s hand a firm squeeze before they wave goodbye to each other and he ducks into the crowd.
Mingyu exits into the hallway.

The bar is to his right, the bathroom is to his left.

Jihoon. He picks, Jihoon.

Why? Because something tells him that Jihoon’s a straightforward person. He doesn’t bother with a lot of words. He gets to the point. Who needs a middleman when the main point is to get Jihoon and Jun to talk out their feelings and understand each other on a new level? Sorry, Wonwoo. As much as Mingyu is sure Wonwoo probably has a little more insight regarding the situation, he’s also sure that asking Wonwoo about Jihoon might spark some unneeded tension (and, thereby, uncheck goal two). Even though they’re friends, he doesn’t want to be entrusted with more emotional baggage right now. Any other time would be fine, but tonight is a night with clear goals. Soonyoung can deal with him when they cross that bridge into the car later.

The bar is crowded with people trying to order last minute drinks, packed full like a can of sardines. There are several reasons why Mingyu hasn’t set foot into a pub for the last couple years: one, it’s always full of tipsy people ready to make mistakes, two, it always smells bad, and three, it’s impossible to hear anything or find anyone.

Mingyu wades through the crowd, almost getting twenty dollars’ worth of alcohol poured on him when his elbow hits a couple making out on the couch. No thanks, no thanks. He shimmies up to the counter where someone offers to buy him a drink and he refuses. As he tiptoes to look over heads and ducks low to look past arms, someone else offers to buy him a drink. He refuses politely, continuing to look for Jihoon. He asks the bartender if she’s seen him, but she shakes her head likely because she can’t hear him and not because she hasn’t seen the audio engineer. Mingyu takes a deep breath before wading through the crowd again, pressed between bodies and being rubbed up against—intentionally or not—and popping out on the other side of the room.

It’s suffocating and dark and he hates it.

How hard is it to find one guy? The room isn’t even that big. The music is too loud and the air is too heavy.

He doesn’t know how Minghao survives social situations like this. There’s just so much stimuli that his brain is having a hard time staying focused. Since he can’t leave, all Mingyu wants to do is hide in the corner and have a breather. Unfortunately, every corner is already occupied with people. He combs the crowd one more time, passing glances over shoulders and between bodies. It’s impossible. Jihoon’s wearing black just like every other person in here and he doesn’t have the biggest presence. It’s like looking for a very pointy, prickly, grumpy needle in a haystack.

Eventually, he takes refuge between two barstools, leaning against the pub table scanning the room again when someone slaps his ass and takes a seat, “Hey, cutie, come here often?” the man cackles. Oh, god, he’s so drunk. Mingyu is and was ready to deck him but decides to be the bigger person and ignore him and walk away. He dreads the prospect of a fight, but the man is being an entire prick and has a hand reaching for Mingyu’s arm already.

A beer bottle intercepts the grotesque hands, kicking them out of the way with the butt of the glass, “He’s taken. Move along.” Jihoon slams the beer bottle down on the table as he boots the man out of his seat and takes it, resting his elbows on the rim of the table, feet dangling because they can’t
quite reach the floor. Mingyu opens his mouth to thank him, but Jihoon speaks first, “One joke about looking underaged and I’ll smash this bottle open on your skull.” He swings the bottle of Blue Moon back.

“I was going to thank you, but I’ll redact that statement.”

“You can’t redact something that you never put forward, but you’re welcome, I guess.” He sighs into another sip, “You get used to handling drunks when you have to work with them. At least it’s just alcohol and not cocaine.” Setting the bottle down, he gives Mingyu a hard stare, “Why are you here?”

“I came to look for you.”

“I meant, like, why did you come to this event.”

Mingyu feels the interrogation starting, but he refuses to let himself buckle and cower. Jihoon’s not the enemy. There is no enemy. He’s already passed 50% since the dancers won the last game, so he might as well shoot for a straight 100%. Fuck it. Even if Jihoon’s grumpy about tonight’s games and wants to antagonize him a bit, he won’t be swayed, “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.” He finally takes the barstool next to Jihoon, “Minghao invited me because Jun wanted to invite you and there was a little mix-up.”

“Yeah, I figured something like that happened.” So, Jihoon isn’t dense.

“And you haven’t said anything to Jun the whole night.” He tries to return Jihoon’s gaze with an equal amount of pressure, “Why? It’s not like I don’t like Jun, but you even said it yourself—we were on the wrong sides of the table.”

Jihoon nods and takes another swig, focusing his eyes on the napkin holder instead of Mingyu. He licks his lips before speaking, “I wouldn’t have come if Jun had— If Jun…” he seems to have a hard time finding the right words.

“You know Jun likes you. What’s so difficult about that?” Mingyu doesn’t know why, but he’s feeling bold, “Don’t you like him, too?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It can be if you just stopped looking like you want to murder someone and give him an opportunity to talk to you. Go talk to him now. Let’s switch dates before the night ends.”

He runs his nails between the grooves in the bottle’s neck, “Have you asked yourself the same thing, Mingyu? Why haven’t you or Minghao said anything to each other? Don’t we have the same reasons?” the expression he gives Mingyu is open and docile, while serious. He wants an honest answer, “We have different lines of work. We have different personalities. We have different goals and different means of getting there.”

“That’s not all there is to it, is there.”

Jihoon shakes his head, “Those four.” Jihoon holds up four fingers, “Soonyoung,” he puts down his pointer, “Chan,” his middle finger, “Minghao,” his ring finger, “and Jun.” he keeps his pinky up, looking at it for the longest moment before picking its nail with his thumb, “Sometimes they’re insufferable idiots who recklessly push their limits to the breaking point, but, ultimately, they’re people who have been dealt a bad hand and work hard to make the best of it. If you ask Jun, he’ll say he’s had it the easiest of the four. His hand isn’t as bad. His life wasn’t as hard. But he takes that as a reason to downplay all his efforts. He works so hard and the luck of the draw always
shortchanges him without fail. If he had a little more confidence here, a little more pride there… And I can’t sugarcoat things—that’s just not who I am as a person—, but I feel like I always have to watch my words with him. It’s as if the smallest critique might send him spiraling into a depression.” Jihoon starts tapping his nails against the bottle with a rhythmic pattern. Is now really the time to compose? “Sorry, I must be rambling.”

The air between them falls quiet for a minute—well, as quiet as it can get, “Is he a burden to you, then?”

“No, never.” the way he sets down the now-empty bottle tells Mingyu that he’s said something wrong, pushed his luck a little too far, “Jun’s self-confidence is delicate like it’s a ball balanced on pinheads. Too much pressure and it pops and deflates, not enough pressure and it’ll fall and roll away. What I’m trying to say is that he doesn’t need me ruining that balance. He’s doing so well. He does so much. His heart is so big and full of so many people and I know if I asked, he would wiggle people over and make room for me to stretch it out even more; maximize its capacity.” He sniffs to nudge the tense words between them.

“Then do so, Jihoon. He’s only a few yards away. Go in there and set things right!”

He shakes his head, “I’m a selfish person, Mingyu,” he picks up a napkin and starts ripping it into little strips, “I’m a selfish person. I can’t sit still with the idea of occupying just that little fraction of his heart.” Dramatic much? “I can’t… a heart has its limits. If I’m included, it’s guaranteed to break.”

He takes the bottle away from Jihoon and checks the alcohol content. He knows people sometimes get oddly poetic when they’re buzzed, but he doubts the 5.4% is enough to do anything especially if it’s his first bottle. Regardless, he tosses it into the busboy’s bucket for recycling, “Okay, Jihoon. I’m going to be really frank with you. You got mad at me for making Jun slightly uncomfortable and got revenge by making Minghao curdle. If you’re already like this, then I’m here to inform you that you’re whipped.”

“And you’re not?”

“I’m-”

“Doesn’t matter, you are.” He piles all the little shavings into a small mound, “I’m going to go out on a limb here.” Mingyu nods, “You know about the four of us, right? Our past, that stuff.” Mingyu nods and wiggles his hand in the air. He sort of knows, “Wonwoo really did a number on Jun’s heart and I can’t forgive him for that. The idea that it might be me who has to break Jun’s heart in the future—well, I don’t know if I’d be able to forgive myself for that either.”

“That’s a cowardly excuse.” Mingyu doesn’t know why he feels frustrated, “Sure, you might end in a break-up, but isn’t that everything? Everything has the potential to stop short of forever, but if you don’t go and talk it out with him, then you’ll absolutely lose your shot at forever. From what I’ve seen, Jun’s not as delicate as you make him out to be, that’s probably just your rose-tinted glasses. He stands up for what he believes in and the people he loves and you’re probably one of those people. You don’t have to ask for a space in his heart, you already have one. So, what’s stopping you from claiming that spot?”

Jihoon gives him an annoyed look, like something he’s saying just isn’t getting through to Mingyu’s brain, but Mingyu’s been around the block a time or two, he knows these insecurities already, he knows about the doubt and all those reasonings and he doesn’t want Jun and Jihoon to be each other’s the-one-who-got-away. That aches more than rejection does, “Have you ever seen Jun’s choreography?” Mingyu nods. He’s seen Jun dance, that counts, right? “That’s how we met back in
high school.” Wait. That’s not right. Mingyu pauses and furrows his brow, thinking about events chronologically. Soonyoung and Jihoon were together when college started. Jun had just moved to the country. He wasn’t even on the same continent, “Well, maybe not met-met, but that’s beside the point. Jun’s growth since then has been exponential. Without realizing it himself, he’s become so experienced and so much. It’s hard to explain, but have you ever been to a concert, stood in a crowd, and looked up to the stage to see someone so captivating and amazing that you can’t help but think that you’ve amounted to so little in the time that you’ve been following them?” That sounds uncannily familiar, “He’s a star with such a soft and warm glow and his love for everyone in his audience is so balanced and fair, I can’t be the nobody who demands more of it. That’s just not my posi-”

“Can you shut up for just, like, one minute.” Mingyu combs an impatient hand through his hair. His crass words seem to have done the job. “I’m just-” he huffs, “You and Jun literally have the same opinion of each other and it’s ridiculous that I’m even sitting here having this conversation with you. Let’s go.” He’s done. He doesn’t care about Jihoon’s worries anymore. This is a fucking sign if he’s ever seen one. He grabs Jihoon’s sleeve to tug him along.

The musician tugs back, refusing to walk, “Go where? I’m not going anywhere.”

“Going to talk to Jun who has been sitting on his hands all night because he thinks that you’re a big, stupid star in the sky, too- or, no- what did he say? Oh, right, he said that you were Superman and he was just a nobody citizen.” He continues to pull Jihoon out of the room, this time with success because the shorter man follows with little, hesitant steps.

If the room was any louder, Mingyu surely wouldn’t have heard him mumble, “Humans can do amazing things, too.”

He stops at the bar door and looks at Jihoon, “Do you think that artists can amount to anything without their audience cheering them on?”

The only difficult part about returning to the ballroom was pulling Jihoon through the door, that and all the buzzed people from the bar who had followed them out as it shut down for the night.

He seriously thought that the guy would bolt when he told Jun that Jihoon had something to talk to him about. Bless Jun and his unassuming heart for warmly accepting the invitation to go and chat outside in the back garden. He’s almost a hundred percent sure that it was Jun’s naivety. The skittish man would have probably found some excuse to avoid the situation if he had any idea that Jihoon liked him that much.

Jihoon and Jun’s issue aside, he sees that Wonwoo and Soonyoung are off on the side talking to another two couples. Soonyoung is doing most of the talking, but Wonwoo doesn’t seem unhappily quiet. He does, however, have his left hand stitched to Soonyoung’s back in some way. Whether it’s in his back pocket, on his waist, his shoulder, or on his back, it doesn’t look like he’ll be letting go anytime soon. The room is still pumping and bumping with music. It is upbeat, but only a few people are dancing. Most are just tapping and swaying to the beat. Mingyu wouldn’t mind escaping to anywhere a little more his pace, but he did promise to come back and find Minghao.

So, here he goes, finding another person lost in a sea of people.

Thankfully, it doesn’t take him long to see the blond caught between three conversations in the middle of the floor. It’s almost as if he has a Minghao-homing signal in his gut because it takes him only a fraction of the time compared to finding Jihoon in the small bar. Feeling Mingyu’s eyes on
him again, Minghao perks up and turns around, scanning everywhere until he’s spotted. Quickly, he excuses himself and makes a beeline for Mingyu. He doesn’t even stop. He takes his hand and walks past him, pulling him along until they’re out of the main floor where everyone is chatting and trading business cards. They don’t go back to the table, but to the now-empty snack bar, barely pressing their butts against the vacant surface.

“Hold still for a second.” Mingyu does as told, crossing his hands in front of him, still keeping hold of Minghao’s hot fingers. He doesn’t expect the latter to lean into his side and rest his head on his shoulder. He exhales and inhales deeply a couple times with his eyes shut.

“You okay?” Mingyu uses his free hand to brush Minghao’s bangs out of his eyes. Minghao nods, rubbing his cheek on Mingyu’s arm. His heart feels like it’s constricting.

“Yeah. After you left people were coming up to us nonstop asking about finals and the choreography we have planned and about work and about students and about life. It was a lot.” It doesn’t seem like Minghao wants to let go and Mingyu’s ready to hold his hand for as long as he wants, “So, thanks for finding me.” He looks up at Mingyu, cheek still pressed against him, “Did you talk to Jihoon?”

“Yeah,” he chuckles, “it was a long talk. I didn’t take him for the emo-junior-high-poetry type, but I guess you can’t judge a book by its cover.”

“Good. Between all the commotion, I talked to Jun for a little bit, too.” He closes his eyes again. Mingyu wanted to look into them for a little bit longer, can he please open them again? “I hope they work things out.”

“Me too.”

Mingyu doesn’t need to reflect on his words with Jihoon to know that Jihoon was wrong about them having the same reasons for not spewing their confessions. They’re different people and not every relationship is created equal. Not every person has the same way of expressing how they feel. He doesn’t know if the straightforward approach will be good for Jun and Jihoon’s relationship—romantic or otherwise—, but in this moment he could care less.

Minghao is his date now.

Minghao is his date for however many more minutes this exhaustingly fun party will be.

“Don’t fall asleep.” He hums.

Jihoon was wrong. Jihoon was wrong. Mingyu has never worried about breaking Minghao’s heart. Jihoon was wrong.

“I’m not.” Is that Minghao trying to speak cutely? His intonations are a little funny, but Mingyu can’t fight his own smile, “Just recharging a little.” It’s been a long day for him. It’s been a long day for Mingyu, too. He would give most things to be able to curl up and nap with Minghao in bed or on the couch—even in his car if that was the last resort—, but standing with him in this room of people will suffice.

With Minghao, the world is a little quieter. It’s like his presence acts like a sound buffer and Mingyu welcomes this little change in focus. He’s still in his body, he’s still present, but when he’s with Minghao, he can feel alive without being force-fed adrenaline.

Is this what Jun meant by being Minghao’s corner?
He looks down at Minghao and his short lashes and his cute ears and his round nose and his dry lips and his hair that was less frizzy thirty minutes ago and his mind is at ease. He relaxes into their contact, feeling the slight weight of Minghao leaning against him and their hands that have been linked together for the longest time to date.

Maybe because his head is muddled with good feelings or because this night has been enjoyably exhausting, he drops a few of his inhibitions and presses a warm kiss to the crown of Minghao’s hair.
He lets his lips linger for a few seconds—blowing a puff of hot air into his locks—before he
backs up to meet eyes with Minghao, suddenly feeling a little less bold, but just as giddy. The half-
smile, half-pout on Minghao’s lips is deliciously sweet and Mingyu would have leaned in for a taste
if he hadn’t become increasingly aware of someone in the crowd calling for Minghao to come and
dance. Yes, before anything else, this is a work-related conference and Minghao’s technically on the
clock right now even if the night has been spent playing insufferable games.

Minghao giggles, pressing his forehead to Mingyu’s shoulder. He sighs and almost sounds
disappointed, slurring a lazy “duty calls.” before turning and waving at the person at the perimeter of
the dancefloor, but it’s Mingyu who doesn’t want to let go this time.

He holds Minghao’s hand, keeping him in his place—not that he tugs or pulls. In fact, he
comes right back to Mingyu’s side the second he feels resistance and gives him that wide-eyed
patient stare. Ah, that face. It’s always a little expectant, a little uncertain, but Mingyu still doesn’t
know what it means when their eyes meet like that. It’s probably best to let Minghao take the lead.

“Do you wanna come?” Mingyu nods, “Can you dance?” He shakes his head, “Do you want
me to teach you how to dance?” hesitates before he nods, “Did you forget how to speak?” Mingyu
doesn’t know why he’s picking now to act cute, but he can get used to this. He can feel his lips curl,
exposing his teeth. It’s a little nice to feel like a kid again.

“Fair warning, I have no rhythm.” He follows Minghao through the crowd and to a little
pocket of space where they aren’t too close to anyone in particular. Mingyu has plenty of room to
make a fool of himself and part of him worries about looking like a fool in front of Minghao, but,
hey, he’s already been leaking snot in front of him, been practically naked next to him, been covered
in mud and soaking wet in his home. Dancing with stiff limbs isn’t anything new.

Minghao lets go of his hand to face him, “So, let’s just get a feel for the beat.” His hands wave
in the air, oscillating with the tempo, controlling Mingyu like a puppet on strings. Mingyu can do that
much, bobbing his head in time with the bass and rocking his body slightly, “Okay, okay.” Minghao
cheers him on and Mingyu starts putting his hips and shoulders into it. While he isn’t the only person
learning how to dance in the room, he knows he definitely looks like an embarrassing dad right now,
but Minghao’s smiling and that’s all that matters.

He leads him through a simple step motion, going one move at a time, switching sides and
having Mingyu follow suit. The ankle flares are difficult to nail and he understands why Minghao
could have easily gotten a leg injury doing this as a career, but the blond nods in approval as he
fumbles and flails into his ‘top rock’. Whatever that is. He probably looks more like a car dealership
inflatable than an embarrassing dad.

“Looks more like an Apache Step,” he didn’t catch when Soonyoung arrived at Minghao’s
side, elbow propped up on his shoulder, kick-standing against him, “but I’ll let it go since you’re a
newbie.”

With Wonwoo watching over them from the side, Soonyoung and Minghao teach him how to
cross step and even though he’s still stumbling a bit, he’s told he looks better than some of the more
tipsy guests (barely better) and Minghao even teaches him a very basic, very slow corkscrew move,
“You’re getting… somewhere.” He shakes his head with a laugh and straightens up Mingyu’s posture with his hands.

“Minghao!” someone from across the floor calls to him and he looks up from his student and waves. The person waves back and beckons him over.

“Ooh, Allegra Movement.” Soonyoung nudges him under the ribs, urging him to go, “Maybe they’re trying to recruit you.” Minghao raises an eyebrow and gives him a doubtful look.

“You should go if it’s a job op.” Mingyu pushes Minghao along as well. Allegra Movement—he heard in passing—was the biggest studio at the conference, the one with the most students and awards until recent years when Performance Studio started carving their way into the rankings thanks to their credible staff and unique teaching environment. Their studio is also on the border between Central and Northern California which is why they were a bit of a surprise, special guest for the night.

Minghao’s feet are sticking to the floor before he drops his smile and inches away, finally taking quick strides to cross the room. Mingyu can still see him through a gap in the crowd where the speakers are loudest and people are avoiding the ear damage. Soonyoung distracts him by drumming on his shoulder, “Yo, you should learn a new move and impress Minghao when he gets back.” And he doesn’t want to seem like a five-year-old ready to impress their blacktop crush, but here he is eagerly learning how to do a knee drop. Why everyone says Soonyoung’s a mean teacher is a mystery to him because this dance instructor is all giggles and loud yodels when Mingyu gets something even remotely correct.

“Am I actually doing well or are you just being nice?”

His smile doesn’t falter, “Just being nice.” Wonwoo shoves him, “No, you’re not terrible, but do you know how to dance anything? Like any other styles?” Mingyu shakes his head, “Not even, like, slow dancing?” he shakes his head again with a sheepish smile, “How did you survive prom?” he shrugs. Well, he didn’t really dance during prom. Minghao knows that. He guesses that’s something he didn’t tell Soonyoung about him, “Whatever, whatever, keep practicing, Hao’s coming back.”

Mingyu looks over his shoulder to see Minghao waving something off and backing up. They’re all smiles, but Minghao’s body language says that he’s not comfortable. He can tell by the way his fingers rub together like he’s trying not to hold a fist and how his head is slightly ducked. It’s obvious that they won’t start a tussle or anything like that, but Minghao’s fight or flight instinct is kicking in and Mingyu wants nothing more than to shimmy across the room, do some ridiculous spin, make Minghao laugh, and remove him from the situation.

He’s already on his way back over, so Mingyu resumes his steps, following Soonyoung and Wonwoo who is likely recording the ordeal on his phone.

A few dancers from Allegra Movement follow behind Minghao and for a second Mingyu thinks that they’re going to try and talk to him again, but all they do is start shouting for the DJ to put something new on and get the crowd hyped up. Of course, what kind of dance conference is complete without a dance party? Minghao turns on his heel the second the beat picks up and peeks into the circle of people, tempted to join them.

“Oh, breakers,” Soonyoung shakes his head, putting a hand on Mingyu’s shoulder and pulling him close, “always so showy.”

“Aren’t you a breakdancer, too?”
“Nope- Well, not usually.” He thinks for a second, “I’d like to think of myself more as a performer who uses dance as his main medium of communication. I do a lot of styles! Hao can, too! We do a lot of contemporary stuff, but Minghao’s the only one at the studio with roots in breaking. It’s in his heart, in his soul.” Mingyu laughs at Soonyoung’s exaggerations, “It’s his specialty, didn’t you know?” he shakes his head, “He teaches hip-hop, but if any of the students want to learn how to break, they go to see B-Boy Infinite over there.”

“How cool.”

“I think you mean Hao cool.” Wonwoo crosses his arms and watches Mingyu dance. While he was worried that he and Soonyoung had gotten into a little spat, he guesses not. Maybe Wonwoo just really had to use the bathroom. They did serve lobster bisque as an appetizer and he’s pretty sure that Wonwoo had a couple sips before asking a volunteer what it was. The bad puns tell Mingyu that the guy isn’t as sour as he was earlier at least.

“Wanna go watch them?”

Minghao is fighting to tear himself away from watching all the people dancing in the middle of the growing ring of dancers in the middle of the floor in front of the DJ’s speakers. He takes two steps towards them and one step back to see whoever jumped into the center for their round. He’ll shuffle a little bit, but his eyes are always pulled back to the action there.

“Sure.”

When they arrive, there’s a little bit of relief on Minghao’s face, “Hey.”

“So, what did Thomas Greene and Jonelle Okoye want with you?” Soonyoung slings an arm over Minghao’s shoulder. The two company owners in question are jamming on the opposite side of the circle, excitedly cheering people on as they strut into the spotlight.

“Oh, they just asked if I wanted to start this.” He gestures around them, “But I told them I was recovering.” A particularly cool trick is shown and the crowd roars. It’s loud and everyone is bumping and swaying to the beat, but Mingyu wants to shuffle past Soonyoung and Wonwoo and wedge himself next to Minghao. He could use a corner right about now.

Someone shoves past them and takes center stage—oh lord, it’s the bar guy.

He starts trotting around the crowd, waving his arms and getting everyone hyped up, motioning the DJ to raise the BPM before doing some fancy footwork and a death drop. The crowd goes wild, when he twists his legs in the air and gets up without his hands, springing into a show-stopping move. Based on the crowd, he learns it’s a ‘double x-out’, well, that explains the midair spread-eagle position.

“Ba-bam!” He croons when he lands, “That was for you, mister tall, tan, and handsome.” The wink and finger guns make Mingyu want to puke. Soonyoung bursts into laughter, scoffing at the drunk man’s words before double-taking to his side because Minghao is gone.

Mingyu scans the crowd for him before someone on the side hollers, “B-Boy Infinite’s back!” Upon further inspection, it’s the Allegra Movement owners that are checking him out and cheering him on—they and the rest of the room.

Minghao makes some sort of gesture at the man from the bar, a ‘this challenge is for you’ type of gesture, and Mingyu’s heart flutters just a little before it is immediately grounded when he understands that it means Minghao’s about to pull some stupidly difficult move out of his ass. The
blond moves like jagged, winter winds, sweeping the floor with his legs, spinning on his hands, freezing with his legs in the air, and setting up a string of moves leading up to a soft drop that ends in some spectacular hands-free flip, “Whoa, a cork shuriken hyper hook after all that?! Are you fucking kidding me?”

At least three people say that.

Mingyu’s first mental reaction is to call everyone who just said that a massive nerd. This isn’t some episode of Naruto even if Minghao’s popping off the ground like an actual cartoon ninja- sorry, anime ninja.

“That was risky.” He’s pretty sure that Soonyoung didn’t intend for him to hear that, but based on his expression, he’s more worried than he is excited for Minghao’s victory. Wonwoo’s hand rubs a few circles into his back, but the action goes unnoticed. The senior dance instructor anxiously grinds his teeth on his thumb nail when Minghao goes back in for a third round after waiting on the opposite end of the ring. The idiot from the bar isn’t backing down either and each move is ended with some sort of gross gesture towards Mingyu. Mingyu isn’t even paying attention, his eyes are on Minghao, not even Minghao’s stage presence, but his body, his stats. He’s looking for signs of pain, discomfort, anything that might point towards an injury.

The two go at it again for a fourth and fifth round and the crowd is continuously impressed with their moves. His date is starting to sweat, but he’s not showing any signs of backing down. Mingyu doesn’t really know how Minghao has the stamina for all of that hoopla. What is even happening? It looked really cool, but did he just defy gravity, like, seven times? Even after landing a stunt like that, he’s impressed that anyone would even be able to stand.

Unfortunately, it doesn’t end there.

Where’s Jihoon with his beer bottle when he needs him?

He’d really hoped that Minghao would call it quits after landing a consecutive string of ‘air flares’ all the way around the ring, but he follows it up with a ‘butterfly switch hyper hook’- who the hell names these things? These all sound like fake names. This performance is certainly unreal.

Even more unfortunately, the man puts all his energy into his final move, a real showstopper sequence of locks, isolations and large movements. Whatever the fuck it is, Mingyu doesn’t know how Minghao will top it. The man springs into a backflip, twisting in the air and moving his legs in a way that make it appear like he’s running. Mingyu’s only seen moves like that in the movies.

Soonyoung shakes his head. He explains that Minghao’s last move was more technically advanced while less showy and the crowd is likely cheering so loud because they don’t really know what makes the technique so difficult. Mingyu doesn’t really understand either, but something he does understand is that Minghao’s looking a little worn. They had worked all morning and they should’ve gone to bed at least an hour ago, but, no, Minghao’s going to do something stupid, isn’t he.

His blond comes over to Wonwoo’s blond and whispers something in his ear as the man from the bar eggs the crowd on, basking in his premature win. It makes Mingyu jump when Soonyoung pushes Minghao back, “Hao, no way. You’re going to break, literally.” He grabs his sleeve, trying to stop him from returning to the ring. His patient doesn’t even pass him a glance. That’s a little concerning.

“Fuck it.” No, Minghao, don’t ‘fuck it’, sit still, sit down, take a rest, “Let’s go.”
“But-” he looks at Mingyu for assistance, probably hoping that he would stop Minghao in some way, but Minghao calls Soonyoung’s attention back to him with a firm hand on his shoulder.

“You have my back, don’t you?” The way he says it isn’t to evoke sympathy. This is the return of a sinful Minghao with poison laced between his words. He’s not happy. He’s not having fun.

That wasn’t a question, that was a command.

So much for Soonyoung being the leader of the dance team. He passes Mingyu and Wonwoo a helpless look as he follows his friend out into the center of the ring and rolls up his sleeves. They both take a couple seconds to feel out the beat before jumping into some rehearsed number, maybe some default combo that they’ve been through before. Minghao does a running handspring and Soonyoung braces himself. Jumping in the air and kicking off of Soonyoung’s waist, he launches into the air, suspending himself and completing three spins before landing on his feet, immediately dropping to an elbow with the bass following right behind him like a wave, and executing a sweeping spin-kick as the song plateaus.

It’s finally clear that Minghao wins (along with Soonyoung) because the crowd collapses in on itself and swallows up the dancers whole.

Wonwoo and Mingyu are pushed to the outer rings as the colony of dance instructors goes absolutely wild over the completed battle. It’s probably their natural adrenaline and a little bit of alcohol that’s the cause for such unprofessional behavior, but regardless of what it is, Wonwoo and Mingyu feel a little out of place.

They retreat to the table only to see that Yixing and Minseok have gone, leaving a little note on the unopened gift box; ‘Have fun, kids! See you at work on Monday. XOXO, Xing and Min.’ Looking back at the crowd, it doesn’t look like Minghao and Soonyoung will be able to escape anytime soon.

“It’s getting late.” Wonwoo yawns, “Good thing they didn’t take forever to win.”

Mingyu doesn’t care. He’s not happy.

No one else caught it, but he did—the little, tiny falter in the smooth movement that Minghao made when he swept his leg for the last move. It could have been nothing but a bad landing, but Mingyu’s almost positive that it was discomfort or pain.

Reckless, that’s what it was, reckless.

Minghao is reckless with zero foresight for the consequences of those actions—why is it so damn loud in here?

Okay, so he’s not mad per say, but he isn’t okay with Minghao throwing himself around willy-nilly for something so small and petty. A big part of him is (regretfully) grateful that Minghao was so ready to throw-down with someone who had their eyes on him, but at the same time he just really dreads the prospect of seeing Minghao hurt again. It’s not worth it. Cat calls happen, unwelcome advances happen, they’re not to be overlooked, but Mingyu’s an adult who can say no and who can fend off unwanted hands.

Then again, he didn’t.

Is that what made Minghao upset?
He didn’t think much of it; drunk people are drunk. They’re under the influence of alcohol and stupid things happen. He should have made his rejection a little more evident, but even then, something tells him that Minghao would have probably still jumped into the ring. He’s scrappy like that.

There’s still a lot of fight in him, just like in high school; a fire behind his eyes when he’s challenged. He’s not the type to be walked over, not the type to bow or cower until he’s forced to. That part of Minghao hasn’t changed. Even though it was a part of him that Mingyu only heard of through the grapevine, it’s a part of him that he’d hoped he’d only have to see when eating spicy food or playing video games.

At least, he’s outgrown using his fists.

“Earth to Mingyu?” Wonwoo waves a hand in front of his face.

“I’m good.” He blinks himself back into reality, “I’m good.” He repeats it one more time to make sure he’s completely there, “I’m going to take a breather in the hallway. It’s a little loud in here.” Mingyu rubs his eyes.

“Sure.” The senior PT gives him a onceover, he’s not sure what for, but he does it quickly before smiling and patting him on the back, “He’s fine, don’t worry.”

But he’s going to worry.

This is Minghao we’re talking about, Mingyu’s going to worry.

Chapter End Notes

double x-out
cork shuriken hyper hook
air flares
butterfly switch hyperhook
quadruple flash kick
triple full
Dropping his coat off on the back of his seat, Mingyu moseys out of the ballroom. It’s stuffy and loud and he just suddenly doesn’t feel like he belongs.

Ha.

Mingyu Kim, in a place where he doesn’t belong? That’s new. Sure, he hasn’t gone out in over a year and a half and he only talks to a handful of people regularly, but Mingyu can usually find a way to fit in. Whether it was Jungkook and his frat friends or the clinic and all its mischief, he could whittle away at himself until he fit nice and snuggly between everyone else even if he has to deviate from his normal personality.

For some reason, this dance conference is just a place he can’t easily acclimate to.

They’re informal while it’s supposed to be formal. He doesn’t know what the boundaries are or what the norms are in this sort of social circle. He doesn’t know why Soonyoung keeps bouncing back and forth between carefree and careful. He doesn’t know why he can’t get the pacing just right and read these passion-driven people. It’s frustrating. He wants to have a good time. He wants to have a good time. No, he did have a good time. He did laugh and he did have fun, but it’s not as satisfactory as he thought it would be. He completed everything on his list—like he had to do—, but he doesn’t feel fulfilled and that’s exasperating, too.

He rolls his sleeves up in an attempt to cool down faster. Who knew that doing almost nothing in a room full of people and no AC could make you overheat so quickly? It’s as if the heat is set under his skin, pooling hot in his veins. Thankfully, the dark of the hallway already eases him back to normal temperatures. The blue light of the moon would be more beautiful if they cut the dim, fake candle lights off the wall and cleaned the floor-to-ceiling windows of cobwebs and calcified rainwater. That’s not the point. The point is to cool off. Cool off, calm down.

Maybe it’s all just new.

Maybe it’s all just new and he needs more experience in order to adequately adapt. He remembers coming in to work the first day and adapting to Dr. and Dr. Hong’s work environment and listening to their son who was just a couple years his senior with no formal knowledge of the field. He remembers adapting to dorm life and living with others and having a roommate and how to cope with how disorganized some people just are. Yeah, yeah, okay, it just takes time. He guesses. Time.

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The wall is nice and chilled against his back, even if the trim digs into his butt a bit.

At least the hallway is quiet and empty. Most people are still inside trying to squeeze the most out of tonight’s festivities and hang out with their friends, trade business cards, do work. After Minghao’s stunt, he must be getting a hundred-and-one propositions to demonstrate at different studios. What pressure it must be to have your portfolio and your body be the same thing. Is that a strain? Is that healthy? Mingyu can clock out, leave his badge at the front desk, and drive away from the clinic and while Minghao can do the same with the studio… well, he guesses it isn’t that different, but Minghao just seems so much more in-tune with his work.

He feels like Minghao doesn’t even take sick days.

His work is his livelihood. Leaving it would mean leaving something that makes him happy,
right? It’s why he uproots and moves for work. He thrives on adapting to new situations and places. Hell, he probably thrives on the exciting instability. Can Mingyu do that? Can Mingyu do that if they… now he’s just rambling in his head. He must be tired. His thoughts aren’t making sense anymore and he’s getting ahead of himself. Minghao’s an adult, he knows his limits and he knows how to handle work and how to handle himself.

But, still.

If Soonyoung has to tell you ‘no’ and says that something is risky, then it’s probably wiser to not do it. He has his guesses as to why Minghao did what he did, some of which he indulges in, but most of which he wishes weren’t done by default. C’mon, Minghao. You have a competition to win in a week. Flipping around like the solid ground is a trampoline shouldn’t be a priority. What if he really did get hurt again? Over something so trivial and simple, too. More so than Mingyu thinks about helping him through recovery and blaming himself for not intervening when he could have, he’s aching.

Minghao could really be in pain right now.

Minghao could be gritting his teeth, unable to stand.

Minghao could be trying to limp out of that crowd with only Soonyoung to help him.

Minghao could be needing Mingyu to come and sweep him off his feet.

Minghao could-

Whatever.

Minghao’s an adult and he can take care of himself. He… can take care of himself, right?

He runs his hands through his hair. Whatever.

The effort he put into it earlier in the day has worn off by now. It’s flopping around since the gel has lost its grip, but it’s still slightly holding its place. A shower and his bed sound like heaven right now, not to mention he has to wake up and meet Soonyoung and Wonwoo at the animal shelter to introduce them to some cats. Ugh. Would it be rude to reschedule for the afternoon? Probably, especially since it sounds like Soonyoung will be coming in between classes. Maybe he ought to invite Minghao. If Soonyoung is free, then he could be free, too.

Hm, but with how salty he feels right now, does he really want to invite Minghao?

Yes.

Yes, he does.

“Hey, come back! They want to talk to you!”

“Bathroom!” and Minghao scrapes everyone off with the French doors leading into the ballroom, shutting it behind him and taking a deep breath before coming in search of Mingyu. He looks down the opposite end of the hall first before picking the correct direction, squinting in the dim lighting. He legs make quick work of the carpeted floor, closing the distance between them almost too soon. Minghao reads his body language immediately and slows his pace, stopping a few steps further away than normal, “Hey, is everything okay?”
“Yeah.” Mingyu nods, trying to hold a neutral face. He just really wants to go home. It’s been a long night. As much as Minghao looks like he needs a corner, Mingyu just doesn’t have the energy to be one right now.

He takes a step closer, “Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” He tries to pull off an incredulous look, but is also pretty sure it isn’t working. “I’m okay.”

“Mingyu,” he raps his fingertips against his thumb a few times, fighting the urge to do something, “you can tell me. Talk to me. Something is bothering you.” his eyes dart around the wall, outlining Mingyu, but not landing on him.

He licks his lips, grinds his teeth on them, and sighs with his gaze rolling to the patterns in the carpet, “I guess I’m just a little tired. It’s almost eleven and I’m up way past my bedtime.” Not that he sleeps at that time normally.

Minghao shifts the weight on his feet, from his left to his right, “Let’s gather the guys and go then.” He notices Mingyu noticing and a bloated silence hangs in the air between them, “Are you mad?”

How can Mingyu be mad when he says it so softly? Curse you, Minghao, and your disarming voice, “I wouldn’t say mad.”

“Disappointed?” he shakes his head, “Exhausted?” he shakes his head, “Worried?” he nods, “I’m fine, Mingyu.” He does a cute little jig in time with the garbled music in the background just to prove that there’s no damage done, “See?” he even does a little hop and a spin, “Fine.” but when he stops, Mingyu can tell that his hip is slightly akimbo, his weight is unbalanced.

Against his better judgement, he takes a big step forward, closing the gap between them, and hooks one arm behind Minghao’s thighs and one under his armpits and hoists him off the ground. Minghao’s first reflex is to wrap his arms around Mingyu’s neck to prevent himself from falling, but there is a little protest in the uneasy noise that slips past his teeth. Seungcheol did sort of knight him with the duty to take care of his ‘son’. He’s just doing what he’s told, but, damn, Minghao might be considerably light, but Mingyu is by no means in shape.

“You can put me down. Don’t throw out your back.” Minghao laughs and pats Mingyu on the shoulder, “Seriously, I’m fine.”

“The truth, if you will.” Mingyu tries his best to hide the strain in his voice.

“Alittlesore, but that’s okay, just put me down. You’re going to keel over.”

To avoid further injury, he bends over puts him back on the ground, but Minghao keeps his hand at his shoulder, casually closing the space between them. They’re okay, they’re not fighting or arguing. There’s no malice or passive aggression between them, but Mingyu still feels the need to say something, “You were being reckless.”

“I know.” He yawns, “But that guy was getting on my nerves and Allegra Movement was doubting our skills, so,” he shrugs.

“You didn’t have to do all that.”

“You saw him,” Minghao’s voice is back to being bright, “with his crazy endurance. He wasn’t backing down.”
“Sometimes it’s okay to back down and throw in the towel. You have a competition and…” Mingyu looks down at him, mumbling the last part into nothingness because Minghao staring at him so intently that he loses track of how his tongue is supposed to work in his mouth.

“Not when it comes to you.” he sways, takes a step back, and leans against the wall with a soft thud. While he normally thinks with silence akin to the vacuum of space, Mingyu can almost hear the cogs ticking, “When it comes to you, I’ll be as reckless as I want.” A dark smirk plays on his lips, “Just to spite you.”

Ah, but Minghao, “This isn’t a joke.”

He brushes Minghao’s hand off his shoulder and presses his palm to the wall by his head, trapping him on one side, leaving his right hand in his pocket, thumb hooked into the beltloop. If Minghao wants to stop and walk away, he can. Mingyu’s feeling unusually intense. He’s tired and his self-consciousness is dwindling with every passing moment. He has to say moment because linear time doesn’t exist when it comes to the man in front of him.

The small amount of attention he has left is all focused on Minghao’s breath, on his eyes, on his expression.

Carefully, carefully, carefully, he bows, lowering his forehead onto Minghao’s shoulder.

He can feel Minghao tense up for a few beats before his shoulders relax again.

“This isn’t a joke. Your wellbeing isn’t a joke. Please, please, please take care of yourself.” He exhales, blowing hot air into Minghao’s collarbone, through his clothes, mouth flush against the silver pinstripes of his dress shirt, “When you’re hurt, I’m hurt.”

Minghao has never been predictable.

He lifts his arms, looping them both around Mingyu’s neck, pulling him even closer and putting the sides of their heads together, “Okay.” He whispers. He hadn’t realized how dry Minghao’s voice had become. Conversing by yelling for three hours does that to you, “Okay.” His fingers comb into Mingyu’s hair, running along the skin behind his ear, and holding him by his nape, “I’m sorry.” Mingyu’s hands come down and forward without him willing them to and wrap around Minghao’s waist, pressing their bodies together against the wall, “I didn’t mean to worry you.” his nose is buried in the soft, black turtleneck. The minuscule vibrations from his vocal chords are somehow soothing and he smells warm and slightly sweet, like deodorant and smooth cologne, “I just got a little blindsighted. I wanted tonight to be fun and stress-free for you.”

Minghao releases him from the hug, sliding his hands over his chest where he gently pushes them apart. His bracelet catches the light of the moon when he does so and Mingyu’s suddenly conscious that his is out in the open. He thinks about rolling his sleeves down or hiding it casually behind his back or fully in his pocket.

“But I guess I botched that. You probably regret wasting your night out here.”

However, Mingyu’s hands feel like they’re rubber-banded to Minghao’s hips and, although he takes a rocking step away, he comes back to hold his date again. Minghao looks up at him—not seeming to mind—and straightens out his starched collar, pinching the crease with his fingers and correcting any hairs that he misplaced on Mingyu’s head.

“No? Well, you were put in a lot of tough positions tonight, right? With me and Wonwoo,”

Each movement feels so careful and gentle, like the time he was sick and Minghao had come
over to baby him.

“And you got tangled up in this mess with Jun and Jihoon, too.”

Being able to—being *allowed* to hold him in his arms is better than any soup could ever be.

“Now that I’ve actually made you suffer,” Minghao sighs, giving him a shy, empathetic smile, “I think we can call it a night.” Mingyu nods, “Should we go find the guys and meet back here?” Mingyu nods, “Maybe Wonwoo can drive, you look beat.” He shakes his head. No one is driving his car but him, “Well, then we’ll get you some coffee. I think there’s a Dutch Bros nearby.” he nods again, “Have you lost all ability to talk again?” he nods, “Okay, baby—” Minghao chuckles, subconsciously sticking the tip his tongue out in repulsion when he realizes that could’ve sounded like a pet name, “Okay, man-child,” It’s Mingyu’s turn to cough out a dry laugh, “why don’t you go find Jun and I’ll brave the ballroom.”

Mingyu hesitates. He knows that Minghao doesn’t want to go back in, but he doesn’t want to go back in either. Calling them would be pointless. It’s way too loud, “I can go to the ballroom. I need to get my jacket anyway.”

“It’s okay, I’ll get it for you.” Minghao slides his left hand down Mingyu’s right forearm until he grazes over the bracelet and finds his hand to hold, removing it from his waist in the most pleasurable way possible, “Let’s meet back here in ten minutes.”

Mingyu gets the hint, he’ll let go now.

“Let’s go home, Mingyu”
Chapter 84

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He only can stand and watch as Minghao jogs back to the ballroom.

The amount of hesitation stored in his hands before he swings the door open is a little comedic and sad. Mingyu wouldn’t want to go back in either and if Minghao’s going to retrieve his jacket then he won’t have to. He does, however, have to find Jun.

After texting twice and calling three times and receiving no response for his efforts, he gives up. It’s very possible that Jun could have left his phone on the banquet table and it’s also possible that he silenced it so that his conversation with Jihoon wouldn’t be interrupted. Mingyu would have done the same thing if he had to have a serious talk, but they need to get going.

Heading down the last corridor and ducking through a glass door, he finds himself moving towards the garden. It’s lush and green and—this section at least—is littered with children’s toys and a little sandbox. It isn’t a maze by any means, but it does have a lot of organic walls made of vine and hedges. It’s quiet, too. Aside from crickets and the occasional car from the main road, it’s relatively silent. He can even hear his footsteps rustle in the grass and his sleeves rub against his torso.

He ventures in, half-expecting someone to jump out and spook him every time he rounds a corner. Mingyu’s not scared of the dark, he’s scared of things that lurk in the dark. It’s also not that dark. Like, it’s dark, but not dark dark- what was that? It was nothing. The moon is plenty bright and the clouds it illuminates diffuse the light nicely. His eyes take a few seconds to adjust, but as he starts walking through the garden’s very simple, linear path, he can’t help but feel like he’s being watched-what was that? Oh, a little lizard.

He calls out for Jun and Jihoon but doesn’t get an answer. His voice just cascades off into the night and only the fireflies and frogs can hear him.

It’s possible that the two walked all the way through the garden and ended up on the other side of the hall. From what he saw when they pulled up to the parking lot, the garden wraps around the back of the building; a practical buffer between the street and kids. There’s probably a door that mirrors the one he entered on the other side. So, Mingyu trudges through the grass, spying a table here, a bench there, and a silly looking ceramic gnome when he reaches the center.

At the core of the garden is a big fountain.

It’s off, but he can imagine that this thing looks pretty cool when it’s bubbling with water and sunlight. It looks rather creepy right now. As much as he can appreciate good and practical landscaping, having a fountain this huge at the back of an open recreational building seems pointless and wasteful. The largest basin at the bottom is surrounded by a thicker rim of concrete, probably for sitting. The intricate designs of the post in the middle lead up to three more tiers that are capped off by an elk striking a very majestic pose. It’s probably in homage to the Elks Lodge that once stood here. He makes a lap around the rather sizeable fountain, appreciating all the small details in its molding. The stagnant water is being skimmed by little water striders and the bottom is peppered with coins, pebbles, and wilted brown leaves. There’s even one shiny dime left on the rim.

That’s a little odd. Who throws dimes into fountains? Isn’t it a general rule that you only throw
in pennies or quarters? Mingyu picks up the icy dime, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger. Maybe some kid left it out here during free-play and forgot to take it home. The adult in him says to just leave it, but—y’know what—finders keepers, losers weepers. If Minghao’s unlucky, then his luck is on layaway.

Is it silly that a grown man is making a wish on a stolen coin he found in a random garden in some town hours away from his apartment? Is it silly that he burns a chunk of his time thinking earnestly about dancing with Minghao under the light of the moon? Is it silly that he wants to go sloshing around in the pouring rain, with the wind whipping through his hair and his socks and shoes soaked, with his hands warmed by someone’s touch? Is it silly that he wants to cook dinner and bake cupcakes and share recipes and eat meals in his shitty, lonely apartment every day after work?

Is it silly that he’d wish for all those simple things over something more interesting like winning the lottery or finding true, self-contained happiness? Because Minghao makes him feel like a million bucks. Because when Minghao looks at him like that, his self-worth skyrockets and he feels so full.

A decade ago, he missed an opportunity because he was a coward.

A decade later, he wants to apologize to his coworker, Wonwoo, because there’s something in his past that he’d still like to correct. It is something that he could move on from and did move on from, but, tonight, he’s revisiting it with revisions in hand.

Mingyu turns away from the fountain and shuts his eyes with the tiny coin held tightly in his palm and he wishes with all his might—all his might—that his wish might come true.

Now, forgive him, because he hasn’t done this in years, but when he tries to flip the coin over his head and into the fountain he misses. Yes, he misses the massive fountain. Sticking briefly to his sweaty palms, the light coin flies off course. The dime ricochets off the cement rim and buries itself in the grass. He spends almost two minutes sifting through the lawn trying to find it, cursing under his breath after turning up empty-handed.

Well, maybe some wishes just aren’t meant to be made.

Forget it.

Making wishes in abandoned fountains is naïve and childish.

He’s running low on time and he still hasn’t found Jun or Jihoon. He’ll assume that they’re together in a physical sense. If Jun isn’t here with Jihoon, then he probably returned to the ballroom. Gosh, he really hopes those two worked something out. Did they come across this fountain and talk about their wishes? Their dreams and aspirations? This is a great conversation starter. It would be a shame if they didn’t utilize it. Mingyu shakes his head and laughs to himself. He’s being silly.

Continuing on, the rest of the garden looks almost identical to the part he just walked through, just inverted. There’s a rather off-putting sculpture with a face that’s been doodled on with a red marker. It looks like its eyes are bleeding. Is that a sign? That could be a sign. When Mingyu enters the very end of the garden, he sees that there’s already a couple from the party that’s eating face on the metal bench. They don’t bother untangling from each other when Mingyu passes by with an apology and strafes by on the furthest edge of this garden block. They don’t pay him any mind. He might as well not be there because they continue on like no one is watching— not that he’s watching. That’d be creepy.

And Mingyu isn’t a creep.
When he enters the door and turns to take quick strides down the corridor, he almost rams his hip into a drinking fountain. That's such an inconvenient place to put it. Who planned this building? He takes a brisk walk down the main hallway, peaking into the first corridor. Combing through each one will take more time, but he can’t see much in the dark. Some of the doors are left ajar and he’s a little squeamish about who might be behind them and what they might be doing. Ew. Children play here, and the elderly use these rooms for Bingo on Saturday nights.

Instead of knocking or peeking into each one, Mingyu does the next most logical thing and whispers Jun’s name as loud as he can into the crack of the doors. He says the same thing every time, “Jun! You in there? We gotta go.” and most of those times he’s met with silence. The couple times he’s not, he ends up jumping back with his heart beating in his throat. Some people are using the activity rooms to chat or finish their beers. Some of them are taking a break from the loud music, resting here while their other friends finish off the night.

And some people are using these rooms to redefine ‘recreational activities’.

Mingyu shudders. He’s not a prude, but there are some things he just doesn’t have the patience or stomach to see tonight. He leaves the first corridor quickly and jets down the second one. It’s next to the ballroom, so hopefully, this is where they disappeared to. He knows there’s a couple in the first corridor that would have made them too uncomfortable to talk.

He goes down the row, whispering his scripted greeting and meeting silence until he’s midway back up the opposite wall.

“Yeah?” Jun opens the door, “Sorry.” He apologizes after making Mingyu jump and whine. The door opens fully as Jun tries to comfort Mingyu who doubled over in shock. He can see Jihoon sitting up on one of the tables among upside-down chairs in the dark with his feet swinging idly under him. His face looks too serious. So much for a calm, sweet, and nice talk, “Are you okay?”

“I’m good.” Mingyu stands back up to his full height and sighs, “Minghao says that we should roll out soon. So, if you want to come back to the ballroom and get ready to go…”

Jun’s eyebrows knit together and his smile fades like he’s thinking really hard about something. His voice is so small and quiet that he doubts Jihoon can hear them, “Uh, yeah, sorry.”

“Did I interrupt something?” Mingyu asks, understanding that he probably intruded at a bad time.

“No.” Jun stammers, “We just- I just, um-

“No.” Jun stammers, “We just- I just, um-

“Minghao’s getting Soonyoung and Wonwoo and we’re going to leave in, like, ten minutes or so. Sorry if I ruined something.” Mingyu whispers the last part to him.

He takes a deep breath to recompose, letting it out slowly, “No. Not at all. I was telling Jihoon a story and you showed up,” his eyes are pointed at Mingyu’s feet as he puts his thoughts together, “It was just something stupid.” No, Jun, your thoughts aren’t stupid. Mingyu feels so bad for looking for them. Maybe they just started talking, “I’ll be out in a few.”

If Mingyu was awake enough to pay attention to everything happening in the background, he would have noticed Jihoon’s milelong stare shift focus from the wall to Jun’s back, “Is your ringtone on? I was trying to reach you.” He would have noticed that his feet stopped paddling under the desk.

“Oh, sorry, I silenced it.” Jun reaches into his jacket’s interior pocket to pull out his phone and change the volume, “Sorry I didn’t get your calls.” But Jihoon snatches the phone out of his hands
before he can alter any of the settings, holding it away from him.

The musician puts a foot between Mingyu and Jun, who still hasn’t passed the threshold of the room. He flips Jun’s phone in his hand once before looking up at Mingyu with stern and cold eyes, “I’ll send Junhui home tomorrow.” He puts a hand up on the doorframe, eyes carving a warning into Mingyu’s cheeks. It sends a chill down his spine because the ‘he’s mine for the night’ is unspoken, “You guys can go.”

When Mingyu looks at Jun for a confirmation of these new plans, the man looks more nervous than anything else, but after he meets eyes with Mingyu, he nods, “Yeah, I don’t work tomorrow anyway, but I’ll talk to Soonyoung later.”

“We’ll be back in town for practice in the afternoon.” Jihoon has a hand at the small of Jun’s back, barely touching but not quite hovering, “Until then.” He nods a goodbye, impatiently gesturing for Mingyu to get lost, as he turns his back to them and returns to the table he was sitting at before, gripping the leg of one of the chairs and waiting there. With his hip cocked and Jun’s phone screen lighting up his face.

“Okay.” Mingyu’s attention is more on Jun than it is on Jihoon. Jun has a lot going on in his expression. It’s not so different from his neutral face, but it’s the very minute details that make it speak louder than his words, “I’ll tell the guys.”

“Thanks.” Jun finally gives him a tiny smile even though it looks like the slight draft in the hallway will blow it right off.

“No problem.” Mingyu turns to leave, but the sound of the door shutting behind him makes him look back.

Jun had closed the door on Jihoon, standing outside the room. It looks like he wants to say something, but his mouth just opens and closes a couple times. He rubs his hands together, “Thank you for convincing us to talk. And thank you for driving us here. And thank you for going along with this stupid mistake of mine.” He anxiously tucks the nonexistent hair behind his ear.

“I hope everything works out.” Mingyu says it quietly before he continues on his way, “You two mean a lot to each other.”

He’s almost at the end of the hallway before he faintly hears Jun speak, “I hope everything works out for you, too.”

Chapter End Notes

look at this amazing fanart snotty made uyu
Mingyu almost has a heart attack when hands slam down on his shoulders from behind.

“Gotcha!” Soonyoung croons after revealing his hiding space behind a catalogue rack in the hallway. He’s pretty sure that the jump-scare shaved off a solid three years of his life. He can almost feel the grey hairs growing. He’s almost tempted to throw the peppy blond over his shoulder, but he remembers that he has martial arts training and it might be ill-advised to roughhouse with someone as strong as Soonyoung, “Disappointed I’m not Minghao?” he slaps Mingyu’s chest and gets off of him.

“I never said that.”

He juts a finger into Mingyu’s face, “It’s written right there.” He rolls his eyes, “Anyway, where’s Junnie? Some people from KINE Dance wanted to talk to him.”

“He’s,” Jun shouldn’t be bothered right now, “hitching a ride home with Jihoon. I think they already left.”

“Really?” The surprise on Soonyoung’s face is more excited than it is anything else, “That’s weird. Jihoon has work tomorrow morning. He’s not coming home until the afternoon- oh.” Yes, Soonyoung, your ex and your best friend are spending a night together. Are you okay with that? “Niiiiiiice.” Of course, “With the way Jihoon looks at him when he’s performing,” he tuts and shakes his head, with a knowing and wide smile framing his teeth, “I’ll be surprised if Jun can even make it through the first bridge tomorrow.”

“I don’t think they’re going to be doing anything like that.” They’ve barely even gotten to talk, he doesn’t think that manic sex is the right solution to their problem. Manic sex is usually not the right solution for most things.

Soonyoung sneers, “You don’t know Jihoon. He’s not good at talking about his feelings and gets frustrated trying to express himself, so angry sex is usually his go-to answer.” With his hands in his pockets, he makes a short lap around Mingyu with his feet tapping to lackadaisical steps, lazy and drawn out; thinking, “But, you’re probably right.” He only stops when he’s next to the doors again, “I can’t imagine Jun being okay with that and he likes emotional talks, so maybe Jihoon will open up for once.”

He hopes that’s the case.

Mingyu follows him up to the French-doors where Soonyoung firmly pushes him out with a shove. The music is finally slowing down and dropping to a bearable volume, “Why can’t-”

“Minghao’s not here.”

“What-”

“I told him I saw you leave for the garden. He’s pretty sharp and it took a bit of wit to convince him, but I wanted to see it for myself without him here to ruin the moment.”

“See what?” Mingyu takes a step back. Soonyoung raises his pinky and wiggles it, showing
Mingyu his promise ring. In the star-embossed silver band, the ruby glistens and the turquoise shines. It takes a minute for the clue to set in, but Mingyu subconsciously pulls his sleeves down and moves his right hand behind his back. He doesn’t know why he feels so self-conscious about it, but it suddenly gains twenty pounds, “How did you know?”

“Well, that was Wonwoo.” He takes Mingyu’s hand to have a closer look at the bracelet, “Minghao’s been picking at his under the table for the last hour and I was curious, but I didn’t expect this. It’s pretty! When did you get it?”

“I didn’t.” He tears his wrist out of reach, tucking it away again, “Seungcheol did.”

“No way, really?” he perks up, “Congrats, man. You, like, got his blessing. Wow! And I can’t believe you’re matching, too! Hao hates that kind of thing.”

Mingyu doesn’t know why, but the last sentence rubs his heart the wrong way. Is that why Minghao hasn’t mentioned it or hasn’t acknowledged it? Is he embarrassed? Does he actually detest having couple-items so much that he can’t admit to sharing one with Mingyu? “I don’t think Minghao knows I have it.” He doesn’t want his voice to sound so unsure and weak, but it does. It comes out like he’s a ten-year-old who’s just broken a neighbor’s window playing baseball in a yard surrounded by a white picket fence and has to explain himself to his mom.

“Well, it kind of feels like he has. He’s sure that this bracelet isn’t cheap, and he hasn’t really done anything to deserve it. If it wasn’t tied to Minghao, it might have felt like all the trophies and awards that he has packed away back at his parents’ place, “But, whatever. I have a couple more people to say goodbye to and a car to key, so, go find Minghao,” he turns Mingyu around and gives him a little push, “declare your hugemungous crush on him,” that can’t be a real word, “maybe make out—I dunno, you do you—and meet out here in, like, ten minutes?”

“I’ll meet you out here in ten minutes.” It’s Mingyu’s turn to shove his friend through the door and shut it behind him with a bang. What a headache- and now he has to drive back with him and Wonwoo in the car without Jun’s calming presence in the back seat. What did he do to deserve this? Is this karma for going against Wonwoo’s advice? It better not be.

Mingyu marches out to the garden again, strides long and full of intent. He’d rather not play tag with Minghao. It’s dark and spooky and he’s in an unfamiliar place.

He just wants to find him and get going, but it still surprises him when he sees his date staring into the dormant fountain with such a forlorn look on his face. What did this fountain do to hurt your feelings? Does Mingyu need to have a word with it? Does he need to call Seungcheol up to fight it? He’s as still as a statue. Mingyu’s blazer is folded neatly over his left arm while his right hand is balled up.

His footsteps call Minghao’s attention and he lowers the fist he was holding at his stomach, “Oh, there you are.” he’s whispering even though no one can hear them out here, “I was looking for you.”

“Were you?” Mingyu smiles, coming up to him and sitting on the rim, the cold cement chilly against his thighs, “It seemed, to me, like you were looking at the fountain.”

Minghao shakes his head and snickers, opening his fist to reveal a small coin. He looks down at the dime, holding onto his words for just a moment before exhaling and folding his fingers over it
again, “I didn’t know it’d be out here and I suddenly wanted to make a wish, but I only had one coin in my wallet.” He groans at how weird he must sound, “I don’t think anyone ever wishes on dimes and I’m not about to fold up a dollar and flick it over my shoulder, so I’ve been standing here for almost a minute debating, but,” he shrugs and hands over Mingyu’s jacket, “making wishes in fountains is silly, right?” It’s warm with Minghao’s body heat when he puts it on, “I’m going to take you showing up as a sign that I’m not supposed to make one and save myself ten cents.”

“Make the wish.” Mingyu looks up at him, “Do you want a quarter? I can check my wallet.”

“No, that’s okay—” But Mingyu’s already reaching into his coat pocket and pulling out his wallet. He’s pretty sure he has at least a couple coins in there for parking meters and he’s determined to let Minghao make his wish, but lo and behold, there’s only one coin, “Looks like it wasn’t meant to be.”

It’s a dime.

He doesn’t know whether he should laugh or cry because this situation is absurd. He’d forgotten that he’d moved all his coins to his car’s front seat compartment. He never needs coins unless it’s to pay for parking, so why bother toting them around with him? For wishes, Mingyu, for moments when someone significant to you wants to make wishes in a random fountain in a random place at a random time. That’s why you keep spare change with you.

Turning to Minghao, he shakes his head, “You should still make the wish.”

“Not with you here. If you’re watching me, it won’t come true.”

“What are you, fiv-“

“Four, thank you very much.”

“Whatever, four.” Mingyu fiddles with the coin, fighting the itch in his fingers to reach out and pull Minghao closer, “I’m not going anywhere, it’s dark.”

But it’s Minghao that closes the gap, reaching down to pull Mingyu up, “Then make a wish with me.”

He’s not about to tell Minghao that he already tried and failed to make a wish in this godforsaken fountain, especially not when he already has his eyes shut and the coin is pressed to his lips. He seems like a child with his hair catching the moonlight like a frizzy halo. He’s so pure and wonderful and handsome and resilient and dreamy… Mingyu can’t say no to him. He can’t say no to Minghao’s pursed lips and nervous fingers. He can’t say no. He can’t say no.

Even if they aren’t holding hands right now, it feels like they’re touching. The blond is distracting and Mingyu won’t lie, he hasn’t been thinking of a wish because he’s so occupied staring at Minghao and his everything. The garden is dark, but it feels like Minghao diffuses a soft light. He’s not a blindingly bright star. He’s not perfect. He’s not ideal. But to Mingyu, he can’t be defined by those words. Those words are useless and have no meaning when it comes to Minghao and his timeless presence.

Everything about this moment feels a little cosmic—a little astral—like they’re meant to be here. Like they’re just meant to be. The man next to him stops time. He silences the crickets and the cars passing by. He removes the grass and the buildings, and he removes everything that lurks in the dark. That’s not to say he removes Mingyu’s exhaustion or the ‘low battery’ sign that’s flashing in
the back of his brain, but there’s a certain energy that he radiates into his bones. It’s something effervescent and calming, vivid and a little painful.

Mingyu’s never had to define the word or think much about it, but isn’t this-

Minghao flips the coin over his head with a flick of his thumb and Mingyu watches its trajectory.

It’s misguided and wayward, flying into the grass behind the fountain because he’s too strong. Without hesitation, Mingyu throws his dime directly into the water, making a splash, and he shuts his eyes as Minghao opens his; pretending. This is why people don’t wish on dimes. They’re light and thin and absolute trash for anyone uncoordinated.

Mingyu creaks open his lids when he thinks it’s safe, eyes resting on Minghao’s sleepy expression, “What did you wish for?”

“I can’t tell you.” Mingyu throws out a fake guffaw, hoping that it’s dark enough that he won’t notice, “If I tell you, it won’t come true, duh. Geez Minghao, I thought four-year-olds knew their way around wish-making magic.”

“Shut up.” Minghao giggles and bumps his hip with his. As if he was lapsing into routine, he links his right hand in his left and takes a step to continue the garden, but Mingyu pulls him back, swinging him into a lazy turn and receiving him with his chest. He steadies Minghao and moves to guide them back the way they came.

“Let’s not go that way.” There’s a couple making out at the end of the line and he’d rather not encounter that awkward situation with Minghao, “The door’s locked.” Smooth lie, Mingyu. The dancer listens without doubt, following Mingyu’s lead instep.

He pulls them closer together, walking shoulder to shoulder, fingers intertwined comfortably and swaying slightly between them. Like Cinderella and her ball, the clock is rapidly counting down the minutes. They’re quickly approaching the end of the night and Mingyu has to go back to being a lonely prince and Minghao has to go back to being a slave to his work. He never thought that returning to normal, friendly behavior would be so difficult, but after being allowed to hold Minghao so closely, to hold his hand so casually, to indulge in glances and whispered words, it’s becoming painfully obvious that he feels a certain way.

There’s something left unsaid, but that’s okay for now. He’d rather not jump to conclusions. He’d rather play it safe. He’d rather hold on to Minghao’s hand as long as possible.

“Soonyoung said he had a car to key. Know anything about that?”

He chuckles and squeezes Mingyu’s hand briefly, staying silent.

“What? I’m not a tattletale.”

“Sure, sure.” He swings their hands in a big motion for a few beats, “Every hardened criminal knows that you never tell anything to the getaway driver.”

Chapter End Notes
* a dime is a coin that's worth 10 cents. $1USD = 100 cents, so 10 dimes makes a dollar. they're very tiny and thin and light weight, about the size of your thumb nail, maybe smaller.
Chapter 86

Once they’re back in the hallway—after he tells Minghao about Jun’s situation in full truth, and after Minghao agrees they shouldn’t tell Soonyoung and Wonwoo—something in their chemistry changes.

People start trickling out of the ballroom as they come closer, so they decide to camp out near the bathrooms and wait for Soonyoung and Wonwoo to find them. It’s not an opportune spot to romantically stare at each other, but they’re all shy smiles and stolen glances. Even if the night is coming to an end, it seems like they both want to indulge in it as much as possible. This is quite possibly the last break Minghao will have until finals reach completion over during Thanksgiving weekend. Is it odd that Mingyu’s already trying to figure out what to get him for Christmas—if Minghao celebrates Christmas—and that he’s planning on kissing him on New Years? Does he have a right to do that? No. But he does feel like things are moving in a positive direction and he certainly can’t imagine kissing anyone else.

There hasn’t been a change in how they look at each other or how they talk, but there is a change here, in how they’re drawn to each other. It’s been a long night, but Mingyu doesn’t mind staying up just a while longer as long as he gets to be by his side.

They casually drop their hands as guests—a little handsy, a little buzzed, a little unsteady—come and ask Minghao for pictures. He paddles back to Mingyu’s side after every interaction and finds refuge behind him, sometimes using his height to his advantage.

But where there’s a will, there’s a way, and they find him every time without fail.

Minghao’s too nice to say no. This is business after all. This is still work even if it is casual and friendly. It’s better to get the studio’s name out there and muscle through not wanting to be touched and not wanting to pose for pictures and trade business cards. He struggles to deter people from asking for his phone number, giving them the number of the studio instead, but—like Mingyu thought earlier—being a walking portfolio sometimes means that you’re known for being your own business. People want to book you and not your studio. It must be tiresome, and he welcomes Minghao’s touch every single time he retreats to his corner.

He doesn’t like how close they squish his face to theirs. He doesn’t like how loudly they talk into his ear. He doesn’t like how they manhandle him without any concern for his wellbeing. He doesn’t like how they act like they’ve been close friends for years when, three seconds ago, Minghao had to ask for their names. He doesn’t like how Minghao struggles out of their grasps every time. He doesn’t like how uncomfortable they’re making him.

Minghao looks like he’s being pulled apart by crows and vultures, smiling through gritted teeth even though he’s tired and sore and Mingyu can’t stand it. He can’t stand it. Minghao had the gall to do crazy flips and pull face-melting moves just to deter one person from bothering him, but the hesitation is heavy in his limbs. Maybe it’s because he’s been branded with the burden of excellent customer service, maybe it’s because he’s generally a soft-spoken person who would rather avoid conflict even if it is at the expense of others, but when it comes to this moment, this situation, and this person, he can’t not do anything.

He pulls Minghao away from the crowd of people, plucking him out of their arms and wrapping him in his. There’s no deterrent like a clingy date who makes you look like a pair of hormonal teenagers going to prom.
He gets to nuzzle his nose into Minghao’s hair, wind his arms around his shoulders, and pull him close. His date plays along, pushing him off with gentle hands only to come crashing back into his embrace when another person marches up to them. Okay, so Mingyu’s game plan doesn’t protect Minghao from handing out his business card, but it does destroy their intent behind asking for his personal number and only those with an iron will can ask him for group pictures.

There’s the faint feeling that he’s laying it on a bit strong. It’s all in the subtle nature of their touches. Nothing lingers. Nothing tingles. It just doesn’t feel the same as when they’re alone. He’s not one for public displays of affection either, so he’s happy to know that Minghao feels the same way when he gives him a look of thanks after he backs up a step. However, he doesn’t want Mingyu to stop touching him.

He places Mingyu’s hand at his waist, mentally magnetizing it there when they’re close and retreating to it after brief conversations. It’s nonverbal conversation, so all of it is rooted in guesses, but he’d like to think that he understands Minghao better than all the guests here.

It’s more comfortable for both of them.

What’s left of their affections drop immediately when Soonyoung and Wonwoo find them towards the end of the parade of people. Wonwoo—with a big and bright smile—waves with one hand, the boxed reward in the other. They still haven’t opened it. The senior dancer doesn’t have time for greetings and pesters Mingyu for his keys that he hands over without a second thought.

“Wait-” Mingyu bounds after him. Of course, Soonyoung wouldn’t have the foresight to bring his own keys to the event just to scratch someone’s car.

Minghao and Wonwoo find them with Mingyu pinning Soonyoung to his own car, wrestling the keys out of his hands, “But I have to, Gyu. They’re massive assholes.”

“I don’t care if they’re massive assholes. This isn’t how you deal with massive assholes.” He grunts as the blond elbows him in the ribs and holds the keys at a distance, “And you shouldn’t be using my keys to do it. What if they trace it back to me?”

“First of all, that’s an irrational fear. Science isn’t that advanced.” Wonwoo chuckles, “Secondly, Soonyoung, isn’t it a little childish to key someone’s car just for criticizing you.”

“But they criticized the whole studio!” he stomps.

“We have to learn how to accept criticism, Soonyoung.” Minghao’s voice wavers a little, like he’s not totally confident in his words, “Let’s just go.”

Mingyu takes note of Minghao’s shift in mood, “But, Mingyu,” Are there really any ‘but’s to be had, Soonyoung? “They hurt Minghao’s feelings!”

“Oh, well, have at it then.” He lets go of the dancer who passes a quick glance at the building’s door, makes a quick headcount of guests, and then sprints off into the still-crowded parking lot. Wonwoo shakes his head like he’s a little disappointed in Mingyu’s decision to aid and abet in his boyfriend’s criminal choices. This parking lot probably has cameras and they have the potential to track down Soonyoung and his band of hooligans, but he doesn’t care. He doesn’t care? He doesn’t care. Whoever it is hurt Minghao’s feelings.

Okay, maybe that was Soonyoung manipulating him, but it’s better to play it safe, right? Justice must be served.
“For the record, my feelings weren’t hurt.” Minghao ruffles his own hair. His expression is excruciatingly neutral like it’s forced onto his face.

“Your feelings were hurt.” Wonwoo carefully puts a hand on his shoulder and pats him a couple times, “You looked like you wanted to start a fight.” Minghao shrugs his hand off, “If that drunk guy didn’t hit on Mingyu, you probably wouldn’t have felt satisfied leaving Allegra Movement alone, right?”

Minghao chews on his bottom lip before turning to give Wonwoo a hard look, “Are you not upset? They criticized everything we’ve worked to build, everything Soonyoung and Jun have labored over.” To some degree, it seems like everyone is having a bad time. From the unsavory comments to Allegra Movement’s very own drunk asswipe, it’s a shame that one studio can ruin their night- “I’m not going to let those pricks ruin my night,” nevermind, “but they have no right to tell us how to teach our kids.” Should Mingyu step in to diffuse the situation? They don’t sound aggressive or angry, but Minghao’s slight frustration is evident. He’s speaking tongue-in-cheek.

“I’ll mind my own business.” Wonwoo secedes, “But keying someone’s car? I don’t think that’s the right way to go about things.”

“I don’t either, but Soonyoung is Soonyoung and he’s never been very good about talking out his feelings.” Mingyu sighs in relief. He’s glad that his friends are mature enough to sort things out before they get out of hand, “Good luck walking tomorrow.” And he almost chokes.

Soonyoung and Jihoon are probably two halves of the same emotionally constipated coin, although Mingyu wouldn’t have written the blond off as someone who can’t communicate well. Maybe he’s just not very good with his words, but he also doubts that Wonwoo is very good at it, too. The four of them—Jun, Soonyoung, Wonwoo, and Jihoon—should probably seek group counselling. It might be hypocritical at this point, but he doesn’t understand why it’s so difficult for some people to open up.

He knows he’s in no position to speak, but if they asked it of him, he’d serve them his heart like an open-faced sandwich. He doesn’t have any deep dark secrets to hide. He doesn’t feel particularly reserved or sheltered. If Minghao wanted him to unload every cubic inch of his past worries, he would, and he’s sure Minghao would, too.

“Oh! I don’t catch the keys that pelt him in the chest and fall to the ground, “Let’s go!”

Sensing Soonyoung’s urgency, everyone piles into the car and Mingyu starts the engine, checks his mirrors, and shifts it into reverse all in one motion. He jumps when Minghao grabs his arm and instantly slams his foot on the break. When he turns to look out the back window, there’s clearly a motorcycle backing up in his blind spot. His heart is drumming, but he’s thankful for Minghao’s attentive nature.

“Cool it.” Minghao turns to look at him, “Murder is a longer jail sentence than scratching up a Mercedes.” He wonders if he can feel his pulse jumping in his wrist, fingers over the bracelet, pressing the chain into him, “Also, seatbelts. Click it or ticket.”

“Whatever, fun police.” Soonyoung straps himself in and leans forward to mess with Minghao’s face, pinching him and berating him for delaying their getaway for ten seconds as Mingyu pulls out and speeds out of the parking lot. He was right, without Jun in the car, the chemistry is different. There’s somehow a lot more energy, at least in proportion to how exhausted they are. It’s probably just Minghao and Soonyoung being too tired and entering a sleep-deprived high, but he hopes its enough to keep him awake.
They talk a little about the night, a little about the dinner, and about why Soonyoung doesn’t have his keys with him because his pants are too tight. That’s a dumb excuse because he has two jackets, but he reminds them that he lives with Wonwoo and Wonwoo has the keys and that ‘Wonwoo’s a fucking weenie who won’t let me key cars’. However, most of the conversation diverts to complaints about Allegra Movement and how far their trophies are stuck up their asses for the first ten minutes before Minghao reminds Mingyu that they need to get him some caffeine.

“It’s fine, I’m good.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

With their elbows sharing space on the center console, Mingyu’s tempted to move his hand from his lap to hold Minghao’s. He’s so close, yet so far. It feels like there’s a spongy barrier between them that they’ll really have to push if they want physical contact. Most of it is in his head, he’s just not very comfortable revealing how whipped he is to his backseat passengers.

“Minghao’s worried about you,” Soonyoung chides, “you should listen to him.” He giggles, “You have to listen to him or he’ll fight you.”

Minghao just shakes his head and looks out the window, but then something comes to mind, “Hey, what did we win?”

“Oh, we haven’t opened it yet.”

Wonwoo sets the box on the console, pushing their elbows out of the way. When Mingyu looks over as they get on the highway, he notices that it no longer has the number 4 on it, but the number 2, “After Mingyu left, The Salsa Club girls asked if we wanted to trade, so I made an executive decision when Soonyoung was off talking. Go ahead.”

Minghao glances down at the box and picks it up, picking apart the butcher-paper wrapping and using his nails to scrape off the tape. Soonyoung has his chin resting on the back of Minghao’s seat, watching with great anticipation over his shoulder. He’s sure if he was any slower that Soonyoung would have snatched the box from him and opened it posthaste. It’s nice to know that if they ever exchange gifts that neither of them will be destroying the giftwrap.

There’s some sort of deep exhale that his passenger makes before whining and laughing a sad, defeated laugh, “Are you fucking kidding me?” he hands the box back to Soonyoung who also sighs and gives it to Wonwoo before dropping his head onto his headrest with a soft thump.

“What? What was it?” Mingyu wants to know. Is it bubble wrap? Is it a box of packing peanuts? Is it a Furby? What could it be? Minghao just shakes his head and ignores him.

“Did we work that hard to win a fucking box of dimes?” Soonyoung groans, “We should have never traded. I’m texting Raquel right now and asking what was in our box.”

Mingyu can’t help but laugh as well. The universe seems to be obsessed with rubbing his simple failure into his face tonight. Then again, maybe it’s telling him that he has this many more chances to get a stupid coin into a stupid fountain. Too bad the only big fountain in town is the one at Waterfront.

“Wait, there’s something else.” Wonwoo hands Soonyoung a bundle of rolled dimes, “There’s a,” he drags on for suspense, “pack of Dentyne Ice,” wow, exciting, “a sleeping mask,” amazing, “a gift card to ASOS,” probably the only useful thing, “and, like, eleven pieces of candy.” Enigmatic,
“Oh, and a card.”

“What’s the card say?” Soonyoung’s not excited.

There’s a little rustling as Wonwoo rips the envelope open, “It’s long.”

“Read it.” Minghao is twisted in his seat to look behind him.

“Don’t read it, I’ll fall asleep.” Mingyu pleads.

“Read it.” Minghao requests again, “Someone took the time to write it.”

“Don’t read it.” Soonyoung puts a hand to Minghao’s cheek and pushes him back to the front seat, “Julia’s always longwinded.”

“To whom it may concern,” looks like Wonwoo’s going to read it anyway, “sometimes we might feel like the people we meet are a dime a dozen.” He pauses to count the number of rolls; twelve, “Sometimes we feel like we’re nothing special. Sometimes we feel like we’re so common, our worth depletes. But sometimes you meet another dime in this sea of loose change and suddenly you’re worried about every tiny detail. Suddenly, it doesn’t matter that you were once a mere dime because they polish you down and plate you in gold and you realize that you’re worth a million bucks. Every day, you feel the need to plan your outfits and look your best. You struggle to look cool and uphold this front of having your personality on ice- that’s a stretch,” he interjects before clearing this throat, “just so they don’t know that you’re melting inside. You can’t get any sleep because they’re always running through your mind and you know they probably aren’t getting any sleep either because you’re sprinting through theirs. However, on the mornings you wake up with them spooled up in your arms, you wouldn’t mind running tirelessly for the rest of time. Here’s to making every moment as sweet as the moment you met. North State Dance Conference 2023, sponsored by the CDEA.”

“That was corny as fuck.” Soonyoung rambles, “Why couldn’t we have gotten an iPad or something? We need one of those. It mentioned gold, is there gold in there? Ice can be diamonds. Are there any diamonds in there?” he rambles and rambles and rambles and Wonwoo humors him and counts the value of the dimes in the box. After counting the one roll that exploded in the container, they find that they’re 20 cents short of a flat $60. The two complain and start opening all the tubes just to recount the tiny coins before coming to the same total.

Two dimes are missing.

One’s in a bush, one’s in the grass.

And Minghao stays silent.

And Mingyu stays silent.

Both their eyes are pinned on the road in front of them.
The conversation in the car is casual and random. They all take turns trying to keep Mingyu up which has proven difficult because Wonwoo’s the only one talking and you can imagine with a voice as deep and calming as Wonwoo’s, staying awake this long has been a miracle. How do his patients stay conscious at work?

Minghao’s playlist has only been throwing them soft ballads and various classical pieces, all of which sound like lullabies and Soonyoung’s been talking his ear off about their formidable rivals. He constantly asks Minghao to pull up videos of the East Coast semi-finals so they can start learning about the competition. After every mile or so, Soonyoung will shout very loudly, earning a swat from Minghao and a glare from Wonwoo, but that keeps Mingyu alert. That is until he gets used to it happening and grows numb. Again, the idea of sweeping Minghao up in his arms and taking him to bed is a delirious escape from his prison at the wheel of a car going over the speed limit.

“We should go to Penguin Shop.” Soonyoung mentions offhandedly, “Dessert sucked tonight.”

“You ate, like, all your dessert.” Minghao mumbles.

“I needed energy, Hao. I’m a growing boy.”

“You are literally twenty-seven-and-a-half.”

“Excuse you, that’s twenty-seven and five months.”

“And two days.” Wonwoo mutters.

“What’s a Penguin Shop?” Mingyu rubs his eyes. He’d been blasting his AC to keep him chilled and fresh, but now his fingers are stiff and he’s lost feeling in most of them. Playing with Minghao has been the only thing that’s kept him up the last twenty miles. Reaching over and zapping his neck with his icy digits has been both entertaining and dangerous because Minghao is having none of it. He’ll whack away Mingyu’s hands any time they come close, it’s even come to the point where he’ll slam his hand back into the console the second he lifts it. He’s sure that Minghao would have fought back more seriously if he wasn’t driving.

“Penguin Shop is a shaved ice place. They sell boba, too.” Soonyoung pokes his head between their seats, “You should totally take the next exit and get some coffee into your system.”

“Or we could just make it a straight shot back to town.” Mingyu yawns.


“Penguin Shop. Penguin Shop!” Wonwoo joins in, making a commotion in the back seat. He’ll excuse him, Soonyoung’s charms are hard to resist.

From his rearview mirror, he can see that Soonyoung is waiting on Minghao to add to the ruckus, shaking him when their chanting falls on deaf ears, “Don’t you dare, Mingh-”

“Penguin Shop! Penguin Shop!” Of course, Minghao joins the festivities. He finds joy in giving Mingyu a hard time and now that he’s agreed, it’s three-against-one and he can’t say no. They could have avoided all the cult-chanting if Minghao just asked nicely, but no. All three of them have to go and act ridiculously cute. What’s with all the wide, sparkly eyes and tiny fists and high voices.
Even Wonwoo participates in bewitching Mingyu into accepting.

He’s going to have nightmares for days after this.

They take the next exit off the highway and Soonyoung and Minghao start fighting over the directions to get there. They both clearly remember different routes to the same storefront. Mingyu somehow doubts they’re still open since it’s almost 1 and with how many times he’s driven up and down the same street, it’s very possible that they’re closed.

“Will you guys just shut up and Waze it?”

“No! I’m right, you have to take the turn on Florin."

“No, he needs to take the turn on Stockton.”

In the end, he decides to listen to Soonyoung. He’s been here more times than Minghao has and that’s the only argument Mingyu’s willing to propose because, god, they probably look suspicious making this many laps around town. However, he should have expected this. Soonyoung was wrong and Penguin Shop is across the street—it is also closed—but because they’re already in front of this other place that sells pretty much the same thing, they might as well get some sweets, grab a drink, and hit the road again.

Blizzard Bee’s looks like the hip-n-happenin’ joint for the teenagers in Little Saigon (re: Asian-teeny-boppers) as they’re seriously the oldest people that walk in the door that night. They unanimously decide to eat their shaved ice outside because the inside of the neon-stripped shop is blasting with obnoxiously loud K-pop and they’ve already had a night full of brain-melting beats. Each of them has his own little cup of sweet, creamy shaved ice with various toppings. Wonwoo gets a green tea smoothie, Soonyoung gets (too much) chocolate, Minghao gets a mango and condensed milk shaved ice, and Mingyu gets vanilla. How boring, but his toppings taste great and that’s all that matters.

“Mingyu, you essentially just bought frozen milk and cereal.” So what if his toppings are all cereal and freeze-dried marshmallows? Soonyoung can suck it, all he has is chocolate with chocolate syrup with chocolate chip cookie dough with chocolate turtles. Who even likes chocolate that much?

“Let him live, Soon.” Minghao mumbles into a spoonful, “It tastes better than yours.”

And, yes, they all did the very mandatory ‘do you want to try a bite’ round of passing their cups to each other. In Mingyu’s honest opinion, Minghao’s tastes the best and he can say that without bias. He promises. The acidity of the mango sorbet is nicely muted by the creamy condensed milk, and his topping choice of aloe chunks, mochi bits, and popping raspberry pearls make the texture divine. It’s not something Mingyu would have ever picked out alone and the combination feels ‘very Minghao’, but he’ll definitely try to expand his shaved ice experience next time.

Coming out with Soonyoung and Wonwoo wasn’t as bad as he thought it would be until he realizes that it looks like they’re on a double date. While he assumed and knew that Wonwoo didn’t really do the whole PDA thing very openly—because they’re outside and because he’s comfortable with Mingyu and Minghao—he’s laying it on strong. He’s feeding Soonyoung and playing with his hair and sneaking not-so-sneaky sugary kisses and Soonyoung’s enjoying every disgusting moment of it, eyes, cheeks, and nose scrunched up because he’s tickled pink.

Minghao looks at Mingyu and pretends to gag—maybe pretends, he’s not sure.
But then he does something unexpected and offers his full spoon up to Mingyu’s lips. They’d been liberally eating from each other’s cups, so he doesn’t understand the premise right away. With a short laugh, Mingyu opens his mouth and plays along, making a mockery of the couple sitting in front of them and overexaggerating all of their nasty, little motions. He gives Minghao a heaping scoop—that he chokes on—and can barely see past his humor-crinkled eyes as he tries to wipe the dribble of cream from the corner of his mouth. He presses a punchy, sticky, loud smooch into his hair, thumbing the cream off his lips—pinching Minghao’s cheek in the process—, and wiping his fingers on a napkin.

He readily accepts the complaint afterwards because the tacky kiss makes Minghao’s hair feel gross. They’re straight-faced for only a minute because bubbly laughter consumes them when they realize how ridiculous they must look. Between him and Minghao, they know that the kiss is all about poking fun at Soonyoung and Wonwoo and their hearts don’t have time to flutter because the senior dance instructor is already up in arms about the development.

“Mingyu, you should roll up your sleeves so they won’t get dirty.” He wants him to reveal the bracelet, doesn’t he.

Feeling rather bold after consuming too much sugar, Mingyu shrugs the jacket off and drapes it over Minghao’s back. He rolls up his sleeves and continues eating casually, waiting for his (not) date to notice, but Minghao doesn’t say anything. He’s preoccupied watching the TV inside through the window and shoveling spoons of velvety ice into his mouth.

Wonwoo looks between the three. His expression sits serious on his face, but the gears in his head are already creaking loudly. Mingyu can hear them and he wishes he had some duct tape to plaster over his coworker’s mouth. Thankfully—so thankfully—Wonwoo sees the panic in Mingyu’s eyes and decides against pointing out the chain around his wrist.

As they finish up and Minghao muscles his way inside to buy Mingyu a nice, iced coffee for the road, he feels a little more energized. So what if Minghao doesn’t want to notice the bracelet? His jacket looks nice pulled over his shoulders. It doesn’t matter if he notices or not, although, by now he’s sure that Minghao knows. He just hasn’t said anything for one reason or another. Maybe he’s just shy. Mingyu’s certainly too shy to confront him about it.

Soonyoung pulls Minghao into the backseat with him, mentioning something about reviewing their competitor’s footage up close and discussing possible additions and changes to their free-dance program after the set choreographies. With a little hesitation, Minghao takes the backseat behind Wonwoo. Soonyoung plops himself behind Mingyu. This is fine. Work is work is work and they only have a little more than an hour to get back to town. Wonwoo will make perfectly good company.

Also, this coffee tastes bad, but he’s not going to complain.

It feels oddly familiar—in the sense that this feels like a family road trip or something along those lines—Wonwoo talks on and off about clinic tribulations and about his prior residency and Mingyu’s more than happy to match his pace, catching his words with rebuttals about small-town elderlies and cabin fever. It’s nice, for lack of better word. This just feels like he’s hanging out with Wonwoo at lunch even though Minghao’s resting under Soonyoung’s arm in the back seat with his phone held a little too close to his face. They’re sharing earphones and their fingers are drumming along to the beat of whatever music is probably playing. In fact, the blond behind him is tapping so hard on his headrest that he has half a mind to snap at him, but he’s so focused on the screen that he doubts his words will do much.
Occasionally, Soonyoung will remark with something like “I think Junnie will have to go head-on with that guy”, “Vernon and Jihoon will have a hard time holding their own against him”, and “none of them really match your style”.

“That’s fine.” Minghao scrolls up and down, “Chan should go up against the 1Million guy, Jisung.”

He’s not sure where Soonyoung gets the little notebook, but ’ is written on the back in messy Sharpie. The dancer jots down- scribbles down everything Minghao says quickly before flipping the page and continuing to write. The two are completely enraptured in their professional equivalent of studying. Every now and then, Minghao will point at the notebook and correct something and Soonyoung will scrub through the video—something Mingyu’s a little surprised he can do—and use some sort of jargon that he doesn’t understand.

Growing slightly tired of Soonyoung’s running mouth, Minghao’s opted to stop talking and just nods whenever he proposes a question. It’s late and they’re all tired, but Soonyoung and Minghao especially. The rings under their eyes are starting to come to surface and yawns have plagued the car, setting off a chain reaction every five to ten minutes. Don’t worry, Mingyu will get them back safe. He has precious cargo.

Sometimes he’s lucky enough to meet Minghao’s eyes in the rearview mirror. His half-lidded gaze blinks slowly a few times before a lazy smile creeps up on his lips and he looks away, either out the window or back at his phone that Soonyoung has taken over.

“You can sleep, it’s okay.” He coos.

“We’ll stay up.” What ‘we’? Minghao’s head is already resting on top of Soonyoung’s. The senior dancer has been snoozing on his shoulder for a good ten minutes and Minghao’s head has been bobbing in and out of consciousness since no one is talking to him.

“You’re already dozing off.” Mingyu reaches his right hand back to shake Minghao’s knee, “Take a nap.”

“I’m not sleeping, just resting. Listening to you and Wonwoo talk is nice.” He shuts his eyes, carding his fingers through Mingyu’s, interlocking them backwards, Mingyu’s palm pressed to the back of his hand. Soonyoung has his right arm looped through Minghao’s left and that makes it difficult to hold hands normally.

“Then take a short nap. We’ll be back at the studio before you know it.” Please rest, Minghao.

“Don’t wanna.” He slurs, opening his tired eyes again to look at Mingyu, a small pout on his lips. The way he captures him in that little sliver of mirror is enough for it to feel like they’re the only two in the car. Oh, the things Mingyu would do if he wasn’t driving. He already gave Minghao his jacket to cover the both of them, but if he could turn around, he’d make sure they were tucked in nice and snuggly.

“Don’t wanna what?” he chuckles as Minghao closes his eyes again. He thinks about taking his hand back because the angle is a bit strenuous on his shoulder, but Minghao holds him tightly in place for just a second longer.

“Nap without you.” the words are tiny and mumbled and garbled between his lips. His voice is already raw from talking so much tonight, but with that, he falls asleep. Mingyu can tell by how deep his breaths become and how he curls up just slightly into Soonyoung’s side. His fingers go limp, allowing Mingyu to slip his hand away, but his heart doesn’t want to let go.
He says it more for himself than anyone else, “We’ll have plenty of opportunities to nap in the future, so nap now.” Without budging anything else, Minghao gives his fingers a firm squeeze before freeing Mingyu from their touch, something he misses immediately. Minghao’s warm hands are so much better than the icy steering wheel.

It does take a moment for Mingyu to remember that Wonwoo is sitting next to him and very much so awake and alert and listening to everything he just said. But, surprisingly, his heart doesn’t drop into his gut and his stomach doesn’t lodge itself in his throat. It felt fine and timely and normal and he can get used to that feeling. When he turns to glance at Wonwoo he isn’t met with a joke or a shit-eating grin, he’s just met with the sincerest, fondest smile.

His eyes fall on Mingyu like a proud parent.

They sit in silence for a mile or two before Wonwoo sighs, coughs out one of his deep laughs, and checks the backseat before speaking, “So, napping together.” Even though he’s not pointedly uncomfortable, his hands are locked onto his steering wheel, “That’s a step I didn’t think you would take for a while.” Why does it sound like he’s about to make a speech? “I know we promised not to prod or pry,” he puts a very fatherly hand on Mingyu’s shoulder, “and I’ll save you a headache and say it while Soon’s asleep,” his hand slides off and he locks his own fingers together over his knee, “but after seeing you with Hao tonight, I can’t ignore it.”

“What do you mean?” He’s not playing dumb. He honestly wants to know.

“The way you look at each other—the stolen glances since we were in the lobby up until five minutes ago—doesn’t it get tiring?” he laughs, “The way you look at each other is,” it seems like he’s gotten the bookworm to lose his library of eloquent words, “well, it isn’t star-struck or with, like, googly eyes.” Wonwoo leans forward a tad to meet eyes with him and gives him an inquisitive and hard stare, “You look like you’re at a crossroads between crying and laughing. Like you’re fighting something.”

“I don’t get i-”

“You know what I mean.” Mingyu nods, not really computing his words, “He looks at you the same way.”

“Since when did you become an expert?” he tries to lighten the mood, but there’s something daunting on the horizon.

Wonwoo cracks his knuckles and leans back in his seat, “Because Soonyoung and I used to look at each other in a similar way. Similar, not the same.” He gives him a few seconds to let the words sink in, “For the record, I can’t read Minghao’s way of looking at you, so don’t ask.”

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

“You can stop pretending now, too.”

“Pretending?”

“That you aren’t freaking out. Your pupils are pinheads.” How can Wonwoo even see him in the dark? “Your knuckles are white.” Seriously, it’s pitch black in this car. Wonwoo can’t see him, “Are you going to tell him?”

“What?”

“Are you going to tell him that you feel a certain way about him?”
“No?”

His immediate response triggers Wonwoo to sit up again and stare at him in frustration, “Dinner every night, sleeping together, texting each other for hours every day, this weird and oddly cute ‘good morning’ ‘good night’ thing, and you’re still not going to tell him?”

“What am I supposed to tell him?” Mingyu hisses. He had thought about it several times, labelling his feelings for Minghao and shipping them off for either rejection or acceptance—just like college apps—, but he can’t even fill these forms out. All the letters look foreign. All the blanks are filled with smudged ink. He’s fallen in love before, numerous times, and all but one time he’s acted upon those very clear feelings and every single time things have gone smoothly and ended as such, “I don’t even know how I feel.” Wonwoo gives him a patient look, urging him to explain with a quirked eyebrow, but Mingyu doesn’t know what to say.

His throat runs dry. His head goes blank. He really needs his corner, but his corner is asleep.

Hell, that’s probably a good thing at this point, but Wonwoo’s words make him feel like he’s trapped in the middle of an open room with a million copies of himself shouting different explanations. It’s overwhelming and he even careens out of his lane for a second before the bumpy border shakes him back to attention. He has to focus. He has to focus. There will be no crashing with Minghao and their friends in his car.

“You’re meditating too much on this. Whatever you say, I think Minghao will understand.”

“I somehow doubt that.”

“I’ll be real with you.” Wonwoo clears his throat quietly, “Minghao has only dated, like, two people. He’s charismatic and cool and funny and sweet and cute. He’s had suitors pour in from around the world, seriously, people in the audience are that smitten with him.”

“And he hasn’t accepted a single offer all these years. Sometimes he’ll agree to a dinner, a movie, but there’s never a second date. They never get a second chance. And, very frankly, a lot of these people would ideally suit Minghao better than you. They’re performers or artists. They have similar passions and lifestyles, but not a single one-” he inhales sharply, exhaling through his nose, “I know- I know I haven’t really talked to Minghao personally, but from Jun and Soonyoung— before you showed up, he was in a really dark place. He was getting out of it, that slump or whatever, but after that night at the studio something changed.”

Mingyu blinks. He’s not sure what to think. He’s not sure what to say. He’s not sure what to do with the things sitting on the tip of his tongue. He doesn’t even know if they’re words.

“And do we need to talk about this?” He picks up Mingyu’s right wrist and shakes it in front of him, “This. Mingyu, you got the Cheol seal of approval. Soonyoung doesn’t even have the Cheol seal of approval and they’ve been best friends for this long.”

“So? I barely even talked to the guy.”

“You can comprehend what that means, can’t you?” Wonwoo drops his arm back onto the console, “Minghao tells him about you. He speaks that fondly of you that Seungcheol, his practical guardian, went out of his way to buy you matching bracelets with a shit-ton of significance- and what are the chances, Mingyu, that you both wind up meeting again after ten years in a town you both left and never planned to return to. What are the chances that you would end up as Minghao’s
therapist instead of me or Seokmin or Jeonghan or any of the other clinics in town? What are the chances that you two would wear matching costumes? That’s just weird, isn’t it?” he tries to calm his excitement, “I’m a logical man, Mingyu. I’m about science and about definite answers with research to back it up, but here you are with Minghao, a person you had buried in your past.”

Mingyu sighs, “What are you trying to say?” he’s so longwinded it’s not funny anymore.

“This has to be fate.”

“Yeah?” he’ll humor him.

“But fate only takes you so far and like a shooting star, I’m really worried that this upward trend is going to quickly fizzle out to an end. Your luck will run out. His luck will run out. Mind you, Minghao has no luck, but he’s bought luck using his karma points and he’s spending it all on you.” Wonwoo, why do you have to say things like this. “You feel ‘a way’ about him. You don’t have to define it, but you should tell him.”

In the wide room of his brain, on the white walls of a fake room that’s too loud, run film reels of Minghao laughing and smiling. Minghao holding his hand. Minghao tickling him. Minghao dancing. Minghao waiting. Minghao holding Cacahuate. Minghao soaked. Minghao with frosting on his face. Minghao with the sun spun through his hair. Minghao with his tired eyes rested by the seat of Mingyu’s couch. Minghao with his limp and fake smile. Minghao with his harsh words and mature apologies. Minghao flipping in the spotlight of their old gym. Minghao with his hair black, standing in the middle of the stale cafeteria with everyone and no one around, thin, with bandages on his palms and the hem of his worn jeans torn to shreds like every other kid that was too poor to afford new clothes at the start of the year.

And Minghao with his wide-eyed, parted-lip stare, looking up at Mingyu. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting for something.

“How am I supposed to tell him that?”

“Tell him what?”

“That I haven’t been able to sleep well for the last few months.” Wonwoo rubs his shoulder, sympathizing, empathizing, “That he simultaneously has the most beautiful heart and soul and dog?” he chuckles, “That I stare at my phone for as long as I can, waiting for him to text me back- it took me almost twenty minutes to build up the courage to return a heart.” They both laugh about that and he takes a peek in the rearview mirror to make sure that Minghao’s still asleep. He is, with his eyes closed and his cheek squished against Soonyoung’s head.

And then something shifts.

Something changes in his mood, in his chest, and even though it feels so, so, so good to finally tell someone about how Minghao has changed him, it doesn’t feel like he’s any lighter. If anything, his heart grows heavy. Its knees buckle as it tries to stay standing. Its membranes strain as rocky objects stretch and scrape at its insides.

“That being next to him, but not touching him aches- that even after we’re holding hands or hugging, it still aches.” Mingyu feels something well up inside. He tries to keep his voice as low as possible, but speaking is suddenly a hurdle he didn’t think he’d overcome, “That he makes me so fucking happy that I get tunnel vision and he’s all that matters. That he’s a time wizard and every time we look at each other nothing and everything makes sense coincidentally.” His eyes feel strained, struggling to stay open despite no longer being tired, “That I would give anything to go
back in time and protect him from everything bad that’s happened.” It’s as if saying the following words is like climbing a mountain, each letter full of painful acid and hot coals. Their sharp edges carve at Mingyu’s chest and he’s so empty and so full at the same time. It hurts, it hurts so much, “That I was so happy when I could finally feel that we became friends that I completely skipped the in-love phase and jumped right into something I lost all understanding of?” he catches his breath.

They sit in silence again for what feels like the longest amount of time, stretched over a thick blanket of tension. They even pass into town.

“Gyu,” Wonwoo’s voice is soft as if Mingyu might shatter, “it doesn’t have to be this hard.” He rubs comforting circles into his back, “You’ve fallen in love before. You’ve felt love before. It’s going to be okay.”

“But Minghao…”

“But Minghao’s different?” he nods.

And sighs, “From the moment I met him again, I’ve never felt so lost.” He picks at his nails when they come to a red light, “And whenever he gives me this look,” he accelerates when the light is green, “I feel hopeful that I’ll be found.”

“Then let yourself be found.” Wonwoo shakes his head, “How is he supposed to find you if he doesn’t know that you’re lost?”

They pull into the studio parking lot. It’s mostly empty aside from a couple cars by the sporting good’s store and Wonwoo’s car parked under a light, “It’s not that easy. I’ve never been so unsure of anything my whole life.”

He turns off the engine and unlocks the doors. He undoes his seatbelt and Wonwoo follows suit, but before anyone wakes anyone up, the older man takes Mingyu’s hand, holding it up slightly, and showing him the bracelet again.

“Mingyu.”

The patience and warmth in his eyes sits unwavering and strong.

“Sometimes love is inconvenient.”
Chapter 88

The night of fun draws to a close in simple terms.

Soonyoung and Wonwoo slide out of the car quietly, shutting their doors with deft hands and thank Mingyu for the ride. Soonyoung isn’t quite awake, eyes still closed and most of his weight slung over Wonwoo’s shoulder. He shuffles forward to give Mingyu a big, warm hug, raising his leg to cling to him like a sloth and presses a dry kiss to his cheek before patting his head, “Be good to him.”

Mingyu nods.

It was determined that Seungcheol had gone to bed already. They can’t expect him to stay up to pick Minghao up from the studio when they had planned to be back three hours ago. He’s a hard-working man who needs his rest and Minghao had mentioned sometime at the beginning of the night that a ride home would be much appreciated and Mingyu had quickly agreed. In hindsight, he shouldn’t have because, now, there’s something deep-seated and murky in his chest. In all honesty, it could be acid reflux from all the food he’s eaten today and the coffee he downed on the way back.

Wonwoo pries Soonyoung off of Mingyu as if he was plucking a starfish from its rock. He holds out his arms for a hug, but he senior PT doesn’t offer one just yet. Instead, he sighs, handing the box of dimes and knickknacks to Soonyoung before holding out both his hands to take Mingyu’s. It probably looks like they’re having a séance in the studio parking lot, “Don’t feel pressured. Telling him or not—that’s your choice.”

“Tell who what?” the blond asks, sleep occupying most of his mouth. Wonwoo just hands him the keys and gives him a little nudge towards the car.

He doesn’t speak again until his boyfriend is in the passenger seat with the door shut, “But I promise that getting it off your chest will feel a lot better. It’ll stop hurting. It’ll stop aching.” His hands are fixed, “And every little dent, bruise, scratch, and wound you’ve made and felt on the inside—Minghao will find and mend all of them immediately.” Mingyu doesn’t doubt Wonwoo’s words, but he can’t fathom how that must feel. He’s wading in unfamiliar waters and all he can do is hum and nod, “I believe in you.”

Wonwoo’s hugs are sometimes a bit stiff and awkward, but he can feel the love.

As he retreats to his car, he reminds Mingyu to text him about when to meet up at the animal shelter. He waits until his door is shut and the engine turns over to head back to his own car. He waits until Wonwoo clears the parking lot before turning his car back on. They’re probably going to head home and crash right away, not bothering with showers until the morning. Sleep is that precious to adults.

Seatbelt fastened, he checks all his blind spots, turning around to look out every window just in case some lunatic decides to dart through the empty car park at 2am.

His eyes land on Minghao.

Minghao’s sleeping, resting form.

And the weight from his conversation with Wonwoo feels a little lighter.

It’s not gone, no, but a pound or two lighter. The longer he stares, the more bearable it
becomes. He leans over to pull his jacket over Minghao’s lap, stretching even further to brush his bangs out of his eyes and—it might be creepy and he feels bad acting without the latter’s express consent, but—he runs the back of his fingers over Minghao’s face, knuckles caressing his cheek. Despite the faded acne scars and slight bit of stubble on his jawline, his skin is supple and soft, but that’s not why Mingyu felt the need to reach out. Minghao’s brows are knitted together. His eyes are shut in a wince. His lips twitch slightly, touching together and popping apart. There are minuscule muscle movements in his upper cheeks, under his eyelids. His hand is balled up in Mingyu’s jacket, holding it to him, fingers convulsing with the smallest movement.

A nightmare.

Deciding against waking Minghao up in favor of rest over freeing him from his dream, he makes quick work driving them back to his home. On the way, as fortune would hold it, it starts drizzling. The halo around the moon never lies and Mingyu has the one meteorology class he took for his GE to thank for that. By the time they reach the parking lot of Minghao’s apartment complex, it’s pouring.

Mingyu cashes in on his last bit of luck for the night because there’s one empty parking space left that’s under the overhang near Minghao’s building. Getting out and rounding his car to get to the right door, he opens it carefully. He doesn’t have an umbrella, so they’ll have to run. That’s right. He’s not going to let Minghao walk down by himself. What kind of date just kicks you out of his car? A bad one. And Mingyu’s a good date.

Instead of doing the normal thing, like clearing his throat or calling loudly for Minghao, he wakes him up the way his mom used to wake him up for school back in elementary. He puts a hand on Minghao’s chest and shakes him lightly, moving that hand up and patting him lightly on the cheek, “Minghao,” he coos just loud enough to be heard over the rain, “Minghao, we’re home.”

Before he wakes, Minghao’s face contorts in such a painful expression that a different ache claims Mingyu’s heart. Once he wakes, his eyes are wide and open, darting around in the bad lighting and finding him in the doorway. His hand comes forward without warning, grabbing Mingyu’s sleeve. He looks startled and panicked and his eyes are glossy, brimming with something.

“Are you okay?”

Minghao shuts his eyes and recomposes himself, exhaling a long-held breath before folding Mingyu’s coat over his arm and nodding. He steps out of the car with shaky numb legs, expression unchanging until he leans forward and drops his forehead against Mingyu’s shoulder, rocking his weight between his feet and shutting the car door behind him, “Sorry. I just had a dream, that’s all.” He seems like he has to recompose himself again and again because every time he looks at Mingyu his wall crumbles and deteriorates. What kind of nightmare did you have, Minghao?

He hands his jacket back.

“Thanks for driving me home.” There’s a forced brightness in his raspy voice and he clears his throat a couple times, “Now, get going. Go home and get to sleep.”

“Uh, I don’t think so.” Mingyu tosses his jacket into the front seat. He’s not cold anymore, “I’m your date, I’m going to walk you right up to your front door.”

“What is this, prom?” Minghao shakes his head and only pushes Mingyu to leave once before complying.

Mingyu wants to hold his hand, but his are stuffed into his pockets. He could- he wants- he
needs- he asks, “Hey, is it okay if we hold hands until then?”

“Huh?” he must’ve asked too quietly to be heard over the rain hitting the tin roof of the awning, so Mingyu sucks up his nerves and asks again, louder.

“Can we hold hands?”

“Oh.” Minghao backtracks to his side, whipping his left hand out of his pocket and locking his fingers with Mingyu’s. There’s something a little empty about the gesture. He doesn’t know why. Maybe it’s because Minghao isn’t completely present for the short walk. Maybe his mind is cloudy because he falls silent. His feet are silent. His movements are silent. Is he walking with a ghost? The blond pulls out his phone in his right hand to check for texts, check messages (of which there are many), and to distract himself from Mingyu’s prying gaze.

“What did you dream about?”

“Nothing.” Minghao’s answer is short and curt. He clearly does not want to talk about it.

It’s then that he decides he’s not going to say anything. He doesn’t want to say anything. If Minghao was in a better mood- If Minghao hadn’t just woken up from a nightmarish dream, he might have, but this night has been a lot for both of them. It’s been a lot. They’re both emotionally drained for one reason or another and exhausted, but Mingyu still wants Minghao’s attention. Just a little bit, please, just a little bit. Stop looking at your phone. Look at the man next to you.

“You know,” Mingyu bites the bullet, “you hadn’t danced all night.”

Minghao abruptly stops in the hallway, pulling Mingyu to a halt as well, seeming to telepathically know the intent behind his words and what time they’re referencing.

And in an instant, the whole world fades and mutes.

The person in front of him is the only thing that exists, the only thing that matters. Half of him expects to be berated for bringing up high school at such a weird time. The other half of him is still lost in a void. As present as he can be, Mingyu tries to conclude his thoughts, “And that’s a shame because whoever could have danced with you would have been the luckiest person on the floor.”

Minghao drops Mingyu’s hand, looking back at his phone, and starts walking again. He doesn’t know if he should apologize or if he should confront him, but he doesn’t want Minghao to run away from this. He takes a few, long steps to catch up with him.

His expression is unreadable, complex beyond Mingyu’s basic understanding. His mouth wrinkles and hesitates before letting the words come out, “You hadn’t danced either.”

“Well- I’m not really a dancer-” Minghao’s look is telling him to stop and come clean. Has it always been that simple? Maybe it’s the sleep deprivation that’s making him delusional. Maybe he’s subconsciously tempted by Wonwoo’s promise that everything will fix itself if he talks it out, but at 2am? While it’s pouring rain outside? With their brains a couple stages away from mush? This isn’t an opportune time… but sometimes it’s inconvenient, “Sorry I brought up high school.”

“You don’t need to apologize. I’m not opposed to it.” He doesn’t hold his hand, he doesn’t look at him, but he does put out a hand to touch his arm, “Prom was so long ago, like, too long ago to have regrets about it.” They resume their walk at a snail’s pace, “We’re here now.” Minghao fiddles with his phone again, “And it’s a real shame that neither of us got a dance in tonight.”
“Yeah.” His fingers itch. “Well, we did dance.”

“I’m- I’m not going to count that.”

“But I learned all these cool moves.” He does a half-hearted Apache step and a sloppy corkscrew. Sorry, Minghao, he needs longer to practice.

“Look, you might be a tall boy, but that doesn’t mean you have to dance like one.” Oh, is that what those flappy, floppy tube dancer things are called?

Without realizing it, they’d arrived in front of his door and Mingyu has run out of time to say the words he hasn’t conjured up. No matter, there’s always tomorrow. For now, all he can do is humor Minghao, “Sorry I’m not some—”

“No. Stop.” Mingyu stops. Minghao stops. They’re standing side by side, both looking forward. The tension in the five-inch gap between their shoulders must be fought in order to keep it from closing. They have to resist the magnetization of their wrists and the imaginary neodymium magnets that are obviously lodged there, “What I’m trying to say- trying to ask is-” Minghao pushes his arm, forcing him to turn and face him, “Look at me.”

“I’m looking.”

“Would it cripple you with embarrassment if I put some corny music on my shitty, broken phone and asked you for a dance in this hallway in front of all my sleeping neighbors?”

Mingyu’s brain registers too slowly and his mouth is already moving, “Yes, that would absolutely cripple me.” And his body registers after his mouth and he closes the gap between them, looking down at Minghao’s phone where his thumb is hovering precariously over the play button of a very corny, very sappy, very apt song that Mingyu hasn’t heard since… prom.

It comes back in waves and wafts.

Standing in the audience, peeking at Minghao through crowds of people. They’d both danced to fast songs, upbeat bops that roused the crowd. Minghao and his band of friends commanded attention when they wanted it, but most of their night was spent packed together. Mingyu was no different. His friends were huddled behind the speakers, telling the DJ what songs to play and selfishly hogging most of the playlist. The room was hot and stuffy, even towards the end of the night when the temperature outside dipped below 50. It was already planned for the night to end with a large snowball. It’s the one reason he stepped down as a candidate for prom king and handed the title to his friend.

He didn’t want to dance. He didn’t want to dance with anyone but Minghao. And if Minghao wouldn’t- couldn’t have him, then no one would.

So, maybe Jungkook wasn’t the first one-who-got-away.

Minghao was. Minghao was. Minghao was.

It comes back in waves and wafts.


Mingyu went home that night, took a shower, and cried.
He cried so hard.

He sobbed his little, immature, hormonal teenage heart out in the heat of his bathroom until his eyes were bloodshot and he couldn’t breathe through his nose. He’s never felt so strongly about anyone before and that’s so dangerous. He was so young. He is so young and the world holds so much potential. There’s so much outside of this crappy town with broken-windowed corner stores and rubble-ridden sidewalks. There’s so much outside of DonutBoo’s, Starbucks, and Celestia’s. There’s so much more to experience, more to do; people to meet, places to see. He can’t be hung up over one, insignificant person. Just one, little, tiny person with awkward pointy ears, a sharp tongue, and ratty, thrift-store clothes can’t make him feel this way at this age.

But his heart begs to differ.

He’d repressed those feelings for two-and-a-half years. He’d watched Minghao get beat up. He’d watched Minghao get courted. He’d watched Minghao be happy and satisfied and successful without him playing a role. He was a coward. He was- is a bystander painted grey in Minghao’s colorful life.

It hurt.

It hurt so bad to stand in that shower that night with his tuxedo hung up behind the door and his heart seething, scalded, and injured. He was mad at himself and for a moment, he was mad at the world. He was mad at the universe. He was mad at Minghao. Why couldn’t Minghao have liked him? Seen him? Looked at him? It was misplaced aggression. He’s the villain—Mingyu’s the villain—but in that moment, it really felt like the whole universe was punishing him for being a spoiled brat and having his head up his ass for four years.

When did he go from being a sweet, little boy to a stuck-up prick at school? When did he let his ego get in his way of true… something? It doesn’t matter. He was young and inexperienced and being overwhelmed with emotions that night made him change for the better. Minghao made him change for the better even if he spent the entire night sitting on his bed with his dog in his lap, staring at the moon outside his window.

He resolved to lock Minghao away.

He resolved to lock Minghao’s memory away in the deepest, darkest depths of his damaged heart. He’ll bury him in work, studies, late nights of textbooks and monetary success, academic success. He’ll bury him with one-night stands and Tinder dates and Grindr dates and OkCupid dates. He’ll bury him under the floorboards of his old house that once was a home and move far away and never look back. He’ll bury Minghao’s memory and his existence in a place that will never be disturbed or touched for the rest of time.

Because he can’t handle the pain. He never wants to feel this way ever again about anyone ever again.

He doesn’t deserve to suffer.

He doesn’t deserve to cry.

He doesn’t deserve Minghao.

He didn’t deserve Minghao.

“Okay, then.” he sighs, moving to pocket the phone, but Mingyu catches his wrist, hits play, and tucks the phone into Minghao’s back pocket as he moves his hands to his waist and pulls their
foreheads together, bowing—again—to the man before him.

“But for you, I don’t mind.”

The feeling of Minghao relaxing into his touch and clasping his hands behind his neck—it feels right. Even with his bracelet digging slightly into his nape, it feels right. It doesn’t hurt. It doesn’t sting. It doesn’t need to because Mingyu’s heart is so full. It’s so full of Minghao.

He’s elated. So much so that he doesn’t even care that his breath probably smells like sour coffee as they rock to the quiet and soft guitar and the lyrics echo down the hallway. The rain masks most of the music, but when you’re this close, you can hear it clearly.

Only they can hear it clearly.

It’s settled. He doesn’t care anymore.

He doesn’t care about checklists or personal goals. He doesn’t care about status quos and expectations. They look like they’ve had a rough night with their hair flying this way and that, slightly damp from the portion of sidewalk with no overhang. They ended up not really winning anything since the $59.80 in dimes will go directly into the fund for students that can’t afford dancing shoes along with the ASOS card. The candy will probably end up in the jar at the front desk. The gum, well, who cares about the gum. Their box dissolves.

He doesn’t feel like he’s missed out. His prize is right here in his arms.

Minghao’s not something to be won or owned. He out-values any crown or trophy. He outshines the moon and all her shimmering stars. Their eyes are tired and closed, but he doesn’t have to look at Minghao to know that he’s beautiful. He doesn’t have to hear it to know that Minghao cares about him. Time doesn’t matter; three months, a hundred years, ten years, a decade, the time it takes to blink—Minghao has proved repeatedly that time can’t touch him. In his arms is a noun; a person, a place, a thing. A four-letter noun. He doesn’t care that he’s a fool, blindly rushing into something unknown because some things are just meant to be.

It’s almost like he can hear Minghao’s thoughts, like he can feel his heartbeat drumming in cadence with his. How did he live this long without him? Minghao’s like air, like water; ever-adapting and flexible, abundant, but necessary, and that’s scary. It’s like he’s back into that weird limbo between exploding and imploding. It’s on the precipice of being overwhelmed and all-consuming, but when Mingyu opens his eyes for just a moment and sees that Minghao’s are closed in absolute, unquestionable comfort and trust, he doesn’t care.

Tonight, it doesn’t matter if he kisses Minghao or not. It doesn’t matter how many kisses they share in the future or if there will be any at all.

Being like this-

Feeling like this-

It’s enough.

And the song ends too soon.

C’mon, Minghao, where are your time powers when they’re needed? Another dance, another moment. But he digresses, parting their foreheads and opening his eyes slowly just as another song starts up and Minghao reaches one hand behind him to stop it. His other hand lingers at Mingyu’s neck with his thumb caressing the space between his ear and his jaw.
Minghao looks up at him with his eyes half-lidded and tired. This isn’t his doe-eyed stare, it’s something different. Either that or he’s just too tired to open his eyes fully. Regardless, he shuts them, breathing one, short breath, deciding on something before their lips touch.

He missed it.

He absolutely missed it.

He missed when Minghao pulled him closer. He missed when they both shut their eyes and the world melted into nothingness once again. But for the first time, he doesn’t get consumed by the dark abyss of space. He tries to stay as present as he can; flailing, struggling, trying not to drown in the way Minghao’s mouth feels against his.

As magical as a kiss can be, he doesn’t have enough time to start a revolution. He doesn’t have enough time to ascend to a higher plane or any of that nonsense that romance novels talk about. It’s short-lived and chaste and he wouldn’t have it any other way.

It ends just as soon as it begins; a little deeper than a peck, but quite possibly the only truly perfect thing that Minghao can do.

He backs up with a smile, a sigh of relief, and looks up at Mingyu with guilt and penance in his eyes before he turns to fish out his keys and unlock his door, “Thank you for taking care of me.”

Mingyu can’t move.

He’s frozen to his place, stunned.

Did that really happen? Did they really kiss just now?

Why does Minghao look so apologetic? No! That’s not how the night is going to end. That’s not how he’s going to leave this situation. He wants Minghao to kiss him. It’s not a punishment. Fate brought him this far. Fate had them meet. Fate gouged out scar tissue. Fate sent Seungcheol to bed early so he could drive Minghao home and so they could dance in the empty hallway. Fate is exhausted. So, it’s his turn.

He pulls Minghao into him by his belt and then by his waist, pressing their lips together again as he takes a step forward and pins him to the door, leaving the keys dangling in the lock. His right hand is against the door, his left is holding Minghao, eliminating his option to flee. He can’t stand it anymore. No more running. Yearning and breathless is the way he wants to leave him. Hair mussed like a bird’s nest and lips swollen and plump is how he wants him to look when he’s through.

He wants to bury himself deep into his soul, burrow his way into his heart, and make a home there. And he wants it now.

Admittedly, he’s a little too forceful because his date’s head hits the door with a thud and their front teeth bump painfully, breaking the concentration of their heated kiss to burst into laughter. He forgets about trapping Minghao against the door and puts his hands on the back of his head where he bumped it, begging for forgiveness in the following kiss and Minghao accepts his apology in the one following that.

This is right. This is right. This is where he’s supposed to be.

This is where they’re supposed to be.
‘Did you get home okay?’

‘Yep.’

‘Sleep well, Mingyu.’

‘Sleep well, Minghao.’

♡

♡

Staring up at his ceiling, he thumbs the bracelet around his wrist.

There’s some sort of attachment he has towards it now. He won’t readily admit it because this bracelet is a gift (or a loan) from Seungcheol. If he and Minghao don’t work out, there’s always the chance that the man might hunt him down, slice off his hand, and take the silver chain back. But for now—and he hates this analogy—he feels like a stray who has a pristine collar around its neck. This shade of red compliments his complexion and the sterling silver looks radiant against his skin. It fits like a glove, and even though it was a hassle to put on by himself, he doesn’t really want to take it off even after he flops into his sheets.

Mingyu never understood looking matchy-matchy.

His parents never wore their wedding bands. They didn’t feel the need to. Their love was unquestionable. He’s seen many couples like that, the kind that don’t need to find security in branding, the kind that don’t need to tattoo ‘I’m yours’ on their foreheads. He wants to be like that.

For the first time in a long time, saying goodbye and goodnight to Minghao wasn’t difficult tonight. Of course, if he was invited, he’d happily stay the night, but there’s stuff to do in the morning. He would, however, like to tell Wonwoo that he’s wrong. Okay, maybe it’s also user error because he didn’t explicitly tell Minghao about all his stupid, indescribable feelings, but—really, truly, honestly—it still aches.

It’s more subtle now, but he wasn’t miraculously healed all at once like he was promised. Relief didn’t wash over him and give him a clean slate to build his unofficial relationship with Minghao. This is real life. Recovery takes time. With self-inflicted wounds as old and deep as Mingyu’s, Minghao will have his hands full for a long time, stitching them up with the red thread of their… fate.

There’s weight in the metal. A density.

Coupled with the mental weight that it holds, there’s some sort of comfort in wearing it. It feels like he’s not alone, like Minghao is there holding his hand in the dark, curled up next to him. He can almost imagine his deep breaths and feathery touches. It’s like his warmth is sowed in the red ribbon, the light of his eyes in the sparkle of the topaz, and if he looks close enough, in the chain, Mingyu can see his own reflection.

Is that what it is? In the time that he’s come to enjoy Minghao’s company, he’s come to enjoy
his own as well? Does he like himself even a little bit more now? Mingyu doesn’t think he’s changed much in the last few months—no one has changed externally—but tonight he realized that he would never trade anything for a chance to go back and right his wrongs. He doesn’t need to. Minghao, in the present, means that much to him. That’s terrifying, isn’t it? In such a short time, Minghao’s gone from something—someone—who was forcefully forgotten to someone who has a unique gravity.

Of course, nothing compares to the real thing in the flesh, but in the moments they can’t be together, it’s a little nice to look down and be reminded that…

Be reminded that…

Be reminded that…

To know that…

To feel that…

He belongs.
Mingyu sits up in bed at a near-perfect right angle at exactly 9:01am with his eyes wide open.

He sits up.

He waits.

He breathes.

Holy fuck.

That wasn’t a dream. Right? Yeah. Right? That wasn’t a dream. He kissed Minghao- Minghao kissed him and then he kissed Minghao-

Last night he didn’t think much about it. Last night he was cool-headed and was satisfied just enjoying and living in the moment of the kiss, but it’s safe to say that he spends the next five minutes screaming internally, completely still until it gets the better of him and rolls around in his bed—kicking off his covers and flailing his limbs, giggling to himself with the bubbles building in his chest. He has so much energy today. Today is a good day. Today is a wonderful day. Mingyu doesn’t even care if he punches his nightstand on accident and stubs his toe on his dresser because he, Mingyu Kim, kissed Minghao Xu on the lips and- oh, his heart might explode.

Take it easy, take it easy.

It’s just a kiss. It’s just a kiss. It’s just a kiss, but it was a kiss with Minghao and his cheeks are already sore from smiling so hard. At least it makes it easy to brush his teeth. Even though he doesn’t look particularly different from any other day of the week, his reflection in the bathroom mirror makes him feel like he’s glowing. He feels weightless and light, like the butterflies from his stomach have given him their wings. The entire morning routine is filled with off-key notes and the carefree singing of love songs he never listens to. He leaves to run a couple miles since the weather is nice and he could run a few more, but he still has to fix breakfast and message Wonwoo.

Yes, Wonwoo.

He’s dragging him to the animal shelter today to look at cats. Soonyoung had been excited, too. He’s not really a cat person, but he’s more than eager to have a pet at home that he can snuggle with in the winter. They don’t have the heart to tell him that cats aren’t very clingy. Regardless, he’s still determined to help them find them a fur-baby and give one of the many deserving cats a forever home.

Breakfast is simple and quick because he doesn’t have much in his fridge outside of a couple veggies, eggs, and a jar of pickles from who-knows-how-long-ago. Dining with Minghao all the time meant that he’d only have to have condiments and the bare essentials, but now that their arrangement is over and their meals together are set to be less frequent, Mingyu will have to fall back into the habit of cooking for himself on the daily. Ugh. Meal-prep is so dry and boring and as much as he knows spinach and eggs are good for him, he also knows that if he goes grocery shopping, he can buy cereal and milk and frozen waffles. Yes, he knows that it’s some unspoken sin that he’s buying frozen waffles even though he stole the waffle-maker from his parents’ house last year, but there’s something nostalgically good about microwaved Eggos and cheap ‘maple flavored’ syrup.

Last night was probably the first night of sleep that he had without a particularly stressful dream sequence. It wasn’t quiet and dreamless like the nights he spent snoozing next to Minghao, but
he also wasn’t running for his life in the woods or drowning in the ocean, so he’s fine. The dream consisted of nothing much, nothing special, just sitting on a couch in the center of a vast and empty room with him and Minghao playing spades on the cushions. His focus wasn’t on Minghao either, just on the cards and playing a game. He doesn’t even know if Minghao plays, hell, the more he thinks about it, the more he wonders if he remembers how to play.

Dreams are weird, but this one was outstandingly normal. He could get used to dreaming like that because then it doesn’t seem so scary to work towards turning those dreams into reality.

‘Yeah. Let’s go!’ Cat, cat, full-bodied cat, heart, heart, home, sparkles. Aw, he’s so excited.

‘How’s 11? Is soon young coming?’ Ah- spellcheck, why. ‘*Soonyoung’

‘I’m going to pick him up.’ Dancer, music notes, car, building, arrow, cat, heart.

Should he invite Minghao? ‘Should I invite Minghao?’

‘It’s up to you. Did you guys get home okay last night?’ Lips, lips, kissy face, heart, heart, confetti.

‘Yes. We did.’

‘Did you… get any smoothies?’ Kissy face.

Mingyu sighs and locks his phone. He doesn’t need Wonwoo breathing down his neck about it. The kiss was personal and private and as determined as he was to kiss Minghao in front of his hot roommate, he would much rather kiss him and not tell anyone. It’s not anything petty. It’s not like the feeling you get when you have a juicy secret you can’t tell anyone that makes you want to tell everyone even more. It’s just that he’s the opposite of Wonwoo. Wonwoo likes flaunting Soonyoung, showing the world how wonderful he is, dangling in front of them something they can never have. Mingyu, on the other hand, wants to selfishly hold Minghao for himself. If the world ever finds out how amazing he is, won’t they want him too? Is that healthy? Probably not. That’s unhealthy. No, he can share Minghao. The world already loves Minghao. Minghao’s heart is big enough for everyone.

He unlocks his phone, ‘Yes, I did.’

Within the next two minutes, he receives eight pages of exclamation marks, fire, sparkles, praise, applause, dog, heart, frog, confetti, more confetti- you get the point. He doesn’t need to see it to read the ‘Congratulations!’ in Wonwoo’s text.

‘Thanks. I think.’

An entire page of thumbs up.

Mingyu shakes his head and puts his phone away. He waters each of his plants before grabbing his keys and wallet and heading out the door. Grocery shopping is a chore that he doesn’t mind doing. In fact, he thinks it’s a little meditative to push a cart around the local market for an hour only to buy a handful of things. He likes looking at the new selections and breathing in that fresh produce smell. Is he weird? He doesn’t care. Today there’s a sale on oranges. Maybe he should get some. They have a pretty good shelf-life.

Sure, he doesn’t need oranges, but he’s trying to keep his hands busy. He’s still debating on
whether or not he should invite Minghao to the shelter. It isn’t a big deal or anything and he doesn’t
know why he’s been sitting on it. He wants to see Minghao.

‘Are you free today?’

The response takes a while, almost twenty minutes, but Mingyu doesn’t fret. Minghao’s at
work and his students come first, ‘What’s up?’ and Mingyu explains his plans, ‘Oh’ and, ‘uh’ and,
’maybe. What time?’

‘11 :)’

Mingyu continues to shop. Minghao can only send so many texts during a water break so he’s
forgiven. Besides, he needs both his hands to compare cuts of pork in the deli. He needs both hands
to bag all the onions and peppers and apples and- ‘Chan and Vernon are supposed to practice with
me, but I do have a lunch break. I’ll see if I can make time.’ He should have expected Minghao to be
busy. Minghao’s usually busy on the weekends, he shouldn’t have thought any different for this
weekend especially since they’re only a few days away from finals, ‘♡’.

A heart, ‘Does that mean the chances of you coming are good?’

‘♡’.

‘Minghao.’

‘♡’

‘I want to see you.’

‘♡’

‘Yes or no?’

‘♡’

He can’t help but chuckle. He’ll take it as a yes.

It still doesn’t feel a hundred percent natural yet—sending and receiving hearts—, but he’ll
take what he can get. Hearts are the only emojis that Minghao uses and, at that, they aren’t even the
true emoji hearts, but the standard keyboard hearts. He wonders if Soonyoung or Jun have received
hearts from him- is that a trivial thing to wonder about? If he’s the only one that Minghao has cooked
for, he can be the only one that receives other things too, right?

Silly, isn’t it?

Insecurity within a relationship isn’t something that Mingyu ever had to deal with. When they
happened, they happened; when they were done, they were done. Like with most things regarding
Minghao, it feels different. They aren’t an item yet, so he shouldn’t have to worry, but it almost feels
like everything is a little too good to be true. He’s not afraid of losing him. He’s not afraid of keeping
him. It’s a limbo where he’s struggling to find a balance between being Minghao’s everything and
wanting to give him everything. Of course, the latter is a better option, but Mingyu can’t help it.

If you could see Minghao’s eyes, if you could breathe Minghao’s air, if you could hold
Minghao’s hand, then maybe you’d also understand that standing at an arm’s distance isn’t enough.
Being added to a collection of special people isn’t enough. He needs to back up. He’s falling too
hard, too fast. That’s the fastest way to drive a relationship into the ground and they haven’t even
taken off yet.

He sighs loud enough for a passing employee to stop and ask him if he needs assistance. Worried about seeming impolite, Mingyu asks where the rutabagas are at which point he realizes that their local grocery store would definitely not carry such a random vegetable. She gives him a weird look before offering a variety of alternatives, but it’s not like he actually needed the obscure root veggie in the first place. The thanks her and excuses himself to go and find… butter?

Sure, butter.

Ping. Minghao?

‘Yoo uu fucking k I seed?!’ Soonyoung. ‘holy shot man go god jon’

‘Please speak English.’ He tosses the butter into the basket and makes his way over to the checkout, digging for his wallet as the cashier scans the items and places them precariously in the bag he provided. He’s given a weird look when he can’t keep a straight face.

‘Racist.’

‘Soon, we’re both Korean.’

‘Whatevrr.’ He has half a mind to wonder if he really told Woong to turn off his autocorrect, ‘Minghao turned off my autocorrect because he likes watching me struggle and quite frankly he thinks I’m adorable.’

‘We all think you’re adorable.’ He plays.

Ping. ‘Soonyoung is not adorable. He’s a pain in the ass.’ Minghao. Is he reading over Soonyoung’s shoulder?

‘Aw shucks. Thanks mango.’

‘Please don’t give Minghao a hard time.’

‘>:O I’m not! And I’m sure he gives you a much harder time ;’) Mingyu fumbles his phone as he gets into his car, almost dropping it when he throws the groceries into the backseat and shuts the door. Soonyoung will be the death of him one day, ‘He hit me. break up iwth him.’

Mingyu shakes his head and locks his phone, placing it in the cupholder as he backs his car up. Oh, if only Soonyoung knew how impossible that would be right now.
While Minghao still hasn’t gotten back to him regarding his attendance to the animal shelter, Mingyu shows up at Peaceful Paws Humane Society right on time. Wonwoo and Soonyoung arrive shortly after.

The blond is giddy, ready to pet every single animal he comes across and his boyfriend has to remind him that sometimes cats don’t like the hands-on attention all the time. He shouldn’t give them his love so aggressively and that handling cats requires respect, patience, and a lot of mutual understanding. Soonyoung nods, probably not hearing much with the words going in one ear and coming out the other because the next thing that runs through his mind after the promise of cute, furry friends is, “So, you kissed Minghao.”

“I did, yes.” Mingyu clears his throat and starts leading them inside to the front desk where he greets the volunteer coordinators and explains why he’s brought his friends. He then moves them to the cat rooms where they sanitize their shoes before entering.

“And?”

“What ‘and’?”

“Did you just kiss?” Soonyoung tiptoes to say hello to a cat perched high on a shelf. He’s legitimately waving to the cat.

Wonwoo has crouched down on the floor already, embracing the five cats that have come to check him out. If he wasn’t under supervision, Mingyu’s pretty sure that he would be sprawled out, welcoming all of them into his arms. He doesn’t think he’s ever seen Wonwoo with a bigger smile. Mingyu, himself, has his hands clasped behind his back. He has nothing against cats, he just prefers dogs. It’s better to not get attached, “Yes.”

Soonyoung picks up one of the felines and it smacks him in the face a few times before he puts it back down with a frown, “How vanilla.”

“Vanilla is an underrated flavor.” He would thank Wonwoo for his defensive remark if he wasn’t the one who spilled the beans to his significant other, “Maybe Mingyu and Minghao enjoy kisses just as much as you enjoy other things.”

He’s not going to bother and try to figure out what ‘other things’ are because knowing this couple and all of Soonyoung’s hypothetical kinks thanks to Minghao makes for a scene he’d rather never think about. Each couple had their quirks, that’s fine, but some stuff is better kept behind closed doors- and what’s wrong with just a kiss? By standard definition, a kiss is a big step! Although, admittedly, to Mingyu, the kiss itself felt like a given. It was a tiny, little thing. Holding Minghao in his arms felt a lot more prolific, “It’s not a big deal.”

“It is a big deal. What are you talking about?” Soonyoung sits cross-legged on the floor, drawing inspiration from Wonwoo’s pose. A blue-grey cat comes to sit in front of him, pawing at his pants and swerving past his touch, “It means you’re close enough to share germs.”

“That’s Soonyoung’s way of saying Minghao likes you a lot.”

Mingyu grinds out a stifled laugh, “Why did you tell him?”

“I didn’t.” Wonwoo clarifies.
Soonyoung turns to look at Mingyu, “Minghao did.” Why would Minghao- Did Soonyoung duct tape him to a chair again? “He got super red when I asked and didn’t actually say if you did or didn’t, but thanks for confirming it.”

He wants to drop the topic as quickly as possible, deciding to busy himself with checking his messages and responding to a couple e-mails. One of his hands is busy scratching gentle circles behind the ears of a black tabby with three legs, the other is busy scrolling through his phone. That’s when he gets the bright idea to check Minghao’s Instagram. He hadn’t looked at it for a while, but when it finally loads with the shelter’s shoddy Wi-Fi, there are surprisingly few pictures from the last few days.

Of course, there’s that picture of him in the field in the rain, holding Cacahuate’s leash and staring into the distance with the caption of ‘I’m pretty sure most people hate weather like this, but I really like it’. Very well taken if he had to say so and the number of likes and comments it receives are enough flattery to make him blush. After that, there’s only one other new post and it’s a photo he took while they were on the road. Mingyu recognizes the wide expanse of nothingness from the fields between their town and the city. The farmland made for a nice landscape. The second photo in the set is of the three dancers and their boss in front of the studio, looking nice in their eveningwear. The caption reads, ‘On the road again, headed to the CDEA conference with @wenjunwhy, Soonyoung, Wonwoo, and Mingyu. :)’.

When Mingyu scrolls through the comments, there are a surprising number of people that remark on how Minghao finally used a smiley face at the end of his words and how that must mean it’s a good day. There are also several people who wish him well and say that they’ll meet him there. He decides that it’s okay to go full-stalker mode since Minghao’s not here and taps on his tagged photos. These—in contrast to the meager amount of new posts—are completely flooded.

From video clips to the frequent group photo, Minghao is tagged left and right. Sometimes he’s with Soonyoung, sometimes he’s with Jun, sometimes he’s with both of them, but usually, he’s alone. There’s footage of the night’s dance battle and everyone going crazy after Minghao landed his gravity-defying flip. There’s footage of Minghao demonstrating how to do certain moves and isolations. Most of the comments lie somewhere between star-struck idolization and the joy of seeing an old friend again. He’ll admit it, though, while Minghao made it clear he was uncomfortable and tired in front of Mingyu, when it came time to pose for pictures or talk to others, his expression read as friendly and welcoming.

Professional, to say the least.

There are even a couple photos where Mingyu makes a guest appearance in the background. Sometimes he’s cropped out, but most of the time he’s left in. The post from the official North State Dance Association’s account garners a lot of attention as well. It’s a candid photoset of the Performance Studio members and their dashing dates. Of course, Mingyu’s sat with Jun by his side, but in other photos, he’s usually with Wonwoo. Rarely, rarely, rarely is he spotted next to his true date. Well, that was the intention, wasn’t it? Getting clingy with Minghao towards the end of the night was a means to get him away from everyo-

Mingyu nearly jumps out of his skin and loses his grip on his phone because something or someone slams down on his shoulders. It takes him a few seconds to collect himself and make sure his phone is okay. He definitely startled a few cats out of hiding and while Soonyoung is laughing, Wonwoo is just shaking his head and comforting every frightened cat in the room.

“I thought you had practice with Chan and Nonnie?”

“I’m using my lunch break.” Minghao.
Is it odd that his stomach is full of butterflies right now? Why does it feel ‘first-date’ awkward? When he turns to meet his gaze, Minghao looks the same as always. Nothing has changed, but everything has changed—okay, some things have changed. Something has changed. He’s going to try his best and not blow things out of proportion, but this is Minghao we’re talking about and even in a black cap, torn jeans, and some old band t-shirt, he looks nice.

They keep their distance. Mingyu will blame it on Soonyoung and Wonwoo being there, but they don’t get closer than a few inches. There’s no tension or strain between them, but there is a stiffness in the air like neither of them has permission to proceed. Proceed with what? Mingyu doesn’t know, but it’s okay. He doesn’t mind. It’s a comfortable awkwardness and Minghao’s happy to play with the cats. They like him, too, wending between his legs and sniffing his pants. They must smell Cacahuate. Sometimes he picks one up, holding their paws to bap at Mingyu’s shoulder. How can an adult be this endearing? They always twist and swivel out of his grasp when he does that, but it gets Mingyu’s attention and that’s probably what he wants.

After a few minutes of enjoyable silence, Minghao suddenly yelps, leaning forward in a deep bow in order to keep a cat balanced on his back. He sticks his arms out to his side, jutting them like a parent playing airplane, but he’s grappling for Mingyu to help him, swatting at him and seeking assistance.

“Aw, but it likes you.” Mingyu avoids his hands, rather enjoying the comical view. He’s given a hard stare and moves. Removing the cat from Minghao’s back is no easy task because it sinks its claws into his shirt. He isn’t sure what to do. He doesn’t want to hurt its nails if he tugs harder. He gestures for Minghao to stand up with the hope of removing the cat using gravity, but it just scratches the skin of his back and makes the dancer whine and bend over again.

In the end, it’s Wonwoo who gets up from his blissed-out spot on the ground to help. He carefully unhooks the cat’s claws one at a time and puts the feline back onto the shelf before returning to his ring, surrounded by them in a tight circle.

Mingyu’s not sure if it’s intentional or not, but Minghao has sandwiched him between him and the shelf of cats, using his height and body as a makeshift shield. The dancer closes the gap between them, leaning against Mingyu with his elbow propped up on his shoulder. He hadn’t noticed earlier but tucked under Minghao’s watch sits the silver bracelet and its red ribbon.

He hasn’t taken it off.

Did he find comfort in it as well? That’s a nice thought.

“So, what do you guys think?” Minghao’s question is more for Soonyoung since Wonwoo’s completely enraptured in playing with them already. He’s double-fisting cat toys, two per hand, and clicking his tongue and has three cats in his lap.

“They’re cute,” Soonyoung is still playing with the same grey cat that doesn’t really like him all that much, “but I don’t know.”

“Well, of course not. You haven’t made a dent in connecting with that one.” Mingyu sighs.

“Let me find one for you.” Minghao looks over the ones on the wall-mounted cat tree shelves, the ones that were too shy to come forward and greet their guests. Usually, older felines would sit there, too tired and aged to bother competing with the cute kittens who had more energy and charm. But Minghao reaches forward into one of the cubbies and coaxes a senior cat out with soft coos and a little treat he took from the volunteer room.
Mingyu’s pleasantly surprised to see his choice.

Minghao sidesteps him, cradling Halibut in his arms and kneeling to carefully place her in Soonyoung’s lap, retreating to Mingyu’s side with a bounce. He’s excited.

Like a kid on Christmas, both Halibut’s and Soonyoung’s eyes dilate when they look at each other. Ah, true love, could this be it? She stands up on her hind legs and puts her front paws up on his chest, leaning up to sniff his face. Feeling the cold nose on the underside of his chin, he lets out a little giggle and delicately tickles her sides, unsure of her reaction or if he’s being too rough. Wonwoo slides over on the floor, sitting behind Soonyoung and pulling him back to lean against him. He wraps one arm around his waist and uses the other to scratch behind Halibut’s ears as she leans into his hand, nuzzling them before putting a paw on Soonyoung’s cheek and squishing him.

Trying to dodge the prodding paws, Soonyoung bumps his head into Wonwoo’s. At first, he expects the senior PT to chide him, but Wonwoo just pulls his boyfriend into him tighter, holding him still for Halibut to plant a soft kiss on his nose.

He doesn’t know why, but Mingyu feels enriched like his heart is warm and full.

“Let’s give them some time.” Minghao pulls on his arm, inviting him to leave the room to allow the two a moment alone with their potential daughter. He obliges, opening the door for them both to step into the hallway. It’s actually a little difficult to rip his eyes away from his friends, but Minghao’s right, giving them some space to bond with her is probably better than four people crowded into a room. Generally, they do better with fewer people around and they both want Halibut to make a good first impression.

“So, skipping lunch to come see some cats?”

“Would you think less of me if I confirmed that?” Minghao laughs as he steps on the foam pad to sanitize his shoes and dries them on an old towel.

“Don’t skip meals.” He follows Minghao back into the lobby, “It’s not good for you.”

“Well, think of it like this,” he opens the door to step outside, “animals are good for your health, so it’s not really a sacrifice. Besides, I have snacks in my car. It’s fine.”

Before he can object, it’s clear that Minghao’s already making a beeline for the canine wing of the shelter, a place that he’s obviously spent more hours. He stops him before they go in, “I’m serious. Let’s go get lunch after this.”

He scoffs, “I have work, Mingyu.” And seeing the immediate disappointment on his face, he decides to add on, “Otherwise, I would.”

Although he’s responsible for Wonwoo and Soonyoung as guests of the shelter and is determined to help them find their purrfect match, he almost wants to ask if Minghao wants to ditch them and grab a bite to eat right now. He’s also pretty sure that Celestia’s delivers anywhere and that Tony’s Teriyaki House is a short five-minute walk down the street. Minghao needs to eat. He’s expending so much energy.

The dancer yawns a big yawn.

“Did you get enough sleep last night?” Mingyu follows him up the ramp to the kennels, already hearing a swell of barking from inside.

“Almost.” He leans against the railing, the brisk wind is stirring up Mingyu’s hair, “I almost
did. I forgot I had a coffee date with Seungkwan this morning at 6am. Good thing it was set on my phone or I would have slept through it.”

Minghao barely got four hours of rest.

“Don’t look so grumpy. I got back home, skipped morning practice, and slept until work.”

“Which was?”

“Until, like, 9:30- okay, don’t look at me like that. You didn’t get much sleep either.”

“I got enough.” At least he can presume that Minghao ate breakfast and that’s better than nothing, but with how much he has to move, he really ought to up his calorie intake. Mingyu’s not a nutritionist, but he had plenty of time to learn about it from his coworkers at the gym during college, “Please take care of yourself.”

“I am.” He moves off the railing and takes a step towards the door, but Mingyu moves quickly to corner him up and trap him with a hand holding the bar at either side of his hips, “What?” there’s still a lighthearted tone in his voice. Mingyu’s not intimidating him in the slightest, “I’m totally fine, so try to understand. It’s kinda like finals in college. You work really, really hard for a short period of time and then you can relax afterwards.” He ducks under Mingyu’s arm, freeing himself, “You can’t tell me you haven’t been there.”

“I have, but,” but this is Minghao and he wants Minghao to be okay, “you still eat during finals- Hey- Hey! Don’t try to avoid me-” Minghao closes the kennel room’s door behind him, shutting Mingyu out with one last teasing glance.

He wants to be followed, he wants to be chased.
Chapter 91

The kennel hall is loud and boisterous with dogs barking left and right for their attention, but Minghao only pays his to the ones who are quiet. He’ll stand at the foot of a cell and wait until the pup inside has calmed down before he hands it a treat and ruffles its fur.

Mingyu ducks into the volunteer closet to grab some treats of his own, deciding to shell them out stingily because he knows they aren’t supposed to be spoiling them since they’re not scheduled to be in. He uses a clean poopy bag to carry them. The idea of crumbs in his pockets makes him cringe.

Believe it or not, Mingyu prefers smaller dogs. Even without formal obedience training, they’re easy to manage and wrangle. That’s not to say big dogs haven’t won his heart, too, but Mingyu likes to stick to what he knows. All his family dogs have been small little things because that’s what his mom liked. His dad is impartial to animals, but sometimes they’d grow on him. He remembers, fondly, how he’d warm up to them after saying that they couldn’t get any more time and time again, but his mom was persistent and at one point during his childhood, they had three dogs at once. He was lucky he wasn’t tasked with doodie duty. Instead, Mingyu often ran all three of them after school. Those were good times.

“How sad is it that the shelter might be the only existence he knows. He doesn’t deserve that. He didn’t do anything wrong.

When he gets closer, he sees that Baxter is laying down with his back to Minghao, up against the gate to his singular cell. He’s much too big to be sharing with any of the other large dogs and, even though he’s usually just a big lummox, he can easily harm or squish smaller dogs by accident. Minghao has his hand squeezed between the bars, fingers combing the tricolored dog’s scruff as he snoozes, “Shh, he’s napping.”

“Kneeling like that is bad for your knees.” Double checking that it’s his clean hand, he stands by Minghao and pats the top of his head, calling his attention and hoping for him to listen. But when he looks up at him with question in his eyes. He doesn’t know how long they stay like that—with his hand on the crown of his hair—and he’s not sure why that expression is so simple, but in the end, Mingyu’s the one to crouch down. He clicks his tongue. Baxter hears this and stands up to make a lap about his kennel before sitting in front of Minghao while being as far from Mingyu as possible. He harrumphs and licks his lips before pawing at the gate. The blond smacks his arm as punishment for waking the sleeping giant and disturbing his rest (which is very illegal).

Again, Minghao twists his hand between the bars to pet him, receiving a few firm licks before the big dog pushes his black nose into his palm, “Good boy.” He coos.
“What about me?” Mingyu whines as he holds his hand out with a treat balanced in his palm, but Baxter just ignores him, “No? But you usually like me.”

“He likes me more.” He scratches his muzzle. Baxter pants in elated agreement, rolling over for a belly rub, but unable to receive one since Minghao can’t fit his arm through the gate. He plucks the treat from Mingyu’s hand and shows the dog, “Sit.” Before offering it to him, “Such a good boy.”

Mingyu pouts.

Baxter had been nothing but friendly to him every weekend he’s come in. Why the sudden change in heart? Especially in front of Minghao! That is a little embarrassing. He wants to show Minghao that he’s good with dogs, too. He has absolutely no control over Cacahuate, even though he’s pretty sure that the golden dog likes him and, now, his one hope of showing Minghao that he knows how to tame giant puppies is null and void. Baxter usually listened so well—sitting and shaking hands—and was always happy to greet Mingyu.

“I think he has a little scab on his cheek.”

That’s news. Baxter isn’t aggressive, but he was known to roughhouse in the yard and go overboard if he was too energetic. It’d sometimes take half-an-hour just to get him to stay still enough for a bath. Today, his fur is a little greasy. Maybe he couldn’t sit still this week and the volunteers didn’t bother to run him before bathing him. It looks like the social service guys just hosed him down in the yard which is very unfortunate considering how cold it is. The kennels have a heating system, but it still runs cold most days. They don’t have enough money to keep it on around the clock.

“What are you doing?”

Minghao unlatches the gate and slides in, “Checking his owie.” He latches it again behind him.

Owie, really?

“It doesn’t look too bad, but it’s warm.” He rummages for a treat in his pocket to distract the large pooch so that he can take a closer look, “It might be starting to get infected.”

“Sit tight, I’ll go report it to the front desk.” Seeing Minghao locked inside the kennel, leaned against the brick wall is a little unsettling. Somehow, it seems like his character fits in here and Mingyu doesn’t understand why. Scrappy. That’s probably it. Scrappy with those giant, brown puppy eyes.

He leaves the dog kennels to return to the main lobby and report Baxter’s injury—as was volunteer protocol. The lead coordinator, Mari, thanks him and forages under the counter’s cabinets for a minute before plopping a small bottle of antiseptic spray on the surface, “If you could apply this in the meantime, that’d be great. I’ll see if Dr. Lao will be able to squeeze him in for a check-up this afternoon.”

“Sure thing. Oh,” he looks up from the canister, “have my friends come out at all?”

“Not yet, but I sent Annie in there as soon as you left to see if they needed help. Haven’t heard from them since.”

Mingyu decides that Baxter and Minghao can be left alone for a few minutes and opts to check
He’s burrowing his mouth and nose into her neck, standing with Wonwoo as they listen to Annie talk. His eyes are red and boiling over with globs of tears. Wonwoo, stone-faced as ever, only has his eyebrows knitted as he rubs big circles into Soonyoung’s back with one hand, the other is twirling that cat’s tail. He can hear part of the conversation from outside the room since the feline branch is so quiet and the plexiglass windows don’t offer much in terms of sound isolation.

“Yeah, she’s a real sweetheart.” Annie reaches forward to rub behind Halibut’s flickering ears, but the cat ignores her, “Some might think it’s because she’s old that she’s unwanted, which is partially true but look at her personality. She’s so bright and cheery, a little jokester sometimes. She brings a smile to anyone who looks at her.” She pushes against Soonyoung’s shoulder to stand up on her hind legs in his arms, “The only reason she’s still here is because she keeps running away from the families that take her in. I think she might still feel like her kittens are here waiting for her or something like that. She takes very good care of all the kittens that come in before we move them into foster care, so if you decide to get another cat in the future, know that she’ll be kind to it. She loves people and other animals—even dogs—and I’m pretty sure a volunteer has seen her befriend a mouse before.”

The cat reaches upwards with her soft paws to smear the tears all over his cheek and hold his face, stretching as far as she can to groom him with her tongue to the best of her abilities.

Mingyu expected the gesture of comfort to bring forward giggles or put a smile on his face, but Soonyoung just holds Halibut at an arm’s length. He gives her a hard look, lips wrinkling and jittering when she meows at him, and melts into a blubbering mess again, pulling the ragdoll-mix into his chest. The smile on Wonwoo’s face is patient and gentle and in it holds the most fondness that Mingyu’s ever seen someone exude. Actors in blockbusters could never capture an expression like that.

That, right there, that’s love. That’s real, gross, soft, caring love.

“Thank you for telling us a little about her. I think we’ll need a little time to think about it.”

“Oh, that’s absolutely fin-”

“No! We’re taking her home.” Soonyoung chokes out, “We’re taking her home. She doesn’t have to stay here anymore.”

Wonwoo gives a shy smile to Annie, excusing her, “I’ll be at the front desk. Come out if you have any more questions or if you need assistance with anything.”

“Thank you.”

Annie gives Mingyu a pointed look on her way out, patting him on the shoulder and wishing him luck. He waits a minute before revealing himself. Luckily, it looks like Soonyoung has calmed down. He’s sitting on the floor with the cat in his lap. Halibut is still massaging her toe-beans into his cheeks while Wonwoo’s pulled the sleeves of his cardigan over his palms and uses them to dab away the wetness from his eyes. He ruffles his hair and presses a kiss to his forward.

Mingyu knocks at the door, sheepishly smiling and waving at them.

Wonwoo motions him to come in, but it’s Soonyoung who turns away from him first, spooning Halibut up and facing the wall. He probably thinks that he doesn’t look very presentable, sitting there like a cog in a machine, eyes red and hot and still blinking away tears.
right now, “How’s everything going, guys?”

“Going well.”

“Fine.” A sniffle.

“Any decisions?”

“Not yet.” Wonwoo’s words are quiet but firm. However, the way Soonyoung’s head snaps up at him says that he disagrees, “They said she’s run away from her previous owners before, so I don’t know if it’s a good idea. Maybe she likes it here, Soonyoung.”

“Maybe she doesn’t.” he doesn’t think he’s ever heard this voice come from the senior instructor. It’s so defeated and hurt, serious and accusatory. It’s so complicated compared to his usual peppy, loud words.

“Maybe she doesn’t.” he echoes, “But what if we take her home and she gets out?”

“She can be an indoor cat.”

“We open the doors all the time, Soon, she can slip out. Cats are determined little things. They’ll always find a way to go where they want to go.” Wonwoo combs his platinum locks into place, “If she wants to come back here, it’ll be a dangerous trip. She’ll have to cross the freeway and she might get hurt.” Mingyu’s impressed with how far Wonwoo is thinking into the future regarding this adoption, but it’s better that he think about it rather than overlook it, “Won’t it be better if she stays here where she’s safe?”

Soonyoung sniffles, hovering a hand over Halibut’s head—wanting to pet her—, but retracts it to his side. She perks up, looks at him, and gets out of his lap to circle around him twice. After finishing her second lap, she nudges herself under his hand to pet herself from tip to tail, “Maybe she won’t run away. If she finds a family that really, really loves her, maybe she won’t run away.”

Wonwoo’s sympathetic smile fades.

It’s painfully obvious that Mingyu’s missing a large piece of the puzzle, a few volumes in this series of novels.

“Maybe she’ll like our house. Maybe she’ll like sunbathing on the windowsill and drinking water from our leaking tap. Maybe she’ll like snuggling in my pile of stuffed animals and sitting on the couch to play video games with you. Maybe she’ll like it when you read at night.” Soonyoung turns his whole body around to look at both of them, Halibut following close behind. His expression is open and curious, no longer wounded, “I know we aren’t home all the time, but she’ll get used to our routines, right?” the question is pointed at Mingyu who has never owned a cat.

Wonwoo answers for him, “Yes. She’ll understand after a few weeks.”

“She seems smart, doesn’t she?” the coal grey and white cat curls up in the circle formed by Soonyoung’s legs. By now, his black jeans are absolutely covered in fur, “I think she’ll pick up on that really quickly. And we already went out and bought all that cat stuff,” even Mingyu wants to convince Wonwoo to get the cat at this point, “wouldn’t it be a shame for it to collect dust.”

He lets out a defeated chuckle and crouches down again to pet Halibut. She purrs and stretches out, adjusting her position and returning to sleep. Wonwoo sighs and looks up at Mingyu, “How long does the paperwork take?”
“It’s not too long. It’s not very extensive, they just want to make sure that you know how to take care of her and that you can take her to the doctor if she needs it. General stuff that I’m sure you already know about.” With Wonwoo and Soonyoung’s combined incomes, they definitely have the resources, “I’d guess that the only big concern would be the time you have to spend with her.”

Leaving any pet at home alone for several hours a day isn’t a big deal, but when it’s every day from morning until night, they might run into problems. Of course, Mingyu doesn’t know if cats can handle so much alone time, but all the dogs he’d ever owned were never alone for more than a few hours. Soonyoung practically lives at the studio and Wonwoo has full-time work. Making a gap in their days for her will be difficult.

“We can go home to check on her during lunch and stuff.” Soonyoung pouts, “I can change my hours and work with Nonnie to switch shifts around and…” Wonwoo wraps him in a warm side-hug—the kind that parents give you before they lay down the bad news—, but he doesn’t say anything. He presses another kiss into Soonyoung’s messy hair before looking down at the slumbering feline, tracing a finger down her spine. She’s thin even though her fur hides it well. It’s not like the volunteers are neglecting to feed her, but sometimes the animals just don’t eat, “I don’t want to leave her here. She deserves a home. She deserves love. She’s been through so much. She needs to rest and she can’t rest here.”

The thing is, Wonwoo was the one who was excited to get a cat, but now he’s the one trying to find reasons why they shouldn’t. Okay, perhaps not that they shouldn’t but reasons why they might not be ready for one. To Mingyu, his worries make sense. Those are the same reasons why he doesn’t have any pets yet. He’s not settled down, he’s at work most mornings, and nothing is permanent until he gets signed on full-time. There’s no telling what his lifestyle will be like in a few months or in a year or in five years and a pet who comes into it now doesn’t deserve to be lonely later on.

“Don’t worry about that.” Wonwoo fixes the collar of his shirt, “Cats crave routine. Working our current hours is fine.”

Soonyoung mumbles, “I can take her to work with me.”

He laughs, “Jun will implode if you bring her to work.”

“He can suck it up.” He gets elbowed in the side, “Fine. I know, I know. Junnie’s allergies are really bad.”

“If it’s any consolation,” Mingyu squats down next to them, petting Halibut’s exposed belly, “I don’t think she’ll like all the loud music and screaming.” She wakes up to bat his hand away, clawing at him until he gives up. Why do all these animals hate him today? Does an upturned belly not mean ‘I want belly rubs’ in cat language? This is misleading. This is false advertisement.

Soonyoung whaps him on the chest, sending him toppling back onto his butt, “You woke her up you imbecilic barbarian.” Wow, harsh.

Wonwoo laughs as he stands up, “So, where’s Hao?”

“Oh, he’s still with the dogs.” Thanks for reminding him that he still needs to take the spray back for Baxter, “I just wanted to check on you guys.”
“Is he thinking about getting another one?”

Mingyu shrugs, “No clue.”

“Cacahuate doesn’t like sharing his collection of parents.” Soonyoung looks up at him, eyes a little puffy and rimmed with red, but his overall expression isn’t so desolate anymore, “Are you getting one?”

“I don’t think so.” he picks at the bracelet behind his back, “I don’t really have time for a dog right now.”

“Will you ever?” Wonwoo sighs, “We study to work. We work to die.” That’s a little oversimplified and morbid, “It’s easy to say that there’s no room in between to make space for a pet,” Mingyu doesn’t really get where he’s going with this, “but I think that’s just us telling ourselves we don’t deserve happiness yet.” Oh, that makes sense.

Again, Mingyu’s absolutely certain that he’s missing some background to the explanation, but that’s okay. He doesn’t mind not understanding everything. This is between the two, he has no business prying into their personal lives out of the blue. If they want to tell him, there’ll be a time for it eventually. All is good. All that matters is that his words seem to resonate with the dancer.

Soonyoung leans back against Wonwoo’s legs and peers up at him with wonder on his face, “So,” he drags it out, “does that mean…”

He nods.

“We can take Halibut home.”

The cat raises her head when Soonyoung inhales sharply, ready to shout his joys to the world, but when Wonwoo shakes his head, he closes his mouth and wiggles his shoulders, fighting to contain his overwhelming joy. He picks her up under her arms and gives her a light shake and even though it seems like it’s to her distaste, she tolerates his excitement. When he puts her down, she springs up onto his shoulder and stands up to put her front paws on his head.

Goal accomplished! Mission cleared! Family assembled!

Mingyu walks the couple out to the front desk to fill out the small packet of paperwork. Annie seems relieved that Soonyoung has stopped crying. She doesn’t even tell him to put Halibut back in the cat room where pets are supposed to stay until their file is complete in the database, but it seems like the cat has no plans to run away. She sits, loafed on the counter, in a loose circle created by Soonyoung’s arms as he works with Wonwoo to fill out the paperwork as accurately as possible. Mingyu gives Mari and Annie two thumbs up before slipping out the front door again.

He jogs across the parking lot and slides up to Baxter’s kennel a second time, but this time the scene inside is a little laughable.

Minghao reaches for him, unable to move with the large dog’s weight bearing down on his thighs as he’s sitting on the floor with this back pressed against the brick wall, “Help me.” He hisses at Mingyu.

“No chance.” It’s illegal to wake sleeping animals, remember? “I brought this spray from the front desk.” He clarifies, “For his owie.”

Baxter’s eyes open when Minghao speaks.
“Oh, shut up.”

“I’m sorry you’re four.”

“Not like being five is much better.”

He raises his large paw to swat Minghao’s arm back under his chin and squishes his jowl into his leg as if to tell Mingyu ‘this is mine, go away’. The blond struggles to raise his other hand and reach for the spray that he’s trying to hand him, but he can’t reach.

Out of easy options, he carefully unlatches the gate and steps into the now-crowded kennel. He doesn’t expect Baxter to get up and start growling at him.

This is unheard of and breaks Mingyu’s heart a little bit. None of the dogs on the floor are aggressive towards people. They’ve been stress-tested and have had their behavior evaluated by at least three professionals. Any of them that don’t pass are held in the back for training and are kept away from the public and volunteers until they’re deemed safe enough. He’d hate for Baxter to go back to being one of those dogs, “Hey, it’s okay.”

Minghao holds Baxter’s collar with one hand and offers the other out to take the spray so Mingyu can escape, but he stands firm. He knows if he backs down all of a sudden, that Baxter might think he can fight any volunteer that walks by. He has to show him that he’s not a threat, but with the number of teeth the Bernese mix is showing, it might not be wise. He won’t admit to this shameful bias, but as a dog with Pitbull and Rottweiler blood, he has the capability to really hurt someone. It would be unfortunate for Mingyu to get bitten. He’d have to report it and that would land Baxter in quarantine for months, but it’s a safety protocol that he can’t ignore.

“Has he done this before?” Minghao asks and Mingyu shakes his head. There have been other volunteers in his cage when Mingyu’s dropped by to say hello and he’s never received this response. He supposes that Minghao doesn’t often work with other volunteers since he comes in during normal work hours, “He’s usually not this clingy.”

“Maybe you smell like Cacahuate?”

“Huatito didn’t touch these clothes, though.” He plucks at his shirt, “He was sleeping with the roomie all night and I left for work before they got up.”

Minghao carefully gets up to stand at full height, bonking his head on the metal support beam in the center of the kennel that holds the steel chord connecting to the draw gate that leads outside. Mingyu’s immediate reflex is to put a hand on the back of his head and apply pressure until the pain fizzles away, but that’s a mistake because Baxter barks a loud and deep snarl at him.

It’s Minghao’s turn to act on instinct as he spins on his heel to face the dog, standing between him and Mingyu.

Baxter looks confused and cautious.

“It’s okay.” Mingyu feels a palm slide against his, locking their fingers together, the antiseptic still in his left hand. He’s not sure if Minghao’s trying to calm him down or stop him from running, but both of those things are working. He rubs his thumb along his, reassuring him of his intent before taking a knee to meet Baxter at eyelevel.

Normally, Mingyu would advise against it. If something triggers Baxter, he could launch into a potentially fatal attack. He resists and tries to pull Minghao back up, but he just turns and looks at him, unyielding.
“It’s okay.”

He coaxes Mingyu down to a squat, hand still held in his. The hairs on the back of his neck are standing at attention. There is fear coursing through his veins and he’s sure that Baxter can smell it in his pheromones, but with Minghao’s determination, he holds steady, gulping his doubts back into his gut. This is trust, this is trust. He trusts Minghao.

The dancer reaches his free hand out to call Baxter away from the wall. He ruffles his cheek, then the top of his head, moving down to his back. Putting him on his rear, the dog sits for a treat, brown eyes still alert and searching them both. Minghao unfurls Mingyu’s hand and places a treat in his palm. He then lays his hand on top of his and they offer the treat to him together. After a moment of hesitation, Baxter sniffs them and sticks his tongue out to lap up the small morsel.

“It’s okay. He didn’t hurt me.” Minghao’s voice is so gentle. Is this how he talks to babies? “This is Mingyu. He’s my,” the word lingers in the air when he licks his lips, “Min- He’s Mingyu.”

Have you been thinking about what we are? “He’s really nice and he helps people feel better.” It’s not like the dog can understand the explanation, but he calms down, tilting his head side to side while sitting on his haunches, “Sometimes he takes care of me.” Mingyu’s very proud of those moments, “And sometimes I take care of him.” And he cherishes those moments very dearly, “He’s a big weenie,” watch it, Minghao, “but he just wants to be your friend.”

Baxter whines once before standing again and coming forward. Mingyu can feel his legs itching to move. He’s fine proving to Minghao that he is, in fact, a weenie—as if the tightness of his grip wasn’t telling enough—, but he stays crouched. The large dog steps into his personal bubble, sizing him up with his very long legs and big head before leaning in to sniff him. He sniffs his neck, his face, his armpits, and pokes his nose into his stomach.

“Oh, I have treats. Are you looking for those?” Finally, he lets go of Minghao’s hand to rummage for the little jerky pieces in his pocket and holds out a few of them to feed Baxter. While he’s busy munching away, Mingyu carefully sets down the spray to comb a hand through the fur under his chin. He knows you shouldn’t pet a skittish dog on its head, but after a few strokes, it seems like Baxter doesn’t mind.

If he wasn’t so proud of his progress, he might have noticed Minghao’s very fond and satisfied smile.

Through all his pats and coddling, he wishes to communicate with Baxter that they’re birds of a feather— that’s probably not an appropriate idiom for a dog, but he can’t think of another one right now. He wants to tell him that they share the same feeling. The ‘it’s okay, buddy, I want to protect Minghao, too’ feeling. The ‘he’s precious and he doesn’t need protecting, but I want to make sure no one ever hurts him again’ feeling. The ‘Minghao’s heart is big enough to share’ feeling. The ‘I want to be the one who gives him happiness and health and fortune’ feeling.

The ‘he’s mine’ feeling.

After they hold Baxter down and treat his scabbing wound, Mingyu decides that he’s awfully tired of bending over in this cage that’s not tall enough for him and shimmies out after leaving the rest of the jerky nubs from his pocket in the food bowl. Minghao follows him out after giving the dog a big hug around his neck, earning a wet kiss. He waits until they latch the gate and patter around the corner before he wipes it off with the back of his sleeve. He jokes that Baxter’s feelings would be hurt if he saw him wipe off the kiss.
Together, they duck into the bathroom to wash their hands.

With Mingyu’s sleeves rolled up and Minghao’s watch set to the side, it’s painfully obvious that they’re both still wearing matching bracelets. They spend a gratuitous amount of time staring at each other’s wrists as they rinse, lather, and repeat, but neither of them says anything. It’s all just chuckles and smiles. Yeah, okay, the Peaceful Paws restroom isn’t the most romantic place, but even as Mingyu tells him about Soonyoung and Wonwoo’s adoption adventure, there’s a heavy feeling in the air.

Are they teenagers? Why do they need to dry their hands together under the same blow-dryer? This probably looks stupid and inefficient, but Mingyu wouldn’t have it any other way. He claps his hands together, smacking Minghao’s in the middle to test if they’re dry. Minghao does the same and quickly escalates to them slapping each other slightly harder than the last time until Minghao secedes, holding his hands to get him to stop.

Taking one step forward, he laughs into Mingyu’s shoulder. He can feel his smile through his shirt. To clarify, the Peaceful Paws latrine might not be the most romantic place, but Mingyu won’t turn down a kiss or anything, so go ahead, Minghao. But the latter doesn’t. He just looks up at him, bats his eyes a couple times with a cheeky pout on his lips and steps away, grabbing his watch from the rim of the sink and putting it on again. He tucks the bracelet into the strap and takes off his hat to fix his hair briefly before pulling it back down and pushing them both out of the restroom.

Wonwoo and Soonyoung are in the lobby, ready to go.

Wonwoo has a carrier with him. It seems like he came prepared. Inside of it is a pretty blue blanket and all the paperwork because the cat is nestled nicely into Soonyoung’s arms.

“Do you want to tell Mingyu what you renamed her?” he prompts as Minghao comes over to pet her. She doesn’t seem to mind.

Soonyoung holds a tight smile, “Well, look, Halibut is a really cute name, but,” he scratches behind her ears and down by her neck where a soft, pristine aqua collar is looped, “this is, like, a new beginning, right?” Mingyu nods, “I wrote down a bunch of names on a piece of paper to show her and the first one she punched is the one I gave her.” Cats… can’t read, Soonyoung— “So, her name is Byeol now.”

“That’s a pretty name.” Minghao coos, “Does it mean anything?”

“Star.” Wonwoo answers.

“And look how sparkly her eyes are! It’s like there’s a bazillion stars in there!”

“I think it’s quite fitting.”

“But, y’know, I still really like Halibut, so I think I might end up calling her ByeolButt.”

Wonwoo shakes his head. The hand he has free is combing through Soonyoung’s hair. He’s not annoyed at his innocuous boyfriend—probably more amazed at how jovial he is—but the collar’s nametag says ‘Byeol’ in freshly engraved letters.

She looks so happy. She looks so happy with her eyes shut and purring into their touches.

This is a scene he wants to remember. On paper, it might not look like much. He took his
friends to get a pet, so what? But in the deepest caverns of his heart, a little bleeding cavity has been mended with red and white stitching.

It looks like Mingyu isn’t the only one to find a home this week.
“I’ll meet you back at the studio for our 3:00.” Soonyoung throws one arm around Minghao’s shoulder, pulling him out the door, following Mingyu and Wonwoo to their cars. Wonwoo’s parked across the street while Minghao parked next to Mingyu. He wants to suggest that Soonyoung put the cat in the carrier to avoid a situation where she could bolt since the street is a stressful place, but she doesn’t seem to pay it any mind even as the blond carries her under one arm. He carries her the way he would carry a bag or yoga mat.

Several times, Mingyu sees Wonwoo’s eyes dart between Byeol and his boyfriend, debating whether or not he should tell him that he’s holding her incorrectly. Ultimately, he decides to keep his mouth shut because she doesn’t look bothered in the slightest. It’s almost like the elderly cat is enjoying it, falling limp like a ragdoll in his grasp and lifting her head up every now and then to catch a curious noise.

“Soonyoung, could you bring back my blue canteen?”

“Soonyoung?” Soonyoung cocks his head to the side.

“I washed it. It’s on the counter.” He unlocks the car and stands on the sidewalk, waiting for goodbyes and ready to cross the street.

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

Even though the words seem a little stiff and courteous, Mingyu still has faith that they’ll mend their broken bridge over time. They’re both uncomfortable, avoiding eye contact and busying their attentions with menial things like lint and nails. He kind of wants to push them together and make them hug, but it’s probably too soon for that. They have to set their own pace even if they don’t click perfectly. There’s still hope. After all, he and Minghao started off with a rocky start and look where they are now.

Well- just **where** exactly are they? They’re probably somewhe-

Soonyoung clears his throat, “Yeah, sure, I’ll bring it, but text me in case I forget.” He bounces Byeol on his knee to get a better grip on her before pulling Minghao into a rough hug. The taller of the two doesn’t seem to mind and doesn’t get startled by the sudden, jerking movement. Are deep hugs a Soonyoung thing? They probably are.

“Congratulations on your new child, man.” Minghao bends over to wave goodbye to the cat, “Be good to him, okay Byeol?”

“Byeol.”

Minghao stands up, pout on display, brow furrowed, pronunciation caught on his tongue as it pokes out between his lips. For some reason, he expects him to have a rebuttal like many of the people he’s come across. Speaking a new language is hard and not everyone has the heart to put effort into learning them properly. He’s had several dates at Korean restaurants where the names of dishes were painfully disrespected and corrections fell on deaf ears to the point where he didn’t even bother anymore, “Byool?”

“Byeol.” Soonyoung enunciates, “You have to move your mouth like this. Byeol.” And
shows Minghao where his tongue lands in his mouth. He readily teaches him and Minghao readily absorbs information like a very eager student. That’s another charming quality, “Byeol.”

“Byeol.” He’s quick.

“Good.”

Maybe one day Mingyu will teach Minghao how to speak Korean. It’s not too hard. After all, it is a language designed for easy pick-up. He only knows, like, three phrases in Chinese; ‘hi’, ‘thank you’, and ‘I love you’. Seemingly shallow and not enough to have a full-blown conversation. What if he has to meet Minghao’s family one day? Will he just be a babbling baby at that point? Probably.

“I’ll see you later.” Wonwoo hits his shoulder before pulling Soonyoung across the street and into their car. He waves silently. They both wait at the curb until the couple speeds off, eyes watching their car disappear around a corner before they waddle back to their spots in the parking lot, whittled between the two automobiles.

It’s only when he lets go that Mingyu realizes Minghao had been holding his hand. When did that happen? That’s scary. He can’t be ignoring little gestures like that so early on. He feels bad that he didn’t notice like he somehow just didn’t care- he does care, he does, but he’s a little distracted. There are things on his mind, “Well, I guess it’s back to work for me.”

“What time is your next session?”

“2.”

Mingyu daringly picks up Minghao’s wrist to look at the time. It’s only a little past 1. Does he have the gall to say what he wants to say, then? Is there room for it? Minghao doesn’t have to be back to work for a while. It should be fine. He doesn’t know why there’s so much doubt in his head today when it comes to him. He should trust him, right?

“Is everything okay, Mingyu?” he pulls him a step closer. That alone bridges more than half the space between them, sandwiched by their cars, “What’s on your mind?”

“You don’t have class until 2.” Minghao shakes his head. He decides then that it’s okay. He places both his hands against the frame of Minghao’s car, boxing him in, closing the gap, and smirking down at him, “So, does that mean I have you until then?”

He doesn’t think he’s ever seen the man in front of him get so flustered which isn’t saying much because he’s not flailing or rambling or moving around. He’s just averting his gaze, his eyes moved to the gravel pavement of the parking lot. A light chuckle slips past his lips which isn’t anything new. However, the telltale sign is that his ears are beet red and he’s fighting the obvious smile on his face which makes for an interesting expression. He seriously has to fight the urge to kiss him.

But Minghao closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and straightens out his expression, “No,” ow, “I can’t.” why, “I have practice with Vernon and Chan still and I already blew them off to come here, so,” his sentence trails off, “It’s a little out of character and I’m sure they’re worried. My phone’s been going off every two minutes.”

“You need to eat.” He’s putting his foot down. This isn’t just for him, this is for Minghao’s health.

“I know. I will.” And Minghao leans forward and into him. Their chests meet with him pressing his ear to his collarbone and suddenly Mingyu is shy that his heartbeat might be too loud.
Somehow, the gesture feels… sad, like Minghao is apologizing for the lunch he most certainly will not eat. He can’t see his expression any more thanks to the bill of his hat, but when he exhales and thumps his head against him once, he can feel it, “I just,” he looks up at Mingyu, “I just want to work really hard right now.” He plays with a button on Mingyu’s shirt, “Only for a few more days- Think of it like a test, a final exam. You study really hard for a week. You work really hard for a week and you lose sleep and you skip meals, but it’s fine because you do well on your test and can rest afterwards.” Is this the Minghao Xu method? Because that method has failed for a lot of people. Cramming is not an efficient way to study and learn.

“You’ve been working hard. It’s okay to take a break.”

“I’m making up for lost time.”

“It wasn’t time lost, it was time spent recovering,” He bends down to mumble into Minghao’s ear, “Please, take care of yourself.” The ticklish sensation causes him to shirk up his shoulders and twist. Is he sensitive there?

“I will.” He backs up, “Trust me. I’m okay.”

He trusts Minghao. He trusts Minghao, but goddamn, if this boy’s self-destructive behavior lands him in a cold… then Mingyu will gladly take care of him.

“Fine.” It’s Mingyu’s turn to pout, jutting his bottom lip out slightly and as adorably as he can.

“Don’t act cute. It doesn’t work on me.” Ah, called out. He wants to kiss Minghao goodbye, but the man has already ducked under his arm and is opening his car door, but he stands clipped between the door and his seat, leaning over it to speak one more time, “If I didn’t have prior arrangements, I would have gone to lunch with you in a heartbeat.” He has a habit of doing that, doesn’t he, reassuring him if he ever gets turned down. Minghao’s good like that. He’s so good to Mingyu, “Maybe I should bring you lunch.” He starts making his way to his own driver’s seat.

“Please don’t.” he opens his door, “I can’t dance on a full stomach.” It explains why he’s so slender. He’s on the dancefloor almost every day, “But text me, maybe we can have dinner on Monday since Chan has work.”

“I will.”

The second he gets home and doubles over on his couch, he gets a phone call. Begrudgingly, he swings his long legs off the side of the couch and gets up again, making quick lunges over to his docking station and swiping the screen, “Hi, mom.”

“Hi, honey! How are you doing? Have you eaten?”

“Yeah. I’ve eaten, I’m doing well.” He notices some crumbs on the counter and starts sweeping them up with the side of his hand, “Did something happen? You usually don’t call at this hour.”

“Oh, dad and some of his friends are planning on having Thanksgiving together across the lake and they need a headcount, so I was wondering if you were coming home.”

He thinks.
Oh, right, Thanksgiving is this Thursday.

Time surely flies by. It feels like it was just last week that he was having Minghao lug a pumpkin around his flat, but it’s actually been a month since they coincidentally matched costumes on Halloween, “Uh,” he doesn’t suppose that he’ll be having dinner with anyone else with all his friends busy at work. No one has brought up the holiday or any thoughts of a Friendsgiving feast, “Sure. I can come over.”

“You don’t sound very excited.” She giggles into the receiver. One thing that always warms Mingyu’s heart is his parents’ laughter, “There’ll be kids your age- sorry, not kids, adults! People-yes, people your age at the dinner. You’ll have someone to talk to.”

Okay.”

“And,” she drags out, “do you have a plus-one?”

Oof.

That wrings his gut in a weird and unexpected way. Does he have a plus-one?

He hasn’t thought about it and with Minghao so busy with work- wait. He’s getting ahead of himself. He isn’t even dating Minghao. Yet. A confession or a declaration hasn’t been heard from either of them, at least not in the way Mingyu often identifies it. Regardless, he’s busy and Mingyu doesn’t feel like it’s the right time to bring him into family matters, “Nope.” He sighs.

“Alright! I’ll tell them you’re coming.” He nods even though his mom can’t see him, “Dress warm it’s been cold at home.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to you later. Say hi to dad for me.”

“Will do, honey! Love you, bye!”

“Love you, too, bye.”

Ugh. He can’t deal with these emotions right now. He’s not in the mood.

Mingyu stretches his back and sweeps all the crumbs into the trashcan under the sink before he fills up his spray bottle and heads over to his little grove of plants. He spritzes each one generously with the vague feeling that he’s already watered them today. He gives Romeo a spin before pouring a bit of water into the vase, careful to avoid its petals lest they rot. He moves the begonia into the sun for a little bit before he slinks off to take a shower and clear his head.

The water is hot, searing his skin, but he doesn’t mind a bit. He lets his thoughts consume him.

Minghao.

Mingyu.

Minghao. Mingyu.

Minghao or Mingyu?

Minghao and Mingyu.

They are friends and something more.
He likes where they are although he doesn’t know what to label it. His past partners had gone by simple equations; ‘I like you’, ‘I like you, too’, ‘let’s date’, ‘let’s be official’, and it usually ended sometime after that. That’s not a great track record, is it. In fact, it’s a little shameful when he looks back. Nothing ever amounted to anything substantial and he knows he’s said that he’s loved before, that he’s looked to like before, that he’s fallen in love before, but all of those feelings and memories seem to fade just as a room does when Minghao looks at him a certain way.

They’re friends and that should be enough. That was beyond the goal that Mingyu had set for himself before this whole thing started. He just wanted to leave on positive terms, but having kissed him… having held him… there’s just so much more that Mingyu wants to be now. There’s no sense in trying to make a goal of it. It’s infinite. The possibilities are infinite.

But what if they do start something. What if they do get into ‘an exclusive relationship’, what does that mean? It means that if Performance Studio wins the title, then they’ll be flown out for work. Minghao has mentioned it before. The short-run contract deal means that they’ll be working even harder; filming commercials, dancing with celebrities, guest starring on shows, travelling to different countries, and hosting workshops in every city they land in. It’ll be a breakneck pace of promotions and performances, but—maybe not more importantly, but more profoundly—it also means long-distance.

Can he handle that? Can he be okay with that?

It’s not too far off, the next week will determine the results of Minghao’s labor, but is he ready to face that reality? The prospect of travelling the world is to experience new things and people. He doesn’t want to be the one to hold him back from something like that. If Minghao meets someone more suitable for him than Mingyu is, he doesn’t want him to miss out on that opportunity. Long-distance is hard, he’s heard so from everyone that’s been in one. It’s trying and exhausting and puts a strain on the relationship. Going from touching and seeing someone every day to suddenly being deprived of their presence overnight is jarring.

And what if Mingyu doesn’t get his permanent residency? That means he’ll have to move or find a job elsewhere. His work isn’t as portable as Minghao’s and it certainly feels a little more exclusive albeit more stable. That might really end things, huh.

Minghao won’t be another one-that-got-away, but he might end up being someone that Mingyu just can’t have. Shower thoughts or not, the idea of losing Minghao really upsets him. The notion that this might not have a chance to grow and blossom—that really upsets him. He’s mad at himself for thinking such things, for putting an end to their relationship before it even starts, but he has a feeling that Minghao’s been thinking about these points all along.

It’s why they hold back sometimes. It’s why they fight themselves.

If love is inconvenient, then why does whatever-this-is have to be inconvenient, too?

It’s unfair.
Mingyu’s Sundays are usually reserved for doing nothing and volunteering, so the last thing he expects is for Wonwoo to call him in the middle of a dog walk and invite him over for videogames and dinner, “Soonyoung declared that he’d be at practice all day, so I’m stuck at home with nothing to do.” Okay, so maybe Mingyu was the one who suggested that they hang out and play local co-op because he knows he’s also going to be insanely bored.

“Yeah, I’ll be over at 4?”

“Sure.”

“What should I bring?”

“Nothing?”

“I need to-”

“I’ll buy pizza, so bring whatever you want to have with pizza.” Fair and easy, Mingyu can do that.

He hangs up before he makes it around the corner. The pooch attached to him today is Marco, a Bichon-mix who is half-blind and deaf. He’s an old boy but loves to play and cuddle and Mingyu thinks that he might have a promising adoption ahead of him during the Thanksgiving Adopt-A-Thon. Before returning him to his kennel, Mingyu makes quick work to brush his fur out to make him look extra poofy (re: extra adorable) and swaps his old grey bandana out for a vibrant sky blue one. The simple change of color seems to cut Marco’s age in half. He looks as spritely and lively as any of the younger pups now.

Ah, the impact of color is astounding.

The dog happily accepts a little jerky treat when Mingyu sets him down on his bed and pats his hindquarters to tell him to sit. He locks the gate and gives Marco a sad smile when he walks forward to follow him only to bump his snout into the door. Maybe his disabilities are his charm-point.

Mingyu spends the rest of the hour tidying up the volunteer closet. It’s actually less of a closet and more of a small storage room, but it’s amazing how messy people can get. All the leashes are tangled up in their box and on the wall. Many of the harnesses are unclipped or mismanaged. Boxes of treats are left opened and placed in weird locations. It drives him crazy when there are only a couple treats left in a box, but someone opens a new one. There are seriously five boxes of unfinished Milkbones strewn about the small room. He pours them all into the fullest container and discards the trash.

Baxter catches his attention before he leaves. He has a cone of shame on and looks less than happy to see Mingyu, but he paws at the gate when he passes, “What is it?” he kneels down to receive a short ‘boof’ from the large dog, “Look, that’s what you get for roughhousing in the yard with the others. You’re a big klutz and sometimes you hurt others without thinking about it, right? So, you have to be careful.” He stands up again to check Baxter’s info sheet, “One week isn’t too bad.”

He whines and scratches at the gate again.
“I’m sorry, Minghao’s not here today. He can’t play.”

But Baxter just grumbles and chirps a bit, not barking or growling, but speaking to him impatiently as if asking for something.

“Do you want me to come in?”

A short woof.

“Okay, fine, but no funny business.” Mingyu definitely doesn’t want a repeat of yesterday, so he wiggles the latch open and slips in, locking it behind him and sinking down to eyelevel with the Bernese mix. Baxter backs up to the back of his kennel, makes a circle over his bed, and picks up his blanket to place it in Mingyu’s lap, “What? Is it gross?” he sniffs the blanket. Nope, it’s clean, “Are you cold?” He covers Baxter with it, but the dog shakes it off and places it in his lap again and looks him in the eye.

Mingyu’s usually good at understanding animals, especially dogs, but Baxter is weird, almost as weird as Cacahuata. He stretches out his legs, touching the other wall of the kennel with the tips of his toes and pats his lap, offering it for the dog to lay down. Baxter doesn’t. He just stands on Mingyu’s thigh, weight bearing down painfully before sniffing his face and licking his cheek. The plastic cone jabs into his neck uncomfortably. If Mingyu’s teeth weren’t gritted, he might have managed a ‘good boy’ or a ‘thank you’, but he just tries to get Baxter to move. He holds his paws, forcing him to crane downwards and roll onto his legs where he asks for a belly rub.

It’s good that we’re back to the sweet Baxter that Mingyu remembers.

“We’ve gotta share Minghao, okay? He’s not yours and he’s… not only mine. We have to share, got it?” he pinches the loose skin around Baxter’s neck, it folds over the base of the cone slightly. If he had to guess, the dog still has some growing to do, “Let’s be friends.” He pants on his back happily, stretching his long legs, almost punching Mingyu in the face, “Did you know that Minghao has a dog at home? His name is Cacahuata and he’s super pretty and he’s a way cooler dog than you.” Baxter sits up and turns over so that he’s laying in the space between Mingyu’s legs, his head resting on his stomach, looking up at him under the brim of the cone with sad, puppy eyes, “But you have your good points, too. Maybe you two would get along.” He burrows his nose into the soft fabric of the hoodie and Mingyu pats his head. He thinks his heart might explode. Dogs are great. Dogs are the best, “I hope you get out of here. This small, little place isn’t all the world has. The world is big and beautiful and awesome and Minghao’s out there, too, he’s not just in here.”

Mingyu realizes he probably sounds crazy talking to the dog like this, but—at the same time—everyone that volunteers here talks to animals like they talk to children. He doesn’t feel as out of place. Baxter whines when he moves to get up, but it’s almost 3 and he still has to go home to change and buy something to take over to Wonwoo’s house—and, yes, he found out that Wonwoo and Soonyoung live in an actual house on the outskirts of town, not just a flat.

“I’ve gotta go, buddy.” His four-legged friend hesitates before getting up and letting Mingyu stand, but he reaches forward and chomps down on his sleeve, pulling hard but not aggressively so. He’s never seen him this clingy before. Maybe he’s not feeling well—it would explain the sudden shift in personality over the last two days. “I gotta go. I have some friends to see and you have some people to impress. A lot of people come in on Sundays.”

But Baxter cries out when the pries his sleeve free and shuts the gate, locking him inside and alone. His heart breaks for the dog who tries to dig in the concrete to be with him a little longer, but he really does have to go.
On his way out, he comes to the front desk to ask if he can write a check to sponsor Baxter’s adoption for the Adopt-A-Thon, but Annie shakes her head, “Minghao came in and sponsored him this morning, didn’t he tell you? It’s been a little hectic today with Baxter’s check up and the load of puppies that came in during lunchtime. We just haven’t had time to print out the sign and put it up.”

“Oh, that’s good.” Minghao beat him to the punch even though he felt like he was supposed to be the one to do it. Baxter has felt a bit like his responsibility ever since the day that Minghao told him to give the dog a treat. It’s safe to say that he feels bad that he’s not the one sponsoring him, “Can I sponsor Marco then?”

“The old blind baby? Sure.” After a few clicks on the PC, she brings up the total. He pays in full, “So, Mingyu.”

“Yeah?” He’s trying to print as neatly as he can. He never uses his checkbook.

“You and Minghao.”

“Me and Minghao?” he doesn’t even look up.

“Are you two,” Is she going to be the first person outside of their friend-group to ask? Does that mean they looked obvious? “a thing? Like- you don’t have to tell me.” She types a few things, “I just wanted to mention that you both look really good together.”

“Do we?”

“Iunno.” She shrugs, “Usually Minghao- he’s a nice guy and really sweet, but he always has this super sad look behind his eyes when he comes in to volunteer.” He hands over the check, “When he was with you and the other two he looked a little relieved, that’s all. I saw a side of him I haven’t seen before.”

“That’s good, I guess?” That’s good.

Annie nods, stapling a receipt for Mingyu and putting the check into an envelope under the counter that they cash in at the end of the month. She makes note to print out Marco’s ‘I’m Sponsored!’ flyer as well, “I think you had something to do with it.” She laughs, “Where do I find someone who looks at me the way you look at him, huh? Tell me the secret.”

Mingyu’s sure he’s blushing, “No secret,” he looks down, thumbing the bracelet through his sleeve, “just patience.”

Mingyu shows up at Wonwoo and Soonyoung’s home with some fruits and a pack of cola under his arm. He would have brought a salad if the weather wasn’t so wet today. It rained for a while earlier, but nothing big, just enough to get the tar and pavement damp and dark grey. You might think it looks dreary—and normally, Mingyu would think so, too—, but after that rainy day in the park with Minghao, a little drizzle isn’t so bad.

“Oh, hey, come in.” Wonwoo has picked today to dress down for once; t-shirt and loose black sweatpants with his hair pushed back into a knit beanie. He somehow looks a bit like a high schooler without all his pressed pants and ironed shirts. It’s Mingyu who seems overdressed to this two-man pizza party with his hair styled neatly and his button-up tucked in. Can you blame him, though? He’s never seen Wonwoo wear anything outside of his work-casual clothes. He’s still wearing the grey cardigan today, too.
“Thanks.”

Wonwoo and Soonyoung live in a rather small neighborhood. It’s a newer one, still in development on the upper west end of town, just before you hit the highway and reach nothingness. There are a lot of trees and the houses here aren’t huge, but still quite modern and nice. Mingyu can’t help but wonder if Wonwoo’s city job paid a lot better than their clinic does. That being said, didn’t Wonwoo move in with Soonyoung? That means this place is Soonyoung’s then. Maybe they’re renting.

Once inside, he realizes that Byeol—in the single day she’s been home—has absolutely taken ownership of the house. She sits on the couch near the door like the maneki-nekos in old Asian shops and waits for Mingyu to greet her, “Hello, Byeol.” *Meow,* “I see you’re comfortable.” *Meow,* “Sorry, I don’t have any treats for you.” he can almost hear her huff with her body language as she jumps down and prances over to Wonwoo in the kitchen and leaps up onto the counter. *Meow.*

“She’s certainly made herself at home.” He scratches her head before pulling out two glasses and some ice, offering one to Mingyu, “She’s very chatty when Soonyoung’s around, but look,” he jogs over to the window to point out a little, suspended bed he’d set up for her, “she gets to look outside while we’re gone! And,” he jogs to the other side of the living room to point out some shelves. He smacks one of the books and it doesn’t topple over, “I affixed all these books down so that she can jump on the shelves and lined them all with carpet! *And,*” he bends down to point at the feet of their couches, “I stapled these matte sheets to all the corners so she can’t scratch them up.”

“Wonwoo,” Mingyu squints, “how long have you been preparing to get a cat?” *Meow.*

“Since you convinced me to go to the shelter.” *Meow.*

“It’s been less than a week.” *Meow.*

“I miss having a cat around, alright?” He laughs and picks Byeol up to cradle her like a baby. For a cat who didn’t even want belly rubs yesterday, she’s surprisingly tolerant of his fondling, “And she’s been so well-behaved. She knew how to use the litterbox and she was quiet all night.” That’s good. Maybe she really won’t run away then. It looks like she’s comfortable and relaxed where she is now.

Compared to Mingyu’s night at Minghao’s place where they played mostly casual games, it’s obvious that Wonwoo’s much more competitive. His gaming set up is extensive and he has as many consoles as Seungcheol does, “Before I moved in with Soon, there wasn’t much to do when I was free after work.” Which makes sense since Mingyu isn’t sure what he did with himself before Minghao showed up in his life. How did he survive so many boring afternoons watching TV and cooking random recipes via online tutorial? While those things still sound enjoyable, doing them alone seems a little lifeless and sad, “As much as Soonyoung likes watching me play, he doesn’t actually play himself since he’s, well, he’s bad at virtual hand-eye coordination.”

“Isn’t he a—”

“A professional dancer who should have impeccable reflexes? Yes. But when it comes to technology he can’t ‘feel it’ and VR makes him nauseous, so I didn’t even bother.”

“You and Seungcheol would get along.”

Wonwoo lets out a dry laugh. Right, if Minghao was mad at Wonwoo, then he’s sure that his personal, hot bodyguard and parental figure would also be a little bitter, “Cheol and I sometimes play together online.” Oh, that’s a surprise, “But he’s usually busy on the weekends.” He flips on the TV
to see who is logged in, “Lo and behold, Seungcheol Choi is logged in for once. Looks like you’ve summoned him.”
Chapter 95

It’s Mingyu’s turn to laugh dryly.

Wonwoo sets him up with a controller and plops them both down on the couch. He’s pretty sure he’ll get his ass handed to him in any game they play. He doesn’t seem like the type to go easy on him just because Mingyu’s a beginner. Before he sits down himself, Wonwoo unplugs his headset and hooks up a push-to-talk mic so they can both communicate with the other players at the same time. He then flops onto the couch next to Mingyu and selects a game for them to play, inviting Seungcheol into the chat.

After a very scrutinizing look from Mingyu, he clarifies that he doesn’t actually know Seungcheol that well—like he’s been saying since the beginning—, but after he moved to town and went out to (a very awkward) dinner with Minghao and Jun, Minghao introduced them. They’d only played together since Seungcheol got back from his vacation on the coast and their conversations are usually limited to in-game banter and strategy-planning. Recently, on occasion, Minghao and Mingyu will crop up in conversation especially if Soonyoung is around to eavesdrop on them. It explains why Wonwoo was so sure that Minghao wouldn’t take his roommate to the dinner.

Wonwoo assures him that they don’t gossip much because they’re both good at minding their own business and because Seungcheol’s been busy he hasn’t come online much in the last couple days. Today, Mingyu just happens to be ‘lucky’.

“Hey, you wanna play Cross-Stitch?”

Seungcheol coughs, “Cross-Stitch? What happened to Overwatch?”

“C’mon, old man, Overwatch’s last update rolled out more than three years ago.” Seungcheol grumbles something about something-something and coughs again, “Besides, I’ve got Mingyu over and he doesn’t play competitively.”

“I never said I don’t play competitively.”

Wonwoo turns to look at him, shakes his head, and presses the button again, “He doesn’t play competitively.”

“Yeah, sure, we can play Cross-Stitch. Should I invite someone else to play so we can do two-on-two or did you want to play free-for-all?” Talking with Seungcheol without seeing him is rather comfortable. The hot roommate isn’t physically in the room, so his presence isn’t as intimidating. His voice is quiet and raspy in the speaker, deep, and not as smooth as it was on Friday.

He thinks it’s interesting that Wonwoo is so casual with him while he can barely carry a conversation with Minghao. Maybe gaming has its perks. It lets you make friends under the premise of a common interest and you have to work together or against each other to win, “Let’s keep it on free-for-all.”

“Kay.” He coughs again. Is he sick? Hopefully, he doesn’t get Minghao sick, “I’ve got a conference call with my department head at 5:30, so I can only play for a bit.”

“That’s fine. We’ll probably eat dinner around then.”

The three of them sit and play a variety of games for the next hour or so. Mingyu constantly feels like they’re letting him win even though he’s trying his hardest, but Wonwoo explains that
they’re better at first-person shooters and PVP platformers and not so hot at games involving what he calls ‘Hungry Hungry Hippo’ mechanics. Seungcheol calls it button mashing. It’s obvious that the two prefer strategy and combat games, but it’s nice that they accommodate him.

It’s not like he’s dumb or simple, Mingyu also likes puzzle games, but he’d much rather play board games if that’s the case. Nothing like a good game of Resistance or Dead of Winter. He has a feeling that Minghao would be good at games like Secret Hitler and Plague Inc. and suddenly the idea of sitting in his apartment with their friends over and a pot roast in the oven with board games strewn about the living room and dining table sounds so nice.

“He, Mingyu, are you wearing the bracelet?” The question is out of the blue and it forces his character to falter right before the goal as he tries to compose himself enough to answer without sounding like a guilty five-year-old.

“Yeah, he’s still wearing it.” Byeol perches herself behind Wonwoo’s neck and he reaches up to scratch her head, rubbing her ears against him.

He clears his throat, “I asked Mingyu.”

“Why do you need to hear me say it?” Seungcheol doesn’t respond, so he gives in, “Yeah. I’m still wearing it.”

He heaves a heavy sigh into his mic, “You two are really something else.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Wonwoo throws an arm around Mingyu’s neck and shakes him, ruffling his hair and making fun of his clueless expression, “Like, Minghao always takes off his jewelry before bed. Except for a few studs, he can’t stand the feeling of dancing or sleeping with necklaces and bracelets on. He hates it.” The poor roommate clears his throat again; phlegmy, “And when I gave him the bracelet a few days ago, he wore it for a bit and took it off like normal. But after the banquet, it’s stayed on.” His voice turns amused, “Even when he showers—I know because the ribbon is always soaked when he gets out of the bathroom.”

Is it bad that Mingyu feels guilty for taking it off when he showers? He doesn’t want it to get water-damaged, but other than his twenty-minute showers, the chain doesn’t leave him for a second. It stays where it feels right and Mingyu isn’t the type to wear jewelry at all.

Wonwoo takes Mingyu’s finger off the talk-button, “I’m gonna go throw the pizza in the oven- don’t give me that look, I can heat up a damn pizza.” You can’t blame Mingyu for doubting him when Soonyoung literally turned store-bought cookie dough into little inedible pucks of charcoal. Maybe their oven is cursed.

Meow.

He offers a hand out to Byeol and presses the talk button after a loud clang in the kitchen startles her and she leaves to check on Wonwoo, “What’s so weird about that?”

“I never said anything was weird about it.” He grunts, “I actually think,” cough, “that it’s oddly sweet. You don’t have to be so standoffish with me. I might be on Hao’s side of things and, for now, that means that I’m on your side too.”

“On my side, huh?”
“Believe it or not, I actually like you a little, Mingyu.”

“So, this bracelet was your greenlight then?”

“Don’t push your luck.” But he says it in such a lighthearted, dad-ish way that Mingyu doesn’t feel offended or defensive about. Seungcheol doesn’t feel like so much of an obstacle anymore. Of course, crushing him at Picky Pepper Pops might have given him a bias, but for what it’s worth, he feels ready to make some sort of amicable connection with him, “What time is it?”

Isn’t there a giant clock in their living room? “It’s 5:31.”

“Oh shit, I’m late.” He hacks again, “I’ll be going then. Enjoy your dinner. I hope it stays unburnt.” He knows, “If it does suck,” Seungcheol whispers, “you can come over. Hao cooked too much food last night and we have a lot of leftovers.”

And he disconnects.

So, Mingyu isn’t the only one that Minghao has cooked for. Well, he is a roommate after all, it’s almost inevitable that they’ll cook for each other every once in a while, right? Yeah, totally. Nothing to be jealous over or envious of. He knows that he didn’t mean to say it in a mean way. If anything, Seungcheol was holding out an olive branch by offering Mingyu an open invitation to come over whenever he wants (if only to finish their leftovers) and there was no malice behind his words. He was just stating facts, but still, Mingyu wanted to be a special snowflake in Minghao’s warm and cozy kitchen.

Soonyoung bursts through the door a little after 6 when Mingyu has a long string of cheese dribbling from his mouth and his cheeks full of pizza. It wasn’t perfectly baked, but at least it wasn’t burnt, “Hooonnneyyyy, I’m hoooooooome!” he singsongs as he struts through the door and Byeol bounds up to him, “My baby! I missed you!” leaping from the carpet into his arms where he swings her around once and cradles her, “Wonwoo, I’m home!” he locks the door behind him and kicks off his shoes.

“In the kitchen.” he calls to his boyfriend, not bothering to leave the room.

“Does he ever stop yelling?” Mingyu hisses at Wonwoo.

“Food?” his voice is so hopeful when he swings his body around the corner, “It smells like foo-Oh, Mingyu, what are you doing in my house?” his clothes and sweat-slicked hair say that he just came from the studio. He’s more surprised than anything else, but the ‘O’ of his mouth quickly melts into a happy smile when he understands the situation, “Are you seriously so bored without Minghao that you had to ask Wonwoo to hang out? That’s kinda sad.”

“That’s kinda rude.” Wonwoo pulls out two slices on the half he didn’t douse with pepper flakes and hands the plate to Soonyoung, “I told Mingyu he could come over since I didn’t have anything planned while you were at work.” He gives the blond a peck as he leaves to go to the bathroom.

“How’s work?” Mingyu mumbles into his food, “Busy lately?”

He shakes his head, “Sorry, can’t talk about work. We have a policy.”

“Policy?”
"Wonwoo and I made a deal when we moved in together that we aren’t allowed to talk about work at home, especially when it’s stressful. It’s how we’ve kept from strangling each other."

"We both have rather rotten tempers when we’re troubled with our professional lives and we know it, so—in order to combat that—we decided to leave work matters at the welcome mat. I think Minghao and Seungcheol have a similar agreement.” The senior PT explains as he returns to the kitchen, drying his hands on his joggers before picking up his plate and a can of cola, “But it’s okay, it’s Mango.”

As if he’s opened a floodgate, Soonyoung starts rambling.

He talks a little about this and a little about that, but Mingyu picks up on the main points. There is a lot of tension riding on finals. Chan’s potential for a job in the performing arts industry rides on this victory and he and Soonyoung have been making it known. Vernon’s been getting sick on and off for the last month and Minghao’s leg has been slowing them down as well. There’s a lot that they aren’t prepared for, especially the fact that their opponents are a completely new team that doesn’t have much data together. Their members are popular, strong, and well known globally. It’s apparent that going up against the Contemporary Taproom is no laughing matter. They’re a team of six instructors.

Performance Studio entered with three and there’s no room for a substitution this late in the game. Soonyoung wouldn’t have it any other way. He assembled this team for a reason and each person has their own role. Some of the reasons are a little convoluted, but Mingyu can’t judge. Soonyoung knows what he’s doing and why he has to do it. His main concern lies in the growing strain in their friendship that’s been bubbling as they practice. Minghao is a stickler for giving the audience a good performance. Soonyoung is obsessed with perfection and synchronization. Chan is all about execution and stage presence. The three of them argue a lot about which one is the most important and Jun, their in-house mediator, is always trying to find balance. It’s usually easier with Yixing’s evaluation, but because this is a victory they want to secure in order to get Chan hired on, they’ve opted to do it without his assistance.

The fights have gotten a little heated recently with everyone’s patience running thin. Finals are just over the horizon, but Vernon’s health has been on the decline and they’ve been missing out on group practices because at least one of them can’t make it. Chan is especially resentful of Minghao recently because he ditched their group practice yesterday to hang out at the adoption center and there have been instances before that where the lanky man has skipped out on extra practices to do ‘other things’.

Mingyu gets the hint. It’s him, he’s ‘other things’, but Minghao had already done hours of practice those days. He’s not sure that his body can handle many hours more than that. He’ll keel over at that rate.

"Group practices are important.” Wonwoo feeds him a bite because he’s too preoccupied talking. He knows the man needs to eat before he returns to practice. Byeol is sitting up on the fridge, not asking for food, but just watching curiously when the string of mozzarella twangs in the air, “It’s the most efficient way to understand each other and move as one. Like when I hold Wonwoo’s hand,” he cards their fingers together, “I can feel what he’s thinking, if he’s stressed or if he’s excited, or if he’s covered in pizza grease, ew.” He shakes off his hand, tossing it back to him and snatching his plate away to finish the slice, “But we take pride in our synchronicity. Even if Nonnie’s a little eager on his steps and if Jihoon is a little slower than us, it works out because everyone has their own unique charisma and because we all understand the mood of the performance, it still feels unified.”
Mingyu nods. He sort of understands. Sort of. He doesn’t really get the nuances that Soonyoung is trying to explain, but he’ll take his word for it. As Minghao has said, dance is something that needs to be felt to be understood, “I’ll pretend whatever you said made sense.”

Soonyoung giggles, cheeks bunching up as he munches on the crust, marinara sauce turning the corners of his mouth orange, “If you wanna understand me better, why don’t you come to the studio and see for yourself.”

“Hm?”

“Yeah, why don’t you and Wonwoo come in after you’re done eating.” He puts the plate in the sink, rinsing his mouth—first with cola, then with water—, and gathering his things again, “I’m sure Minghao could use a cheerleader.”

“Sure.” Wonwoo answers for both of them, “We’ll drop by Safeway to buy some drinks before we go.”

“Cool.” Soonyoung patters back into the kitchen and stands in front of Wonwoo, eyes shut and lips pursed, expecting a kiss before he goes. The PT grabs the bill of his hat and turns it around so he can give his boyfriend a proper kiss without being jabbed in the forehead. Mingyu still looks away because he’s shy. He feels like he’s in a space meant for private eyes even though the two have made it very clear that they don’t care if anyone is watching them, “I’ll see you guys in, like, thirty?”

“Probably.”
Chapter 96

He waits until Soonyoung shuts the door, “Do you really think it’s a good idea to go if tensions seem high?”

Wonwoo shrugs, dropping his dish into the sink and walking into the living room to put away the controllers and power down the console, “Well, Soon’s inviting us. If it wasn’t alright, he wouldn’t.” Mingyu decides to trust Wonwoo’s call. He’s probably seen the worst of the dance team before and knows where they draw firm lines, “Besides, don’t you want to see Minghao?”

Mingyu drops his plate in the sink, too, and starts doing the dishes. He perseveres even though Wonwoo tells him to stop and tries to shoo him away. He’ll be damned if he goes over to someone’s house and doesn’t try to do their dishes after eating.

“Well, yeah, but,” work and dance are important to Minghao and he doesn’t want to get in between that, “he didn’t invite me, so-”

“As I recall,” he grabs his keys and two canvas bags from a drawer near the sink, “Hao didn’t invite you the first time either.” Yeah, and that time ended with Soonyoung and Minghao punching each other in the face. He had helped him sop up blood from the wooden floors of the dance studio that night and he doesn’t want to see a repeat, “And the second time, you invited yourself.” And it was nice and without prying gazes, he had Minghao all to himself.

But this is different. This won’t be the same as the first time—he can feel it in his gut—they mean something else to each other now. It’s complex and vague still, but it’s something different and it’s something right.

Mingyu’s never liked Safeway.

He believes their monopoly in being the only large grocery store near campus lends them the ability to charge whatever they want for simple things. His default frugality is thanks to growing up on a rather strict budget. Five dollars for a normal sized box of Rice Crispies is stupidly expensive when he could just drive across town and pay a fraction of the cost at Target or FoodMaxx.

This is ridiculous. It’s a good thing that Wonwoo has a Club Card.

They spend a while grabbing toxically blue Gatorade for Soonyoung. He’s pretty sure that the sugar content might kill him. Wonwoo picks out VitaminWater for Jun—XXX flavor—, a red Powerade for Chan, and Vernon is given a blueberry Bai. It seems like he knows the guys pretty well, but leaves Minghao’s and Jihoon’s picks to Mingyu, claiming that they’re his responsibility.

He’s clueless. Thinking back to his first visit to the studio, he vaguely remembers Jihoon running off with his drink, but doesn’t remember what flavor it was or what brand.

As a result, he just picks the tallest looking bottle in the aisle. So be it, he’ll get Jihoon a SoBe in cherr- cocon- strawberry banana. Sure, that sounds good. Baby pink seems to suit the audio engineer rather well.

Minghao, based on his memory, only drinks water while practicing. He knows that much. He said that drinking sweet stuff can upset his stomach if he hasn’t eaten. Oh. Mingyu really hopes that he’s eaten. He hopes he’s warm. He hopes he’s slept enough. He hopes he isn’t exhausted. Minghao
didn’t return any of his texts since last night. He’ll chalk it up to him being busy, but even on his busy days, he usually manages to text Mingyu back. Now Mingyu might never get to know who his favorite Rugrat is since he didn’t accept Reptar as an answer and Spike is a dog and that doesn’t co-

Right.

Drinks.

He glances over at Wonwoo who is facing the opposite aisle, reading the back of a box of Cheez-Its. Everyone knows they aren’t healthy for you, but it’s like Wonwoo’s determined to find some sort of hidden message in the nutrition facts.

Wonwoo meets his gaze and shuffles over to collect Jihoon’s drink, “It’s not rocket science. He’ll be fine with whatever you happen to select.” It feels like a copout if he just buys water. He knows that Minghao’s the type who won’t appreciate fancy water and will tell Mingyu that he wasted money getting it. He only drinks from his canteen and refills it in the drinking fountain and he has to agree that that’s the soundest way to stay hydrated. If he just picks a sugary drink at random, Minghao might think that Mingyu didn’t really listen to his words when he said he doesn’t like sports drinks.

Soda’s a no. Alcohol’s a no. Milk and yogurt-based drinks are probably a no.

“I don’t think he’ll drink any of this stuff.” But it’s not like they can just show up at the studio with a drink for everyone but Minghao, “I’ll just get him an iced water or something at the checkout.”

“Sure.”

After Wonwoo grabs some cereal bars and salted nuts for the dancers, they mosey over to pay. He makes sure to pick out something safe for Vernon since he’s allergic to nuts and something higher in calories since they’re burning fuel at both ends these days. It feels like he’s back in college, standing in line with a friend after some sunless grocery shopping for seemingly random ‘college meals’. It would have probably been easier to just buy a six-pack of one drink, but each of them gets his own.

Even though it’s rather late by the time they’re done and most of the storefronts on the strip are closing down for the night, there are still a couple of restaurants open. In front of an ice cream store, a man is packing up his fruit cart. He wonders why he bothers selling icy fresh fruit in the dead of winter. Maybe he has a mission to deliver vitamins to bellies that have seen nothing but soup and mashed potatoes.

He squints so he can see his menu. Minghao doesn’t like energy drinks and he already got him a water, but Mingyu finds himself jogging over after sending Wonwoo to his car. The fruit cart has a selection of standards but also carries three large coolers of juicy agua fresca. Okay, if there’s one thing that Mingyu’s sure of, it’s that Minghao loves stuff like this.

Upon asking about the available flavors, the man explains that he has watermelon, orange, and cantaloupe. He also has hibiscus tea, agua de tamarindo, and tepache de piña stored somewhere in the tiny cart. Mingyu doesn’t have much time to deliberate and he’s probably scowling at these drink options for too long because—to hurry him along—the man jokingly mentions that the hibiscus tea will match his bracelet nicely. Just for that, Mingyu chooses the watermelon drink instead.

Wonwoo shakes his head when Mingyu returns to the car and closes the door, sliding the juice into the cupholder of the center console, “Ooh, special drink?”
“Agua de sandía.” He mumbles. He feels kind of bad. Outside of tidying up their home and spending too long thinking about drinks, it’s closer to 8 than it is to 7. Whoops.

“Last summer, Soonyoung, Jun, and Minghao ate their own weights in watermelon.” He turns to back out of the parking space, “And it was all because I told them about suikawari and they got really competitive at the studio. I’m glad I wasn’t here for it because Soon said he got up every half-hour to pee for a week.”

“Was watermelon a bad choice?”

“Nah.” Wonwoo gets on the main road, “Don’t worry about it. I already told you, whatever you pick, Minghao will like it.”

“I don’t appreciate the sentiment.”

“What, that he likes you?”

“That he’ll agree with me because he likes me.”

Wonwoo shrugs, “He might be a people-pleaser, but he doesn’t sugarcoat things. Just stop worrying about it. It’s just a drink. I can feel your nerves from over here. Geez, you already professed your feelings to the man, why is buying him a drink so difficult?”

“I haven’t.” he coughs.

“Haven’t what?”

“Haven’t told him,” Mingyu scoots an inch away from Wonwoo in his seat, “about ‘my feelings’.”

He expects a lecture or to be scolded or berated or something along those lines. Wonwoo’s been egging him to propose a relationship to Minghao from the start, but he doesn’t even blink when Mingyu gives him the real facts of the case. He does raise an eyebrow but drops it just as quickly. He doesn’t speak until they pull into the studio’s parking lot, “Is something wrong?”

No, everything has felt right and maybe that’s what’s wrong, “I don’t know.”

“You don’t have to tell him. You’re an adult, he’s an adult. You’re more than free to make your own decisions on the matter. I just thought you might have needed a little push.” He rubs a hand into Mingyu’s shoulder, “But if you really want me to drop it, just say so. I can’t speak for Soonyoung and his advocacy for Hao, but as your friend, you can tell me if you’re uncomfortable.”

“I’m not.” He runs his nail over the chain, picking at the ribbon of his bracelet subconsciously before he scoffs, “I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know how to put it in words.”

“Sometimes actions speak louder than words.”

“I’m just- I’m so worried about this thing becoming a thing- let me clarify,” the parking lot isn’t empty and it isn’t full. The first two rows of spaces are filled, so he and Wonwoo are sitting in the third row, facing the studio, “what if we agree to be a thing and they get the title at finals? Won’t they be travelling for work? Won’t they be gone for almost a year? I don’t know if I can handle that- and their jobs are so mobile. He can up and move whenever, right? I can’t do that. And we lead such different lifestyles, it’ll probably burden him to slow down and live in mine because I definitely can’t keep up with him and-“
“Hey, Gyu, shut up.” Mingyu closes his mouth immediately, “You can’t be drawing assumptions like that. You can’t be picturing the end of a relationship before it even begins!” he shakes him, “Listen to yourself! Do you enter all your relationships looking for reasons to end them?” Yeah, “You better shake that habit. It’s unhealthy.”

“Yeah, but-”

“Weren’t you the one who was talking about the L word on Friday? That’s a big word for some people. Maybe Minghao isn’t ‘the one’, so what? You won’t know until you give it a shot. You still have a lot to learn about each other and have a lot of room to grow.” He sighs, “With someone like Minghao, you can’t be half-assed about it. You can’t be wishy-washy. He feels a way about you and you feel a way about him, so make it clear.”

“If you’re so sure that he feels a way about me, then why can’t he make the first move?”

“Hasn’t he been doing that from the start?” Is it weird for two people to sit in the parking lot at night talking about an instructor who is only a matter of yards away, “You’ve been trading off, but Hao’s made most of the first moves, hasn’t he? He came to the clinic, he let you be his PT fully knowing who you are, he accepted your proposal to help, he showed up to your apartment, he invited you over to his apartment, he seeks you out in crowds, he holds your hand, he kissed you first!”

He can’t help but notice that Wonwoo skipped the detail about the dance. Maybe that’s something that he doesn’t know about meaning that it’s something that Soonyoung was never let in on. Minghao does have his secrets after all.

“What more does he need to do first to show you that he likes you, Gyu?” Wonwoo laughs, “It’s not so much about making the first move as it is about making sure that no one makes the last.”

“Wise words of wisdom, Wonwoo.” Mingyu sighs and leans back in his seat, letting his head thud against the headrest.

He feels knuckles graze his jawline, “Chin up, soldier. You still look like you’re going to cry every time I bring him up-”

“That. You- I just wanted to mention,” he feels bad for making him jump, so he tunes down the theatrics and clears his throat, “it didn’t heal all at once like you said it would.”

He shrugs, “Every relationship is different. He’s been busy, no time to pull out his needle and thread, so he’s trying his best with washi tape and Elmer’s glue. So, try your best to hold it together for him until he can really focus on it.”

“He’s four, he can’t sew.” Mingyu shakes his head after realizing how silly he must sound. He shouldn’t have expected anything to fall into place after talking to Wonwoo. It’s just the same as Friday night except it isn’t, is it. He didn’t confess his feelings verbally to Minghao that night even after Wonwoo’s encouraging advice.

He didn’t need to say anything.

Minghao didn’t need to say anything either.

They haven’t had to say anything, but so many things have been explained already. Mingyu just didn’t realize it because he’s so used to verbal cues and seeing ‘I love you’s in text. He’s so accustomed to strings of heart emojis and the word ‘boyfriend’ that he never really learned how to just embrace those things as he felt them. It’ll take him some more time to adapt fully to how
Minghao communicates, but Wonwoo’s helped to facilitate that understanding and analysis.

That night when he came to the studio alone and they fell asleep on the floor with their backs pressed against the mirror, he held Minghao’s hand. Even after moving and readjusting, Minghao took his hand again. That meant something, right? He had moved Mingyu’s bangs out of his eyes and that means something, too, right?

And his Instagram posts, those ones with vague captions that allude romantically to ‘someone else’, those are about him, right? He rarely mentions Seungcheol by name because he knows that Mingyu gets jealous, right? Minghao asked him to dance because he really wanted to dance with him, right? Because he likes him? He might not have liked Mingyu in high school, but he did pay attention to him during senior prom. He still retains a memory of Mingyu from high school and doesn’t hate him for it. He likes Mingyu and all his gaping flaws.

And for once, Mingyu doesn’t feel like he’s empty-handed because he’d been communicating nonverbally without even thinking about it. It’s through gestures, this strange dance they’re doing around each other. It’s frosting cakes together, it’s kneeling down in the middle of the frozen food section to tie a shoelace, it’s throwing a dime into a stagnant fountain just to keep a childish hope lit. It’s spending thirty minutes to (not) pick out an overpriced drink in a Safeway.

It’s Minghao skipping practice to spend time with him. It’s Minghao sucking up all his exhaustion after a long day at work just to hunt down some random food and have dinner with him. It’s Minghao honing in on him in a sea of people just to hold hands with him.

It’s knowing that Minghao finds comfort in his arms because he can feel it.

He can feel it. He can feel it.

It doesn’t need to have a word assigned to it, but he can feel it.

He hopes it’s mutual.

It feels mutual.
Chapter 97

The studio is rumbling with music.

Low bass reverberates the left wall of the lobby when they enter and instead of Vernon greeting them at the front desk, BamBam is sitting with his feet propped up on the table and he’s folding up a paper ‘crane’. That’s not a crane by any stretch of the imagination, but it’s something.

“They’re in A3.” He doesn’t even look up.

“We could be murderers and he wouldn’t even care.” Wonwoo mutters, swinging the bag of drinks as he picks out a lollipop from the candy cup.

“I probably wouldn’t, but Yixing’s out with his hubby and Vernon’s practicing—speaking of,” he swings his thin legs off the surface, heavy heels smacking loudly on the floor. BamBam scoots forward and leans on his elbows with genuine intent, ‘ya boy probably doesn’t want you back there right now. I’d wait until their next break.” Despite BamBam saying ‘ya boy’ in such a meme-inducing way, there’s nothing funny about his expression, “It’s been a rough day, but Minghao has a class in,” he looks at the computer’s clock, “ten minutes, so just chillax until then.”

Wonwoo turns to check Mingyu’s expression, scanning his face for approval and hesitance, before nodding and coming back to the desk, “Fine, we’ll wait.”

Suddenly, it seems like BamBam’s taken notice that Wonwoo isn’t the only guest in the lobby because a shit-eating grin slides onto his face, “Oh, hey, it’s the pretty boy.”

“Pretty boy?”

“Yeah, what’s your name again? Mango?” He lets out an exasperated sigh, passing Wonwoo an annoyed glance before correcting BamBam, “Mingyu, sorry.” He cackles, “Yeah, man, you’re the talk of the town.”

“Am I?”

“No, but you’ve been the talk of the studio. Chan’s pissed.”

He feels a protective arm sling over his shoulder, “Stop scaring him.” And drag him over to the benches, “Don’t worry about it, Chan’s harmless. He’s just stressed.”

Mingyu fiddles with his thumbs, spending his time wiping the condensation off the outside of the sweet drink. He certainly hopes that the ice won’t finish melting by the time he gets to deliver it. This night already seems to be headed for a nosedive, but Wonwoo tries his best to explain why it’s not a big deal and isn’t his fault. BamBam just likes to poke fun and clarifies (yells) across the lobby that he was just joshing.

Jooheon crosses the hallway with a short hello before ducking out for the night. His once-red hair is now black and he almost drops his keys trying to get his employee card out of his wallet. A girl that Wonwoo introduces as Mina is the next instructor that clocks out for the night, she’s surrounded by students, but the way she walks holds a certain grace and power that sets her apart.

The night seems to wind down quietly, but a few students linger around. A few of them greet Wonwoo—and, in turn, Mingyu—as they wait around for their class to start. A few trickle in the door with water bottles in hand. The group seems to be on the older end, somewhere in their late
teens and mid-twenties, Mingyu can tell due to their lack of high school paraphernalia. These must be Minghao’s students.

Just before 8, a commotion stirs down the hall, “I have a class right now. It can wait.” Minghao barks over the loud music that reverberates into the lobby when he swings open the door. Some of the students look at each other, clearly worried that their instructor might be in a bad mood, but his cheery voice says otherwise as he jogs past them, “Okay, I-3, let’s go!” He doesn’t even pass a glance into the front room. His hair is messy and thrown into that black hat that he wears often. The baggy, plaid flannel around his waist trails after him and his long strides. He’s already covered in a layer of sweat.

The group of almost twenty students starts shuffling after him, pulling their bags off the ground and mumbling amongst themselves. “Maybe he’ll let us off easy since they’re busy.”

“And maybe he’ll make us practice till our feet fall off, Eric.”

“If that’s the case, then I hope Jun saves us.”

“Yeah, Jun will definitely save us.”

After several minutes, the room falls quiet again. BamBam’s attention is back on his paper folding and Wonwoo stands up, motioning Mingyu to follow him down the hallway and back to A3. The mood feels different from the last time he was here. Instead of feeling hopeful, he feels unwelcome. As far as he knows, A3 is one of the smaller studio spaces, but a good enough size to comfortably fit ten-or-so people who need to wildly flail their limbs in an artistic way. Right now, there are five people standing around, pouring sweat and stretching out tired muscles.

None of which look happy.

Thankfully, the first expression that comes to mind is exhaustion, but frustration follows right after that; impatience.

Jihoon’s sitting on the floor with the laptop, clicking here and there with his eyes focused and his jaw locked. Vernon is on his knees looking over his shoulder, sniffling and pointing at the screen every now and then, but his hands get shooed away. He rolls his eyes, sighs, and gets up to drink water. His complexion doesn’t look great. Jun’s sitting up on the benches, leaned over with his head in his hands. It looks like he’s too tired to even crack open his water bottle. Maybe things didn’t work out. Still, Mingyu wishes that Jihoon would take notice since he seems less tired, but everyone is occupied with themselves and the room feels like it’s full of needles and glass.

The most apparent development is Soonyoung and Chan yelling at each other.

They aren’t yelling per say, but they’re talking very firmly with heavy agitation behind every word. Mingyu can’t make out what they’re saying from behind the windowed wall and he’s never been very good at reading lips, but he can tell it isn’t friendly banter. Soonyoung is a force to be reckoned with and Chan isn’t backing off. They’re arguing, emoting—you could equate it to two wolves snapping and snarling at each other before launching into a full-blown attack.

Wonwoo clears his throat, “You can wait out here if you want.” His eyes say sorry. This behavior probably doesn’t reflect well on their friends from the outside. In fact, they’ve pulled most of the sunshades and blinds down over the glass. Only one is left open aside from the door, “I’ll try to calm down the situation.”

Mingyu nods and backs up out of sight. If Chan really is mad at him or about him, he’d rather
not catalyze something else. As Wonwoo enters and he turns to walk back down the lobby, Yugyeom sprints by, bumping into him, apologizing as he fumbles to catch the drink, and dashes into Minghao’s current studio. The music is loud and bumping. When he turns to ask BamBam why the other dancer is in such a rush, he shrugs, “He’s supposed to be co-teaching, but that idiot,” he hollers, “is always late.”

He’s back in the lobby, waiting patiently with the drink turning his fingers numb. BamBam even excuses himself to use the bathroom and vape outside, leaving front desk duties to Mingyu who can’t manage a front desk. He doesn’t work here. What is that man thinking? Is he crazy? What if someone comes in with questions? What’s he supposed to do about that? He can’t answer questions about dance? He’s not witty enough to bullshit his way through it. This will reflect badly on the whole studio. He could get BamBam fired! This is too much responsibility-

“Mingyu?”

Finally.

He turns around to face Minghao, but- that’s not the expression he was hoping to see.

He’s not angry, he’s not mad, but he’s not happy or relieved to see him like he’d expected. Minghao looks like someone caught in a lie and Mingyu is the proof that will land him in trouble. He looks a little scared, like he needs to hide his tall and awkward PT immediately in order to protect them both. He looks a little lost, “Here, I got this for you,” like he has something to say, “I don’t know if you like stuff like this, but-”

“Thanks.” Like he’s defeated.

Minghao shuffles over to him, adjusting his hat and receiving the drink with careful, shaky fingers. He’s overexerting himself because fatigue is settling in, that’s what makes your hands jittery, “Sorry that I showed up unannounced. Wonwoo wanted to come.”

The bracelet around his wrist is tucked under his watch again, “Wonwoo’s here?” he takes a sip, a tiny sip, the littlest sip. Seems like the big-mouthed blond wanted to keep it a surprise. He has to wonder how much he had to fight himself to keep their appearance a secret. Although, he might not have had to work so hard considering his mind must be busy with complex choreographies and prickly co-workers.

“Yeah, we were having dinner and Soonyoung invited us when he swung by.” He wrings his hands behind his back, restraining them from reaching out and touching Minghao. His dancer leaves the straw between his pursed lips and if he knew what that was doing to Mingyu’s head he would probably stop.

“Oh, fancy dinner date, I see.”

“More like gaming with Seungcheol for an hour and eating lukewarm DiGiorno’s.”

“I’m sure Wonwoo tried his best.” He shuts his eyes and shakes his head, a toothy grin on, but when he opens his eyes Mingyu notices that his pupils are out of focus and he takes an unsteady step backwards.

Instinctually, Mingyu’s arms fly out from behind his back and create a little barrier around him, hovering just inches away. He feels like he needs to support him lest he collapses. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” He takes another sip, a bigger sip.
Maybe he has a low blood sugar, “Did you eat today?”

Minghao nods, “Yeah, around 1.”

“What did you have?”

“Uh, just some leftovers.” He blinks a few times in—what he guesses is—an attempt to refocus his vision.

Mingyu stops fighting himself and reaches forward to take his hand, not to hold, but to test his pulse. It’s a little slow. Definitely, “Low blood sugar. Drink up.”

With mock annoyance, the shorter man takes a big gulp of the agua fresca just to appease him, “This is really nice. Have you tried it?” He shakes his head and Minghao immediately offers the cup to him. This isn’t for him and he won’t drink much because he wants the dancer to have as much sustenance as possible, but when he does it like that- well, Mingyu smiles and takes a shy, humming bird-sized sip. It’s sweet and refreshing. He’ll have to make a note to get himself one the next time he can. “I don’t mean to be rude, but why are you guys here?”

He pushes the cup back to Minghao, making sure he drinks more before giving him the answer, “Just because Soon told us to come.”

“Really?” the straw pops out of his mouth when he asks, but Mingyu is quick to return it to its rightful place between his lips, “Stop that, I’m not a baby.”

“Right, you’re four.” Minghao pouts before actually frowning, “What? Don’t like it when I baby you? Wittle bab-”

“I never said that.” it’s muttered, but Mingyu hears it and the room feels a little hot, “But really, why?”

“He said,” he thinks about it for a second, shakes his head, chews his lip, and admits it, “that you could use a cheerleader.”

The embarrassment is worth it because Minghao’s serious expression cracks and he lets out a short chuckle before letting himself smile in full bloom. He takes a step forward, putting the cup on the counter for a moment as he pokes a finger at Mingyu’s chest, “So, you’re here to cheer me on?”

His wide, dolly eyes seem a little untimely, but nonetheless enticing. Oh, no, Mingyu can’t fight a look like that.

“I don’t know,” his eyes drag over him, “am I doing a good job?” Even with his hair clumped together with sweat and his white shirt a little damp, Minghao still looks as breathtaking as ever when he smiles. And, who would have guessed it, he initiated contact first. Tsk tsk, would Wonwoo be mad if he let Minghao take the lead again?

“Mm, a good job?” he cocks his head to the side, “I’ll need to evaluate your cheer.”

Mingyu laughs, “My cheer?”

“For me.”

“My cheer for you?” he’s incredulous.

“Yeah. You’re a slam poet, I’m expecting a lot.”
“I don’t have anything prepared.” His cheeks hurt from smiling so big.

Minghao steps forward and bumps his hip, taking another gratuitous sip of his drink, “Oh, c’mon, you’re Mingyu Kim.”

He shakes his head like a wet dog shaking off water. It’s making his spine tingle just thinking about how cringe-worthy the following few seconds will be because he raises his hands in the air with invisible pompoms and shakes them around as he executes a very half-assed, very shoddy excuse for a cheer, “Go, go, Minghao, you’re our man. If you can’t do it, no one can. Woo.” And the throws the fake pompoms up in the air before resting his forearms on Minghao’s shoulders casually.

“Could use some work, but you’re getting there.” The dancer tips the cup forward, pulling the straw from his mouth to offer Mingyu another sip, “For your efforts.”

Making intense eye contact with Minghao while biting a shared straw between his teeth shouldn’t be as much of a turn on as it is right now, but they’re technically swapping spit and Minghao essentially admitted that he wouldn’t mind being babied. That’s it, he’s going to make a move. He’s just going to do it. He puts a hand on Minghao’s waist, pulling him closer another step, but under the thin fabric of his shirt, he can feel some sort of padding. Bandages? He doesn’t know, but they stomp on the breaks and the concern on his face tells Minghao that he’s been caught, “What’s this for?”

“Nothing.” He backs up a step and picks up the drink again, teasing the straw between his teeth after taking a sip. His words are timid and careful, “Just hot patches for sore muscles- I’m not hurt. I promise. Don’t- don’t worry about it-”

“I want to worry about it.” He reaches forward to pull Minghao back towards him by the sleeves of the flannel around his waist, “I like worrying about you.”

“Seriously, it isn’t anything big. A good night of rest and it’ll be fine.” He reaches a hand up to fix Mingyu’s bangs, “I’m not hurt.” He enunciates it very clearly to make his point.

“Fine. If you say so.” Mingyu removes his hand from fiddling with his hair to hold in his, linking their fingers together tightly, “But you’ll let me baby you if you are, right?”

“No.” he purses his lips and shakes his head, letting himself get pinned to the counter, “You can take care of me, but I’m the one who babies you.”

“But you’re younger.”

“But you’re the helpless infant.”

Mingyu shakes his head, “I just don’t like it when you neglect yourself.”

“Then I’ll try harder not to.” He’s so lost in the half-lidded stare that there’s just so point in avoiding it anymore. He’s going to do something that he wants to do, “But really it-”

“Can I kiss you?”

“Uh, I s-”

Flashing lights and the siren of an ambulance swallow up Minghao’s words as they both turn to look out the door and into the parking lot only to realize that the ambulance is here for someone in the studio.
Immediately, he ditches the drink and Mingyu to run over to his studio and check on Yugyeom and his students. The EMTs bust through the door with a stretcher as Soonyoung runs out into the lobby and beckons them to follow him. His meets Mingyu’s eyes for just a second before dashing back to their studio. Within seconds, just as Minghao returns into the main room, the medics wheel Vernon out.

What is happening?

This level of drama and urgency don’t fit in with their timeline. Everything is frantic and panicked and abrupt and loud and nothing is adding up. Soonyoung and Jihoon follow the medics into the back of the ambulance and within another few seconds they’re speeding away. They can’t move. It’s obvious that they’re too shocked to do anything but breathe and there isn’t much breathing happening at that.

Wonwoo briskly passes them with Soonyoung’s things in tow, “We’ll figure it out, but I need to follow them right now.” Mingyu can only nod as his senior plows through the doors and runs to his car.

Jun’s the next one to enter the lobby. He seems comparatively calm, but also a little tense. A few students are poking their heads out of their studio rooms, “Minghao,” he grabs Minghao’s arm, jerking him back into reality and shoving his keys and wallet into his hands, “Minghao! We can’t reach Seungkwan. Chan’s still calling, but he’s not picking up. I’ll keep things moving here, but you’re the only one who knows where he lives- Hey! Minghao!”

Minghao nods, again and again, blinking rapidly while processing the words as fast as he can, searching the ground for answers before looking up at Jun and nodding once more before turning on his heel and running out the door.

He feels a fist ball up his collar before spinning him around and pushing him to move.

“Mingyu, go with him.” Jun’s words are firm, “Drive.”
Chapter 98

Only following Jun’s command, Mingyu sprints out of the studio, tailing Minghao into the parking lot. He grabs his wrist, spinning him around just as he reaches his car and unlocks the door, “Stop. I’m driving. Give me the keys.”

“Mingyu, we don’t have time to argue over who drives!”

“Exactly, so get into the passenger seat because I’m driving.” He tries to pry the keys from Minghao’s hands, but his fingers are gripping them so tightly that his digits hurt when he whittles into his grasp. Mingyu bores into his eyes with a fixed strictness and it finally feels like something registers in the panicked dancer, “Minghao. You’re exhausted. It isn’t safe for either of us if you drive.” He should have started with that argument because the blond secedes and gives him the keys without another word, jogging over to the passenger’s seat as Mingyu ignites the engine.

It takes him a minute to configure the layout of the old 2015 Toyota Camry. It’s in unsurprisingly good condition considering Minghao is good at cleaning and Seungcheol knows how to fix cars. It’s relatively clean with nothing special or notable about the interior except for one detail that catches Mingyu’s eye immediately. On his rearview mirror hangs a braided red tassel with several stings of silver and white woven between them. Oakdale’s school colors never looked as complex as they do in the blue light of the night. Minghao must’ve dug it up since their dinner in Mingyu’s living room two weeks ago.

The slam of Minghao’s door makes him refocus on the situation at hand. They have to find Seungkwan.

Of course, Minghao tries calling first and once that fails, he starts pointing out the directions to his house. His fingers pick incessantly at his ripped jeans and the scabs on his knees until Mingyu holds his left hand in his right, trying to calm him down, “Fuck, I’ll try the bakery.” And he dials another number after pointing down another street, “Dammit.”

“It’s okay. It’ll be okay.” He rubs his thumb into Minghao’s skin, pressing firmly against his prominent bones just to make sure he can feel it through the haze of chaos ringing through his head.

Mingyu’s had his share of emergency situations like the time his roommate’s chinchilla swallowed a Lego and they had to pass four red lights to get her to the vet. They were too late, but that was probably the most incriminating reckless driving he’d ever done. Tonight, Minghao’s in the car and he’s not going to risk his safety. He’s not a university hooligan anymore. There was also the time that his lab partner cut her hand open when she was dissecting a specimen and he had ‘borrowed’ one of the campus golf carts to get her to the health center. They were hounded by campus police but got off scot-free.

None of that compares to this. Those times he had nothing to lose, but he doesn’t know what happened to Vernon—what’s happening to Vernon. He doesn’t know if it’s life-threatening or if it’s just a lightheaded spell, but if it was alarming enough for them to call an ambulance, then it must be serious. Perhaps it isn’t so much the prospect of something unfortunate happening to Vernon—of course, that’s important, but that’s not exactly what he’s resonating with right now—but the idea that Seungkwan, Vernon’s very significant other, doesn’t have any clue what’s happening and how much he’ll blame himself if something fatal- no.

He’s going to be the one who stays optimistic.
Minghao needs him to stay focused and positive. Minghao needs his support. These are his friends and if Mingyu’s already this stressed, he can’t begin to imagine the state of panic Minghao must be in. He’s been friends with Seungkwan since high school and he’s sure that he’s known Vernon for just as long.

His passenger’s fingers find trouble scrolling through his contact list and he carves his thumb nail into his forefinger to concentrate and he curses under his breath before he can hit ‘call’ again.

He’ll be strong for Minghao.

“Make a left and turn right on Warner- Ms. Boo- thank god. Hello- yes- I’m sorry. This is Minghao. Vernon is in the hospital.” It pains Mingyu’s heart to hear his voice tremble, but he tries his best to do what he needs to do and follow instructions, “Yes, I believe so. Please tell Seungkwan to get ready, I’m down the street. Soonyoung and Jihoon went with him. Yes, ma’am. I don’t know which one- yes, I’ll call you as soon as I find out- I’m so sorry- no- yes, I promise. I promise.” He hangs up and lets two deep breaths, collecting himself for the longest moment. His brow pinches when his eyes shut. The first breath is shaky. The second is smooth. When Mingyu glances over to check, he’s returned to a composed expression. Not calm, but no longer jumpy, “Okay, take a right. It’ll be the third house.”

Without realizing it, Mingyu had entered uptown. They’re driving through a rather nice neighborhood of family homes with three-car garages and intricate frosted glass doors. There’s a large children’s park in the center of the neighborhood with new swings and a pristine basketball court with no nets missing. The paint is still fresh.

“Stop.” And Mingyu steps on the brakes, jerking them to a sudden halt.

The seatbelt cuts into his chest, “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Minghao lets go of Mingyu’s hand to unfasten his seatbelt and open his door, but when he sees him undoing his own, he stops him, “No, stay in the car. Keep the engine running.”

Minghao bounds up to the Boo’s home, knocking at the door before the lights of the grand foyer flip on and a short and stout person opens the door. She pulls her robe tight, letting Minghao into the home after hugging him. In seconds, Minghao’s pulling another man along. It’s Seungkwan who is wearing his pajamas and carrying nothing but his phone, wallet, keys, and an odd-looking stuffed animal with a baby blue hoodie and four ears, two of a cat and two of a dog. Somehow it seems befitting.

He shuffles Seungkwan in the backseat and scoots in after him. For a second, he wonders why, but then he understands it’s because Seungkwan has a death grip on Minghao’s arm. His dancer is cooing to him as he tries to fish out his phone and call someone. Instead of waiting for instructions, he starts driving towards the hospital closest to the dance studio.

“Jihoon, which hospital is it?” his voice is solid and confident. Looks like Mingyu doesn’t have to worry about being solid ground for him anymore. It happens like that often, doesn’t it? It’s happened to Mingyu. He’s needed support until he found someone else that needed it more. That’s what’s happening in the backseat. Seungkwan needs Minghao to be strong and Minghao is a people pleaser, “Got it. We’ll be there in a few.” He locks his phone and pockets it again before meeting Mingyu’s eyes in the rearview mirror, “Hearth Medical.” He was right, it is the one closer to the dance studio.

“Got it.”
Unfortunately, or fortunately, Seungkwan is at a loss for words. He’s spending most of his time dribbling tears into Minghao’s shirt and he doesn’t mind one bit. He’s pulling the honey-haired blond into his chest and holding him like a parent would console their child. It’s not like Seungkwan’s sobbing or anything, but he is crying and he keeps mumbling and muttering and Minghao keeps shushing him, petting his hair and rubbing his back.

Once they get to the hospital and sprint down—Mingyu was lucky enough to find a parking space right near the entrance to the ER—they meet Jihoon in the lobby with Jun and Chan sitting with him, two seats away from each other. It’s eerily cold. There are a few people sitting around, some coughing, some wheezing. A baby is crying—two babies are crying. A kid is precariously holding a broken arm. An elderly man is complaining to the front desk. The phone is ringing. There isn’t any time for greetings because Minghao is moving on autopilot, asking the attendant where the man in question is and when he asks what their relation is to him, he seamlessly responds for the bereft baker, “Family.”

It’s sometimes a good thing that people think all Asians look the same. Especially in a town where the Asian population is comparably small, he’s none the wiser to assume that Minghao, who is Chinese, and Seungkwan, who looks nothing like Vernon, are obviously his relatives.

Deciding against the obvious answer to not follow Minghao and Seungkwan, he trails them into the recovery unit on the third floor where they had moved Vernon from the ER after he was deemed stable. That’s good news. That’s very good news. Maybe Seungkwan doesn’t know that there’s such a significant difference between the them because he’s still babbling nonsense and lets Minghao guide him down corridors and hallways like he’s been here before.

Soonyoung comes out to flag them down when he hears Minghao’s voice. No smiles, no laughter, nothing but worry is on his face. Mingyu can hear the heart monitor beep constantly in the background, “Quiet, he’s resting.” Wonwoo’s deep voice calms Mingyu down at least. He gets up from his seat and shuffles out of the way to let Seungkwan and Minghao get closer.

An IV drip has been administered and there’s a plasticky white band around Vernon’s wrist. His arms are laid over his blanket and he’s in a hospital gown instead of the clothes he was wearing earlier. What a stark contrast this is.

Vernon’s colorful clothes in the warm-toned studio looked so much livelier than the plain hospital gown in a white bed in a white and off-grey room. There are those washed out watercolor paintings hanging from the walls, the kinds that are sold in bulk in Bed, Bath, and Beyond. In any other setting, they might look nice, but it seems like the hospital and its patients suck the life out of them.

Wonwoo walks Mingyu and Soonyoung out of the room and into the hallway where they’re out of the way from hospital personnel. He’s rubbing his boyfriend’s back as he fills Mingyu in on what’s happened, “He had a grand mal seizure for about a minute-and-a-half. They think it was triggered by stress, but I don’t know the details. The doctor said it was probably from a preexisting condition, but the good news is that there’s no permanent damage.”

“I have to go tell Dr. Zaccharian that Seungkwan is here.” Soonyoung speaks quietly, excusing himself from Wonwoo’s touch and shuffling to the floor’s front desk.

Wonwoo watches him with gentle eyes, so Mingyu speaks instead, “Did he hit his head or anything?”
“Nope. Soonyoung and Chan were arguing and Jun and Jihoon were talking and suddenly he was grounded and convulsing. I called for the ambulance and everyone else called Seungkwan. It’s good that you guys were able to find him.”

Soonyoung sighs when he returns to them, picking up Wonwoo’s arm, ducking under it, and laying it over his shoulder, “There are probably a million other places that Minghao would rather be than a hospital, but he’s really close to those two. Thanks for keeping him focused.” It’s a little endearing that his lips still curve a little even though he’s not smiling, “God. Tonight has been stressful.”

“Yes, it has.” Wonwoo presses his lips into Soonyoung’s hat, “No more practice for the night.”

“No more practice for the night.” He echoes before looking up at Mingyu again, “We’ll wait till Minghao’s done and go out to the lobby together to send everyone home.”

Minghao doesn’t leave the room for almost half-an-hour.

Soonyoung, Wonwoo, and Mingyu sit in the small waiting room at the end of the hallway watching reruns of Rachel Ray’s Thirty Minute Meals with the volume off and only closed captioning to get them through the episode. Mingyu is constantly rubbernecking. The hospital is a newer experience for him. All the bells and whistles and quiet announcements happening in the background feel like orchestrated disorder. He sees the doctor enter the room and he sees the doctor leave the room. He sees Minghao go to the front desk for something, for some papers, and return to the room several times.

“I texted him.” Soonyoung shifts his weight on the couch and leans his head on Mingyu’s shoulder, “He’ll be out in five.” His cheeks are as squishy as they look, “I don’t know what we’re going to do. There’s no way Nonnie can perform this weekend. He shouldn’t perform this weekend.”

“You’ll figure it out tomorrow.” Wonwoo offers him a cup of water from the cooler, he’s been doing this for a while, trying to keep Soonyoung and his cracking lips hydrated, “Leave it for tomorrow. No one has the energy to think about it tonight. You included.”

“Why were you and Chan fighting?”

Soonyoung sits up, fully awake from hearing Mingyu’s question, “We don’t fight often, but we have different opinions when it comes to dance and we wanted to change different parts of the choreography—just little things, you know—if anything, Chan’s a lot like Minghao. They both focus a lot on performance over perfection and that’s why they both fight a lot.” He lets out a sheepish chuckle, “I usually take Chan’s side because everyone takes Hao’s. He has the experience to back it up, but Chan has his good points, too. Honestly, group performance isn’t his strong suit. He looks better on stage alone, but we included him in this group to show Yixing that he could work with others and, yeah, it’s not going so well.”

“Minghao hasn’t mentioned much.”

“Yeah?” he stretches, “He hasn’t let me hear the end of it, so we fight sometimes, too- okay, it’s starting to sound like we all hate each other, but we don’t. I swear. It’s just that the competition is stressing everyone out. Junnie and Nonnie are the only ones who haven’t tried to bite off someone else’s head.” he blinks a few times, figuring out his words, “We’re seriously good friends outside of
competition season- sometimes we argue- I mean, who doesn’t argue with their friends.”

Wonwoo smiles, “Well, the first time Mingyu showed up at the studio, you and Minghao gave each other bloody noses-”

“Excuse you, I was betrayed.” He gives them both an exaggerated gasp, “My best friend hid his condition from me for months and he told Junnie, but not me! How was I supposed to react?”

“If it makes you feel any better, Jun didn’t know the extent of his injury either.”

“You didn’t have to punch each other in the face though.”

“I’d do it again.” Minghao surprises all three of them, showing up unannounced, standing behind the couch.

“Okay, he’s free, let’s go.” Soonyoung gets off the couch first, linking Minghao’s arm with his and dragging them out of the waiting room and into the hallway. It seems like he’s in just as much of a rush to leave. Wonwoo and Mingyu follow close behind and watch the platinum blond rapidly smack the down button on the elevator. His gaze constantly darts between the number on the pad above it and Minghao’s face.

His expression is outstandingly neutral. His eyes are pointed straight forward. His eyebrows and mouth are relaxed even though his jaw is locked. This is a guise, right? It’s not exactly dissociation, but he can tell that Minghao’s still on autopilot.

He’s being strong for his friends.
The lobby is a little quieter now with most of the patients from earlier finally getting admitted.

Jihoon is sleeping on Jun’s shoulder but gets up immediately after he’s nudged. Mingyu almost wishes they had stayed upstairs with Vernon and Seungkwan a little longer. The lanky dancer looked like he was having a good time albeit them both seeming to be uncomfortable. Jun had spotted them coming out of the hallway and woken Jihoon up right away—said man is now shaking the sleep from his head and stretching his back—maybe he was asked to do so.

Chan’s on his phone, still two seats away from them, typing until Soonyoung comes over to catch them up on the status of the situation. It seems like he’s explaining mostly to Jihoon and Chan while Minghao’s using Mandarin to explain the situation to Jun. His English is very good, but there are probably some uncommon words that don’t have obvious or quick translations.

“Can we do a substitution?” Chan asks. Jihoon passes him an annoyed glance before tuning out of the conversation and turning his attention to Minghao even though he probably can’t understand a word.

“I don’t know, but I don’t want to talk about it tonight.” Soonyoung shakes his head, “Let’s just go home and think about it tomorrow.”

“But this is serious, we have to think about this asap.” He stands up and tucks his phone away, “If Vernon can’t perform, we have to figure out the legalities of the competition and get a replacement if they’ll allow one.” Mingyu wonders why they didn’t figure that stuff out already when Minghao was temporarily removed from the team. Unless they knew that he would be back in the game by the time of the competition, they should have taken all the appropriate precautions, “BamBam already knows a lot of it-”

“Our friend is in the hospital, Chan.” Minghao snaps at him, “The competition shouldn’t be the first thing on your mind.”

“I’m just being realistic.” The mood in the room shifts immediately, “You think I’m some heartless fuck that doesn’t care about Vernon’s wellbeing? If you would have gone and sought treatment earlier, we wouldn’t be in this situation in the first place!”

“That’s misplaced blame. This isn’t Minghao’s fault.” Jihoon takes a step forward, pushing his hands into his pockets.

Mingyu wonders why it isn’t Minghao that’s objecting.

“Are you telling me that if Minghao hadn’t sorted out this leg thing from the beginning that we wouldn’t be cramming all our practices in like this and changing shit up literally five days before the competition?” Mingyu can tell why everyone usually takes Minghao’s side. Chan’s saying things that shouldn’t be talked about right now. None of this is Minghao’s fault, so why all the finger-pointing? That’s just not right and not fair. Although Soonyoung did say that Chan has his reasons to be pressed for this competition as his career rides on it, as a professional he really shouldn’t be violently blowing up bridges with his future co-workers.

“Regardless-”

“No. Not ‘regardless’. You’re on a team, Minghao. You can’t just focus on yourself-”
“Hey, do you really think this idiot only thinks about himself?” It seems like even Jun is getting a little agitated. He doesn’t raise his voice, but he’s not staying silent, “This isn’t anyone’s fault.”

“I’m just saying that this could have been avoided if we were all responsible.” That’s it. He can’t just let this pipsqueak talk to Minghao like that. Minghao doesn’t deserve it, “If he even cared about this competition, he should have—”

He opens his mouth to speak, but the person he’s trying to defend puts a hand on his arm and stops him, shaking his head. It’s Jihoon that speaks in his place, “You think that Minghao wanted to be injured to the point that Seungcheol had to force him to go seek medical help- and don’t blame this on Mingyu either. I don’t know what’s going on with you, Chan, but you need to grow up. This isn’t how we handle situations like this.”

Minghao blinks slowly, retaining his composure, “Vernon has medication for his condition and he wasn’t taking it. We couldn’t have foreseen this coming. We still have time to figure this out—”

“I’ve said this before, but—”

“But like Soon said, we should keep it for tomorrow—”

“Maybe instead of ditching practice to—”

“And rest tonight in order to—”

“Make kissy face with your boyfriend, you ought to—”

“That’s enough.” Soonyoung growls, “Both of you, shut up.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to ask you guys to leave and take this argument elsewhere.” One of the hospital attendants waits by their party, patiently waiting for their attention, “Unless you’re here to receive treatment or visit someone, please do not loiter in the lobby.”

As if everyone takes a collective breath and exhales all their frustrations at once, the conversation dies. In its place rests a heavy air that needs to be cleared.

“Sorry.” Is mumbled out a few times.

“No practice tonight. Everyone go home and get some rest.” Soonyoung pulls his jacket shut and crosses his arms, “Show up tomorrow. We’re practicing without Vernon for now. I’ll send an e-mail to the organizers tonight.” He sounds so serious with his leader-hat on.

Chan decides to leave first. No huffs, no apologies. He’s clearly still frustrated about the situation—like most of them are. Mingyu understands that it’s stressful but taking out your anger on your teammates just isn’t the way to go. Jun offers Jihoon a ride back to the studio after the shorter man realizes that he doesn’t have his car. It’s accepted without any hesitation. Following them, Wonwoo leads Soonyoung out with a curt goodbye and it’s just Mingyu and Minghao again. However, Mingyu somehow feels like the latter isn’t ready to step down from his autopilot mode.

“Are we—”

“Would you mind going back to the room to keep an eye on Seungkwan?” Mingyu wants to reach out and touch him again. He looks better than he did an hour ago, but his poor complexion says that he’s still the same, worn down Minghao, “I have to go get them a change of clothes and check up on Seungkwan’s mom. I’ll need someone to buzz me in if I don’t make it back by the time
visiting hours are over.”

He doesn’t have the heart to argue, “Sure.”

“I need my keys.”

Is there a way to do this without Minghao driving? “Do I have to?”

“Yes. C’mon, the faster I come back, the faster we can get you home and I can get to bed and you want me to go to bed, right?” He wants to argue with that logic, but Minghao knows how to handle himself. If it’s truly unsafe, he wouldn’t do it. He’d call Uber or Lyft instead of driving, but he seems awake enough to make a safe drive. Adrenaline is probably still coursing through his veins.

With heavy hesitation, Mingyu hands over the keys and makes his way back to Vernon’s room after watching Minghao dash past the automatic doors.

When he returns to the hospital room, Seungkwan has his elbows propped on the bedside railing with his chin resting on them. The odd stuffed animal-creature-thing is tucked in under Vernon’s arm, under his blanket next to him. His eyes are pinned on him, searching and concerned. Mingyu clears his throat to make himself known.

“Seungkwan, right?” by now, all their names are engraved in his memory. Minghao mentions Seungkwan—and Vernon—on occasion, he’s known them long enough and feels a little bit of that parental responsibility for them even though they’re both rooted in very close-knit families.

“Hey, Mingyu.” Whoa, his voice is so soft when he’s not yelling over the roar of DonutBoo’s morning rush. Compared to his pastel uniform and his embroidered apron, his white and navy pinstriped pajamas with little yellow moons seems on par.

“Minghao sent me up to check on you guys. Do you need anything?”

“No, I’m good.”

“Okay, then I’ll just be over-”

“Is it alright if you just sit with me? At least until he wakes up.” Seungkwan’s gaze only leaves Vernon to blink. That’s it. His rested expression doesn’t change either. He must still be in shock.

Mingyu pulls up a chair. It’s nice that they have the room to themselves, “Yeah. I can do that.”

They sit in silence for almost ten minutes. The only noise that fills the air is the heart monitor and the general buzz from outside. Mingyu even offers to close the door, but Seungkwan says that the silence will make him feel worse than he already does. From the big bay window, the only thing that’s visible in the black of the night are the lights along the path in the park across the street. Sometimes he’ll spot someone jogging or walking their dog, but aside from the cars, it’s generally vacant and still. The minutes tick by and he wishes he brought earphones because the cadence of the heart monitor is deafening when it’s the only sound.

He wonders how long Minghao will be. He texted him once when he got to Seungkwan’s house and once more on his way to In-N-Out to grab them some food, asking Mingyu if he wanted anything. Of course, he says no. He already ate and even though he’s a little hungry—two slices of pizza can only fill you up for so long—he doesn’t want to add to Minghao’s mental checklist.
Searching for conversation starters, Seungkwan’s eyes finally leave Vernon and land on Mingyu, “So…”

“So…”

“Thanks for keeping me company.”

“No problem.” Stuffy, “Has this happened before?”

Seungkwan shakes his head, “Well, to him, yeah, but not with me.” He goes on to explain that Vernon had non-epileptic seizures as a child, rooted in psychogenesis. They sometimes call it PNES. His childhood was incredibly stressful up until adolescence and his parents had searched far and wide for remedies. Apparently, growing up was the best solution because his symptoms eventually faded as he grew into his teens and it was easily managed with anti-anxiety medications. As an adult, he didn’t even need medication anymore. For as long as Vernon has known Seungkwan, he hadn’t had any trouble.

However, with all the stress of work and his own deadlines and the dance competition happening, he was worried that something might happen, so he dug up whatever pills he had left from when he moved to the US and took them for about a week. It was becoming obvious that the medication had some bad side effects even though he was taking the prescribed dosage. He’d lost his appetite and became nauseous often. He’d dropped a significant amount of weight in that short period of time and out of worry, Seungkwan had begged him to stop taking the pills and to rest instead.

“But he’s as stubborn as I am. He kept going to practice and going to work and doing extra hours at the bakery.” He rubs his face, “Instead of telling him to stop, I should have taken him to the doctor to get proper treatment. I should have figured something out. If I did, we wouldn’t be here.”

“It’s not your fault.” What else is Mingyu supposed to say? That’s the truth. It isn’t Seungkwan’s fault. Vernon knew the precautions he had to take and he knew about the consequences, “He can take care of himself.”

“I wish that was the case.” He rolls his eyes and scoffs, “I’m usually the adult in this relationship.”

“Wedding ring?” Mingyu gestures towards the silver band on Seungkwan’s left hand, you know, the place where wedding rings go.

“Uh,” he looks at the ring himself. The hesitation is a little odd, “promise ring, I guess.”

“Aw, how long have you two been together?” Maybe helping Seungkwan focus on the Good Times will dissuade him from placing all the blame on himself or, at least, take his mind off of the fact that his significant other is horizontal at a hospital.

But Seungkwan’s response isn’t quick. It doesn’t even come at a normal speed because the man thinks for what feels like five minutes, “Um,” and he searches Vernon’s sleeping face for an answer, “eighteen.” Wow, that’s right out of high school, “Crazy, right?”

“Love is kind of crazy.” He wants to get Seungkwan to smile, even just a little, “Hits you at weird times.”

The latter just shrugs, “It’s different for everyone.” He says it so nonchalantly that Mingyu is sure that he and Seungkwan share different opinions on the word right off the bat.
“If you don’t mind me asking,” he looks up a Mingyu, “how did you know when,” and he doesn’t really finish his question, just gestures to the air around them and hopes that Seungkwan can pick up on what he means because he doesn’t really even know what he means.

“Well,” seriously, the softest voice in the world, “for me, it’s sometimes moments like this. Sometimes it’s eating a meal together. We don’t spend much time together since I’m at work from 5 till 3 every day and his hours are a mess, but he usually takes late mornings up until dinner time. He gets sick easily and he catches at least two colds every month. Despite all of that, he’ll show up at the bakery during his breaks to serve a few customers and- I don’t know- he always tries to make time for me. He tries to involve me in his hobbies. He sometimes asks for a lullaby even though he knows I hate singing in front of him. How can I say no when he’s hacking up his lungs, right?” The plan backfires because Seungkwan is definitely closer to tears than he is to laughter. What did Mingyu do to deserve this? He just wants to cheer him up, “He’s such a sweetheart. He never gets mad at me when I push his buttons. On days where I’m cranky and give him a hard time for the smallest things, he tolerates me so well. Even when we fight, he never raises his voice. He worries about me and he’s protective of me, like really, and he-”

Vernon stirs.

His eyes flutter open and he winces for no apparent reason before blinking a few times and understanding where he is, what has happened, and why he’s in the hospital. Then, something unexpected. He chuckles, smiling down at Seungkwan with a toothy grin, “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” He sits up when all the words tumble out. The surprise written on his face means that he doesn’t know why the honey-blond is apologizing. Nonetheless, he reaches out a hand to be held.

“I’m fine. I’m okay. You didn’t do anything wrong.” He shushes him.

Most the next few minutes is full of gibberish that Mingyu barely understands. Some of it is in garbled Korean and he doesn’t understand that either—and he’s fluent, but he eventually calms down. Vernon didn’t acknowledge that he was in the room until he passed him a helpless glance at the start of Seungkwan’s babbling fit. It’s safe to say that he feels like a third wheel in this room. It’s not like the two younger men are kissing or showing any PDA—in fact, they have barely touched which Mingyu finds odd for a couple that already lives together—but he barely knows them.

A nurse comes in after hearing the small commotion and checks up on Vernon’s vitals quickly before writing some things down and excusing herself, “See, absolutely fine. Totally, completely fine.” He assures him again and again, “I’ll be back at work tomorrow. It’ll be like nothing happened.”

“Absolutely not! You will not be going back to work ever.”

Vernon chuckles, “Okay, okay. I won’t go back to work ever.”

Ping. ‘I’m downstairs.’

“Hey, I’m going to let Minghao in. Do you guys need anything before I go?” They both shake their heads.

Mingyu is absolutely relieved that he has an excuse to leave the room. He’s not particularly fond of hospitals—although, he guesses no one really is—and getting walk away from the awkwardness of that area is a godsend. He helps an older woman on a walker get into the elevator
and guides her down to the first floor where he helps her get out of the elevator, making sure her walker doesn’t get caught on the lip of the elevator’s sliding doors.

After he gives the front desk a greenlight to buzz Minghao out of the lobby, it’s apparent that he’s still very much so not back to normal. After thanking Mingyu, he doesn’t smile and doesn’t say anything else. They head straight back towards the elevator, straight back towards the room in the recovery unit, and straight back to Vernon and Seungkwan. There’s no regard for how uncomfortable Mingyu is and he’s okay with that, he’s not the one who just had a seizure. He’s also able-bodied and able to leave whenever he- well, he doesn’t have a car, but he can call for a ride if he really wants to leave.

Vernon lets out a happy gasp when Minghao paces into the room with a duffle bag under one arm and a big bag of In-N-Out in the other, “Food?”

“Are you allowed to eat?”

“Yes, yes, yes, gimme.” He makes grabby hands, beckoning for the bag of greasy goodness.

“Is he allowed to eat?” he asks Seungkwan instead.

“Yeah, he can eat.” And Minghao hands the bag over for the excitable man to tear into, “It’s probably a good thing that he has his appetite back.”

“There’s food in there for you, too.” Minghao pats Seungkwan’s head before retreating to the back of the room where he leans against the chair that Mingyu had pulled over earlier. He seems relieved, like he’s finally able to breathe now that Vernon’s conscious, “I brought a change of clothes for both of you since you’re probably spending the night. Your sister said that she’ll come by in a few hours to check on you and sort out the insurance stuff.”

“How’s mom?”

“Your mom’s fine. She’s worried, though, so FaceTime her later.”

“Did you get anything to eat?”

“Yeah, I ate on my way over.” He didn’t. Mingyu just knows. He knows that Minghao didn’t eat on his way over.

Vernon moans into his first bite of burger, “You’re the best.”

“I know.” There’s something soft and fatherly behind Minghao’s eyes when he receives the praise. Even though most of his face says he’s tired, the majority of his expression is at peace. He can finally step down. Mingyu wants to put a hand on him, reassure him or something to that effect, but he keeps his hands to himself. Minghao might be a little prickly right now.

“You should go home and get some rest.” Seungkwan slides a fry into his mouth, “Mingyu, too, he’s been listening to me blabber since you left.”

“I’m sure he enjoyed every second of it.” He didn’t hate it, “But, yeah,” he yawns, “I’ll drive Mingyu back to his place and go home for the night.” Yes, good. That’s exactly where Mingyu wants Minghao to go; straight to bed. He’s even giddy when Minghao puts a hand on his waist and gives him a light push to start walking out the door, “I’ll be back to check on you guys before morning practice.”

“I’m fine.” Vernon slurps his soda, “I’m so good. I’ll be at pra-”
He points at the patient, “No, you won’t.” and then at Seungkwan, “No, he won’t.”

“No, he won’t.” he nods, ignoring Vernon’s pout.

“Good.” Minghao sighs, “I don’t want to talk about finals tonight, so just get some rest and we’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

After saying their goodbyes, Minghao shuffles them both out into the hallway and promptly drops his shoulders. For a moment, Mingyu seriously thinks that he’s about to faint, but he just takes a lazy step towards the elevator room. He swings his limbs like he has no bones, walking with only control over his tired legs. The area holding all the elevators is quiet as visiting hours are over and the patients on this floor have been situated for the night.

He pushes Mingyu against the wall with a soft shove and leans into him, burrowing his face into his shoulder and exhaling a hot breath into his shirt. That was unexpected but very welcomed even if the bill of his hat jabs him in the neck. Minghao deflates in his arms, shedding the façade he had kept so well for the last couple hours. Stuff like that expends a lot of energy, energy that he didn’t have.

“It’s gonna be okay.” He bends down to mumble into his ear before cupping his face in his hands and looking at him only to repeat the same thing when he sees just how exhausted Minghao is.

“Thanks for letting me borrow you for a little bit.” Minghao’s fingers grip at his shirt and he shakes off Mingyu’s hands so he can pull himself back into his chest where he feels safest.

That’s okay. Mingyu just wraps his arms around him. He’ll protect Minghao from everything, even himself. Rest, sweet time-wizard, rest. You’re safe now. “Anytime.” He raises a sleepy hand to hit the elevator’s call button before snaking his hands behind Mingyu’s back, shutting his eyes until the ding rings in their ears.

“Let’s get you home.”
“Actually, I can’t go home yet.”

“Why’s that?” Minghao’s holding his hand and walking them out the door.

In the flurry of all the things that happened tonight, he’d forgotten about his situation, “I think Wonwoo probably forgot that my car is parked at their house. I hitched a ride with him to the studio.” It’s a good thing that the drive to their home is a shorter distance than the drive to the studio or to Mingyu’s apartment. As fate would have it, Wonwoo texts him with an apology as they reach Minghao’s car, “A ride to their place would be appreciated- I can drive.”

“I’m fine.”

“Keys, please.” Mingyu holds out his hand, waiting for Minghao to dig them out of his pocket and hand them over. The cold breeze whipping around in the parking lot sends goosebumps up his arms.

He crosses his arms, dropping Mingyu’s hand, “I don’t feel like arguing, just get in, please.” he unlocks the doors and gets into the driver’s seat. When he asks nicely, it’s hard to say no. He’d feel better if he was driving, but he trusts that Minghao won’t crash with him in the car; a liability.

It’s a little funny that Minghao has a similar tactic to keep himself awake at the wheel. The AC is on as high as he can crank it and as low as he can drop it. The flannel hasn’t left his waist, leaving his forearms to bear the frigid winds. The only difference is that Minghao is blasting orchestra music, epic scores from movies and videogames without any classical pieces to slow them down. Mingyu can feel the percussion in the speakers vibrate from his feet up to his knees, during some key points, his teeth even chatter.

However, it seems that the music isn’t doing its job because every time they slow to a stop, Minghao shakes his head, rubs his faces, and yawns. Mingyu has to raise his voice just to talk and after realizing that it’s a little strenuous, Minghao turns down the music, “You didn’t eat, right?”

“No.” Minghao sighs, knowing that Mingyu will likely give him an earful.

So, he has mercy. He doesn’t want to keep nagging him. He’s an adult, “Then please eat when you get home.” His effort to avoid conflict is appreciated because after receiving a quick glance, Minghao smiles a small smile. He decides to talk about whatever that comes to mind next just to keep his driver awake, “Did Soon ever find out what was in box 2?”

Minghao thinks for a moment, “I think he said it was something like a $100 Chili’s gift card and a bunch of glitter. Raquel is still cleaning it out of her car.”

“Oh man, I know the feeling.”

“You do?”

Yeah, Soonyoung wrote me a letter and filled it with glitter. It got dumped everywhere. I’m still finding flecks of that demon sand in the groves of my steering wheel.”

“A letter, huh?” at a red light, he drums on his lap and Mingyu finally realizes that he’s busted himself. Maybe he won’t ask- “What did he write about?” Of course, he’d ask. Who writes letters in this day and age? It’s probably not something that Soonyoung does often either. The gesture must be
interest to someone who has known him as long as Minghao has.

“Oh, I…”

“You don’t have to tell me if it’s personal.”

Minghao will never find out about it then- but the roots of a healthy relationship are sowed in truth and trust. He shouldn’t lie, and he shouldn’t avoid the hard facts even though he’s been given an out, but Soonyoung had asked him not to tell and his friendship is a relationship, too, “He said I couldn’t tell, so you’ll have to ask him. Otherwise, I would.”

“Fair.”

Honestly, being ousted by Soonyoung for having Minghao’s Instagram handle and stalking his account for a little more than a week will probably look worse than him admitting it himself right now, but Soonyoung said he didn’t want him to know, so a secret it shall remain. The best thing to do is change the subject, “But, yeah, I was wondering,”

“Yeah?” he hits the small stretch of highway leading to their friends’ home.

Mingyu isn’t sure if it’s because a particularly romantic song is playing or if he really does just want to change the subject, but he’d like some closure to the night either way, “About the question I asked you at the studio, what was your answer?”

“You asked me a question at the studio?” He doesn’t blame Minghao for forgetting. A lot of things probably take precedence over a simple question like that. Vernon’s hospitalization and Chan’s accusations are probably at the forefront of that list. Finals, choreography, legalities—those things probably follow close behind. The look on his face means that he’s earnestly trying to remember and coming up empty-handed. It’s only human to err, “What was it?” He doesn’t really want to ask again. It feels more embarrassing now than it did then. The mood isn’t right, “You know what it is, just ask me again, maybe I’ll remember my answer.”

They pull up to Wonwoo and Soonyoung’s house and Minghao kills the lights and turns the engine off after parking behind Mingyu’s car. He opens his door and pulling that handle unlocks all four doors, he’s going to walk him down, isn’t he, “It wasn’t important.”

And Minghao shuts his door and locks the car before he can move to touch the handle, “Verbatim, if you will.”

“It’s not important, Minghao. It was just something small.”

“If you wanted to know my answer after all these hours, then it’s important to me.”

“Okay, fine, but you can’t change your answer if you remember it.” He feels like he has to phrase it like this because Minghao would have probably agreed however many hours ago it was, “Alright?”

“Yeah. Okay. What was the question?”

Mingyu opens his mouth to speak but shuts it again to think. He really has no momentum to ask a question like this. It’s awkward, misplaced, and weird to ask when prompted like this. It won’t have the same effect and Minghao’s answer has probably changed since then and if Minghao doesn’t want to anymore then he doesn’t want him to keep his answer from before because that would just be a formality and that makes him a little uncomfortable because that’s like a pre-signed consent form and people are allowed to change their minds and-
“If you wanna keep it private, you better ask before they realize I’m parked outside.”

“Can I,” Minghao’s eyes are patient and curious, waiting for Mingyu to build his courage up again, “Can I kiss you?”

“Oh.”

“Yeah- see? It’s awkward, right? Asking again out of the blue- I mean-”

The blond only chuckles and leans over the console—propping his chin upon his palm—to give Mingyu a cheeky, half-lidded stare, “I have to retain my answer from earlier?” Ooh, that coyness, that sugary sweet look. That means he still agrees, right? He still wants to kiss Mingyu.

He turns to face him in full. The red is probably creeping into his cheeks, but he takes Minghao’s cap off, letting his bangs fall into his eyes and forcing him to wink involuntarily, a sly smile tweaked onto his lips as he waits. They’ve already kissed, it shouldn’t be a big deal to do it again. They’ve already kissed, but that was to put punctuation to a long and arduous night. He doesn’t want to think of it as a formality because it wasn’t. It wasn’t. It wasn’t, but kissing Minghao again and again has been on his mind since.

Closing the gap between them, Mingyu shuts his eyes and expects to meet Minghao halfway, but instead of lips, he feels a cold hand cup over his mouth and hears that cute and bubbly laughter that he’s missed all night, “I would, but I have to retain my answer.”

You tease.

Mingyu kisses his palm anyway, then links their fingers together, pressing his mouth to his wrist and bracelet. He locks Minghao’s gaze into his, “You don’t want to kiss me?” his voice is low, probably a little sultrier than he intended, but he hopes it plays into his favor.

“At the studio?” Minghao reaches forward with his free hand and picks a piece of lint out of his hair, “I shouldn’t have.” He fixes his bangs and because Mingyu doesn’t really remember what a peaceful night of sleep feels like, Minghao’s fingers ghosting over his face is delightful.

“Then what about n-”

Mingyu jumps, bumping their foreheads together painfully. The loud bang on his window took him by surprise and he whines when Soonyoung starts howling out a laugh in his pajamas, Byeol under his arm and Wonwoo slinking down the driveway with a cup of tea in his hands. Whatever he says is muffled by the closed window, so Minghao unlocks the door for the cat’s owner to open, “Were you guys going to make out in our driveway?”

Mingyu will vehemently object to that, “Absolutely n-”

“So, what if we were?” Minghao says flatly before stepping out of the car, “Were you expecting an invitation?” and rounding it to come and pet the fluffy old feline in Soonyoung’s arms.

“You’re a good kisser, I’d accept.” That’s news. They’ve apparently kissed before.

“You’re not invited.” Mingyu kicks his door open, wagging a finger into Soonyoung’s face before he laughs and holds his finger like a baby before bending it backwards firmly, but not painfully.

Shaking his head with eyes mere crescents, “You can’t hog Minghao all to yourself when I’m right here.” He lets go of Mingyu and slings his free arm around the said man’s shoulders, pulling
him close. Minghao just rolls his eyes. He’s annoyed, but in a good way—if that makes sense—like he knows that these are just Soonyoung’s antics.

Wonwoo is the one to save them, “Let them be, Soon. If they want to have a goodnight kiss in our driveway, you shouldn’t stop them.” Meow. “See, Byeol concedes.”

“Fine, fine, go ahead and smooch.”

“No, you ruined the moment. Now we can’t smooch ever again.” Minghao crosses his arms and yawns, “Why are you two still up anyways?”

“I usually go to bed late,” Wonwoo takes a sip from his mug, “and Soonyoung has a lot on his mind.”

“Don’t we all.” He pinches the other dancer’s cheek, “Go to bed. You’re leading us through practice tomorrow. We need you well-rested.”

Soonyoung bats his hands away, “I was in bed, but Wonwoo saw your lights when you pulled up so I got up to say hi.”

“Go back inside and say hi to your pillow, we just came by to grab my car.” The keys jingle when he pulls them out of his back pocket and walks to his car. It’s probably best if he ends the conversation quickly. The sooner he speeds off into the dark of the night, the sooner Minghao can leave and get to bed himself. That’s more important than their endearing banter, “I’ll see you at work tomorrow, Wonwoo. Goodnight, guys.”

“Bye.” Is called after him twice.
Ping. Ping. Ping.

Ping.

‘btw hao is pissed that you didnt kiss him goodnight’

Mingyu is barely able to creak his eyes open to read the text. What time is it? 3? 4? 3:55. Great. What? Why is Soonyoung still awake? Why is Minghao- Minghao’s mad that he didn’t kiss him? He gives himself a minute to adjust his screen brightness before looking through the texts. There has to be some sort of context.

The first text of the four is a picture of Byeol sitting on Wonwoo’s head. He’s aslepp in bed and she’s loafted on top of him, eyes shut with her mouth curved into a sly smile. The second text is of Minghao sleeping on the couch with his mouth hung open and a MacBook in his lap. A small stack of papers covers his chest. He looks so uncomfortable- wait. Those clothes are clothes from tonight. Did he not go home? Why didn’t he go home? Why didn’t he go home?! Attached to the photo is Soonyoung’s text, ‘sry. we ended up talking bout dance stuff after woowoo fell asleep hes so precious look at him I did feed him tho don worry.’ Smiley face.

The third text is another picture. This time it’s a selfie of Soonyoung, snuggling next to Minghao on the couch. They’re both awake and Minghao has his hat on backwards and is typing fervently on the laptop—Mingyu can tell due to the motion blur—as the older blond is flipping through papers halfheartedly. His blond isn’t paying any attention to the candid photo. His tired eyes are pinned on the screen, his brow is furrowed, and the dark circles that bruise his eyebags are very apparent in that lighting, ‘he hasn’t stopped cursing since 1’.

And the final text is ‘btw hao is pissed that you didn’t kiss him goodnight’ and it’s so out of place that Mingyu feels the need to reply.

‘Are you just going to tell me that without any context?’ he’s a little salty right now. Firstly, because Minghao didn’t go home and go to bed like he’s supposed to. Doesn’t he have a dog to snuggle with? Doesn’t he have a parental roommate that needs to make sure he’s fed and tucked in? Didn’t Wonwoo and Soonyoung have a policy to not talk about work at home? Secondly, it’s almost 4am. 4am. Everyone has work in the morning and he hasn’t been sleeping well. He needs all the rest he can get and while he appreciates Soonyoung giving him a heads-up about Minghao being bitter, if Minghao really was bitter, he would have told Mingyu himself. He’s the one who said they couldn’t kiss because Soonyoung ruined the mood.

‘we had a little h2h after woo went to bed’

‘h2h?’

‘heart-to-heart’ a few seconds pass, but Mingyu waits for him to finish typing, ‘u kno, like when u sit and talk and cry on someones shoulr’

Did Minghao cry? Did he hurt Minghao’s feelings? ‘Should I talk to him? Is he okay?’

‘hes fine it was me doin the cryin lol’ that’s kind of sad too, though. Mingyu doesn’t like hearing that his friends are so stressed and upset. If he could protect them all, he would, ‘woo said he should spend the night bc hes so tired its been a while since weve had a sleepover’
'You two should go to bed.' And why isn’t Wonwoo yelling at them to go to get some shuts? Isn’t it painfully obvious that those two need rest? Mingyu would have nagged Minghao’s ear off by now. He would have burritoed him in the plushest blanket he could find and wrapped him so tight he couldn’t leave the covers.

‘can’t sleep with all this stuff on our minds so were trying to figure it out’ That much makes sense, but, still- ‘haos gettingnn suspicious that im texting so much hbye’

‘Sleep, Soon.’

He tosses his phone back onto his nightstand. He’s so tired that he can’t deal with any sort of dance drama right now. Wonwoo’s establishment of the no-work-past-the-door rule absolutely makes sense because he doesn’t know how Minghao can stay sane. Is it always about work with him? Is it always about improving something somewhere at some time? Maybe it’s just that the timeframe he’s reunited with Minghao coincides with an important competition; there’s no way that he can always be on like this.

Okay, fine. Mingyu sits up again just minutes after he puts the phone away and hashes out a quick text, ‘Rest well, please.’ And waits almost five minutes before he gets an answer that totally gives him away.

‘Then why are you waking me up?’

Sassy, silly Minghao. Mingyu knows he’s not asleep, but he decides to leave it there. There’s no sense in pushing his luck while his brain is still clouded over with sleep.

Of course, even if he did go back to sleep, it’s not like Mingyu ever gets much rest these days. His brain is always wracked with dreams and they aren’t great. Tonight’s dream involved walking during his college graduation, falling through the stage into an underground pool, and fighting a sewer monster; less fighting, more running for his life. Exhausting, to say the least, but he’s at work bright and early like usual. As long as nothing goes wrong, he might actually make it through the day without deflating.

Joshua is at his desk like normal, fiddling with a pen until he accidentally breaks the lid and looks up at Mingyu. He looks a little better than (what has become) normal, even giving Mingyu a warm greeting and sliding the stack of folders over to him.

“I see one of us got enough sleep.”

He nods with a lazy smile, “You should try exercising before bed. It helps.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He picks up his stack of patient folders. Ugh, Mr. Carr. He’s one of the hardest patients to chug through because all he ever wants to do is talk and he never leaves room for them to give instructions. Ugh, Mrs. Zhang, no. It’s probably just a thing with old Asian tiger-moms, but he really doesn’t want to deal with her and her obsessive ranting about how he’s doing a subpar job. And no, Mr. Schultz and his constantly off-putting smell and disgusting need to lick his fingers before he touches any paper. Why. Just, why. Why is he stuck with terrible patients today? “Hey, has Wonwoo come in?”

“Looking to trade, I see.” He nods, “He and Seokmin are in the breakroom. You’re usually the last one to work these days.”

“Not Jeonghan?”
“Jeonghan’s here, he just sleeps in his car until his first appointment—”

“Is that why we have to set up the room without him? He’s not even late, he’s just sleeping in his car?”

“Yep.” Joshua spins in his chair and crosses one leg over the other, “He’s had some rough nights and probably needs the rest.”

Excuse you, Mingyu hasn’t been resting well either. Why does Jeonghan get special treatment? “Does he even ever do anything but sleep, eat, and cause mischief?” Mingyu shuffles through his patients again. They aren’t the worst. They’re all tolerable, but he’s only got one that he doesn’t mind and that’s little miss Sierra Johnson, a twelve-year-old who broke her arm trying to pull a raccoon out of the gutter. She’s a sweetie and is always ready to talk about medical stuff.

“You’d be surprised. I think he leads a pretty active lifestyle, he just doesn’t have great stamina.” It’s a little suspicious that Joshua knows about how much stamina the senior PT has even though they’re good friends. Mingyu certainly doesn’t know about how much Wonwoo—okay, maybe Minghao has joked about his stamina, but that’s only when it comes to the bedroom and—look, that’s only what Soonyoung tells him and that’s probably an exaggeration. There’s no way someone like Wonwoo can go at it for two hours—no, no. he’s not going to think about his friends having sex. That breaks some bro-code somewhere.

He enters the breakroom and slams his file down on the table, calling the attention of both men in the room, “Okay, dweebs. I’m super tired and I don’t want to deal with three of these patients so I’m willing to trade.”

“No way, I’ve got Ms. Pereira, Ms. Reed, and Dr. Jones today. Can’t trade those gems away.” Seokmin laughs and leans both his elbows over his patient folders, protecting them physically as if Mingyu would just steal one and run, “Put on your big boy pants and deal with it like everyone does.” Easy for him to say. Those two of the three are grade school teachers who have infinite amounts of patience and the other works in recovery herself, she knows that it takes time to heal and that miracles aren’t easy to come by.

“Wonwoo?”

He sets down his mug, “I’ll trade.”

“Yes!”

“In exchange for a favor.”

“Why is there always a catch with you?”

“It’s Wonwoo,” Seokmin shakes his head and flips through the other man’s patient list, “and by the looks of it, he’s wise.”

Wonwoo gives them an exaggerated nod, “Working with city wolves does that to you.”

“What do you want? And who do you have that warrants a favor in exchange—” Wonwoo picks up his folders, staggering them to show Mingyu the names. Damn, that’s a solid list of ten of their best patients this season. A favor is definitely in order, “Okay.”

“Cook us food for Thanksgiving and you have a deal.”

“I already made plans with the folks. Is there something else?”
“When will you be back?”

“Same day, just late.” He hasn’t told his mom that yet, but he just doesn’t feel comfortable sleeping in a bed that isn’t his. He’ll make the drive back even if it is late.

“Friday’s fine. Is Friday fine?” he looks at Seokmin, asking for his approval to which he receives two thumbs up. Mingyu feels like he’s just signed a contract with the devil, “Friday’s fine.”

In an act of desperation, he agrees, exchanging his entire stack for four of Wonwoo’s. One of the appointments is at 2:30, but that’s fine. He doesn’t have anywhere else to be and at least he can rest easy today. Spur of the moment deals like this aren’t really his style, but he’s recently come to realize that sticking to a plan might not always be the best course of action especially when he’s tired and restless. It makes him irrational. Wonwoo sprinting out the door to solidify the exchange with Joshua makes him understand that this deal was completely unfair. He’ll probably regret in full after lunch.

It’s not that he doesn’t want to cook for his friends but preparing a whole feast for an office full of people is rather daunting especially if he has to do it alone. He has a feeling that something slipped about him not cooking for other people often and getting him out of his shell of culinary abstinence is Wonwoo’s true intent. He means well even though it is frustrating.

‘Are you busy today?’

‘Yes.’

Should he try rephrasing it a little selfishly, ‘Do you have time for me today? You said you wanted to have dinner.’

An answer doesn’t come for another twenty minutes. It’s almost lunchtime and Mingyu’s just waiting for Wonwoo to wrap up his 1:00, ‘What time?’

Normally, yes, Mingyu would give Minghao a time, yes, because they both have their own things to attend to and it’s easier to have things be predictable and scheduled so that he can prepare, yes, ‘Any time.’ He just wants to see Minghao and make sure that he’s not mad at him.

‘That’s not a good answer.’

‘We can grab lunch. Did you have lunch yet?’

‘Not yet.’

‘When’s your lunchbreak today?’ Is he going to blow Wonwoo off to meet with him? Absolutely. Screw Wonwoo, that man expects him to make a full dinner for the entire clinic and that’s stupidly extra. To do it alone the night he comes back home is even more ridiculous. He’s not going to let that go for a while.

‘2 but I’m practicing with Soon, so no. Let’s just meet at 6. Your place.’ Doesn’t he want to go out and eat? ‘We’ll decide from there. Break’s over. Bye.’

It certainly sounds like Minghao’s upset. It certainly sounds like he’s pissed.

He never took him for the type to get worked up over something like a missed kiss, after all, their relationship so far has been nestled in communication and asking for permission. Minghao said
they couldn’t kiss, so Mingyu heeded that, but was it sarcasm? Probably not, right? They’ve spent this long hiding whatever they are from Wonwoo and Soonyoung, he can’t just expect- then again, intonations and emotions don’t translate well over text. That’s excusable. Minghao could just be tired, thereby making his texts short and concise. He’s sure that there’s chaos in the studio today.

It was probably sarcasm. Fuck.

“Hey, ready for lunch?”

“Are we waiting for Seokmin?”

“Nah, he’s eating with Jeonghan.” Wonwoo grabs his wallet from his bag and waits by the door for Mingyu to look away from his phone, “What’s on your mind?”

“Nothing?” locking the phone and pocketing it, he jogs over to Wonwoo and they leave through the lobby, “So, Minghao spent the night at your place?”

“Yeah.” He gestures between the restaurants across the street and his car, asking Mingyu if he wants to eat local or drive somewhere else. He picks local, “We didn’t want him driving home and Soon was more than excited to have Hao spend the night. He actually used to stay over quite often when I wasn’t around but hasn’t come over since I moved in.”

“Thanks for-”

“Don’t thank me, it was Soonyoung that didn’t let him leave.”

They pick a place that they’ve been to before, ordering hot subs and soup. It hasn’t been getting any warmer these days as December is just around the corner, “And what happened to not talking about work at home?”

“I can’t complain if I’m asleep.” he blows on his chowder, “Soon’s mind was on it since we left the hospital and I could tell he was getting incredibly anxious having no one to bounce ideas off of. If anything, having Minghao over to talk it out got them both to sleep. There’s still a bunch of legal matters, but Vernon’s getting discharged today and they’ll call the organizers after lunch.”

“Discharged already?”

“There wasn’t any damage done. Soon cushioned his fall before he hit his head on anything. His mom is flying in tonight.” They eat in silence for a few minutes, looking at their phones and enjoying their meal. It’s always nice to eat with Wonwoo because silence doesn’t feel stuffy or loaded. It’s just comfortable.

But there’s still something on Mingyu’s mind, “Is Minghao mad at me?”

Wonwoo sits up, dropping his plastic spoon into his now-empty soup container, “Mad at you? No. Did Soon say something?”

He debates telling him but decides to anyway. He’s already revealed so much to Wonwoo during that drive back to town and even though his lips were loose thanks to sleep deprivation, the words still rang true and Wonwoo has an impeccable memory, “Soon said he was mad because I didn’t kiss him goodnight. Crazy, right?”

“Do you usually kiss him goodnight?” Just the thought of that makes Mingyu flustered. How scandalous, kissing someone goodnight often. Kissing Minghao goodnight every night instead of texting him or calling him- that would mean he’d get to see Minghao off at night and that’s just such
“So, you don’t. I don’t think—”

“Who said I don’t?”

“Your face and how much you’re blushing and smiling. It’s a little creepy. Please stop.” Wonwoo chuckles. “As I was saying, I don’t think he’d get mad over something like that. Maybe Soon’s just exaggerating. He has a habit of doing that. Minghao might have mentioned wanting to kiss you offhandedly and he just blew it out of proportion, but Hao’s the kind of person who will talk things out before he decides to be mad. If he’s going to expend energy—what little of it he has left—being mad, he’ll make it known.”

Sometimes Mingyu is really glad he has Wonwoo. He can put him at ease because he’s an unbiased third party who sees things from a purely observational angle and can make comments like that without planting any doubt in Mingyu’s mind. It’s not to say that Wonwoo’s words are always pure and clean and come without baggage. Sometimes Wonwoo really tests his patience and says things that force him to overthink a situation, but hearing that Minghao’s probably not mad makes him rest a little easier.

“Even if Minghao was mad at you, I don’t think he could stay mad for long.”

“What makes you say that? He seems like the kind of person who stays angry for a long time.”

“I mean, look at me and Soon, we bicker every day and fight over stupid things like how much cream belongs in coffee or why shoes need to be put in shoe cubbies.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that it’s hard to stay mad at someone you’re smitten with.” He unwraps his sandwich and precariously folds the paper down, “And with how much Minghao likes you, I doubt that any sort of residual anger would last more than a few minutes.”
“Hey.”

Mingyu swings open his door right after Minghao knocks. It’s not like he was waiting on his couch for the last twenty minutes, no, not at all. The wind that crashes in is freezing and he’s quick to pull the blond in and out of the cold. His hood falls off when he stumbles through the doorway, revealing that his hair is at least two shades lighter than before and three times crispier. This is why Asians shouldn't bleach their hair, but, golly, “You look nice.”

Why were you hiding it? It looks cute. It’s frizzy and poofy and bounces when he moves.

Minghao raises an eyebrow as he shakes out his bangs and fixes his posture. It’s evident that his legs are a little stiff, but if it doesn’t carry on, Mingyu will just blame it on the icy weather, “Thanks.” He shuts the door behind him, “Lifting it has been a pain, but it’s for the performance. I’m not very partial to this shade.”

“Any breakage?” That’s a thing, right? Mingyu doesn’t know much about haircare other than deep conditioning and that a lot of heat is bad. Chemical treatments are also bad. These are just general terms and he’s never dyed his hair more than a few times—the brown shade he has in right now is quickly growing out and his soft black roots are very welcome. He’s waiting for the day to come when Minghao will remark on how silky it is after carding his fingers through it.

“Not yet, but we’re getting there. Hopefully, I won’t be bald by the weekend.” He sets his bag down by the kitchen island and drops his keys and wallet on the counter, “So, what do you wanna do for dinner?”

“Uh, I didn’t have anything in mind.” Mingyu follows his gait, tracing parts and points with his eyes. There’s an obvious bias for his right side and he’s not twisting or bending as fluidly as he normally does. Yes, he’s a little stiff and—he’ll blame not noticing it earlier on his blindingly bright hair in contrast to his all-black outfit—the black wrist brace had blended in with his clothes, making it hard to spot, “Did you get hurt?”

“Ask again in ten minutes.”

That’s a funny way of saying ‘I don’t want to talk about it right now’, but it’s better than ‘I don’t want to talk about it at all’, “Are you mad at me?” He might as well scrape it off his plate now, rip it off like an old bandage.

“For?”

“Last night.”

Minghao cocks his head to the side in genuine intrigue, “No?” his eyes search the air, recalling memories and instances, “Why would I be mad?”

“Nevermind then.” He moseys over to his fridge and opens it, searching for answers. They could cook something easy and simple. That would be the best option if Minghao has to go back to the studio. Driving to a restaurant, ordering, eating, and driving back would take far too long. They could have probably just met somewhere, but maybe the blond was hoping for a night in with a light meal.

“No ‘nevermind’, did something happen?”
Why does Minghao always have to press on questions like this, “You didn’t say goodnight to me when I left, so I thought I did something wrong.”

“Oh, that. Sorry,” Mingyu hears him adjust the Velcro of his wrist brace noisily, “I was a little salty that you didn’t,” he falls silent, ears red and flushed. This is exactly why Mingyu didn’t want to say it himself, admitting words like that is difficult, isn’t it? Those sorts of words in this setting—it’s a little-“yeah.” The blond chews his lip and grits his teeth, gaze burning a hole in the carpet, fingers plucking lint out of the burrs, “Sorry. I’m not mad at you or anything. I was just tired. Sorry if I worried you.”

“You don’t need to apologize.” He waddles over to help with the brace. Minghao seems like the type of person to fasten it too tightly in hopes that it’d heal faster, but cutting off the circulation won’t help anyone, “I thought you didn’t want me to,” he lets the sentence die before the ‘kiss you’ leaves his lips.

Taking Minghao’s hand, he slips the brace off. Grooves from the stitching are lightly engraved into his skin, red and irritated from constant movement, “I thought you would.” No bracelet, which Mingyu half-expects him to wear despite having the brace on, but that’s a good thing, “It was a miscommunication, I guess.”

“Which part hurts?” Minghao sighs and points out an area or two, one of which is on his palm. He explains himself instead of making Mingyu wait another six minutes. He’d been putting more weight on his hands to lighten the burden on his knee. Overall, it’s more tiring—and has the potential to be more damaging—, but he has no choice unless they want to switch up the choreography entirely and with Vernon temporarily out of commission, they can’t afford any more changes. Regardless, Mingyu kneads his thumbs into his hand, eliciting a hiss, the muscles in his arm tensing from the pressure. He’s just here to help and he’ll ignore Minghao’s annoyed stare as much as possible because this is trust, “Thanks, by the way.”

His eyes glean up at him curiously, “Why are you thanking me? I should be thanking you.”

“You didn’t hide this from me.” And for some reason, it feels very warm. It feels like a step in the right direction. Minghao didn’t bother hiding the wrist brace and he didn’t hide his soreness. Mingyu knows that if he really wanted to, he could have easily endured the pain and moved with that robotic flawlessness that he’s done before, “So, thank you for that.” Today, he doesn’t have to catch him slipping up.

He gives his palm a kiss, traces of salt and sweat are still there. He’d been practicing with it on for hours. Minghao pushes him back a step, not strongly, but firmly, probably a little self-conscious if there’d be a smell or something. Mingyu doesn’t mind, “That hurts.”

“Sorry.” He can’t fight the smile that pricks at the corners of his lips, “It’s just custom to kiss booboos and you have an owie, that’s the worst booboo.”

“Watch it, or you’ll be the one getting owies.” He slips Minghao’s brace back on, explaining the proper way to fasten the Velcro and how he should try to get a version with rigid ribbing instead of soft ribbing. It’ll help keep it still, especially when he’s asleep.

Mingyu returns to the fridge, rolling up his sleeves and hearing his bracelet twang against the metal handles when he grips the door a little too enthusiastically, “When do you have to be back at the studio?”

He follows after him, bumping into his side to get a good look as well. To Mingyu, there aren’t any obvious combinations. Sure, he did go grocery shopping a couple days ago, but his mind
is going blank. It’s mainly focused on Minghao’s warmth, “8.” Oh, that’s quite a bit of time, more time than he could have hoped for, “I mean, I should be there at 7,” an hour isn’t too bad, “but Chan gets off work at 8, so I don’t have to be there before 8.”

“Minghao.”

“Mingyu.”

“Minghao.”

“Do you want me not to spend time with you?”

“If you have prior arrangements you should-”

Minghao shuts the fridge doors behind his back and leans against them, fitting nicely between them and Mingyu. The room fades into nothingness. The white noise from the street and from his dryer and from the heater all gets muted by his presence. There, before him, is Minghao Xu and all his exhausted, damaged hair, dried sweat glory. He doesn’t even have to capture his gaze. He looks at his chest, not meeting eyes, making himself small—so small—and Mingyu’s lost.

“You make me happy.” His facial muscles tense for just a moment and his jaw locks when he swallows, “And after all the shit that’s been happening at the studio, I’m going to selfishly take a break.” That voice is so quiet and so steady, “If you’ll have me.”

He wants to be found.

“Always.”

Minghao peers up at him, “That’s a big word, Mingyu.”

“Always.” He nods and pulls Minghao out of the way so he can resume digging around in the fridge. A future without him—Mingyu can’t even picture that. ‘Always’ is a big word, sure. It’s a heavy word, definitely. It doesn’t need to be, though. With Minghao, ‘always’ has just come to be as obvious and apparent as waking up and going to sleep. It’s not groundbreaking anymore, “We could make pasta.” He’s pretty sure he has rotini in a cupboard somewhere but does he have tomato paste? He never has tomato paste. No one ever has tomato paste just laying around, “Is that okay with you?”

Minghao hums.

Pulling out an onion, some garlic, some basil- what else does he need? A protein is probably needed—something not too heavy so that Minghao won’t be full to the point that he can’t dance—eggs maybe? “How about eggs in purgatory?” Minghao just hums again, “An opinion would be appreciated.”

But lanky arms just snake around his stomach and a weight is added to his back. Is he breathing? Is his heart exploding? He can feel Minghao rest his cheek against his shoulder and he finds himself grinding his teeth into his lips to stop from squealing or laughing—he’s not sure—because despite that punchy and standalone exterior, despite his apparent calloused and rough past, there are moments that the man behind him is just so damn soft.

He effortlessly melts Mingyu’s heart.

Proceeding with dinner plans, he shuffles over to the utensils drawer to pull out a chef’s knife and scoots over to the sink to rinse and dry off his cutting board. Minghao follows, koala’d to his
back like a cub, as he gathers ingredients and throws a deep pan on the stove and gets a pot of water boiling for the pasta. When he shuffles, their feet sometimes clumsily bump together, fluffy socks and all. Sometimes Minghao holds him a little tighter when he turns quickly so he doesn’t get thrown off. Mingyu would ask why he’s being so clingy all of a sudden, but if he’s honest, he really likes it. He’s on corner duty and he’s absolutely fine with that. Minghao should hang on for as long as he wants. His hands are a little cold and he’s sure that a thin hoodie isn’t enough to keep him warm from the winter weather outside.

Minghao only lets go when Mingyu starts to get to work, shaking off his wrist that had gotten stiff wrapped around Mingyu’s waist, “Aw. So soon?” The half-hearted whine earns him a little scoff as the dancer rolls up his sleeves.

Oh.

He wore his bracelet on his right side.

“Give me something to do.” So, Mingyu pulls him over to the stove and gestures to the pot after throwing a generous pinch of salt in. Watch the water boil, Minghao, you’re the guest, “No. This is stupid. Give me a knife.”

“You can’t cut produce with one hand, Minghao.”

“Yes, I can.” He holds a hand out, “Let me show you.”

“No, you can’t. I know the limits of a household chef.”

“You don’t know the limits of Minghao Xu.” He stretches towards the blade.

“I know you can’t cut a spherical onion with one hand.”

“Watch me.” He reaches for the knife, but Mingyu holds it just out of reach.

“No.” Minghao huffs and gives up. Good. They might be grownups but playing with knives is never safe for any occasion, “But if you insist, here’s a spatula. If you could heat up a splash of olive oil and sauté this,” he scoops the rest of the onion and garlic into a bowl to slide over to his sous chef, “that’d be great.”

The sound of the sizzle is music to his ears, but it does feel oddly new. It’s not uncomfortable, but it feels like a ghost is in his kitchen cooking with him. He doesn’t know if something will burn or if something is hot enough; he doesn’t understand the pace when he’s not cooking alone, and he's only ever cooked alone. He usually chased his parents out of the kitchen when he cooked at their place and he doesn’t often come into situations with the opportunity to cook with anyone else but cooking with Minghao is something he can get used to.

It’s not like they’re flipping crepes or dicing pineapples midair and it’s a little uncoordinated, but here he is, moving to the side whenever Mingyu wants to toss something else into the pan. He doesn’t have to ask, he doesn’t have to nudge him out of the way, he just moves. “Do you have bay leaves?”

Is Minghao digging around in his spice cabinet? He turns to check. Yes, yes he is, “I should. Top shelf.” He knows full well that Minghao can’t reach the top shelf without the dinky stepping stool under the sink.

“Who keeps spices on the top shelf? You can’t even see them up there.” He reaches for the eye-level oregano and thyme instead.
“I have fresh thyme over there.” He points with his knife, midway through cutting mushrooms. His little spice garden by his window is growing slowly. He wants to get a basil plant too, but they’re a little finicky and he feels bad cutting them. That’s a silly worry, right? But they’re not very big and cutting them as saplings makes him sad.

Minghao looks over at the small plants and returns to the cabinet, “Cutting those makes me feel bad. The dried stuff is fine.” He thinks that Minghao will stop with just two spices and some salt—that’s usually where Mingyu stops—but he hears at least four more caps pop open and his pepper grinder churn.

“Whoa, what else are you putting in there, Iron Chef Kenichi?”

“The basics.” Minghao returns all the spices to their rightful spots, “red pepper flakes, onion powder, garlic powder, grill spices, cayenne, a shake of this, a shake of that,” just as Mingyu turns to drop the mushrooms in, “but,” he pulls Mingyu over by his sleeve, “bay leaves, if you will.”

“Bay leaves,” he returns the bowl to the cutting board and puts a hand at Minghao’s waist, pushing him back to the spice cabinet and against the counter. He sometimes forgets that it wasn’t much longer than a week ago that he fantasized about this exact situation and, sure, it may be entirely overboard when he makes sure he’s completely flush against Minghao when he reaches up on his tippy toes. He’s careful to not press too hard in case his back hurts and is sure to keep his legs out of the way, but outside of all the precautions, he thinks it’s a little fun getting up in Minghao’s space. He grabs the little bag of bay leaves and brings it down for him, waving it in front of his face, “if I will.”

Minghao nods, snatching the little sachet out of his hands and making his way back over to the stove after slipping away from him, “Do I even want to know why you keep your bay leaves in a weed bag?”

“I don’t smoke.”

“I don’t either, but I keep my spices in containers. Well, okay, they aren’t always in containers.” He throws two leaves in and zips the bag back up, tossing it back to Mingyu, “But the roomie got us a big spice rack a few days ago and I haven’t had many chances to use it.”

“Seungcheol said you guys had a lot of leftovers.” He shuts the cabinet and returns to dicing tomatoes and rolling the basil to chiffonade, “Did you get overzealous?” because that would be the most endearing thing.

Minghao scurrying around the kitchen cooking this and that just because he’s excited about using a nice spice rack is just, “Yep. I mean, look, I should have probably waited until after finals to spend four hours in the kitchen, but it was one of the big ones from Costco with, like, 40 spices and he said he was hungry and too tired to cook so I had to, okay? Those spices were asking to be used.” Smart man, that Seungcheol.

“Sure they were.” He uses the back of his knife to scrape the tomatoes into the saucepan and mashes them using the spatula after cranking up the heat. It bubbles away as Minghao washes the cutting board and dries the few bowls that they used, “It’s missing something.”

“Yeah, tomato paste.”

“But I don’t have tomato paste.”

“You could just let it reduce.”
“But I need enough sauce to poach the eggs.”

Minghao looks at the forming sauce. He’s offered a taste and smacks his lips together a couple times before nodding, humming, mulling, and moving over to the fridge where he pulls out sriracha and ketchup.

“What- what are you doing?” Mingyu’s jaw drops in disbelief when he squirts a heaping tablespoon of ketchup into the sauce, “Minghao! That’s sacrilege.”

“Are you Italian?”

“No, but-”

“Am I Italian?”

“No, but-”

“Then it’s not sacrilege.” And he proceeds with a squirt of sriracha, stirring it, tasting it, and revising as he goes with another healthy squeeze of ketchup, “I did this in college all the time. It’s fine, just let it cook down a little.” Mingyu looks at his once-pristine and pure red sauce. Minghao, why? “Trust me.”

Mingyu gives it a taste after he drops the pasta in the water, “Not bad.” It’s actually pretty good. It’s not restaurant-quality red sauce by any means, but there’s something warm and wholesome about the way it tastes. It brings a certain zing that was missing without the tomato paste that the ketchup has seemed to fill nicely. The little bit of sriracha brings out the sweet heat of the pepper flakes and it’s now salty enough that the eggs won’t taste like warm Jell-O.

“But is it good?” he gives the pasta a stir and hands Mingyu the eggs to crack into the pan.

One, two, three, four eggs are executed and sent to poach in purgatory, “It’s good.”

“Good.”
“So, how’s Vernon holding up?”

Minghao looks up from Romeo on the dining table with his fork pressed to his lips, “He’s actually doing well. Walking around. Itching to get outside, but Seungkwan has him under house arrest.”

“How long have they been together?”

“Uh,” Minghao’s brow furrows as he thinks, “like officially or?”

“Sure.”

He thinks for a while longer, “Like, two years-ish? It’s complicated with them.” Wait, didn’t Seungkwan say they were together since they were 18?

“How old are they?”

“Younger than us.” Minghao laughs at the randomness of the question, but Mingyu’s feeling curious. A lot of things aren’t adding up, but there’s a possibility that he’s just remembering wrong. It was a long night after all, “25. Almost exactly a month apart. Seungkwan’s older.” Yeah, what the hell is this? “They’re cute, right?”

“Adorable.” As much as he’d like to pick apart Vernon and Seungkwan’s relationship, he somehow doubts that Minghao knows everything. Maybe with time, he’d be able to learn more, but at this moment, it’s frankly none of his business. However, there is one thing that is absolutely all of his business, “Oh, by the way, why didn’t you want me to agree with Wonwoo? Weren’t you the one who wanted me to cook for other people?”

Minghao breaks open the molten and gooey egg yolk and chops it into the rest of his pasta with the side of his fork, “He and Soonyoung seem to be up to something, that’s all.”

“Up to what?” That meddling couple is probably going to be his demise and even though he calls them friends, he knows that they’re more or less impish cupids in his love game with Minghao, “I mean, cooking an entire meal for the clinic on Friday is going to be difficult, but-”

“Friday?” he looks up from his plate, “Isn’t Thanksgiving on the 23rd?”

“Yeah,” and Minghao isn’t his plus-one, “I’m going to visit the folks in the bay, but I’ll be back the night of. I can’t stand sleeping at their place. Are you,” he weighs the question heavily but knows he has to finish asking since he already started. Minghao won’t let him off easy, “going to have dinner with your family?”

Instant regret.

Minghao’s expression drops any sign of joy or content and even though there’s barely a notable change to the average eye, Mingyu knows. He wants to apologize right away for overturning a stone that shouldn’t have been touched, but his guest meets his eyes and straightens up, cocks a little smile and eats another bite of food, “I never really did Thanksgiving growing up, but I’ll see what the roomie wants to eat and work from there. I’d really hate to leave him alone since he doesn’t really have any family in the States.” He points his fork at Mingyu, “We were talking about having a Friendsgiving potluck thing at the studio, though, so if you’re not dead tired on Friday,” he chuckles
and drops the utensil back into his plate.

Mingyu smirks, is he trying to ask him something. “What?”

Clearing his throat, “You can swing by.”

“As your date?”

“As my,” He probably thinks that he’s got him flustered and shy, but Minghao just nods, “Sure.”

Overall, the dinner is satisfactory and filling and- okay, so it isn’t the best dish he’s ever had and far from the best pasta he’s ever had, but it feels a little special. This is the first thing that he’s cooked with Minghao and it’ll take them a few more tries to get their flavor profiles to match up. Simply put, they’re not very in sync and Mingyu’s more than happy to make up for that in the future.

He’s also ecstatic that Minghao has finished everything on his plate.

The plate had started off full and now it’s empty aside from a couple mushrooms and a little puddle of tomato sauce. Of course, he turns down the offer to get seconds, but Mingyu will take all the wins he can get. They share idle conversation about this and that as Minghao polishes off his second plate, mostly talking about art and animals and how Minghao beat Mingyu in sponsoring Baxter. The big dog deserves a home and Marco does, too. There’s a little talk about college and how Minghao used to make small art pieces for charity drives and knows his way around spray paint and watercolor. He wants to try oil but explains that it’s too hard and too time consuming to wait for the layers to dry.

Mingyu shares a little about himself as well. He admits that he’s never really dabbled in the arts, but thinks that photography and drawing are really cool. He wishes he could draw and Minghao simply encourages him and makes him promise to share whatever he creates with him first, going so far as to suggest that—if Mingyu ends up liking art enough—they should collaborate on a piece and donate it to the shelter to spruce up the lobby.

When he moves to do the dishes, Minghao glues himself to his back again. In his heart, he knows the shorter man is counting down the minutes they have left until he has to get back into his car and drag himself across town. He just wants to hear him talk a little more, wants to feel his warmth a little bit more, “Do you really have to go?”

“In, like, twenty minutes, yeah.”

“I just don’t feel comfortable,” with what exactly, he doesn’t know, but sending Minghao off to a place that seems more hostile than it is friendly—he can’t do that easily.

The blond lets go of him and comes to his side to stack the washed plates on the drying rack and wet a towel to wipe down the table. His nimble fingers make quick work of the mealtime remnants and he flicks them into the sink before wringing out the towel and slapping it onto the counter. He makes a little hop to sit on it and fails when he realizes that his wrist can’t support his weight, “With Chan?”

He frowns, shaking his hand and attempting another jump without his hands and sliding off thanks to his soft pants, “Yeah. If you two are fighting-”
“Chan and I have our differences, but I made a promise to him and I,” he sighs, giving up, “I haven’t been making good on it. The other guys, I think they’d be up in arms if they didn’t know about you.” What’s that supposed to mean, “And since Chan and I aren’t that close, he doesn’t really know about you aside from the obvious.” The fact that he had referred to Mingyu as Minghao’s boyfriend—is that what he’s trying to say? “But, don’t worry about it. I’ve been in his position before and I’ve fought with other friends before when they’d skip practice to hang out with significant others.” So, he’s a significant other, then.

“He shouldn’t yell at you. It’s so out of place. And Vernon-”

“He went back to check on them after we left. Seungkwan told me.” He absentmindedly picks up the dish towel again, “He brought them breakfast before work. He’s actually pretty close with Vernon. They have good chemistry together on and off the dancefloor. I think—kinda like Soonyoung—you just caught him at a bad time.”

“Soonyoung punched you in the face.”

“And I punched him in the face.” He folds the dish towel twice and sets it to the side, “I’ve made a promise to my work and my team and—it might not seem like it to you but—I’ve been neglecting that responsibility which is something I never do. Chan’s career and future-”

“Are riding on this? Yeah, I know, but when he talks to you like that- it’s just not right.” Minghao puts a hand on his forearm, telling him to lower his voice, “I appreciate you worrying about me, but until you’ve been in his position, I just don’t think you can understand. When the future is uncertain, and you’ve run out of options, it’s scary. He’s not some simple, cartoon villain.” And he locks their fingers together briefly, “He doesn’t have anyone like you to lean on. He’s stubborn and lonely and I know how that feels. It feels bad and it makes your blood boil, it makes you frustrated when life deals you a hand of bad cards. But then you have friends that you can rely on that help you—play cards to your advantage, hand you new cards under the table—and bring you out of that.” Mingyu wants to say something, anything, but he’s at a loss for words, “And I was letting him down and I wasn’t helping like I promised to do. He wasn’t really mad at me, he doesn’t understand my behavior yet.”

“You should be able to do what you want. You’re both adults-”

“You’ve never been very good at team sports, huh.” He can’t say he has. He was good at listening, good at executing orders from the coach, but never felt the team spirit that was so hyped up by his friends in high school. If he knew that a move would land him on the bench due to injury or foul, he wouldn’t make it. Team sports, team victories, those were for his resume and college applications. That’s all, “I’ll admit it, though, I don’t know what I’m doing here. I should be at practice and I would be at practice, but I just really needed to see you today. I still holds true—what I said earlier—you make me happy, but I can’t really explain why, and Chan probably won’t accept whatever explanation I give him. He’s never been in a,” Minghao bites his lip before he slips up and is more selective with his word choice, “situation like this. And I guess it’s just a little out of the ordinary for me which is why he might be doubting me.”

“Like what?” he puts a hand on the counter, leaning into it, getting just a little closer. If the bubble of friends is a certain size, then the bubble of a significant other is slightly smaller, right? Getting this close doesn’t tiptoe into the danger zone.

“Skipping practice to spend time with someone.” He tries to jump up on the counter again, wincing when the weight on his palm stings. Minghao sighs with the smallest bit of frustration, “I’m
actually really opposed to that kind of thing- *this* kind of thing, but, y’know. Whatever.”

The mood changes then. He can tell. He can read it in the way Minghao dusts off his clean hands like he’s scraping off his reservations about whatever his teammate has to say about his actions. He *really* doesn’t care anymore. It’s the bridge from doing something selfish to doing something self-fulfilling and Minghao has mentally crossed it and he’s beckoning Mingyu to follow him.

They stand like this, on opposite sides of a river for the longest while.

They stand like this, Minghao picking nothing out from under his fingernails and Mingyu watching him for the slightest cue, for the smallest permission to proceed. With what? He doesn’t know either, but just to proceed.

How untimely, this situation.

Why couldn’t they have met months before this competition or months after? Why did it have to be now while Chan doesn’t have a real job and Minghao is injured? They had months to run into each other at the grocery store, months to collide in the bread aisle and drop jam jars on the floor. They had months to trip over each other at the park with Cacahuate sprinting into Mingyu’s jogging path and Minghao following him to the ground. They had months to meet at more opportune times without wavering environments and grumpy teammates and-

It’s all quite inconvenient, isn’t it.

Whatever.

Abruptly, Mingyu hoists him up onto the counter and Minghao’s arms come behind his neck for balance. His hands linger on his thighs, feeling his strong muscles tense and then relax under his touch, “What kind of thing?” The way Minghao looks down at him makes his head swim. Do your magic, time wizard. We need more moments together, “Taking a break? I think you deserve one.”

He shakes his head, scoffing a bit but not haughtily. Giving Mingyu one good look, he runs a couple fingers through his black roots and moves a few strands here and there. He absorbs all of him in due time, in the fractions of seconds that they have. He preens his hair and straightens out his collar and fixes the single, offset button that Mingyu had been wearing all night—how embarrassing —and he returns his hands to his lap. Stiff fingers pick at the bracelet on his right wrist, no longer mirroring his, but the same.

“The same as his.

“You’re a world of trouble for me, Mingyu Kim.”

“Good trouble?” he gives him a little squeeze before pulling him forward by his waist, to the point where he’s standing between his spread legs. Minghao’s arms come up again to avoid punching him in the stomach and his hands land on his chest.

His lips wrinkle, “Trouble.” Half-lidded stares aside, his lips look awfully soft. The blond smiles, pushing Mingyu’s bangs to the side and tracing a line behind his ear before resting his hands on his shoulders, “Good or bad, I still have consequences to face.”

“Then, we can stop here.” He picks at the hem of Minghao’s shirt.

He leans forward, bumping their foreheads together, “I don’t want to.” He cups Mingyu’s face, squishing his cheeks and laughing when he makes a funny face. He loves it when he has that
wide, closed smile that stretches his thick lips thin and makes deep, curved creases in his cheeks. He loves it when Minghao looks at him like that, like he’s just found an answer. But then his mouth flattens out and his smile turns soft and shy, “I think I like you a little too much, Mingyu.”

“That’s okay.” His face is burning up. Sure, kissing with garlic and onion on his breath isn’t the hottest thing, but if Minghao doesn’t stop them, then he’ll happily eat dinner twice, “If possible, could you like me even more?”

“If you’ll have me.”

It doesn’t even take a blink for Mingyu to understand everything that they’ve both just admitted to each other. He doesn’t want to ask permission this time, he doesn’t need to. Minghao is right here, right now only because he makes him happy and that’s enough. That’s more than enough. He presses a warm and full kiss to Minghao’s lips, making up for the one he missed last night. He presses another kiss to his lips, apologizing for missing the opportunity. There’s no laughing or giggling this time, but there’s a heat and intent behind each one.

The first time they kissed, he thought it was one of the few things that Minghao could do perfectly, but he’d like to revise that statement as he meets him halfway, teeth dragging against a plump lower lip. His hands pull him closer. His mouth begs for more. His heart pleads for mercy.

Kissing is something that only feels perfect when its done with Minghao.

Another kiss for bringing up a sore subject. Another kiss for bringing up Seungcheol. Another kiss for being too cute. Another kiss for helping with dinner. Another kiss for being clingy.

Another kiss for… whatever. Who cares.
Dates were never really important to him. He only cares to remember the *most* important ones like birthdays and—well, that’s about it.


Tonight, he sends Minghao off with his lips plump and raw after apologizing profusely for the little red marks peppering his neck. He’s sure to get an earful about it, but he tries to waive Mingyu’s concern, claiming to have a cowlneck sweater in his trunk, “It’s not too bad. You can barely see it in this lighting.” That’s true when his hood is up, but if he’s going to be dancing and flipping around the floor, won’t they come to surface? He really doesn’t want to cause trouble for him.

“Like a bunch of mosquitos decided to attack you at once.” He follows Minghao out of the bathroom, trailing after him with little shuffles from his socked feet, “Sorry. I should have—”

He pulls him close by his nape and leaves a warm kiss burning on his mouth, “It’s fine. Really, Mingyu, don’t worry about it.” But he doesn’t even have the mental capacity to respond, Minghao is just *that* enticing. He pushes him against the wall, nipping at him with his hands holding him in place by his waist. For a few moments, he’s all giggles and bubbly laughter, letting his head thud gently against the spackled paint. He pushes Mingyu off, effectively stopping him and earning a whine, “Geez, you’re such a puppy.”

Look, if Minghao wants him to back off, he will—readily, and longingly—, but all his body language and silly, soft stares are telling him otherwise, “Is it annoying?” if there was a muscle building competition for cheeks, his would probably place first with how much he’s been smiling.

Minghao shakes his head. His hood falls back down to his shoulders and his lips curl into a grin, “No, but if I’m late, I *will* actually get in trouble and it *will* actually be your fault.” Right, the clock—that cursed thing—is creeping closer and closer to 8 and Minghao still has to make the drive across town, “So, let’s pick this back up tomorrow.”

“Dinner tomorrow?”

He nods, “Dinner tomorrow,” and envelopes Mingyu in a hug that squeezes his heart more than it squeezes his sides, “but until then, I need to focus. So, we’re on a timeout, okay?”

“Okay.” Walking Minghao to the door feels suspiciously light. Knowing that the next time they’ll meet will resume from here—treating his door like a game’s save-point—excites him to no end but it’s like a splash of cold water to his face. It’s refreshing and not necessarily *bad* per say, but doing this with Minghao feels strangely grounded in reality. It’s not like past romances where people threw their schedules to the wind just to spend sleepless nights with him and he set the pace for when things would end. He’s following Minghao’s lead like a dog on a leash and he doesn’t mind it one bit. It’s comforting to know that he has boundaries and an agenda that Mingyu—while he isn’t the center of the agenda or completely extradited from it—is woven in between the time he has free and the time he has to endure.

“Really.”

“Okay.” He tuts Minghao out the door, handing him his bag and hesitating before letting his hand go, “I’ll see you tomorrow. Text me- don’t text me. Show up at 6.” The blond laughs as he bounds away and Mingyu locks the door, only to come back to it when he hears a knock. Did
Minghao forget something? He opens the door with such force that it rustles his hair.

“One for the road.” He smiles into a giddy kiss, laughing wholeheartedly when he backs up and bounces on his heels, holding his hands behind his back and swaying cutely, “And,” he drags out, voice sliding out cloyingly sweet, “one to tide me over till tomorrow?”

Mingyu chuckles, heart wheezing and shaking his lungs. His whole chest feels tight, “Nope.” Would it kill both of them to play around a little, “If I kiss you again, I won’t want to let you go.” Minghao pouts, laying it on thick. There’s no way Mingyu can win. Absolutely no way.

“No, you can’t take back what you said.” He teases, but now it’s Mingyu who wants a kiss for the road, a kiss to tide him over until tomorrow.

“Fine.” He takes a step closer, putting one foot on the door trim and tiptoeing to plant a warm peck on his cheek, “See you tomorrow.” But he catches Minghao’s hand before he fully turns to leave, “What? You said no-”

“I get to kiss you somewhere, don’t I?” A kiss on the cheek is simple and he’s sure that the small amount of squishy baby fat hugging Minghao’s face would be nothing but soft against his lips, but he picks a place that means a little more in this moment. Be safe, don’t get hurt, I hope you feel better. He presses a warm kiss to the knuckles of his left hand, the Velcro of the wrist brace scraping his cupid’s bow and, when he looks up, Minghao’s expression is completely unreadable.

His gaze is open, but not expectant. It doesn’t search him, but it does understand him. And there’s something behind that look that feels far more serious and deep-seated than they were a minute ago and Mingyu doesn’t get it.

“See you tomorrow.”

Tuesday passes in a blur and for once he’s extremely glad that he’s picked up working all of his weekdays. Otherwise, there’d be absolutely too much time to sit around and do nothing but wait. He thinks it’s odd that Wonwoo makes him promise (twice) that he’ll surely, definitely, and undoubtedly cook for them on Friday, “Won’t it be a lot of work? Can’t we do it on the weekend?”

“No, we have to go to the competition on the weekend.”

“I guess you’re right. I can sleep all weekend, then.”

Wonwoo lets out a frustrated sigh, “You’re going to finals with us.”

“I haven’t been invited.” He’ll humor his coworker.

“You’re- Mingyu, my friend.” He claps his hands together patiently, “You know, after Minghao gathers his nerves, you’ll be invited.” True, he’ll admit he felt like Minghao would invite him one way or another even without knowing if he was allowed to invite guests, “Two tickets,” as if Wonwoo could read his mind, “and one of them is yours.”
“And the other?”

“Do you want me to say it? Seungcheol, of course.” And even though he knew the answer already, he’d never think that hearing Seungcheol’s name would put him at peace. That doesn’t really make sense and it’s a given that he’d go, but to look at it from this new perspective—of sharing mutual attraction with Minghao and feeling even closer to him—means that they fulfill the intimate supportive roles of a parent and a lover- not lover, boyfriend- not boyfriend. Significant other.

“Cool.”

“Cool?”

Mingyu shrugs, “Cool?”

“Wait,” Wonwoo stops him from leaving the breakroom, “did something happen last night?”

“Nope.” He can tell he’s not fooling anyone.

His senior narrows his eyes with scrutiny, “Something happened-”

“What happened?” Seokmin’s bright voice rings into the room as he essentially skips in through the door and hops onto the back of the couch. Good, he can distract Wonwoo and they can go out to lunch and Mingyu doesn’t have to explain himself. Then again, there’s something odd ingrained in that, too, right? He should be happy and excited to tell his closest friend about this new development.

“Nothing, I just made Mingyu put it in writing that he’ll make food for us this Friday.”

“Nice.”

Is it because he doesn’t have a solid answer? He doesn’t have a label or a name. He’s a dog with a new collar but no name tag. If he were to tell Wonwoo about ‘them’, there’s always the smallest, slightest potential for things to fall through and for everything to amount to nothing. Disappointment? Is that it? It’s not stable. It’s not solid. Is it because he’s not entirely comfortable with where they are right now? They’re bridging between friends and labeled relationship—definitely more than friends— but crossing over the potential of the-one-that-got-away.

Despite how nice kissing Minghao feels and despite how warm and right he is in his arms, not labelling it makes him uneasy. It shouldn’t be such a big deal, though, he should share his thoughts with Wonwoo about this situation- “Mingyu!”

“Huh?”

Seokmin laughs, “You’re really out of it today. I was asking where you wanted to go for lunch.”

“Oh- sorry, anywhere is fine.” Maybe he’s also worried about what he’ll lose if they don’t work out.

“Let’s go then.”

He lets his legs carry him out the front door, following Seokmin across the street and into the plaza of restaurants until he realizes that Wonwoo… isn’t there? Where did he go? He whips around to check behind him and again to peek around the corner. The man is usually quiet, so the absence of
his voice didn’t alert him, “Where’s Wonwoo?”

“Wonwoo?” Seokmin turns around to walk backwards, “He told you.” he laughs again, “He had lunch with Soonyoung, so he left. It’s just us- I mean, if you don’t want to eat lunch with me, that’s okay. You can head back, I want a chicken pot pie, so-”

“No, no.” He knows that Seokmin likes to give everyone an out, “Let’s get lunch. Sorry, I’m so,” he doesn’t have a word for it so he just wiggles his fingers by his head. Maybe having lunch with Seokmin and talking to him alone will make him feel better. He could ask his opinion on ‘a hypothetical situation’ and return to lunch with him and Wonwoo without fear of either of them communicating about his relationship status in the future, “My head’s been in a weird place today.” He laughs, trying to keep the mood light.

“Aww, dude, that sucks. What’s on your mind?” he swings open the door to the pie shop, “You don’t have to tell me if you’re not comfortable, but I’m all ears if you need them.”

“Actually,” he steps up to the line, letting Seokmin cut in front of him, “I have this friend.”
Never in this lifetime did he think he’d be sitting with Seokmin Lee at a tiny table in the dead center of The Pie Palace with a little baby-fork and two pies but look at him now.

Seokmin isn’t a quiet guy and he’s had more than enough opportunities to get closer with him, but there’s just something a little off-putting to Mingyu when it comes to people who seem to be happy every waking moment of their lives. Doesn’t his face hurt from smiling so much? Don’t his lungs ache from laughing at everything? However, despite Seokmin’s ineffable and unyielding positive mental attitude, there isn’t an inch of it that Mingyu finds disingenuous. On the surface, he seems like a simple and kind fool—maybe a bit naïve, maybe a bit dimwitted—but he isn’t. Seokmin knows that places like the clinic need all the cheer they can get. It might be one of the biggest reasons why Joshua’s been giving him more and more hours as the weeks pass.

He’s incredibly good at bringing up the mood and is smart about when to cut in. He can diffuse even their most fiery clients and Mingyu’s never seen a patient of his leave without a smile. He also knows when to tone it down, like right now. Admittedly, he’s never had a deep conversation with Seokmin. Thinking back to it, the deepest conversation they’ve ever had was about college debt- no, he takes that back. The deepest conversation they’ve ever had was with Wonwoo when they had discussed the trolley dilemma.

It’s such a ‘Wonwoo question’ and a loaded question too.

Given that they were all strangers and that he’d know nothing about the people on the track, Mingyu had easily picked one over five. He’d gone over this question before, back in high school, and his answer still remains the same. It’s better to let one person go as opposed to five. Wonwoo had nodded at the time and posed the question to Seokmin who was entirely frantic about it. Even the thought of fictional people dying was enough to stress him out and when Wonwoo said ‘no, you can’t sacrifice yourself to save any of them’ he was even more pressed and ultimately didn’t answer them.

Wonwoo explained that he wouldn’t do anything and let the five people die instead of the one because this was an event that was already set to happen. If he saved the five to sacrifice the one, it would make him a murderer and as long as he didn’t touch anything, he wasn’t obligated or responsible—at which point Seokmin had cut him off and called shenanigans, “People are just getting run over in front of me, of course, I’ll feel responsible! The obvious answer is to derail the train by pushing the lever halfway so the wheels get stuck and stop.”

To which Wonwoo had shaken his head and explained that a train going that fast getting derailed would kill most of the people in the front of it and therefore it’d still be murder. They almost got into an argument over that—not like Seokmin would ever fight about anything—and overall it was very telling of their moral characters. It’s not like the sunflower-esque PT could ever imagine hurting someone else nor could he ever contemplate murder. Seokmin is a wholesome fellow who couldn’t hurt a fly even if he tried. Maybe that’s where they’re similar. They’d both probably cry before they ever got into a real fight.

But, now, Mingyu has Minghao to protect him. He wonders if Seokmin has anyone- scratch that, asking Seokmin for advice on romantic relationships might be a terrible idea. Has this guy ever been in one? It might be bad to presume, but most people have entered at least one romantic relationship by this age. Right? Is that fair to say? Do you need to have been in one in order to speak on it? Probably, right? You have to speak from experience for things like this, don’t you? Although, he’s probably worrying for nothing. A guy as nice and friendly as Seokmin has definitely been in a
good, solid relationship before.

“So, your thing about your friend,” he comes to their table with his tray of chicken pot pie, a little slice of cherry pie on the side, and a lovely-smelling earl grey, “What’s up?”

Mingyu’s sitting with a fork-full of shepherd’s pie in his mouth and has to rush to swallow the scalding mashed potato before answering, “Uh, y’know, just friend things.” Where was he going with this? Oh! Right, “He just really likes someone.” Seokmin gives him expectant eyes and a crooked smile, waiting for the rest of the story even though Mingyu just wants to leave it there for feedback. He understands there isn’t much there for feedback. It’s not like he gave Seokmin any context, but wouldn’t it just be easier if he could read his mind and tell him what to do, “And the person he likes, likes him back, like more than he could ever hope.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but he’s- I don’t know, I guess he’s just uncomfortable because the person he likes hasn’t really said they’re official or anything despite, like, confessing their feelings to each other.” He fills his mouth with food in hopes that he’ll sound less stupid and floundering if he’s incapable of talking properly. It doesn’t work.

Seokmin scrapes at the puffed crust of his chicken pot pie before breaking the shell to let some steam out. Mingyu’s definitely getting that the next time he comes here, “That’s a hard one- this isn’t a Wonwoo question, right?”

“No- no. I’m definitely not as cynical as him.”

“Okay,” like Wonwoo, Mingyu can almost hear the cogs in Seokmin’s brain churning and he can hear the scale creak as it weighs answers against other word choices. It’s okay, just tell it like it is, “well, like, what difference does ‘making something official’ make in this relationship? Does it mean something to your friend?”

“Yeah, it means a lot to him. Every relationship up to this point, he’s gone by ‘boyfriend’ and in this one, he’s only- barely referred to as a significant other.” C’mon, Mingyu, don’t get too into it, this isn’t you, this is a friend.

“Do you know about the person he likes then?”

“A bit.”

“Then maybe that person just isn’t comfortable with labels and being referred to as someone’s significant other isn’t a bad thing. In my opinion, it might mean more than being someone’s boyfriend, but what do I know.” He takes a bite, but pants and fans his mouth as it is still molten magma. Seokmin laughs at himself.

Mingyu would like to smile, too, he knows that Seokmin’s trying to bring his mood up and he’d apologize for being such a downer if he wasn’t so focused on soul searching, “But this person has a lot of significant others. My friend is just one of many and I think that’s where he’s caught up.”

He shrugs, “I think you have to ask your friend to take a step back and look at the relationship itself then. Does he get special treatment? Does he get to see parts of this person that no one else gets to see? And—more importantly—this person already said that they like your friend, isn’t that enough? I think being liked by someone is a real honor and your friend is really lucky. He should cherish what he has. I’m sure the other person would understand if he vocalized his concern and desire for a label. I don’t get why he’s so worried.”
“I’m not worried—he’s not worried.”

“Smooth, Mingyu.” Seokmin chuckles, “I’ll pretend I didn’t hear you slip up just now and I’ll pretend that I didn’t know this was about you and Minghao Xu from the beginning. So, continue as you were.”

That slams a foot down on the brakes of Mingyu’s metaphoric train of thought, “How did—”

“I know?”

“Yeah.”

“Jeonghan told me about parts of it—and another friend that you don’t know told me more parts—and I can add things up pretty well. And, I mean, what else do you expect Jeonghan to talk about during lunch outside of friend-circle gossip.” He blows on a new bite, “You didn’t hear it from me though.”

“So, you know Minghao, too?” At this point, it wouldn’t come as a surprise. Minghao has a vast and growing circle of friends and people just seem to appear out of thin air and know him. He knew Wonwoo and didn’t make a fuss about it; Mingyu didn’t know they were acquaintances until weeks later.

“Uh, no, not really, but his name comes up a lot. He’s friends with my friend and his husband, so there’s that, and Jeonghan is seeing his roommate.” *Whoawhoawhoawhoa. Back the fuck up.* What the hell is happening? What the *fuck* is he hearing? Jeonghan is seeing Seungcheol? And Seokmin didn’t say ‘dating’ does that mean they’re just hooking up—no, he’s—what?

Mingyu wheezes.

His brain is officially fried. It’s gone, blown to smithereens by a single sentence uttered by Seokmin Lee, a man he’d never think he’d be having lunch with within the confines of a small pie café across the street from where they coincidentally work part-time.

And he’d never thought he’d be saying this, but where’s Wonwoo Jeon when he needs him?

“Are you okay?”

“I’m,” *is he* okay? “okay.”

“Sorry, I should have probably eased into that one. I’ve known for a while, but I didn’t think it was any of my business.” He scratches behind his ear, sheepish smile on full display, “And it seemed like you really didn’t like talking about it with me around.” Ah, sweet, innocent, pure Seokmin, why do you have to get tangled up with people like this? “I hope you don’t get mad at anyone, they haven’t said anything bad about it and—believe it or not—I think a lot of people are cheering you guys on.”

“Cheering us on?”

“Yeah, to make something of it.”

“Make something of it.”

“Are you just going to repeat everything I say?” he laughs a laugh that brightens up the room and infringes upon the cloud hanging over Mingyu’s head. “And I know it’s not really my part to say since I don’t know you or Minghao that well, but no one’s really brought up what you—‘your friend’
asked about. In all honesty, I know that feeling.” His smile drops after his last bite of pie and for a
moment, Mingyu isn’t sure if he’s upset about running out of food or if Seokmin can actually be sad
about something. Up until now, his personality had been almost two-dimensional to him; happy or
less happy, always earnest, always friendly, “It kind of hurts when you don’t know what you are to
someone, right? And sometimes you doubt yourself and you feel insecure,” He jabs the fork into a
soft maraschino cherry and pops it into his mouth, “but you should… you should talk about it if it
bugs you. It’s really not every day that you meet someone that can mean so much to you and it’d be
a shame for something so good to go to waste if you stew over something that bugs you especially if
he doesn’t know that it bugs you.” he clears his throat, “Of course, that’s just my two cents. You
don’t have to listen to me. My relationships and yours are probably different and, again, I don’t know
you that well, but something in you has changed since I’ve known you. I wouldn’t say that you’re
happier or livelier, but,” he squints, “maybe that you’re more colorful. Does that make sense?”

“I don’t know, am I?”

Seokmin shrugs, “To me, you are. Like, there’s just a bit more vibrancy in you, it’s hard to put
into words, but you know how pregnant people have ‘that glow’, when you’re in love you kinda get
‘that glow’ too.”

“Great, I’m glowing like I’m pregnant.”

He bursts into laughter and smacks Mingyu on the shoulder playfully, “No, it’s different.
Being in love makes you glow a different way. Cherish it, hold it close to your heart, and
communicate. You have to talk things out, even if they’re things that bug you. Those are hard
conversations to have, but because you’re both mature-ish adults, you should sit down and talk them
out. Miscommunications drive a lot of relationships into the ground, even the ones that aren’t
romantic.”

“What if he doesn’t want to say ‘boyfriend’ because that’s, like, commitment or something?”

“Mingyu.” Seokmin rolls his eyes and beams at him, “I don’t even know Minghao and I can
tell you that that man’s only problem with commitment is that he gets too committed. Just talk to
him.”

“What am I supposed to say?” he makes an effort to not be so glum and crack a smile like he
cracks into his apple empanada; very crisp, tan and toasty, a little dry on the pastry, but the cinnamon
is in good balance with the apple filling, “I want to be your boyfriend, so call me your boyfriend?
That’s just awkward.”

“Well, when you phrase it like that I’m not sure what you’re expecting.” He chuckles again,
“But love can be simple, Mingyu. Have you ever considered that Minghao might not want to call
you his boyfriend because ‘boyfriend’ can’t describe you? Maybe he thinks more of you than that!”

“Isn’t that a little too optimistic?”

Seokmin shrugs, “He told you he likes you and he’s been wearing that bracelet thing and he’s
been plant hunting and keeping his roommate up just to have late-night chats about you. I’d say he’s
quite smitten.”

“Yeah, but-”

“Wake up, Mingyu. Just let things happen! Talk about your feelings. Live life to its fullest.
And don’t let this one get away!”
“How did you know I had a one-that-got-away?”

“I didn’t.” Seokmin’s laugh is contagious. Talking about ones-that-got-away should be sad, right? It should be concerning and serious, but Mingyu just doesn’t have room to feel bad or upset about anything, “I told you, I’ve been there. The way you talk about Minghao just makes me think that you’ve loved and lost before. It’s why you’re so guarded about this whole label thing, right? I’m the same way. So, now that you’ve got Minghao, you have to compromise on it.”

Despite the premise of a serious conversation with Minghao in the heat of his battle with a daunting competition and constant studio stress, Mingyu feels oddly at peace again. He’ll have to thank Seokmin for that and make him a cherry pie for the small Friendsgiving feast on Friday, but until then he’ll just have to settle for opening doors for him and keeping Wonwoo from asking pressing, loaded questions ‘for fun’.

If anything, if there’s one person that Mingyu wants to share Minghao with, it’s Seokmin. He feels like they’ll get along well for some reason despite having very different personalities. He wants to introduce them even if Minghao already has enough sunshine-filled friends; Seunghoon and Seungkwan probably make up enough bright light for one person. In some fantastical alternate reality, Mingyu would like to gather all his friends up and have them all meet and get along and then they could all be friends with each other and- *let a man dream*, okay?

He will talk with Minghao.

It goes unsaid, but he can read between the lines.

While Seokmin is all smiles and good-feels on the surface, at one point during their conversation, there was pain knitted into his words. He’s been hurt before. He didn’t have to say it, but he can feel it. He doesn’t want Mingyu to make the same mistake. He doesn’t want something so good to go to waste. He doesn’t want to see something crumble and disappear because he didn’t mend the little cracks and faults while he could.

Stability is one thing. Stability is one thing, but it doesn’t always have to be in the same place. Words can find new meaning if someone shares their viewpoint. Love is a conversation, it’s communication. Wonwoo said it’s inconvenient, but that’s only because it poses obstacles that make you stronger in the end; an uphill battle of wits and support.

Minghao’s whole life has been a battle. He’s fought for everything he has; every trophy, every dollar, every title. One conversation—one *little* conversation—won’t end the world.

He doesn’t know why he was so worried. Maybe he just needed to hear it from an outside source that’s unbiased—again, thank you, Seokmin—because friends tend to sugarcoat things when they know it makes you happy. Of course, Seokmin wants him happy—Seokmin wants everyone happy—but it’s just nice to hear it from him for some reason. It’s silly, right? He’s acting like a teenager who’s never dated before, the kind that needs a friend to ask a friend to ask a friend of a friend to ask for him.

That’s fear, right? He’s scared of the outcome and is trying to distance himself from it. He’s scared that Minghao will say no and that it will be a commitment thing or something like that, but when he really looks at them, when he really looks at him, he knows that won’t happen.

Minghao’s always ready to listen to his input whether it’s about movie cinematography or dog food, the absurd price of ripped jeans or the proper way to install toilet paper—over, not under—he always respected his opinion and never made him feel like less of a person if they disagreed. They always shared their viewpoints and they sometimes changed each other’s minds, but they usually
upheld their own beliefs with a new understanding and respect for opposing views—for the last time, though, you have to roll your toothpaste, not just squeeze it out, you *heathen*. You very cute, very soft, very sweet, very determined, very strong, very admirable, very precious *heathen*.

He’d never asked or talked about something like this, though, but how much difference is there between ‘why can’t you call me boyfriend’ and ‘you need to pronounce the L in almond’?
Chapter 106

Wonwoo stops him when they pass in the hallway. It isn’t a forceful stop or an aggressive stop, in fact, it’s quite the opposite. The older man simply gives him a few strong pats on the chest and sneakily sneers with his Cheshire grin.

“Ow- ow. What was that for?” He just wanted to clock out and go home and aimlessly clean his apartment until Minghao came over. His sheets are also due for a washing. The washing of bedding happens twice a month and because it’s almost the end of the month, he’s overdue. He’s ready to try that new all-natural detergent he bought; it smells like strawberries.

He shakes his head and hits Mingyu again, shaking him.

“Wonwoo, words, please.”

He covers his mouth to hide his wide smile and shakes a finger in Mingyu’s face, tutting and pushing him back down the hallway, away from the lobby and away from Joshua and Jeonghan who are supposed to be going over patient files but are spending their time flicking paper footballs instead. Mingyu just has to endure the excited hands alone, “So, Minghao forgot his jacket this morning.”

The first thing that comes to mind is that Minghao must’ve been freezing because it was in the high 30’s this morning and it was windy and overcast. He hopes that he’s warmed up since and had something hot to eat for lunch.

The second thing that comes to mind answers the question about all the slapping and giddy behavior of the man huddled next to him. No neck coverage. But that should be alright since the marks weren’t that obvious against his skin, especially in dark or dim lighting. They should have faded by now.

Knowing Wonwoo and Soonyoung, this could just be a hunch. That’s right, this love-struck and clumsy hominid can learn from his mistakes. This is totally just a shot in the dark from them, he doesn’t have to confirm their suspicions, “Okay? I hope he’s not an icicle?”

Wonwoo’s smile wavers ever so slightly, but he regains his cool immediately. This man could win an Oscar, “Do you have anything to do with it?”

“What, the missing jacket? No.”

“He didn’t leave it on your bedroom floor or anything?”

“Wonwoo! There are patients here.”

“Yeah, Mrs. Guthrie who is eighty-five and would cross the street in front of a blaring firetruck.” That’s actually close to the reason why she’s here for therapy; it was actually a guy on a pizza delivery scooter, “So, did you two,” he gestures with wiggly fingers in the air—short of jazz hands, close to creepy crawlies—and raises his eyebrows.

“No.” Mingyu stands firm, facts only, “We had dinner and I sent him off like normal.”

“No heated smoothies?”

Oh god, he really wants verification on this, doesn’t he. And you know what, here goes nothing, “We kissed, so what.” Yeah, that’s right Mingyu Kim, you tell him that you smooched your
significant other right on his lovely, soft lips. Be proud that you kissed him. Be proud that you’re his.

Wonwoo lets out a happy cheer and claps his hands together once, “Ah-ha, so you did. Soon thought he caught something last night but had his doubts until he asked today.”

“What did Minghao say?”

“Surprisingly, he said that you made out and that it was nice. Soonyoung was suspicious that answer was so frank, so he thought Hao was lying so he’d be left alone. He’s exaggerated before, but it’s good that you’re both- yeah.”

“Wait, what has he exaggerated on?” Wonwoo shrugs, brushing Mingyu off—probably for his own good—and dismisses himself to attend to his next appointment after pointing a frantic finger at his wristwatch and dashing off with long strides. What a weirdo. Why are they friends again? Oh, right, Mingyu’s smiling, that’s why.

Mingyu’s staring intently at his laundry machine, waiting for the dryer to spit out his duvet when Minghao knocks. His heart beats as fast as it normally does when the man at the door enters his presence, but something is different. His gait is terrible.

“Hi, I’m in a bunch of pain and I need to ask you for a favor,” wasn’t how Mingyu thought tonight would go. What happened to picking up where they left off? What happened to lips, lips, kissy face, heart, heart, confetti? Admittedly, though, he could care a lot less about making out with how sorely Minghao’s holding his back and favoring his good leg. Happiness first, safety first, making out second, “Can I come in, or?”

Mingyu wants him off his feet, “Can I pick you up?”

“No.” Minghao scoots by him, kicks off his colorful shoes, and drops his thick jacket onto the couch. Looks like he went home and got one. He follows the coat onto the couch and lets out a deep sigh when he lays down on it. His spine must be thanking him, “Don’t worry. I’m not super sweaty. I hosed off in the bathroom at work.”

A sweaty Minghao lounged on his furniture is the least of his concerns, “That’s not what I’m worried about.” Mingyu leans over the back of the couch to look down at his shut eyes. Oh, wow, those are some deep, dark circles under his eyelids. The bit of stubble says that he hasn’t shaved. His hair is up in a beanie, but the bits that poke out are a little damp and clumped together. So, he is telling the truth, he came straight from practice today too, “What’s the favor?”

“It’s sorta from Jun.”

“I’m not being his date again.”

Minghao groans when he sits up and heaves his legs off the armrest. He eagerly takes a seat next to him, “So, those IOUs.”

“How many-”

“This is his last, don’t worry.” He rubs his tired eyes.

“Why doesn’t he just text me?”

“Would you let me finish?” Minghao straightens Mingyu out before lying down again, this
time with his head on his lap. He pulls his left arm over his chest like the world’s most inefficient blanket and rests his hand over his… heart, “Tomorrow is Jihoon’s birthday and he wants me to help him make a cake. I okayed this plan a few weeks ago before all this hoopla, but I forgot about it until he came up to me today and was like ‘how’s that cake plan going? Am I coming over tonight or what?’ and I almost cried—Mingyu, my feet hurt much.” He whines, “And Jun said I didn’t have to follow up on it and he could just go buy Jihoon a cake or toss one of those box mixes in the oven, but, dammit, I made a promise.” He jabs a pointed finger up into the air.

Mingyu gently folds his raised hand back down, “Yeah, no worries, I can make the cake.”

“What, no. I don’t need you to make the cake. I promised that I would help make the cake. I’m not going to ask you to- yeah, no, Mingyu. You already got swindled into cooking for all your coworkers, I’m not going to ask you to bake a cake this late, especially when you have work tomorrow.”

“But you’re going to stay up late and bake a cake?”

“No, look, here’s the plan since Jihoon’s blood is 80% coffee; icebox tiramisu. Ladyfingers, espresso, mascarpone, whipped cream,” the way he’s stacking his hands in the air and motioning towards all the steps is incredibly adorable, “whack it in the fridge overnight, cocoa powder the day of. Bam. Done. No bake, no sweat.”

“Solid plan, but what did you need me for?” he idly picks at the lint on the beanie and tucks stray strands of hair under the knitted rim. Unfortunately, it looks like Minghao’s wrist is still out of commission. The brace is pressing sharp but shallow grooves into the back of his hand as he rests his on top, holding it flush against his chest.

The blond blinks a few times and looks up at him, “After we eat, can I give you money to buy the ingredients while I go back to practice? I can take care of the biscuits since the bakery by the studio usually has them.” Oh, that’s simple and easy and Mingyu can do that. This is much better than being Jun’s date again. Saving Minghao an hour of errands and all the unnecessary walking is something he’d do even without the favor card being played, “And favor part two, can you drop the ingredients off at the studio? You can just leave it at the front desk with Yixing if you’re not comfortable coming in or you can text me and I’ll come out to get it.”

“Chan still salty about me?”

“No, we talked.” Minghao’s good at talks, “We have to talk stuff like that out. It’s the only way we can keep functioning as a team and he understands that. Sure, he’s still not thrilled, but he’s not mad anymore and I have a little wiggle room tonight because he has work.”

“Yeah, I can drop off the goods,” Minghao hooks their fingers together, “if you’ll be good while I make dinner.”

He nods sleepily, sitting up again and closing his eyes for a few moments before gesturing towards the kitchen, “What are we having tonight?”

“Should I just make something easy?” He does have slightly more ingredients now since he dropped by the supermarket after work. He’s got veggies and meats packed away neatly in the fridge and some stock from a local deli, “Stew okay with you?” He leaves Minghao on the couch, hoping that he’ll take the hint and stay there like a good boy. He’s hurting and he should stay p- he’s totally clinging on to Mingyu’s back and waddling in step behind him, isn’t he.

“Anything is fine.”
Back to corner duties for another night, not that Mingyu would ever complain about something that feels so nice. A little more than Minghao’s arms feel right around him, it feels good to be relied upon. Even superficially, it means that Minghao trusts that Mingyu’s strong enough to support this fraction of his weight, trusts that Mingyu won’t swing around too fast and set him off balance, trusts that Mingyu doesn’t step back onto his feet.

Minghao seeks him out when he wants to rest—and maybe not only that—, when he wants to heal.

A warm kiss is pressed into his shoulder from behind, “How was your day?”

That’s heartachingly domestic, “It was pretty good.” He fishes ingredients out of the fridge, “Had a long chat with a coworker and told Wonwoo that I kissed you.”

“Bragging, are we?” Every time Minghao speaks, it sends a small vibration through his bones akin to a cat purring and he—jokingly—can feel it, feel the little wounds and scars of his tired heart being stitched and mended one at a time; slowly and carefully by the long, slender fingers linked at his midsection.

“Yep.” He starts chopping a few veggies, a little surprised that Minghao hasn’t moved to help—not that he would let him without a fight. He would much rather he sit back and relax for just a bit, “And he said you told Soonyoung something, too.”

“Did I?” he perks up, removing his mouth from where it was flush against Mingyu. The surprise in his voice says that he forgot.

“So sleepy-headed you don’t remember that you told Soon we made out?” he sets his knife down and turns to face him, letting Minghao pin him to the counter. He cocks his head to the side, like a dog learning about curious noises, and briefly does that signature pout. His brow furrows as he tries to recollect his words, “How many hours did you get last night?”

He just shakes his head, taking the blade from Mingyu’s hand and throwing off the wrist brace to continue chopping, bumping him out of the way with a kick of his hip. He knows that he instantly regrets it when he stumbles and sucks in a breath to flex those muscles as the pain subsides. Mingyu can already assume that it wasn’t enough hours, but without arguing he lets the blond continue chopping to his heart’s content, handing him a daikon as he tends to the onion and carrot already on the stove, dropping in the ingredients his sous chef has finished dicing up.

After a few chops, he hears the knife scrape against the bench and a hiss. He turns just as Minghao skirts by him to get to the sink and run his hand and the knife under the water, “You good?” He’s so tired that his eyes can’t even focus properly on the cutting board. Sure, daikon is a little slippery, but he already cut it in half to have a flat work surface.

“Can I have a Band-Aid?”

“How bad is it?” Mingyu is already digging for the first-aid box above the fridge. Regretfully, he only has metallic bandages that he bought back when flash tattoos made a comeback two years ago. Neosporin first, he takes Minghao’s hand and dries off the cut on the tip of his ring finger.

“I’m fine, it’s not that bad.” He glances over at the cutting board, luckily there’s no blood on the food or the bench, just the knife, “Sorry.”

He knows that Minghao doesn’t like gold or bronze, so he wraps a pearlescent silver bandage around his finger and throws the wrapper away, “Don’t apologize,” and presses a kiss to the owie
like it’s a given, “but maybe you should step away from sharp pointy things.” Mingyu moves the knife into the drying rack and away from him, pulling Minghao over to the stove instead and handing him the wooden spoon, “Actually,” he redacts the spoon, “go sit.”

“No,” he takes the spoon back, “I can stir.”

Stubborn, as usual.

This random jjigae he’s thrown together contains a bit of pork belly, but it isn’t so fatty that it’ll feel heavy. It’s a good ratio and when it accompanies rice, it really hits the spot on a cold night like this. Minghao handles Korean spices well, even adding a little more pepper powder to his serving before sitting across from Mingyu at the dinner table, “It’s different from Chinese chilis that numb your mouth. Proportionate amount of pain, though.”

“One time, I got a banh mi with a bird’s eye chili in it and I cried.” It was an honest miscommunication. He said he’d like more chili sauce, the sweet and hot stuff, but the granny probably didn’t hear him.

“You would.” Minghao takes a bite, “I used to work in a kitchen with this old shifu from Laos and he popped those things like grapes. It was insane. He also ate raw ginger like apples, so I’m pretty sure his taste buds are just nonexistent.”

“But why?”

“For health, Mingyu. Never question old Asian people and their homebrews, okay?” Minghao laughs, “Man, there were a lot of weird things that happened in that kitchen.”

“Is that where you learned how to cook?”

He shakes his head, “Nah, I was mostly on prep because I was young. They didn’t want me tossing that wok around.”

“When did you even have time to work? You left town for college.”

“Oh, I worked in high school. My mom got me a job where she worked, so I’d sometimes work weekends and Fridays if they were short staffed.” Impressive. He worked through high school, “I took up as many hours as I could outside of practice and homework just to get out of town for college, but look where I am now.” A little disheartening but understandable. Mingyu got out of town, too, for different reasons, but admitting defeat and returning to their little city-town was difficult for a short time, “But work landed me back here, so I can’t complain. I’m making money and having fun. I still get to see the world and meet people and dance.” He twirls his metal spoon in the remaining soup, eyes cast down into it, “And I got to meet you, so,” the sentence dies on his lips just as Mingyu’s eyes snap up to him.

“So, now you regret it even more?” he’s sarcastic and it makes Minghao chuckle, still not looking up at him. There’s something a little unsettling about how much thinking he’s doing, like he’s reviewing and reliving memories—good and bad—just to weigh Mingyu against all the struggles of the last decade, maybe even longer.

He nods to himself and eats another bite, chewing slowly before swallowing, finishing his meal. Setting his hands down on the table, the bracelet on his right wrist taps softly against the wood when he plucks at it. He finally meets eyes with him.
“You’ve made it worthwhile.”
Chapter 107

The clock reaches 7:30 just a little too soon. He barely has time to throw the dishes in the sink before Minghao mumbles something about needing to go. It took so much convincing to get him to stay seated at the table instead of helping with dishes, but he’ll leave them for now because he’s going to use the time he has left to say goodbye and solidify this cake plan.

However, Minghao’s already stretching out his legs and preparing to stand. He can’t just stand. Legs, waist, arms; they’re all sore and aching. It’s not like the satisfying good ache you get after you’ve worked out and PR’d. This is an ache that comes when you’ve pushed your body to its limits and haven’t let it rest properly. On the bright side, his knee hasn’t gotten any worse. On the real side, it’s because the rest of his body is sustaining the injury in order for it to heal as well as it can.

As he irons out his muscles with his hands and gets out of the chair, Mingyu swoops him up in his arms—a king’s feet should never touch the ground—and Minghao flails for just a moment before laughing and wrapping his arms around him. He presses his forehead to Mingyu’s neck with lazy giggles. This is different from that time he picked up Minghao at the banquet. He’s much more comfortable in the privacy of Mingyu’s apartment and he’s not asking to be put down, but the most notable thing—despite the sparkling laughter and sloth arms—is that Minghao is a little lighter. Just barely. It can be attributed to his dressed-down outfit, but he knows that the man hasn’t been eating regularly or sleeping enough.

“What does that face mean?” shouldn’t he be the one asking.

Optimistically, maybe Mingyu’s just stronger, “What face?”

“That one. You’re thinking about something.” Minghao reaches up and flicks his bangs to the side, making his nose scrunch up when the brown locks jab into his eye, “Also, you can put me down. I need to go.”

Mingyu swings him back and forth. Yes, it’s difficult. Minghao’s not light by any means, he’s just lighter, “Don’t wanna.”

“You gotta.” He says even though his grip tightens, “I’ll get in trouble.”

You might think that it’s easy for Minghao to get his way when he puts things like that and you’re absolutely right. Mingyu sets him down immediately and very carefully only to dive back into his arms and kiss him, hands hooking behind his thighs to hoist him onto the table before they slide over his worn jeans, “You seem like the type that gets into trouble often.”

Minghao hums against his lips, smiling before pushing him off with gummy and languid movements like his body is already falling asleep, “Trouble seeks me out sometimes,” and he plants one last soft kiss on Mingyu’s forehead, “but I really have to go.”

He wonders if it’ll feel like this when he sends Minghao off in the future. Wonwoo has mentioned that the hardest part about long distance is saying goodbye at the airport or at the Bart station, when Soonyoung drags a luggage behind him or when his taxi driver ushers him to leave before the traffic swallows them up. So, cherishing the time they have together is important. Other things can be put on hold, but Mingyu’s dryer honking loudly in the background is enough to put punctuation to things.
His dancer slides off the table and slips his shoes on, supporting his weight on the wall as he bends to tuck his ankles in. Seems like he already knew that Mingyu would have agreed to his favor because he has a short shopping list already jotted down in his wallet. He pulls it out along with $25 and hands it to him, “If it’s more than that, just tell me and I’ll pay you back later.” This is silly. Mingyu can just pay with his card and have Minghao Venmo him the balance later. Who even uses cash these days?

Slipping out the door in a hurry, before Mingyu can shove the bills back into his hand, Minghao vanishes into the night and back to his car across the street, speeding off and away before he has a chance to miss him. What a very Asian thing to do.

It’s a short list of obvious ingredients. All stuff he can get at the market down the street. They’ll be open for another two hours, so he has plenty of time.

He doesn’t remember the last time he made a tiramisu, but he does remember it tasting very good despite not holding its form and turning into something that resembled Cozy Shack pudding. He’ll head out after this dryer cycle is finished. He really ought to invest in a new dryer because this one takes at least three hours to dry his comforter completely. In the summer, he tends to hang things out to dry just to be a little more eco-friendly and because the sunlight from the big window in the back of his living room can dry his shirts while he’s at work. But it’s the dead of winter and a goose-down comforter won’t dry in anything less than forever-

‘You forgot your jacket.’ He texts Minghao after sending him a bathroom mirror selfie of himself in said oversized, thick jacket. Is putting his foot up on the counter and throwing deuces necessary? No, but the cut and fit of the jacket make him look like he’s about to drop the hottest hip-hop album of the century.

While he waits for a response, he throws the coat into the dryer with his comforter after checking that it’s machine safe. How unfortunate would it be if it was a name-brand jacket he just casually destroyed it in his laundry? Very. Ping. Soonyoung, ‘If u could kepe ur tinder pics t o urself thatd be great, u nerd.’ Wow, rude.

‘Wow, rude.’

Ping. Minghao, ‘Sorry, can you drop it off later?’ Of course, he can. He’s dropping off the ingredients anyway, ‘Or you can keep it. You look nice. :)’

Wow, rude, who told you to be so rude, Minghao? You can’t just send emojis willy-nilly, you fool. They mess with Mingyu’s heart, ‘I’ll bring it when I swing by.’ and because he likes playing, ‘Operation tiramis-hoon, commence!’

‘Good luck, operative weenie.’

‘Good luck, secret agent gyugyu. The fate of this cake is counting on you!’ he has to doublecheck that the first text in from Soonyoung and not Minghao because he wouldn’t put it past him to call him a weenie. Secret Agent GyuGyu makes him sound like a superhero from a toddler’s TV show. He can be Minghao’s hero, right?

Mingyu shakes the naïve thought from his head as he attends to the dryer and throws the comforter on the couch. Minghao doesn’t need a hero. He replaces it with the pillowcases and bed sheet and chucks in a couple scented dryer sheets. Minghao is the hero. He’s the protagonist who overcomes every force that’s posed against him. No, Mingyu’s not the hero by any means.
He grabs his keys and the small grocery list is shuffled into his wallet before he heads out.

The hero has always been Minghao.

When he arrives at the studio a little after 9, Yixing is at the front desk to greet him, “Mingyu, right? Sorry, I’m so bad with names these days.” Why does he talk like he’s 80 when he’s barely in his 30’s? He nods, “And are you here for Minghao or Junhui?”

“Both.”

“Oh, both!”

He sincerely hopes that the studio owner doesn’t take it the wrong way, “Yeah, just dropping off some secret cake supplies for Jihoon’s birthday.”

Yixing drops (re: slams) his pen down onto the desk, “It’s Jihoon’s birthday?” Mingyu tries his best to shush the excitable man, explaining that the birthday is tomorrow and that they’re trying to make him a cake. Maybe Jihoon’s like Minghao and keeps his birthday very lowkey and under wraps so no one makes any grand gestures like this. Luckily, Yixing seems to catch on pretty quickly—despite his dumbfounded expression—and leaves to call the two into the lobby. Mingyu jumps when he starts yelling, “Yes! Yes, a new project for you two! I need to talk to you immediately! Just really quick! Wow, so awesome, a great opportunity, yes!” and herds Minghao and Jun into the lobby, giving Mingyu two thumbs up before dashing out of sight—supposedly to keep an eye on the others in A3 without raising suspicion.

“Is he always-”

“Yep.” Jun comes forward first to thank him. Mingyu hands over the little canvas tote. It might look a little more obvious than a plastic bag, but at least it’ll keep the contents hidden from immediate discovery, “It’s why we don’t let him in on plans like this. Yixing absolutely can’t lie.”

“Oh, and change.” He rummages in his pocket to hand over the remaining $4.13. It would have gone over with the amount of espresso he asked for, but Mingyu had some points leftover on his Starbucks card and he’s not going to have Minghao compensate him for that in dollars. “And, jacket.” He shrugs off the black coat and tosses it over his shoulders, wrapping him up tightly despite the thin coat of sweat already covering him.

“Seriously?” Jun laughs and shakes his head, “I was wondering where you’d left that thing.”

He hopes that Jun doesn’t get the wrong idea either, “Thanks.” Minghao’s nose wiggles just slightly when he sniffs the air, “Did you wash it?”

“Nope, just the dryer.”

“It smells nice.”

Jun rolls his eyes and pretends to gag as he moves the mysterious bag of groceries into the breakroom fridge, “Thanks, Gyu.”

“Welcome!” Minghao shoves him for shouting. The others aren’t supposed to know that he’s here, “Sorry, sorry.” He takes his hands, noticing the absence of the prickly wrist brace he’d gotten used to feeling over the last couple days, “How much longer is practice?”
“Like, three hours give or take.”

“Alright, then I’ll let you go.” Jun rounds the corner again, beckoning for Minghao to return to practice.

“Sleep well.” He gives Mingyu’s hand a squeeze, stopping him before he turns to leave, “What, no kiss goodbye?”

In front of Jun and Yixing? “Are you okay with me kissing you here?” Minghao nods eagerly, shutting his eyes before Mingyu can give his reaction.

Well, if Minghao says it’s okay, then he has nothing to lose. If they’re going to continue down this path, then they’ll cross this bridge eventually, right? Might as well get one best friend and his boss out of the way now. Wait, that’s not how he wants to phrase it. It sounds so negative when he thinks of it like that. What he wants to express is that making a relationship—whatever their relationship is—public is often a big step and it should be a little special. So, to Mingyu, Minghao’s saying that he’s comfortable with Jun knowing. He’s comfortable with introducing Mingyu as… his… to Jun.

Goodbye kisses are usually very deep and touchy-feely with Mingyu, but with Minghao it feels more appropriate to keep them chaste; short and sweet. PDA isn’t a priority on his list. He doesn’t like making out in front of crowds or in public places (at least not when he’s sober) and he knows that Minghao’s not very comfortable with that either, so keeping it brief is absolutely fine. And even though it is short—unmistakably—it doesn’t lack any feeling. Every lingering touch, every fraction of every moment says ‘I’ll see you soon’.

“Rest well, Mingyu.”

“Good luck with the cake.” He kisses the knuckles of his left hand before turning to leave.

It’s just tiramisu. What could go wrong?
‘Hey, are you still up?’ Mingyu towels off his hair and wipes the steam off his phone, pausing the upbeat track that he was scream-singing to in the shower just minutes ago, Jun?

‘Yes? What’s up? Is everything okay?’

‘Do you have an oven?’

‘I’m waiting for the punchline.’ In the past few weeks, he’s barely texted Jun and when he does it’s always some dry pun or a casual check-in; a ‘how was your day’ or a ‘is your fridge running’.

‘Can we come over to bake? Promise to be quiet.’

That’s so random and honestly, Mingyu doesn’t really want company right this moment. He’s already cleaned up and made his bed. If he hops in right now, it could still be toasty and warm. Besides, weren’t they supposed to buy cookies after practice? He could have just picked up a box of ladyfingers at the grocery store when he bought the rest of the ingredients. Why did they wait until now to second guess buying the fresh stuff? Cookies like that are better used day-old at least, ‘I mean, sure?’

He’s a weak-willed man.

‘Cool. I’ll convince Minghao and be over in a bit.’

‘Just got out of the shower, I need to get dressed. Take your time.’

‘I’ll hurry him along then ;)’ Is that winky face really necessary, Junhui Wen? Is it really necessary?

It’s already well past 12, closer to 1. He’d spent the last couple hours watching Netflix, clipping his plants, and paying bills; a standard night for a very bored Mingyu who knows he can’t sleep well anyway so why bother sleeping enough to start with. He ought to get a pet or something, anything to make his apartment feel a little less empty and his idle time a little more occupied-that doesn’t mean he wants people to come over. No, he’s in his pajamas and he’s ready to curl up in his fresh baked cavern of coziness. It’s only one door away, but no Jun needs to use his oven.

Oh well.

It’s a once-a-year thing at best and he already agreed. Ugh, he already agreed. Can’t they come over in the morning before work? Now, he has to see Minghao again and that’s not supposed to be a bad thing, but then he really just won’t want to stop touching him and hugging him and kissing him because he’ll be here and this apartment has been a private place for them both for the last month or so. In the last couple days, it’s turned into the only place that has heard of them as an item- well, no, Jun knows now—he was really grossed out, but he knows—and he’s sure that he’s nothing but supportive of his best friend’s endeavors in the realm of romance, but still. These are a lot of big steps in quick succession and Mingyu doesn’t really know how to feel about it.

At 1, two cars pull up to his building. That’s probably smart; they’ll make the cake here and part ways since it’s already so late and driving back and forth between homes would be a waste of
Jun comes into view first, a bag of ingredients in one hand while the other is dragging Minghao by his good wrist up to Mingyu’s door. The taller of the two is still in the clothes he was wearing earlier at the studio, but Minghao has since showered and his hair still has little droplets of water pebbling at the tips. Isn’t he cold? Old black t-shirt and navy plaid pajama bottoms, for some reason, Mingyu had imagined him to wear something a little *cuter* to bed. Maybe something with stripes or polka dots, pastel and soft and oversized and not something so similar to what he’s wearing. It’s not his fault his normal pajama button-up was lost somewhere in the laundry. He could only find the navy-blue bottoms and is wearing—you guessed it—a black shirt.

“Seriously?” Jun remarks after giving him a once over and glancing over his shoulder at Minghao’s getup. He sees now that the blond is no longer wearing his wrist brace, probably forgetting it at home where his bed is (where he should be nicely tucked in), “Anyways, can we please bake? It’ll take, like, thirty minutes max.” He somehow doubts that, but steps aside to let the two in. There’s so much hesitation in Minghao’s legs that he’s worried Jun might hurt his other wrist if he keeps tugging like that.

“So, what’s the story? Don’t you both have ovens?” Minghao and Seungcheol’s kitchen was fully outfitted, oven and all, and he’s pretty sure that Jun has his own.

“Sorry.” Minghao rubs his eyes and shakes the sleep from his head before combing his hair back with his hand and pushing Jun into the kitchen, “Jun’s oven has been broken for months since he never uses it and ours picked a really bad time to give up—”

“There was a fire and everything!”

“Are you okay?”

“We’re fine.” He fishes out the sheet pans from the island cabinet and preheats the oven with a few quick pokes, but groans when it doesn’t listen to him, “I don’t know what happened, but it kept severely overheating. Turning it on would just crank it up to 500 for no reason, so I had to wake the roomie up and the three of us pulled it out and unplugged it, but we had to open up the junction box and shut off the power, but we didn’t know it was connected to the neighbor’s power due to some faulty wiring when they built the place and so we got a complaint while we’re trying to unhook this stupid oven in the dark and Jun dropped the flashlight on my foot and Cheol hit me with the oven door and—”

“It’s just Minghao’s bad luck making a grand comeback.” Jun laughs and sways him around a bit, trying to knock the bad mood out of him with a few firm pats on his back. Minghao glares and shoves a mixing bowl and wooden spoon at him before giving up on the oven with a firm smack.

“It’s a *new* oven, too. At least we got the warranty on it, but what are the odds that, one, the bakery was open tonight but *ran out* of fucking ladyfingers and, two, that an oven that has worked perfectly fine for the last few months decides to crap all over these cookies? Shitty odds, that’s what.” He grumbles and rummages for measuring cups and spoons. It’s a good thing that Mingyu is a man of method and organization because everything is where it’s always been and even though Minghao hasn’t had to use some of those items, they’re in the same places that they always are when he puts away silverware or washed pots.

“Sounds like it’s been a long night.” Mingyu comes over to set the oven properly, 350 seems about right, “You can use the stand mixer.”

“It’ll be noisy.”
“It’s not that noisy.”

“It’ll be noisy when we try to clean it up.” He yawns.

“Yeah, sorry for the last-minute intrusion, but I don’t know anyone else with a reliable oven.” The black-haired man cracks three eggs into the mixing bowl as Minghao puts a pot of water on the stove, checking his phone for instructions periodically. “You can go to bed though. We’ll be out of your hair asap.”

“It’s okay.” Mingyu picks up one of the clean handkerchief napkins from a drawer and rubs it into Minghao’s hair. It looks like Jun really did try his best to hurry him along, the collar of his shirt is damp, “I’m awake, just use the stand mixer, it’s a lot faster and you’ll need to whisk anyway.”

After getting out his trusty KitchenAid and setting it up with a whisk attachment, he trails behind Minghao with the cloth as he patters across the kitchen to gather a few more supplies, “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I probably couldn’t sleep anyways.”

“We should have just gone to Soon’s place.” He drops his shoulders and looks at Jun. Mingyu thinks he took the comment the wrong way. Even without guests over, he would have tossed and turned for at least two hours before losing consciousness.

“Minghao, their oven is cursed.” He stirs together eggs, sugar, and a pinch of salt, “I’m not going to risk it. And Wonwoo said that Mingyu bakes all the time, so his oven is more reliable.”

“I don’t even know what kind of logic that is.” He shakes his head free of Mingyu’s hands and scurries back over to Jun’s side to move the bowl over the pot of boiling water, “Mingyu ate a pizza from that oven and he’s still alive.”

It was an edible take-and-bake pizza, but he does remember Soonyoung’s ‘cookies’ and shudders. Those burnt hockey pucks should have never seen the light of day, “Chill, it’s fine. I’m all for supporting Jun in his efforts to woo Jihoon.” He puts his hand on Minghao’s waist but the latter takes it as a cue to sidestep and leave the mixing to him in order to line the baking sheets with parchment paper and give Jun instructions on how to sift properly.

Surprisingly, tonight Minghao works quietly and with militant precision. It’s different from the times they shared in the kitchen together with the flirty touches and otherwise fun company. He guesses it’s from his time working in a real kitchen that he knows how to keep his workspace clean and wash dishes as he goes, “It’s a good thing we forgot the orange zest in the first two batches because we have plenty now.” He says it with such aloof sarcasm that it almost reminds Mingyu of the first time they met at the clinic.

Jun cozies up next to him on the barstool, watching Minghao work.

It’s probably smarter of them to let him pilot the kitchen by himself—that is, after Jun threw the flour in too quickly and caused the mixer to throw it all over Minghao’s shirt. He’s in the middle of fixing it right now, “He’s a little snappy because he’s tired and Soonyoung threatened him and Chan with the ‘get along shirt’.” The way he whispers sounds a little funny, but it’s a bit of relief to him. Mingyu’s glad that Jun knows Minghao’s touchy side and can read it easily, that he knows Minghao’s boundaries—at least in the kitchen—and knows when his patience runs low.

“The ‘get along shirt’?”

“It’s a big, stupid t-shirt that Soon bought at a yard sale and spraypainted ‘best fwends 4 lyf’
on, and when his students fight he makes them wear it together. You can fit, like, four ten-year-olds in that thing.” Minghao turns on the stand mixer a little too hard, rattling it, but patting it after it starts working. He must be beyond tired, he essentially apologized to a kitchen appliance.

“Cute.”

Minghao whips the wooden spatula at them, “Look, there’s a reason why Jun’s the studio favorite and Soon isn’t and it’s because Soon’s a giant asshole a third of the time.”

“He’s not an asshole,” Jun corrects and shakes his head with a smile, “Hao’s just mad because he managed to wrestle both him and Chan to the floor and get their heads through the armholes before he was kicked in the dick.”

“Who kicked him?”

“Chan.” They answer in unison. It’s probably lucky for Soonyoung that it wasn’t the one with martial arts training.

It was a good choice to let Minghao manage the kitchen by himself because he gets those cookies into the oven within ten minutes. Mingyu has piping bags, but Minghao already used a Ziploc from the clingwrap drawer to pipe out the biscuits. He’s resourceful and about to keel over in exhaustion. Minghao digs through the bag they brought to pull out a springform pan already lined with acetate. Upon closer inspection, it looks like it’s probably cut blister packaging that’s been nicely washed and evenly trimmed because he can’t imagine that he’d be the type to purposefully seek out acetate just to make one cake. It’s so wasteful.

“How’s Vernon doing?” he asks, trying to fill the awkward air. It was obvious that Minghao wasn’t in the mood to be touched or clung to. He doesn’t know if it’s because they’re in front of Jun or if it’s because he’s still in ‘work mode’, but he doesn’t mind being hands-off. Minghao needs some space and he can easily respect that. There will be plenty more opportunities to snuggle up to him.

“That weirdo is back in the studio.” Jun answers because Minghao’s very occupied, “It’s such a bad idea, but the doctors said he’ll be okay as long as he resumes his antianxiety meds to be safe. It’s just for the short term, but every time we tell him to go rest he’s like ‘it’s fiiiiiiiiine guyssss’.” The flamboyantly annoyed expressions add to Jun’s absolute doneness over the situation, “Even Chan asked him to take a rest several times, but he’s an adult and he knows his body best.”

“Seungkwan’s not happy about it.” Minghao mumbles as he wipes down the counter and tosses his bangs out of his eyes. He attempts to dust his shirt off in the sink to no avail.

Jun crosses his arms, “Of course Seungkwan isn’t happy about it, we’re not happy about it either.” He turns to Mingyu, “We already called officials and everything and the agreement was that the New York Taproom could replace or remove one of their members if needed and they took us up on it immediately because someone was injured on their end.” Honestly, Mingyu could listen to Jun talk all day, “They already had a new guy waiting on the wings-”

“*In* the wings.”

“Whatever, *in* the wings and we can’t find anything on him, so we’re playing at a disadvantage right now.”

“I think we can still hold our own.” He rinses the towel out and hangs it on the side of the sink where it normally goes. It’s probably evident to Jun that Minghao’s been in this kitchen many, many
times, “Sure, they have a new member that we know nothing about, but we already have people looking him up. There’s no changing what’s already been done.”

He starts whipping the cream in the stand mixer, dropping in a tablespoon or two of the espresso and lets it go while he combines the mascarpone with a shot of brandy. Minghao doesn’t drink often, so it’s kind of cute that he only has one of those little sample bottles from BevMo. Jun tiptoes back into the kitchen to help, pouring the cheese mixture into the whipped cream when Minghao pulls the ladyfingers out of the oven, “So, why exactly are you guys making Jihoon a cake in secret?”

“Jihoon doesn’t like celebrating his birthday like Minghao.” Jun uses a rubber spatula to scrape the sides down, “He’s not as hostile about it,” and gives Minghao a pointed shove, “but he’d rather not make it a big deal. I think he likes being celebrated, though.” The smile upturning Jun’s mouth is reserved and quiet.

“Did you guys ever really talk things out?” Minghao looks up when Mingyu asks.

Jun puts the bowl down and shrugs, “Sort of. It’s complicated. We agreed to not change anything about our relationship until we know the results of finals and, even after that, it’ll be up for discussion.” He chuckles, “It sounds like a business deal, right? But I don’t really mind. I’ve waited this long, I can continue waiting,” that part frustrates Mingyu a little. It just seems too unfair that Jun has to be so patient and endure his feelings, but at the same time, Jihoon does as well. Why is it so hard for them? They like each other. They admire each other. Just kiss already, “but that doesn’t mean I can’t make him a cake and celebrate him. I’m actually really happy that you and Minghao are helping me out. I’ve never baked before, so I was really excited that Minghao picked something easy.”

Minghao slides the ladyfingers out of the oven and slaps the tray onto the counter in such a way that the parchment paper slips off cleanly. Mingyu needs to learn that trick. He fans the cookies with the baking sheet and peeks at the mixing bowl, turning it off after it’s well incorporated and moving it to the fridge so it can stay cold, “He better enjoy this.” is muttered as he washes the spatulas and rinses off the sheet.

“You can leave the dishes, I’ll wash them tomorrow.”

“Fight me, Mingyu.”

“No fighting.” Jun coos, clinging to Minghao’s side, holding his arms down and out of the sink, effectively dripping soapy water onto his pants, “You’ve done enough fighting today.”

“Studio fighting doesn’t count.”

“Are you really going to fight Mingyu after he let us use his oven?”

“Yes, absolutely.” Minghao shakes him off with a jerk of his shoulder and resumes the dishes, “If he thinks we can come over at 1am and use his oven without me washing his dishes, then he’s got another thing coming.”

Mingyu puts his hands up in surrender, “Wash away.”
Chapter 109

It’s truly unfortunate when Minghao lifts the cake tin off the counter only for the springform to release and for the entire, sloppy tiramisu to pour out the bottom and onto the counter and floor. In that instant, he doesn’t think that he’s seen a person look more defeated over (not) baking.

Minghao freezes, Jun with his fingers still drowning a couple cookies in espresso, and sighs. He expects him to yell or curse or blow up at something, the man is known for an explosive fuse after all, but Minghao just chews his lips together and takes a deep breath. Serious as ever, he simply shakes the cookies off and puts them to the side and scrapes most of the cheese mixture back into the bowl. Impressively collected; maybe he’s too tired to get mad. There’s a certain fire in his eyes that says he doesn’t want to hear anything from either of them.

Mingyu can tell that Jun hesitates before speaking and instead of poking fun or hugging him like he’d been doing most of the night, he simply smiles and asks what he can help with. He would join himself, but two people in the kitchen already makes it feel crowded, “Mingyu,” Minghao’s voice is quiet and soft, “can you clear a space in the back left so it’ll set up faster.”

His response is exhaled, “Yeah.” He’d do anything to make Minghao’s night just a little easier. Of course, he’s not upset with Jun for keeping him up—he ought to be tired even though he seems to never run out of energy—because Minghao was supposed to plan this weeks in advance and set aside time to do it that wasn’t after midnight the night before it’s supposed to be delivered and Jihoon better appreciate this damn cake because Mingyu should also be in bed and not playing Tetris with packets of tofu and jars of pickled vegetables at this hour.

“Thanks.” He doesn’t turn from his work, just stacking and layering the cookies and cream after cleaning the acetate and remixing the mascarpone. They work in absolute silence, mouths knitted shut with sleepy string and sore limbs. Occasionally, Minghao’s back will graze against his in passing when he shuffles behind Jun to get to a different part of the kitchen, but that’s it. He could have probably shoved an arm in the fridge and scooted everything over with force, but he takes his time because it somehow feels like Minghao wants him in the kitchen. It feels like he wants to be close to him for those few fractions of seconds.

“It’s clear.” Mingyu returns to the barstools to watch the two dancers work around each other. Within just a few minutes, Minghao cleans up the trim and dusts the top with cocoa powder. Instead of moving the tin himself, he gets Jun to do it. That eliminates all chances of his bad luck getting the better of the dessert again and it finds a temporary home in the very back of Mingyu’s fridge while they do spend the next twenty minutes scrubbing up all the sugary cream from the work area.

Honestly, it was perfectly fine ten minutes ago, but once the water dried, some places stayed sticky and Minghao absolutely can’t stand that, so he’s recleaned some spots three or four times just to ensure they’re spotless.

“I think I better get going.” Jun rinses the dishtowel and looks at his watch, “I’ll make up for the dishes.”

“Don’t bother.” Minghao glances at the living room clock, “Get going, you have to open in four hours.” Right, Jun opens the studio in the morning, “How are you going to bring the cake?”

The black-haired man fishes the tiramisu out, carefully setting it on the counter and asking for some saranwrap to cover it just in case the ride home gets bumpy, “Uh, just,” he motions lifting the cake and placing it down again, “Y’know, simple?”
“Well, it’s your cake.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Plate it.” Minghao grumbles. True, they went through all this effort to make the cake, Jun could at least put it on a nice plate if he doesn’t have a cake stand.

“We’re going to cut into it anyway.”

“But won’t it be nice if it looks the part?” Are these two going to argue? He can’t picture them arguing, but the conversation surely seems to be taking a turn down that lane.

“I mean, I can try, but I don’t have anything super fancy to plate it on.”

“I’ll plate it and bring it then.” Minghao sighs, “Jihoon won’t be in until late, so you don’t have to worry about him finding it in the breakroom early. Besides, if you take it now, there’s a big chance it’ll get stirred up during the ride and we went through all that trouble to make the layers nice.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, go home and get some rest.”

Jun wraps Minghao in a quick hug, thanking him and spinning him around once, “Thanks again, Mingyu.” His wry smile is reminiscent of the night at the banquet and Mingyu doesn’t know why. Is this the face that Jun makes when he feels bad about agreeing to something? It seems that way sometimes; a little fickle and frail, “Make sure he gets home okay, okay?”

He nods and helps Jun to the door, waving goodbye as he crosses the street with upbeat bounds. Seriously, where does he get that energy from? It’s constant, not explosive or incredibly loud like Soonyoung is sometimes, it’s just at a comfortable, constant high.

The night air is chilly with a little drizzle cascading over the parking lot. The wind is strong, however, blowing droplets of rain up to his doorstep as if Jun’s departure summoned it. He hopes that friend gets home okay, too.

When he returns to the kitchen, Minghao’s already rinsing off the last of the dishes. The leftover mascarpone is collected in a ramekin sitting on a plate holding the ladyfingers they didn’t deem pretty enough to use—which is silly considering you can’t see the start or end of any cookies inside a tiramisu anyways.

“Leave the dishes.”

“They’re already done, you just need to dry them.”

“I’ll dry them in the morning.”

“Fine, I’ll dry them.” Minghao picks up a dry towel, but Mingyu snatches it out of his hand and asks for an explanation, “You don’t like water stains.”

What a shitty explanation, but Mingyu ends up drying the dishes instead of his sleepy, blond pâtissier. Instead of clinging to his back, Minghao packs away the ingredients they brought and puts them back into the bag, pulling out Mingyu’s canvas tote and tucking it behind his mail filer on the
back counter. He picks up one of the spare cookies and pops it into his mouth after dipping it, wrinkling his nose, “Not good?”

“It’s fine.” He grabs another of the small cookies and dips it in, getting some of the cream on his fingertips before offering it up to Mingyu’s mouth, “Too much espresso for me, but what do you think?”

The PT leans forward to take a bite, but Minghao inches it away from him. Sending him a warning glance, he leans in again just to have the sweet morsel swerve out of his way. Does he want him to taste it or not? He smiles before trying again, only to meet the same result. So, he sets the glass bowl down and grabs Minghao’s wrist firmly to hold him still and gratuitously enjoy the cool and sweet tiramisu. The texture is nice because the porous cookies haven’t had a chance to absorb all the moisture from the espresso and mascarpone, but the taste of coffee is a little strong.

With intention, he licks the cream off the tips of Minghao’s fingers one at a time. The sensation sends the blond into a flustered state, ears red and lips upturned in a laugh that’s stuck in his throat. Serves him right for being a tease, naughty bakers need to be punished- getting whipped on the rear with the dishtowel snaps him out of his thoughts, “You don’t know where my hands have been, nasty.”

“You’ve been washing dishes.” He rinses his hands off and offers a dipped ladyfinger to Minghao, but the latter is not having it, knowing that Mingyu will probably pull the same cheeky prank on him. At least he tried, “So, are you going to take it home while it’s still jiggly?”

“I was hoping that it’d set up in the few minutes it took to clean up, but it still looks pretty loose.” He wiggles the cake tin and frowns, “It’s probably safe to transport, right?” the concern resting behind Minghao’s eyes is incredibly uncertain.

“We can give it a bit.” His arms snake around Minghao’s middle, pulling him away from the cold fridge and shutting the door with his elbow. He presses a kiss into his now-dry hair, inhaling the scent of his fruity shampoo.

“You need to go to bed.” Minghao leans back and into him, putting his hands over Mingyu’s. He takes it as a cue to let go. As he loosens his grip, slender fingers hold him in place, fastening digits like a seatbelt, “This was only supposed to take thirty minutes. Sorry, it’s so late.”

Mingyu nuzzles him, nose tracing the curve of Minghao’s ear, sometimes bumping into the backs of his studs. When he exhales, the shorter male tenses up and shies away and that’s a little funny to him for some reason. It’s cute. It’s cute, “It’s fine. Let’s go watch an episode of Friends or something and check on it after.”

Somehow, he manages to let him go long enough to make some hot chocolate and settle them on to the couch with his warmest throw blanket. Only the light from the stove hood and the TV allow them enough vision to navigate around. It seems like Minghao’s regained a little bit of energy, sitting next to Mingyu with his knees up to his chin, making himself a tiny, blanketed ball.

This isn’t his best cup of cocoa. He ran out of whole milk and the combination of 2% and double-cream should have been enough, but it tastes different. It looks like Minghao likes it since he takes a little sip every few seconds.

And, sure, this episode of Friends is fine.

Minghao’s watching it, at least. As much as he wants to pay attention to Rachel’s crisis and Phoebe’s clueless antics, he just wants to watch Minghao. He wants to watch the blue lights shift the
hues of his skin. He wants to watch the characters dance in the reflection of his hooded, brown eyes. He wants to watch as his lids close and open sluggishly because the moments keep ticking by and the night is growing old.

After fifteen minutes, it’s evident that he’s also lost interest in the show because his eyes look everywhere and anywhere but at the TV and at Mingyu. Maybe he can sense that there’s something on his mind now that it’s quiet.

“Can I ask you something?” his voice is so airy and quiet that he can hear the gross bits of spit in his mouth; a whisper at best.

Minghao blinks and looks over at him slowly, like his eyes were snails with broken feet, “What’s up?” also a whisper.

“It’s a little heavy, is that okay?”

“Yeah.”

“It regards us, is that okay?”

“Yeah.” Minghao sets his empty cup on the coffee table and turns to face Mingyu, sitting on his knees and winding the blanket behind him so that they’re both sitting in the cold. He puts his hands on his thighs and waits patiently, “Anything is fine.”

“Even if it’s extremely cliché?”

“Especially if it’s extremely cliché.” He cracks a little smile in an effort to lighten the mood, “I’m all ears.”

“What,” he starts and stops. He thought this was supposed to be easy and straightforward, but it’s all caught up now. It’s clogged in his esophagus, but it has to come out. He needs to know, “What am I to you?”

Minghao’s eyes drop into his lap. He gives a hard swallow before he answers, “You’re Mingyu.”

“Is that all?”

“Is that not enough?”

Mingyu shakes his head and he understands that’s not an obvious answer for him, “How do you define ‘Mingyu’?”

“Does he need a definition?” he picks at his bracelet subconsciously.

“He would like one.” His lips wrinkle and Mingyu almost regrets asking because it looks a little like Minghao wants to cry. Why is it so hard to just say ‘boyfriend’? Why is it so hard to say ‘lover’? “Please.”

Minghao sighs, “Mingyu means a little bit of everything; ever-evolving, ever-changing. There are both not enough and too many words to describe him and at the same time, you can’t describe him, you just have to feel him. And he’s right here in front of me, probably not feeling like my tired brain and babbling mouth are enough- aren’t the right words that he wants to hear.” His nails dig into the chain, “And I’m sorry that I can’t give him the word that he wants to hear because I don’t believe in limiting words like that and if he really wants me to call him my boyfriend,” he sighs, “then I’m
sorry, but I’ll also have to refuse.”

Mingyu takes his hand and pulls him forward and into his chest where he rests his chin with a pout, “Why’s that?” he’s oddly content even though he feels like he ought to be a little mad or frustrated. Minghao makes it so much more complicated, he makes understanding feelings impossibly difficult.

“We don’t know if we’ll win and if we do win, then we won’t be here for a long time because of the contract deal. We’ll be traveling and working, and I won’t be able to see you and you don’t deserve that. You deserve happiness and if someone that makes you happier than I do, I don’t want you to feel tied down.” Even though he claims that will not happen, Minghao just shakes his head and cracks a little smile, cracks his heart just a little, “You never know when it’s going to happen.” He pushes Mingyu’s bangs to the side, smoothing the messy locks back, “A few months ago you didn’t think you’d ever see me, right? Keep an open mind. It might happen, and I want you to be happy. Your happiness is my happiness.”

“I would spend time arguing with you, but it’s almost 3 in the morning,” he uses his arms and legs to pull Minghao up so that he’s completely over him, stomach to stomach, chest to chest, legs staggered together with his hands sinking into the couch behind Mingyu’s head, “And you probably won’t listen to me because you’re stubborn, so let’s learn from our elders and make a deal instead.” He moves Minghao’s hands to his chest after realizing that the weight might be straining his wrist, “If you win the competition, I will wait until you come back and when you come back, I’ll be your boyfriend if you’ll have me. If you lose, then I’ll be your boyfriend immediately.” He searches Minghao’s face, “If you’ll have me.”

He nods carefully and slowly, agreeing with actions and not words, “Then what do you think of me, Mingyu?”

It hangs in the air. Silently. Intensely.

Mingyu had prepared for this moment, he had a whole speech, he had rehearsed lines in the mirror, he stayed up for nights thinking about this, and he came to the same answer over and over, but now that simple word has dissolved. It doesn’t come to mind.

A word can’t amount to what Minghao means to him.

“I’ve suddenly lost my dictionary.”

His hands link behind Minghao’s back and he pulls him forward into a warm and full kiss, filling up this big, blank book with a million and one definitions that only he can read, in a language that only they know. He doesn’t need these rudimentary lights to see every nook and cranny of his face, he’s already memorized every scar and every detail. He doesn’t need words to outline what Minghao means to him.

Fate carried them this far. Fate combusted an oven tonight. The rest is up to them and right now Minghao’s form weighing down on his makes him feel grounded and real even though the TV disappears and his couch disappears and everything falls silent and black. These are all material things anyway; things he doesn’t need by definition.

Like the times before, it’s always a little scary when it happens and he’s not sure if it’s just for him or for both of them, but when everything vanishes and the man on top of him is the only thing in existence… well, it’s a little magical. He transcends time, he augments reality, he has this way of digging through Mingyu’s chest and right into his heart where he sets to work stitching and sewing by the light of a withering fire. He embroiders flowers over leaks and ladder-stitches old, gaping
wounds closed.

He does it tirelessly, working around the clock without rest, without sleep just like he runs miles and leagues through his mind.
Mingyu dreads letting Minghao out of his grasp.

The slightest shift or movement ignites a reflex to hold him in place.

Forget the fridge. Forget the cake. Forget your friends just for this moment and focus on me.

“Can we,” Minghao blinks slowly, trying to be as attentive as he can, “talk?”

“About?” They’re used to their conversations flowing smoothly, transitioning from one topic to another seamlessly and enjoying most of them. If you asked, Mingyu can’t pinpoint a precise subject they enjoyed; sometimes they talk about animals, sometimes they talk about helicopter parents, and sometimes they talk about their friends. Minghao’s easy like that, able to match him on almost every level of a conversation.

He never tunes him out or changes the topic prematurely. He’s very well adapted to Mingyu’s interests and Mingyu tries his best to keep up with Minghao, but Minghao knows so much about so many things. It’s like he just hoards little nuggets of information about this and that—random stuff that you wouldn’t cross day-to-day. All of it is limited, but it’s surprising how much he knows sometimes. General knowledge, is that what they call it? Mingyu has that. He also has his specialized field of knowledge; human anatomy, kinesiology, biology, stuff in that field. Minghao knows a lot of it, too, but he also knows about places and time. It’s amazing.

Proposing and formally initiating a conversation is new to them.

“About?” he nudges Mingyu this time, trying to reel him back into the present, “Mingyu? You in there, buddy?”

“Seungcheol said that you really don’t like wearing accessories when you go to bed. Isn’t wearing that bracelet inconvenient?”

“Ah, so we’re addressing this now, are we?” he smiles, crossing his fingers together up by Mingyu’s collar, bracelet pressing into his chest lightly, “I don’t mind this one.”

“I was wondering why you didn’t say anything during the dinner.”

“Hey, you didn’t say anything either.” Mingyu rests his hands on top of Minghao’s, he likes the way his skin curves over his knuckles; the little scars that give them character, he plans on memorizing all of those, too, “I thought you might be embarrassed.”

He shakes his head in disbelief, “Seriously?” Minghao nods, resting his chin on top of his hands, “Admittedly, I’ve never been fond of couple items, but—I don’t know—with you,” moving his hands out from under him, he cups Minghao’s cheeks and gives them a little squish, “I don’t mind.” The blond wiggles free, “Did you know Seungcheol was going to give me one?”

“He gave you- he gave this to you?” Minghao sits up a bit more, arching his back and popping it accidentally. The brief tension and release says that it probably hurt, “Really? I thought it was just a coincidence.”

“A coincidence that we got the exact same bracelet?”

“Well, stuff like that has happened before, right? Like Halloween,” his eyes glean up at the
ceiling, recalling specific events, “hell, we’ve ended up in the same town after college, so you can’t tell me that buying the same bracelet is too much of a stretch.”

“It’d be nice if it found its way to me that way.” He pushes Minghao up with his knees and gives him a kiss on the forehead.

“Then, if you’re okay matching with me,” he turns away to yawn, “can we match for a little while longer?”

“As long as you want.”

“You’re not uncomfortable with it?”

Mingyu shakes his head.

“You’re not just agreeing because I like it, right?” his lips curl at that question before he shakes his head again. Didn’t Soonyoung say that Minghao hates this kind of thing? What happened to being grossed out at couples being matchy-matchy? Well, he could ask himself the same question. It’s different when it’s with Minghao.

“Nope. In a weird way,” he rolls his eyes, the cheese levels are at a maximum high tonight, “I feel a little less lonely, maybe a little like you’re with me even though you’re at wo-fucking-don’t give me that look, Minghao. You’re wearing it, too!” Laughter bubbles up. It’s a new feeling, having someone laugh with their body flush against yours. All of him vibrates with happiness all at once. It’s even more immediate than hearing it next to him because it doesn’t have to work its way through his ears and into his brain. This is something he could get used to, “Why are you wearing it then?”

He stops laughing when he humors Mingyu, “Why am I wearing it?”

“That’s what I asked, yes.” He snuggles him absentmindedly, the scent of his shampoo filling his nose.

It seems like the blond has to think for quite a while, processing something. Maybe he’s never thought about it before. Maybe he didn’t have to until this point, “I guess it makes me feel safe. Secure? I don’t know, secure in general, not just in our relationship.” He grinds his lips together and his voice gets infinitesimally smaller, “Like you’re protecting me,” Is his heart still beating? It must be close to giving up because Mingyu is dying with happiness, “and kinda I like that feeling, so, yeah.”

Yep, it’s official, “So corny.”

“Shut up.”

He’s Minghao’s.

Guard dog, lap dog, best dog—whatever companion Minghao wants him to be, Mingyu will be. Finding security in him? He’s beyond happy with that answer; absolutely elated. Minghao was wrong, some things can be described using words despite being a little indirect because whatever he just made him feel is firing off endorphins like fireworks and drowning him in dopamine.

They sit in silence, eyes rolling here and there.

Mingyu really didn’t know where he wanted to take that conversation and it doesn’t look like Minghao knows how to continue it. It dies on their lips and on the tips of their tongues. Even though
they don’t meet, he still finds it difficult to let him go. He wants to hold and wrap this man in his arms indefinitely. Sure, blame the winter, blame the cold, blame feeling lonely for the last few years, but once you have someone that makes you feel the way Mingyu feels about Minghao, you’d understand. Holding someone this precious is something you might not even get to do once a lifetime.

It’s rare to find someone that beautifully fits you so imperfectly.

When he rolls to shift his weight ever so slightly, he tightens his grip around him, but flexing his arms is for naught because Minghao eases back onto his chest. He shakes awake, “Sorry, I thought you were uncomfortable.” and rubs his eyes with the back of his hand—ohmygosh was he dozing off? He was. Aw, Mingyu didn’t intend to startle the exhausted dancer. Go back to sleep, baby, it’s okay.

“I’m good.” it was a welcomed weight. Minghao is definitely not as feather-light as he was in high school, but he’s not as stocky or muscular as Jun or Soonyoung or any of the other dancers he’s seen in and out of the studio. Mingyu’s definitely not getting crushed by any means, “Are you good?”

He sighs before nuzzling his face back into his shirt like a baby with a blanket, “I should check on the cake.” For a while, he’s not sure if he’s dreaming or not.

Mingyu combs a hand through his hair, careful not to get tangled up in the kinks and knots left by too much bleach and not enough conditioner, “Then go check on the cake.” This is real—very much so—he’s real and he’s here with him.

“You make it very difficult to do so.” His words are sleepily drawn out as he rubs his cheek into his breast once more before sitting up, pushing off the couch with resolve and hovering above him for just a moment before pattering into the kitchen with slurred steps dragging over the carpet and onto the cold tile. He swings the fridge door open with enough force to rattle the condiments. Mingyu hears the pan jiggle and clatter as Minghao shakes it. Based on the heavy sigh, he can tell, “It’s set pretty nicely. I can probably take it home without worrying about it erupting in my car.”

So, he sits up and checks on the tiramisu himself.

You have to have some quality assurance for stuff like birthday cakes, you know, and Mingyu just wants an excuse to pull Minghao back into his arms. He’d left him cold on the couch. Okay, no, that’s a lie—he had the throw blanket—, but that sort of warmth feels empty compared to tying your arms around a lover’s waist and resting your lips in the crook of their neck, “Do you think it’s set enough?” It’s just a guess, but Minghao’s probably a little sensitive there because whenever he gets close, he tenses up. He hasn’t had the audacity to ask if he likes it, but until they cross that bridge, maybe he ought to stop.

He could say no. He could say that it’ll need an hour or two more. He could say that it’ll never set up ever and that Minghao will have to stay, “I think it’s good.” It’s not good to lie, but when his back is pressed against him like this, it’s so hard to stay away from that temptation.

Minghao nods and starts to pull the cake out of the fridge. With one arm around his waist, he uses the other to catch his wrist, “What? This is my good si-”

“Do you want to spend the night?” There, he said it. He ripped it off like a bandage and said it.

“Wow, forward.” He’s apparently awake enough to be sarcastic.
“It’s not safe for you to drive home. You’ve been nodding off since you got here.” He nudges the cake a few inches deeper into the fridge and shuts the doors, returning his free hand to Minghao’s hips and turning him around so that they’re face to face, “And I’m well aware that we’re both a little too sleepy to contemplate sex.”

“I know.” Minghao bumps their foreheads together carefully, shutting his eyes.

“C’mon. I’ll take the couch, you can take the bed.” He knew he picked a good day to wash his sheets-

“No way.” He opens up the fridge again, “I’m out. Thanks for letting us borrow your kitc-”

“Fine, you win, you can have the couch. I know it’s super comfy.” But he rolls his eyes at his sarcasm and reaches for the door again. Mingyu wrestles his arms back down, hugging the fight out of him and closing the door with his elbow as he shuffles Minghao out of the kitchen.

“It’ll be hard for you to sleep well knowing you have a guest over.”

“If you don’t want to stay, you can say so.” He’ll give Minghao an out. Maybe he’s not comfortable spending the night especially after what they’ve talked about. He definitely doesn’t want him to get the impression that he’s just been trying to sweet talk his way into his pants because he absolutely isn’t—he doesn’t want to rush into anything, the snail-like pace they’ve been developing at has been comfortable and natural so far—and he knows he’d be a little weary if someone just asked him to spend the night right after laying down the definition of their feelings less than an hour ago, “I’m really worried about you driving home, but you know your limits better than I do.”

“Why does it feel like there’s a right and wrong answer?” he locks his fingers behind Mingyu’s back.

“There isn’t. Don’t feel that way.” Another warm kiss is pressed to his forehead. That’s a little concerning and he sincerely hopes that Minghao’s never been in a real situation where someone has forced him into a corner like that, “I’m not trying to pressure you into doing anything.”

“I have work in the morning,” he mumbles into his shirt, “and you have work in the morning. We both need the rest.” While he assumes that Minghao would let go after tightening the fingers behind his back, he’s pleasantly surprised when he unhooks his digits and simply splays them over his back, pulling his shirt taut when his fingers curl into the fabric, “But it’s hard, Mingyu, I really don’t wanna let go.”

He hums into his scalp until he presses a kiss to his lips, “Then don’t.”

“What should I do then?” he sighs and backs up just a hair, eyes already shut and voice drowsy. Letting Mingyu decide—knowing him this well—means that he’s fine with either answer. He’s more concerned that Mingyu won’t sleep well and that he’s intruding; he’s not worried about Mingyu plotting something or stepping over boundaries. Seeing him in this position, where he’s essentially asleep while standing, tugs at his heartstrings. There’s absolutely no way Minghao will get home without swerving a couple times on the highway and doing that in the rain is dangerous.

Of course, he’s also aware that he doesn’t want to let Minghao go either.

He doesn’t want to see him walk out the door just to creep into his room a few hours before the sun comes out. Sure, spending the night and needing to go home to change before work might be a bit of a hassle, but it’s better to get enough rest than to- well, he can’t really justify it. If it was all about work, he’d probably force himself to drive home, too. However, this in itself feels like an
exercise of trust, like the universe is offering him a chance to prove himself in some way, shape, or form.

Moreover, it’s apparent now that Minghao trusts him and that matters more to Mingyu than everything aforementioned. That, alone, settles it.

“Stay with me.”
It’s not some telenovela cliché where Minghao and Mingyu end up in the same bed.

It’s not some old drama screenplay where they make out and fall over each other and giggle until sleep covers them with a blanket of sand.

No, that’d be too easy.

After the blond asks to borrow a shirt so he doesn’t get residual flour all over everything, he settles himself onto the couch and shoos Mingyu away to sleep in his room. It’s too bad because all he wanted was to see him stand around in his oversized t-shirt a little longer. Actually, it’s about the same size as the shirt he was wearing earlier—that’s neatly folded in his bag now—and there isn’t anything really notable about the scribbled ‘Stussy’ over the chest. It’s an old shirt that his taste outgrew, but it suits the blond so well. You could say that Mingyu’s overreacting with his pink cheeks and sudden inability to look Minghao in the eyes, but what a wonder it is that he can make a simple t-shirt look so exquisite. Don’t laugh! Surely, he’s wearing rose-tinted glasses. Wonwoo was right back then, seeing Minghao dawn his ill-fitted clothes is a serious guilty pleasure that he can’t deny any longer.

It’s a good thing that winter is just beginning because he will take every single opportunity from now till whenever to wrap him in his softest coats and dress him in his comfiest shirts. He’s going to bundle Minghao up until he’s smothered by sheer wool and cotton and flannel and- it’s settled, he’s going to buy him a giant fluffy scarf for Christmas even if he doesn’t celebrate. How cute would he be in that? Super cute. He can understand the appeal of sugar daddies and spoiling their lovers now. Geez. Things are getting out of hand- has he been staring a little too long? Is that okay? Is he allowed to stare too long now that they’re more than official without being official?

“You’re spacing out, go to bed.” Minghao’s hands push against his chest and he stumbles backwards to catch himself on lazy legs.

“Not spacing out, just appreciating the view.” He smirks and Minghao rolls his eyes, blinking tiredly with an aloof smile until he goes on his way.

Instead of arguing for many more minutes, he understands that it’s smarter for them to drop formalities and for him to dig up an extra pillow and comforter from his closet; submitting is the only way they’ll get any sleep tonight. Man, it’s been a long night. Not the longest night, but it’s been far more eventful than he thought it’d be. He certainly would have never guessed that it’d end with Minghao spending the night in this context. Although, the more he thinks about it, the more he can’t picture Minghao’s first night being any different.

True, true, the first time he met up with Minghao again, it was purely physical attraction. They were all claws and teeth a few months ago, there wasn’t room to make friends.

A one-night stand was a fantasy that popped up every couple evenings, but since they’d started a more wholesome friendship, he hadn’t dreamed of such things as often. Okay, that’s a partial lie. Especially after that lap dance, he understood what Minghao was capable of and a small taste of that was enough to fuel his imagination for many nights and days to come, but still. That’s not real life.

This is real life, your significant other showing up unannounced at their wit’s end with their best friend asking to borrow your oven and spilling mascarpone all over your counter. There’s
nothing sexy about it, about exhaustion and soreness and aches brought forth by overt and zealous self-discipline. There is something lovable about it, though, something endearing and sweet and comforting. For situations like this, for feelings like this, his libido takes a break. There’ll likely be plenty of situations and feelings and moments in the future when they can close the bedroom door and do whatever they please to each other; nights where Minghao’s knee is healed and his wrist and back aren’t paying the price for his recovery.

However, because tonight is a night like that, all he wants to do is tuck him in and kiss him goodnight.

When he returns to the living room, the blond has already conked out.

He’s curled up in a tight ball with his lips slightly parted, breathing so quietly you’d miss him if you were blind. He then recalls a long-winded story of Jun tripping over him at night when they went camping. The little scoff that slips past his lips and the rustling of the comforter in his hands are enough to stir Minghao from his sleep, “Sorry, did I wake you?”

He sits up immediately and looks around before recollecting himself and understanding where he is, “Nah, you’re good.” He’s a light sleeper, Mingyu knows that much. He doesn’t want to be a light sleeper, but it’s been a part of him since childhood and it’s something he has yet to outgrow.

“For you, sleepyhead.” The pillow is dropped by his head and he gives him a little shove to push him back down. The only Minghao he wants to see right now is one that’s completely horizontal. He flaps the comforter out and over him, tucking the edges under his sides and rolling him back and forth like he’s setting out to make the most perfect enchilada.

“Thanks,” balling his fists into the blanket, Minghao pulls it up to his nose and curls up again as Mingyu flicks the lights off, “sleep tight, Gyu.”

He almost passes the threshold of his bedroom before he turns and tiptoes back to Minghao’s side, “Can I kiss you goodnight?” The blond creaks an eye open and gives him an exasperated laugh before sitting up once more, “You don’t have to get up.”

“Fine.” And he flops into the couch again, curling up as tight as he can.

“I didn’t mean- fine.” Mingyu kneels down by the couch—much like did when he’d pray before bed as a child—and brushes Minghao’s bangs out of the way to plant a soft kiss on his forehead, “sleep tight, Minghao.” Now he feels comfortable going back into his room.

“So fucking cheesy, oh my god.” Is groaned out somewhere in the dark.

For once, he sleeps with his door open. Right? He knows, sleeping with someone else in the apartment usually turns closing your bedroom door into a common protocol, but what if Minghao needs something? Well, he could knock—and he knows the apartment well enough that he could find most things on his own—, but Mingyu just wants to be sure. No? Not good enough? Well, in a terribly clingy sense, if he keeps the door open, it feels more like they’re in the same room. It may not be the same bed, but at least it’s the same room and he feels better like that.

If there’s one thing that Mingyu hopes and prays for it’s that he’s not wracked with nightmares tonight. On nights where he has a lot of contact with Minghao, he doesn’t dream and it’s great and he usually wakes fully rested and ready to start the day. On those rare chances they got to nap together, his mind was also blank. It’s as if Minghao’s innate ability to become a vacuum to all his
senses is somehow projected into his subconscious.

Since they made a cake tonight and had a nice talk (and he’s asleep in the living room), it’ll hopefully be one of those nice nights.

So, Mingyu throws his covers open, leaps into bed, and cocoons himself immediately. His window is open to an exact amount, he emptied his bladder and brushed his teeth, his alarm is set for work, and he’s nice and cozy and finally, most finally, he’s asleep.

Aaaannnd he’s awake. Okay, he’s awake.

How many minutes was that- barely an hour and a half. Barely. It hit him hard and fast. He’s sitting upright, gasping for air and a cold sweat is pilling on his hairline. His sheets are balled into his fists and his mouth has run dry. Who would have thought starting your dream in a burning building would snap you awake so quickly? One minute the house is on fire, the next minute a flaming beam is dropped on top of him. Great. Lovely. Wonderful.

Maybe he should just tiptoe outside and get a glass of water to cool down and reset himself.

He almost forgets that Minghao’s sleeping on his couch. If the man wasn’t sitting up with the comforter tossed off of him, he might have ghosted by him without a second thought. His chest is also heaving, he’s rubbing his eyes and trying to grasp where he is again, “You okay?” He visibly flinches when Mingyu accidentally surprises him.

Coughing to clear up the air and recompose himself, “I’m good, I’m good,” he sighs, “just dreams, y’know.”

“Oh, I know.” He can barely keep his eyes open.

“Why are you up?” his voice is raspy, “I thought you went to bed? What time is it?”

Just then, the sound of running water kicks on. It usually goes unnoticed, but because it’s absolutely silent, the sound of his neighbor turning on her shower is apparent. She gets up this early to go to work in the city, “Uh, I dunno, past 5.” Minghao’s head turns towards the noise as he flops back down onto the couch. Right, right, noise, “Hey, why don’t we switch?”

“No. I’m fine. Go back to bed.” He pulls the covers over his head tightly and grumbles once more about Mingyu not getting enough sleep because of him.

It should be expected that Minghao sleeps soundly after that because his exhaustion sets in and forces him unconscious, but a few minutes after Mingyu’s horizontal again, there’s a rapping at his door and his eyes peel open as he sits up.

He doesn’t have to ask or explain why he’s there. Mingyu understands him already. His body language says he’s sorry for intruding, but the neighbor’s water is keeping him up as well as the birds perched in the tree outside that are starting to sing. So, being a good significant other, he swings his legs off the side of the bed and starts to get up only to be pushed back down and shuffled into the covers. Didn’t—forgive him, his brain is beyond tired—Minghao want to switch places? Isn’t that why he’s here? Why is he still in bed? They need to switch.

But the mystery debunks itself when the mattress dips with Minghao’s weight crawling in on
the other side. At first, he keeps his distance, but after the noise permeating the living room’s walls magically start echoing into Mingyu’s bedroom, he covers his head and curls up. As if it’s an instinct, Mingyu easily pulls him closer, tucking an arm under his head and using the other to hold his waist before searching for his hands, icy and cold. Why is Minghao so cold? When he extends his foot forward to search his feet, they’re cold as well.

So, Mingyu twists their legs together, clamping his frigid toes between his own. He puffs a hot breath into his fingers, kissing them every couple blows, “You’re freezing.”

“Sorry.” Minghao pulls his extremities away, tucking his fingers into his armpits and curling his toes into the bedsheets instead, but Mingyu’s quick to seize them again.

He gently un-pretzels Minghao’s arms and kneads his thumbs into his wrist. No brace tonight means that they have to be extra careful sleeping together. He has to keep the joints toasty and fluid, “It’s okay. I’ll warm you up.” It seems like the blond gets a little shy after that, pulling his hand away with hesitation.

In the dark, it’s hard to make out shapes and lines, but the sun is rising, casting a deep blue light through his blinds, barely illuminating Minghao’s sleepy eyes as they look up at him.

It’s that look, you know, that look.

The look that Mingyu still doesn’t understand two months in and that he’ll likely never understand in full because he’s always too lost in it to pick it apart and document its minutia for later review.

Minghao doesn’t have the energy to hold his gaze for that long because sleep is quickly claiming him, pulling him under the covers but not before his fingers curl into Mingyu’s shirt, one hand at his chest, one at his stomach. It reminds him of a needy and vulnerable child. He counts his breaths as they plateau and steady themselves, evening out into a regular cadence. He listens as they fade into the waning night—into silence—and all of a sudden he can’t fathom that Minghao’s actually in his bed with him. If it’s possible, it feels so nice that it hurts. It’s a sort of heartache—different from before—and it hurts with a unique intensity.

He’s so happy, so happy, so happy. It’s a simple happiness, but he can feel it welling up in his chest.

He’s taken people to bed before—god, has he taken people to bed before—but no one is allowed to stay. He can’t sleep well if people stay. Of course, that hasn’t stopped people from staying. It’s not like he can just kick people out and more often than not the ‘please get out of my room’ is stuck in his throat, buried under formalities and manners. However, it’s always at the front of his thoughts. He never wanted anyone to spend the night. He never wanted to sleep with anyone until tonight, until Minghao.

Mattress-wise, well, this is a virgin mattress. He got a new one when he moved back to town and hasn’t brought anyone back to his flat to ‘break it in’. Until Minghao, he hadn’t brought anyone back to his flat, period. So, technically tonight’s the night that his mattress loses its virginity- Why is he thinking about stuff like this at 5:30 in the morning? Can his brain just not? That’d be great.

If Minghao found security with him, he’s going to be sure to uphold that trust. He’s going to use his long arms and legs to shield this lanky boy from the harsh nothingness of the night. He’s going to spoon him up and protect him from every nightmare. Come at me, nightmares, I’m not afraid of you. You can have me, just don’t touch Minghao. What a righteous hero- what a righteous sidekick defending his hero.
C’mon, tired Mingyu-brain, go to sleep. You’ll have plenty of opportunities to think about sexy times with Minghao in the future. Minghao’s going to be part of the future.

Oh, he’ll be part of Mingyu’s future.

The future looks bright and exciting for once.

That’s nice.
Chapter 112

It’s not the first time he wakes up before his alarm, but it is the first time he wakes up from open, lush fields covered with blooming poppies and daffodils. Tall sunflowers in the distance frame the land, standing regally with their bright yellow petals as they sway slightly with the breeze.

The sky is bright blue and vast, stretching for miles and miles with full and dense clouds. Birds sing from nowhere in particular and there’s a pleasant, omnipresent humming. His clothes are loose and flowy, billowing whenever a cool gust brushes by and he’s at peace with whatever this is. Even without shoes, the ground, the dirt, the grass, it all feels like he’s stepping on plush carpet. It carries a gentle and sweet scent, the scent of spring, the scent of cut grass, the scent of blue candles that vaguely smell of the ocean.

There’s a weight on his head; a light weight. When he removes it to take a look, it turns out to be a wreath of flowers; peonies and lisianthus. They’re dewy and fresh, braided with olive leaves and vine. He decides to return it to the top of his head. Why not, it’s pretty and it feels suitable for such a lovely landscape. Where’s his photographer when he needs him?

And just as he’s about to have a seat, sprawl out, and enjoy this amazing weather, someone dashes by him and grabs his hand to pull him along. Minghao, dressed in all white with his hair back to dark brown—now that’s a sight he’ll never get tired of. Behind his right ear, carefully woven into his earrings, is a small bunch of baby’s breath. His light and baggy t-shirt balloons whenever the wind picks up, but he doesn’t stop running. Barefooted, without phones, wallets, keys—city necessities—they barrel through the field as the sea of green, orange, and yellow part for them. Cabbage butterflies are kicked up and flutter away, monarchs and blue morphos take to the sky and dissolve into cherry blossoms only to be swallowed up by the plants and respawn as metallic beetles.

They sprint until Minghao’s exhausted himself at the top of a hill, but Mingyu’s not feeling winded in the slightest. At one point, it felt like their feet just stopped moving and they hovered over the land, flying, but it was all a blur because the man in front of him gestures him over and suddenly they’re at a cliffside. Overlooking a vast ocean and cascading waterfalls at either side of them. He’s a little nervous being so close to the edge, but Minghao takes his hand, grounding him with a giggle and his fingers emphasizing the divots between his knuckles.

His mouth moves to speak, but it’s silent. Mingyu can’t hear what he’s saying even though he looks excited as he takes a step back and hurdles over the edge, dragging Mingyu with him. For a single moment, fear consumes him. His grip on Minghao’s is so tight, he worries that he’s hurting him- but then he’s weightless. They’re soaring over the water, gliding with Minghao’s guided precision. He looks back at Mingyu and lowers a hand into the ocean to flick water into his face, but the droplets explode into stardust the second they contact his skin. They glitter and sparkle as they evaporate into the air.

They fly to an island of happy and well-fed dogs who greet them with wagging tails and spend the night by a campfire buried in their warmth. They lay out under the stars, under a sky that’s crystal clear and full of dreams and hope and when he turns to his side, Minghao’s laughing, tiny bubbles flying up from his mouth and bursting as they fly over the embers of the fire.

His heart is so full, so full of joy, of happiness, of all things good and pure in this world.

Of Minghao.
It’s not the first time he wakes up before his alarm, but it is the first time he wakes up to his bedroom window casting warm sunlight onto the beautiful person next to him. His messy, frizzy hair is ignited into the most humble halo and his lips are slightly curved into a soft smile. It’s in obvious contrast to the last time Mingyu saw him sleeping with his face contorted in dreamscape-pain. It’s relaxed and open now, delicate and lovely.

He stretches an arm behind him and over to his nightstand where he picks up his phone without taking his eyes off of Minghao. He has to be careful when he moves as to not disturb him. Wasn’t there a tale like this? The story of the cut-sleeve boys? The tale of a king who didn’t want to wake his lover, so he cut the sleeve off of his expensive robes just to let him sleep a few minutes more. However, it’s not like Mingyu can sever his entire left arm. He still needs it for work and for hugging. They’re just common folk without the luxury of palace romance.

He reaches over Minghao, precariously gripping the phone with two fingers and sliding it into his palm. Quietly, he unlocks it and turns off the alarm before it fills the room with shrill beeps and honks. Would it be creepy of him to take a picture? It might be. But how many firsts will he get to have with Minghao—this one is for the books.

Of course, his phone’s camera can’t capture his intimate and special beauty as perfectly as real life can and the accidental shutter noise stirs him anyways.

He creaks one eye open. The creases in his cheeks deepen as his smile gets wider.

Mingyu presses a kiss into his hair, “Sorry, couldn’t help myself. Go back to sleep.” He rolls his eyes at Mingyu’s excuse and burrows into his warmth, rubbing his forehead into his chest. His fingers are still gripping at his shirt which is both the best and worst thing because Mingyu needs to get up for work. It’s already 8.

What a new experience this is.

Waking up to not just another person, but to Minghao. Minghao and all his Minghao-ness. Sorry, his brain is still half-asleep and his limbs feel heavy and lazy and he can’t imagine getting out of bed. His mouth is nestled in Minghao’s bird’s nest hair and his free arm pockets the phone and finds its home draped over his waist.

When he does finally build up enough resolve to get up and leave the warm and safe confines of their bed, Minghao’s the one to call him back. After he had gotten out of the sheets, he feels himself tugged backwards by the hem of his shirt. At first, he thought it was his imagination, but when he turns the blond is all stretched out like a cat and clawing into his tee, “I have to go to work.”

“Work can’t wait for a few minutes.”

He pats the frizzy halo down and tucks the stray strands behind his ear as he yawns, “It’s already 8:20.” Minghao nods and throws his legs over the side of the bed, using Mingyu’s shoulders as leverage to stand. “You can keep sleeping, it’s okay. What time do you have to go to work?”

Blinking slowly and wincing when the bright sun hits his eyes, “10?”

“Then keep sleeping. You need the rest.” He pushes Minghao back under the covers and tucks him in, shutting his blinds to lessen the amount of sunlight pouring through them, “I’ll leave the spare key on the counter, so just lock up when you leave for work, okay?”

His voice is tired and drained, but he hums in agreement and pulls the covers up to his nose after Mingyu plants a kiss on his forehead. He shuts the door on his way out so that the noise of him
whipping together a quick breakfast and washing up won’t disturb him too much.

Making scrambled eggs, toast, and sausage is easy even when he doubles the amount. While he throws all of his into a bowl to eat quickly, he carefully plates Minghao’s and sets it up on the counter with a small bowl of strawberries on the side. It might be a little sad, but the act of cooking breakfast for another person—the whole narrative that sets up a situation where he gets to cook breakfast for another person—is something of a bucket list dream for him. It’s such a simple thing and he has cooked breakfast for other people. When you have roommates and dormmates, stuff like that is inevitable, but to cook breakfast for a significant other the moment after you wake up in their warmth—now that’s something special.

He gets dressed and brushes his teeth and washes his face like normal. The motions are the same as any other morning, but there’s something inherently different about today. He’s a little bit quieter because Minghao’s asleep in the other room and he needs all the rest he can get. He feels well-rested for once and his head isn’t lacquered with exhaustion because sleeping and napping with Minghao has that effect on him.

And he’s happy.

It’s a general term, but he’s happy and even though he’s not smiling right now because it’s so early and he could sleep in Minghao’s arms for another decade, his heart is happy. It feels light and ready, impervious and immortal. He doesn’t remember the last time he woke up feeling this way. Could it have been months? Years, maybe? It doesn’t matter now because all of that is in the past. Today is new; fresh.

Before he slips out the door, he digs the spare apartment key out of his trinket drawer and places it by the plate. However, he feels like it’s missing something. You can’t just leave a key there, right? That’s a little rude and in the event that Minghao’s absolutely blind from not wearing his glasses or contacts and having just woken up, it’s absolutely possible that he’ll miss the key.

So, he writes a quick note for him to place under it:

‘Good morning, Minghao. I hope you slept well. You’re really cute when you’re sleepy. Don’t worry about cleaning up, just enjoy breakfast and have a nice day at work. Love, Secret Agent GyuGyu.’

Work ghosts by in an instant.

He’s sure—absolutely sure—that Wonwoo noticed his change in mood this morning. Even Joshua points out that he’s been abducted by an alien and replaced with some hyper preschool teacher.

When Jeonghan comes in he gives Mingyu a pointed look. He definitely knows something and Mingyu now knows that he’s seeing Seungcheol—in what nature, he still doesn’t know, but knowledge that they know each other can’t go unacknowledged. It’s almost like meeting Jeonghan in the hallway steps on his brakes and the day is suddenly on hold. Has he encountered another time wizard? The mahogany haired man gives him a sly smile before he passes him on his way to the front desk to drop of a patient’s folder.

He’ll have to deal with that eventually, won’t he.

He can tell that he and Jeonghan are skirting around each other because they both hold
information they have no business knowing. Although, in his opinion, it’s a little bit childish now to
treat these nuggets of facts like they’re some contraband loot. So what if he’s with Minghao? So
what if he’s with Seungcheol? They’re all adults here. There’s nothing sly or sneaky about dating
another person even if the two are roommates. However, the possibility of Jeonghan eventually
filling the role of an in-law sends a shiver up his spine. Seungcheol walking Minghao down the aisle
and Jeonghan boring into Mingyu’s eyes with that crafty stare.

That’ll be the day.

“Why the good mood?” Wonwoo loops an arm around his shoulder and drags him into the
breakroom where no one has to hear them. Still, Mingyu doublechecks that Seokmin nor the workers
from the imaging department are in. He lets out a sigh and smiles. Before he can speak, Wonwoo
cuts him off, “Did you,” eyebrows, “with Minghao?”

Mingyu gives him a firm shove that causes him to burst into laughter, “No. I’m not going to
tell you if and when we have sex, so stop assuming that we go at it like rabbits every time we meet
up.”

“Okay, okay, fine.” He returns his arm to Mingyu’s shoulder, “Then what have you been up
to and why did Minghao miss their 7am practice?”

Oh no.

He missed practice? Again? Can they just not practice at ass o’clock in the morning when no
one gets any sleep, “There was practice?” Neither of the two dancers mentioned a 7am practice. It
must’ve just come up or they could have forgotten about it.

“Yeah. Soonyoung sent out a group text this morning for everyone to meet up if they’re free
and Chan had work, but at least he responded. The only one who didn’t respond was Minghao, so I
wonder what he could have gotten up to.” Wonwoo pinches his nape, “So, I assume you have to
undertake some responsibility, Mingyu. Waltzing in here all smiley like you’ve just won the lottery.”

“Ow, ow- He spent the night, okay?”

Wonwoo’s face is one of legitimate surprise, “He,” didn’t Mingyu just say, “he spent,” yes,
Wonwoo, get over it, “he spent the night?”

“Yes. He spent the night and we talked about feelings.” He rolls his eyes and stacks his patient
folders in preparation to hand them over to Joshua on his way out, “And now most of it is cleared
up.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“And where are you now?”

He crosses his arms. It’s obvious that Wonwoo wants him to say ‘boyfriends’ or something
like that. Most people want to hear words like ‘we’re official’ or ‘I’m his boyfriend now’, but after
their chat, Mingyu doesn’t really feel the need to give Wonwoo an answer like that. He doesn’t want
to label it either because he kind of understands Minghao a little better. He’s not going to belittle the
words that the blond took so long to stew over and piece together just because he knew Mingyu
needed them.

So, he says what he wants to say. He says something truthful and honest, without stretching or
exaggerating what they really are, “We’re somewhere comfortable.”
You can judge him if you want, but part of Mingyu really expects to see Minghao lounging on
his couch with the TV on and the windows open.

He even opens the door with a smile, arms ready for a big hug, but no one crashes into them.
His apartment is empty. The windows are shut. The blinds aren’t drawn. It’s dark and stuffy and
quiet and lonely.

The warm light from outside gives everything a slight sepia tone, but as much as it looks like
something straight out of a slow-burn movie, he feels much more comfortable with the blinds open.
He likes it when light pools on his carpet and on the linoleum and strikes the leaves of his plants
giving them a hot green glow. Sunlight is the only way he says sane in this desolate place and he’s
curious as to why Minghao decided to plunge his flat into darkness. They’ve been open every single
time he’s come over, so he probably only closed them by habit.

When he walks into the kitchen, it’s plain to see that Minghao had done all the dishes, dried all
the pans and plates, and filed them away in their respective places. The sink is dry, too. Tsk, it’s just
like that guy to not miss any details.

When he goes to his room, his bed is made, sheets and comforter tucked in so tightly he could
bounce a quarter off it. His alarm clock is adjusted to be at a precise angle and the cable he uses to
charge his phone is rolled up and packed away.

When he checks the bathroom, everything is where it normally is, except for the goddamn
toilet paper. It’s over, not under, you fool. Aside from that and the borrowed pillow and blanket that
sit neatly folded on the coffee table, everything is more than in place.

Wait, he takes that back.

On the dining table, next to Romeo, is a new little plant sitting on a piece of folded black
paper. Mint by the looks of it- did Minghao really rifle through all his windowsill plants just to check
that the only basic herb he’s missing is mint? Because that’s nitpicky and anal and a little spiteful. He
doesn’t even like mint—it’s the whole reason he doesn’t have one in the first place—but that’s okay.
Minghao doesn’t know that and it’s the thought that counts.

As for the letter, it’s extremely difficult to read thanks to the graphite. He has to tilt it at just the
right angle so that it catches the sunlight:

‘S. S. A. GyuGyu, I’m writing this report to tell you that—as much as I enjoyed breakfast—
you are an absolute imbecile if you expect me to spend the night and not clean up after myself. As
punishment, here is a mint plant that you have to take care of from now on. That’s right, I’m
punishing you with responsibility and I will check up on its health. I’ve named it Peter. Feel free to
change it. Best regards, S. S. A. HaoHao.’

Why does he have to be so cute?

‘P.S. You’re cute when you snore.’

Whoops.

‘P.P.S. Don’t worry, it didn’t keep me up.’
Oh, thank god.

‘P. P. P. S. This message will self-destruct in T-minus 10… 9… 8…’

He flicks the letter across the table like a frisbee. Somehow, it doesn’t seem like a stretch for Minghao to engineer a way for it to explode so he’ll err on the side of caution. He’d rather not end the day with soot or glitter in his face. Of course, the letter doesn’t combust. No worries, Minghao probably knows that he’s so clumsy that even warning him about an explosion might not help him avoid it.

For a little more than an hour, he doesn’t know how to feel.

Flopping into his bed with his work clothes on and before his shower feels foreign and out of routine, and he’s disappointed when the pillowcases and sheets don’t hold any trace of Minghao’s scent or warmth. The bracelet on his wrist, you ask? Well, once you have the real thing, no substitutes can compare. The silver chain is dense, but he’s gotten used to it. It feels like it’s a part of him now and when he takes it off, he feels naked and exposed even when he’s fully clothed. Ridiculous, right? He doesn’t think so.

In the past two months, he’s grown accustomed to Minghao’s constant presence. It has become routine and Mingyu’s a man of routine, but his counterpart thrives off of adapting to different circumstances. It’s fun—he’s shown him that—to make plans, scramble them, and end up somewhere else. It’s a little stressful, but you get that nostalgic satisfaction out of it; the feeling of victory after beating a really hard level in a game or solving a timed puzzle seconds before your clock hits zero. Is that adrenaline? Maybe, but he’d like to think that-

Ping.

Who- Jun? ‘Hey Mango’ oh no, the nickname has spread. Wonwoo will hear of this, ‘Are you free?’

‘Yeah?’

It takes the dancer almost five minutes to respond, ‘Do you wanna come to the studio at like 5? :D’ he waits because he’s still typing, ‘you can eat cake with us! :DDD’

Oh, that’s simple, ‘sure, I could go for some cake. But what should I get for hi mom.’ He sits send too quickly, ‘*Jihoon.’ Why does he bother using Swype when typing their names? There’s no way his phone can recognize stuff like that. Any non-western names are instant garbled messes to the predictive text algorithm.

‘You don’t need to get anything for Hi Mom lolololol can I send this to my gc? plz, mango.’

‘But it’s his birthday. And no.’

‘If you absolutely /have/ to get him something’ Mingyu sighs, why does he have to hit send without proofreading his texts. This is the worst. Calling Jihoon ‘hi mom’ might be worse than calling Minghao ‘money hot’, ‘the joint corks for his clarinet are weared down.’ He resists the urge to correct his spelling because he knows that he wasn’t too thrilled when Minghao corrected him before. Learning English is hard and all of American-English’s nuances make even his head spin and he’s a native speaker.

He does, however, appreciate Jun’s straightforward answer. No beating around the bush when it comes to presents—what a godsend, ‘I can do that.’
‘Cool. I’ll see you at 5 then :) also’

Also?

Also?

‘Also what, Jun?’

‘nvm :P’

That’s going to bug him for the rest of forever, thanks a lot, Jun. He doesn’t have much time to think about it because now he has to set out and locate whatever a ‘joint cork’ is. Also, the image of Jihoon playing the clarinet is a little funny to him for some reason. It’s likely because the closest thing Mingyu’s played to a clarinet is one of those crappy plastic recorders you have to play in elementary. Jihoon’s probably a little more experienced than that. He’s come to understand by now that the people working in and around the studio can be considered jacks of many trades. Each one of them is multitalented with hidden skills and superpowers. He wouldn’t be surprised if they decided to reveal their secret identities tonight and save the world from certain destruction before dinner.

As for this joint cork business, he hits the music store closest to his apartment. Winchester Woodwinds seems like a good starting place since they specialize in woodwinds (obviously) and have on-site specialists. He’s incredibly disappointed when they’re closed. Who closes this early on a Wednesday? It’s only 3. Don’t kids have music lessons after school? Fine, he’ll try the one on the other end of town.

Right, right, tomorrow is Thanksgiving. A lot of mom-and-pop shops might be closing down early to prepare for guests and dinner. And ugh, he forgot he agreed to go home. He really hopes his parents don’t have anything funny up their sleeves. They usually have quiet dinners, but they’re having their friends over this year. Oh, fuck, and he has to cook for his clinic friends. How did he forget about all this?

Minghao.

Goddammit, Minghao. He’s been so focused on Minghao that he lost all track of time. That’s scary, fucking time wizard—stealing hours and minutes and days—but, gosh, don’t hesitate to do it again. If Minghao asked it of him, he would even consider cancelling on his parents. He would settle for takeout and a night in without hesitation. Snuggling on the couch with comfort food and a pretty boy curled up on your lap will always beat sitting stiffly at a dining table full of old, traditional people.

Oh, ho, ho, if his mom heard those thoughts, she’d probably lecture him about the importance of family bonding and gathering to celebrate each other. He’d get a firm talking to and his dad would probably nag him as well before they’d dissolve into laughter and sweep it away. His parents are easy like that. Their moral codes are simple and clean and he never had to worry about getting in trouble as long as he stuck to those boundaries.

He kind of regrets not saying that he’d have a plus-one for the holiday.

Then again, Minghao did say he already planned to spend it with Seungcheol since the guy doesn’t have any immediate family here. There is that Friendsgiving thing on Friday that he promised to attend to—as Minghao’s date—and that’s something to look forward to. Maybe that’s all he needs to get through dinner and another lovely round of prying questions about his occupation and about
his education and about his relationship status.

It’ll be fine. It’ll be fine.

He’ll just say he’s not seeing anyone. It trumps having to explain the nature of his current relationship and it’s not like he’s planning to bring Minghao to meet his parents so early in their-yeah, he’s not going to make Minghao sit through dinner with his folks and their friends. No one deserves that. Plus, without warning, they could bring out embarrassing baby photos or—even worse—photos from high school. It’d really gouge out all the wounds that Minghao’s worked so hard to mend and that would be a shame.

For now, Minghao will remain his beautiful little secret just like all the others. His parents will never find out about any of them until he’s good and ready.

Conductor’s Connection is his only option left. That’s right, there are only two music stores in town. It’s what you get for living in a small city-township in the middle of nowhere. Also, what’s with music stores and alliteration. He supposes they do cater to a lot of kids and families and that’s the reasoning for their silly spelling, but the important matter is, “Do you guys have joint corks?”

“What size?”

Frick, “Uh,” he panics, “I’ll be totally honest. I know nothing about music, but my friend,” is Jihoon his friend? “plays the clarinet and he said his joint cork was wearing down.”

“Oh, well,” she thinks for a moment, “if you don’t know which piece it is, we do have general replacement kits for all five pieces. It’ll cost more than just buying one, but chances are if one part is worn down, all of them might need a changing.”

“Sure. Let’s go with that.”

“Alrighty!” her smile is bright, “Give me a second to finish restringing this violin for a customer and I’ll ring you up. Feel free to take a look around.”

The music store is messy and disorganized. It’s chaotic, to say the least. The main room’s floor is covered in stuff. Anything and everything from music stands, drum kits, shelves of composition books, and a wine rack full of drumsticks pepper the showroom. In the back wing, guitars hang from the wall—floor to ceiling—and cellos, harps, and electric keyboards create a tight maze to navigate. Down the only hallway, there’s a waiting room on one side and rooms for lessons on the other. Everything is covered in this off-white and chipping paint. Their deep teal carpet is stained just like the ceiling tiles are, from rain and wear.

As he walks through the shop, it’s evident that some places have been a little well-loved, and some places have gone neglected. There are shelves of used books with dated covers, fading prints, and a thin coating of dust. On some other shelves, the books are pristine and crisp with more modern designs and instrumental renditions of pop songs and classics.

The same goes for instruments. One piano, in particular, has yellowed keys and looks like it’s been on the showroom floor since the opening of this place. It’s the only mini-grand in the room and when he presses a key, the note that comes out is a little sour and muffled. The rest of the keyboards are electronic, made of matte plastic and wires. There’s even one that looks extra cool because it’s framed with clear acrylic. The price on it matches its aesthetic. He understands the value of music and the craftsmanship that must go into making instruments, but for all the kids that need something as beautiful as an outlet like music, it’s unfortunate that the price has to be so high.
He wasn’t afforded an opportunity to play anything growing up. He picked up a guitar a couple times in high school because his friends played during lunch, but that was about it. He can play one chord, C major, and that’s it. In recent years, he hasn’t really had the desire to pick up something and play it. He likes music, don’t get him wrong, but the prospect of learning something new from an absolute zero is a little daunting—*is that a tail?*

*Is that a dog?*

Nevermind, all his reservations about coming into a decrepit music store with questionable fungus growing in the crown molding has been thrown to the wind because *that’s a dog! A cute dog!* And any store with a dog is a reputable, 5-star, best Yelp-rated store with excellent customer service and amazing employees.

Mingyu patters after the black lab, its face growing a white mask from years upon years of guarding this old shop. He crouches down and offers out a hand to sniff, and the pooch gives him a lick before slowly flopping over on the floor near the cash register, panting happily and waiting for a tickle. Its age shows in the way it sorely bends its joints and stretches them out, but a happy tail is a telltale sign that it’s still a puppy at heart.

“Oh! There you are.” The girl from earlier pokes her head over the counter to look down at Mingyu, “I see you’ve found Toot!”

*Toot.* That’s quite possibly the most perfect name for a music store dog, “I love you, Toot.”

She laughs at Mingyu’s enthusiasm, “Yep, I’d back up before you find out why she has that name.” Why? Will she spring up to play a French horn or something—Oh, she means that this dog farts a lot, doesn’t she.

Mingyu sighs as he fishes out his wallet and checks out whatever a ‘joint cork’ is. It looks like tape, “Oh, so that’s what it is.”

“Mhmm, our kits come with a cleaner and adhesive to apply the strips.” He nods, “Eighteen dollars, please. On the card?” he nods again as she plugs it into the reader. Toot is now resting her head on his foot and he’s legally obligated to stand here forever now.

“Mingyu?”

He turns to see the devil himself, “Jihoon, what are you doing here?” Said man has a leather bag hanging off of one shoulder and his hair is shoved up into a black beanie, “No practice today?”

“Nah, there’s practice today.” he walks towards them, “Hey, Allison, did James drop by with my Code 61? Using my old Akai MPK has been a real headache.”

She presses a few buttons and waits for the machine to process a receipt, “Huh. He was supposed to bring it in, like, yesterday, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think he has yet, but let me go check the back after I ring him up.” Allison raps her fingers on the glass countertop.

“You can go now, he doesn’t mind.” Excuse you, Jihoon. Mingyu is a man with time, but he doesn’t want to spend all of his time standing here. In addition to that, he’s buying Jihoon’s birthday present and seeing a present before it’s wrapped with a pretty bow and sparkly giftwrap is a violation of standard birthday protocol.
But, alas, Allison listens to Jihoon who he supposes has seniority over her, “I thought you were an audio engineer. What are you doing in an instrument store?”

“Last I recall, instruments make noise.” It’s a little awkward because they haven’t really spoken since the dinner. He won’t count the few minutes they were in the same room at the hospital. However, Jihoon doesn’t sound antagonistic or brash. If anything, he sounds perfectly normal and relaxed. Maybe it’s because he knows that Mingyu’s not in his element and he’s on home turf, “I let a friend—the owner of this shop—borrow one of my keyboards to play with, but he was supposed to give it back a few weeks ago. The learning curve for it is too big, like I told him, but no one ever listens.” He shakes his head, “They think ‘oh, it’s electronic, push a few buttons, beep, boop, masterpiece’ but it’s a lot more complicated than that.”

Mingyu laughs nervously. What’s he supposed to say about that? “That sucks, I hope he brought it back.” Yeah, that works.

He gives Mingyu a weird look before nudging him over just a hair, “Anyways, what are you getting? You should have waited, I could’ve gotten you a discount.” His voice is light and intrigued, different from the weight and strain it carried all those hours at the banquet, “Joint corks?” he peeks at the counter while petting Toot and squishing her cheeks, “I never took you for a clarinet player.”
“Oh, I’m not.” Mingyu weighs his words heavily. This is whole cake thing is a surprise and he shouldn’t have any clue that it’s Jihoon’s birthday. However, he can tell that the expectant man can easily read through any lie he’s about to tell, sharp eyes already searching his face for tells, “This is for you. Happy birthday.”

There’s no easy way out of anything these days, so telling the truth is the closest thing he can have to an escape. It seems like it isn’t the wrong choice because Jihoon brightens up immediately and smiles—he smiles, and it’s adorable—and tilts his head after thinking a moment, “Huh?”

His brows knit in confusion. It seems like the idea of sudden gift-giving has him a little flustered, “Minghao,” not Jun because that would make it too obvious that there’s a plan in motion, “mentioned that your birthday was close to his,” Nice save, Mingyu, “and so I thought I would get you something small for him to deliver for me, but since you’re already here, why don’t you just take it and save me some giftwrap.” He laughs to hide is obvious panic. The sweat is already pricking at the nape of his neck and his palms are fogging up the glass countertop.

“Oh,” he blinks a few times, adding up the facts and nods, “thanks. I really appreciate it.”

“Sorry, it’s not in the back.” The brunette comes back to the register and finishes checking Mingyu out, handing him a receipt for his signature and sliding his card over, “I can give him a call if you want.” Mingyu takes this moment of distraction to quickly text Jun, turning just slightly so his phone screen is out of sight.

‘ABORT ABORT. Jihoon is in the music store with me. I told him the corks were for his birthday. What do?’ After hitting send, he mutes his ringtone.

“Nah,” Jihoon waves and shakes his head, “I can’t wait that long. I just thought I’d drop by to check on my way to the studio- thanks for checking, though.” The last part is tagged on almost as an afterthought, as if Jihoon had to remember to thank her.

“No prob.” She smiles and takes the receipt back from Mingyu, handing him the customer copy, “Have a nice day!” He takes the small packet of joint corks and places them into Jihoon’s hands—resisting the urge to ruffle his hair because the man looks incredibly smitten with his small present—and pats him on the shoulder.

“Thanks!” Mingyu shuffles the paper into his wallet before feeling a slight vibration from his phone. Jihoon also turns to leave, following just a step behind him.

‘oh fuck what? OnO’

Passing a glance over his shoulder to make sure Jihoon’s not paying him any attention, ‘He’s on his way to practice. He’s following me out. What do???’

‘play it cool B) just don’t tell him about the cake’ Whew, he’s glad Jun isn’t upset about it. He’s really living up to his name as the most easy-going instructor at the studio, ‘thanks mango <3’.

It’s apparent that something is bugging Jihoon and maybe he’s just too polite to say anything considering Mingyu just gave him something. He has it on the tip of his tongue, waiting to come forward and just when he thinks that the audio engineer will be good and polite and not say anything, “How did Minghao know that I played the clarinet?” comes and catches him off-guard.
Dammit, Jihoon.

You just had to go and make Mingyu put his witty Wonwoo hat on and work around this. Okay, it’s information that Minghao shouldn’t know. Does that mean that it’s information that Jun can know? He wants to avoid throwing that dancer under the bus especially since he’s doing all this sneaky cake-making behind his back, “I don’t know.” He shrugs, “He mentioned it when I asked if you had any,” he has to think really hard, “hobbies?”

Jihoon narrows his eyes, flapping the package against the palm of his opposite hand impatiently- idly? Mingyu’s not sure. He hasn’t known him long enough to read into the gesture, “I haven’t played since high school.” He crosses his arms.

He plunges deep into his archives for this next fact, “Maybe Soonyoung told him?” If he recalls correctly, the two were friends since, so the blond knowing these facts might not be too far of a stretch.

And it seems to work!

The shorter man nods, accepting the explanation and sliding the packet into his messenger bag before fishing out his keys. The suspicion hasn’t left, Mingyu can feel it in the air, but at least he’s not asking any more questions, “Thanks for this, Mingyu.” He takes a step back to go to his car.

But Mingyu just has to open up his big mouth and ask, “How are things with you and Jun?”

“Me and Jun?” he plucks out the key for his car and unlocks it with the remote. It’s clear that he’s not going to be long-winded, but he doesn’t expect his return to be this short, “None of your business.”

It doesn’t necessarily feel like a slap to the face, but he does feel the frustration rushing to his cheeks, “It is my business. Jun’s my friend and I want to make sure you’re not hurting him.”

“Even if I do hurt him,” Jihoon snaps, “it’s not your business to poke around in other people’s personal matters.” Wow, what did he do to warrant this temperamental birthday boy? Geez, he just wanted to check-in on how they were doing. Even saying something like they’ve gotten friendlier or closer would have sufficed and Mingyu would have probably left him alone. Probably, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to sound so,” the way he rewinds and backs up to realign his words is vaguely reminiscent of Minghao’s method of speaking when he’s upset, “yeah.”

“Yeah?”

“Jun and I are fine. He likes me, I like him, we’re fine.” His eyes point at the ground, counting cracks and loose pebbles in the paving, “We’re okay.”

“Are you?” Mingyu thumbs his bracelet. He doesn’t want to ruin Jihoon’s mood. It’s still his birthday and there’s going to be a surprise at the studio later. He should be trying his best to cheer him up, but he likes Jun. Jun is his pun-slinging, emoticon-sending, beautiful-voiced, goofy friend, so he has to know if they’re going to be okay.

Jihoon takes another step towards his car, “As okay as situations will allow.” A short smirk graces his lips and flies away with the next gust of wind, “I don’t know how much you know, Mingyu, but please try to understand that our circumstances aren’t like yours or Won-” he sighs, “or Wonwoo’s. In the decade that I’ve known Jun, he’s wound up being something akin to a metronome for me; constant. Call it cowardice or selfishness,” he shakes out his hair and breathes. It seems like he resets what little composure was lost for a minute. He returns to a slightly brighter state, “but I’m
more scared of losing him than I am concerned for either of our feelings towards each other.”

“But-

“I’m a self-centered person,” He shrugs on a façade that Mingyu can see through but can’t understand, “and Jun is a selfless person. Like gasoline and water, we just don’t mix.” The affirmation in his voice makes it seem like he’s already come to a decision, that everything Jun hopes to talk about after the results of finals will be for nothing, “If you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to go to the studio.”

He wants to pry Jihoon’s door open even after he speeds out of the parking lot and into the busy street without giving him a second look. It’s so conflicting. His words and his expressions and the context of everything—it doesn’t add up. He never thought that he’d be the type to be able to read people well—he takes things as they come and receives people openly—but he’s certain that Jihoon is hiding something or leaving something unsaid. What does it take to break a hardened person like him?

Well, no sense stressing over it now. He’s long gone. If anything, Mingyu’s worries are consumed by thoughts of him ruining Jihoon’s reaction to the twice-made cake that Minghao and Jun worked so hard on-

It’s decided.

If Jihoon doesn’t appreciate that cake, he’s going to clock him in the face. That’s right, Mingyu’s first real scuffle in his entire life will be against some stout punk that is half his size.

He kills an hour driving around town and dropping by Office Depot to find new ink for his printer and a pack of pens for his desk. Nothing new, nothing special. However, he’s distracted. Still stewing over the words he shared with Jihoon, he can’t help but grow concerned over the nature of his and Jun’s relationship. What if he really did stir things up for them and overturn some stones that needed to stay seated for a few more moons?

Ping. Soonyoung?

‘u flying f ude’ he doesn’t have the mental capacity to deal with Jihoon’s situation and this firecracker, ‘u’, yes, ‘u funki gn’, yes, get it over with Soon, your boyfriend said the same thing, ‘u slept w ih t m onagho’.

That took a while. He must’ve been teaching a longer class if the message took that long to go from Wonwoo to Soonyoung’s keyboard, ‘Yep.’

‘how?? ???? ?? ?’

Why? What? Why is he asking ‘how’? ‘huh?’

‘HOW?’

‘I tucked him in? Kissed him goodnight? Turned off the lights?’

‘no’ No? ‘not that’

‘I don’t have the energy for guessing games, Soon.’
It’s come to a point where he wonders if Soonyoung purposely mistypes things and hits space too many times just to add to the aesthetic of his errors because he’s suddenly typing perfectly fine, ‘how did you get hao to sleep somewhere thats not his bed’

He’s gotten Minghao to fall asleep outside of his bed more than once, ‘Magic’

‘ha ha very funny did you hypnotize him or something’ Soonyoung’s texts never have much punctuation so it’s hard to tell if he’s being sarcastic or not, ‘hes been in a good mood today so whatever you did thanks’

‘You’re welcome?’

‘his students thank you too’ Does that mean no one had to whip out the ‘get along shirt’? ‘now hurry up and get ur ass to the studio for cake’

‘See you soon.’

‘See you SOON ;)'  

Conversations with Soonyoung are nice but very exhausting. Text messages are easier to metabolize, but his quick and jittery personality manages to come through the little pixels on his screen and drain him. Whatever, he’ll get to the studio, have a bite of cake, give Minghao a kiss, and make his way home.

If only things were that simple.

Mingyu shows up at the studio and Yixing greets him happily, shooting eyes behind him every three seconds just to make sure that no one knows he’s there, “Jun told me to hide you in the breakroom until the coast is clear.” He patters around the front desk and pushes Mingyu to move with his hands, “First door on your left.”

He appreciates Yixing’s enthusiasm and ducks into the breakroom without much hesitation in his step. Yugyeom greets him first, setting down his water bottle with a flip and returning to his phone. The breakroom isn’t as big as the one they have at the clinic, it’s quite cozy. A fridge sits at the end of the counterspace while on top of it sits the sink, microwave, and a dated coffeemaker. There’s an open space where a couch should go—where a couch probably sat at one point or another and caused the slight discoloration in the carpet—and their table is surrounded by brightly colored wheelie chairs. These vibrant and slightly garish colors would feel right in the energy or atmosphere of the clinic, but feel perfectly situated here.

The more apparent difference between their breakroom and the clinic’s is that the studio breakroom homes an entire wall of screens. It’s likely where a chunk of their budget went during the renovation. Six sizable monitors play choreographies from everywhere and everything; from street dance to Broadway to traditional movements. There’s even a screen playing Animal Planet so they can study the mobility of mammals.

Yugyeom seems to be watching a children’s stage in Beijing on and off, “Here for the cake?”

“They told me to come for the cake.” Mingyu chuckles to fill the air of awkwardness.

“I hope this doesn’t end up like Minghao’s birthday- wait, I take that back.”

“Why?”

“Minghao shoved a fistful of leftover cake into BamBam’s pants and it was hilarious.” He
unlocks his phone to read a text message, “Jun says you can head to the practice room now.”

“Huh?”

“A3, the room where you tried to stop Soon and Hao from decking each other in the face.” He knows where the room is, he’s just confused as to why Minghao doesn’t come get him. He has to get the cake anyway, right? Whatever, he’ll play along. “But you should go around through the right hallway instead so Wooz won’t see you on his way to the bathroom.”

“Who?”

“Wooz, sorry, Jihoon.”

There’s something a little familiar in the nickname, like he’s seen it before. Maybe on his Instagram? He doesn’t really remember, “Kay.”

He heads out into the hallway, turning right instead of left, passing the lobby again with a short nod to Yixing, and makes his way through the right hallway. The whole studio wraps around and the hallways connect in a loop with A3 and A4 at the back.

When he ducks into the studio space, Jun ushers him over to their little group. Soonyoung jumps on his back and Vernon waves. He makes sure to steer clear of Chan since it’s very possible that the youngest of the six is still a little bitter towards him, but the black-haired dancer doesn’t seem bothered by his presence. He looks a little excitable even, whispering to Vernon, “Is he here?”

“He should be?” Vernon checks his phone and shrugs when there’s no new message, “I don’t know. Maybe they got caught in traffic.”

Jun speaks quietly as well, “Should we just go through with it?”

“You already told Minghao to go get the cake.” Soonyoung is still getting piggybacked by Mingyu, his chin resting on his shoulder and his legs are clamped around his waist. He couldn’t put him down even if he tried. It should have been obvious and expected, but Wonwoo isn’t invited. That fact alone makes Mingyu a little sad. He guesses that it’s for the best. Jihoon still hasn’t worked out those wrinkles in their relationship with him and summoning him on his birthday probably won’t be a comfortable place to do it, “And Hoonie’s in the bathroom, so the timing is good. It’s fine, Junnie.”

“What if the cake sucks?”

“It doesn’t suck.” Chan steals the words out of his mouth, “Believe in yourself a little.”

“Yeah,” Vernon throws an arm around his shoulder, “Jihoon will be able to taste your efforts.”

“Why are all of you crowded into the corner of th- why is Mingyu here?” he dries the water on his face with his t-shirt, dropping the damp collar back to his chest. His bangs are tied up in a little palm tree, and it’s plain to see that he’s been sweating just as much as everyone else in this room—especially Soonyoung who’s hands are grossly moistening Mingyu’s shirt, god, please let go, you stinky, little sun—because the droplets pill at his temples and run down his jawline.

Mingyu turns to face him—turning Soonyoung as well, “Oh, I just got here because I’m,” Jun shakes his head, Chan shakes his head, Vernon shakes his head, “here to,” their eyes bore into him, telepathically communicating that they still want to hold onto the element of surprise even though it’s obvious that they’re up to something, “see Minghao. Where is he?”
The entire wall that lines the hallway is Plexiglas and all the other walls are covered in mirrors.

There’s no hiding that Minghao’s carefully trotting along with the tiramisu balanced precariously on a cream-colored ceramic cake stand with lacy, fluted edges. If Jihoon turned around he’d see him. If they budge even just a hair, Jihoon could see between them and catch the reflection. They have to distract him as Minghao opens the door and signals Jun over.

Soonyoung nudges Mingyu’s pocket, “Oh no.” Why are you oh no-ing- OH NO.

His phone takes a spill on the floor in the center of their not-so-dense circle of people, but it’s enough to hold Jihoon’s attention as Jun and Minghao switch places. He’s not sure if he wants to yell at Soonyoung or- no, no, he wants to yell at Soonyoung, “Soon- why? What the hell.”

“My bad. Is it okay?”

Vernon already has his eyes closed and he’s shaking his head. Chan’s face is one of absolute disbelief, “It’s probably fine.” Minghao chimes in and leans forward to look at it, “Y’know, Samsung’s glass is usually more reliable.” He says this even though his phone screen is smashed.

“Are you going to pick it up?” Jihoon’s eyes are still on the device, but Mingyu sneaks a peek at Jun who is lighting sparklers and glittery white candles as Yixing, Yugyeom, and another handful of instructors and staff tiptoe through the door.

When the dancer nods at him, he bends down to slowly pick up the phone. Before he can flip it around to check for damage, someone hits the lights and the studio goes black except for the small, delicate sparks flying out from the cake. Jun holds it as far away from himself as possible because the sparks are hitting him in the face.

The general roar of celebration erupts in the small space and they burst into a (surprisingly on-key) happy birthday song. It floods them with jolly cheer. He has a feeling that Jihoon hates being manhandled more than he hates blowing out candles, but they grab him and throw him into the air with such fervor that he nearly rebounds off the ceiling before Yixing stops them. It’s a little too late since he’s already involuntarily kicked a ceiling tile out of place. Jun sidesteps the little crumble of dust and debris that trickles from above them.

Jumping off his back and running a circle around them, “Make a wish!” Soonyoung coaxes his equilibrium back to normal only to shove him in front of Jun who holds the cake out. The candles are a little crooked because you can’t really poke them into the cookies very well, so the mascarpone is all they have to hold onto. But the homemade feel of it, the rustic imperfections that Minghao tried to cover up with chocolate shavings and cocoa powder, those make it feel very humble and heartwarming.

The man seems caught up on something, like he’s still trying to process what’s happening. He’s surprised, that’s for sure, but there’s some weird complication to whatever’s written on his face when he looks at Jun smiling through the candlelight. It’s a little similar to Minghao’s expression when Mingyu had tried (and failed) to surprise him, but there’s something a bit more bittersweet about it.

Why does he look so lost? Why does he look so defeated? It’s your birthday, Jihoon. This is your person-of-interest trying to make you happy and all your friends are here to celebrate you.

Why do you look so sad?

Jun’s voice is quiet and it’s likely that only Mingyu can hear him because he’s attentive since
everyone else is chanting for him to make a wish, “You don’t have to. It’s fine to just blow out the candles.”

He’s even surprised that Jihoon hears him because right after he looks up at Jun’s face and his downcast stare, he shuts his eyes and wishes in earnest. He doesn’t know what’s going through the audio technician’s head, but the man wishes for the longest while, eyeballs darting around inside closed eyelids, like he’s imagining pictures and remembering times. He laces his fingers together and his nails dig into the backs of his hands.

Jihoon exhales with a deep breath, destroying all the flames in one blow. The room erupts in whoops and hollers, but he’s silent. He’s attentive and alert, focused and homing in on one thing. He’s listening, just listening for his person to speak.

Quietly, so quietly, so quietly as if anything over a single decibel would shake the room to its core, Jun smiles fondly and finally meets his expectant eyes.

“Happy birthday, Xiao Wu.”
Mingyu would like to ask what that nickname means, but there’s an immediate disturbance from the doorway.

“They couldn’t have waited two more minutes?” It’s Seungkwan. He’s yelling and carrying three baby blue boxes with the DonutBoo logo stamped in white. Next to him, with a Costco canvas bag presumably filled with goodies, is someone that he’s been anticipating for a while, Seungcheol. It seems like they arrived together. The man ruffles Seungkwan’s hair and tuts him into the room.

He somehow looks different with his hair neat and tidy and his work-clothes still on. Black button-up, black slacks, black belt—isn’t that some sort of Asian celebration taboo? The man reaches into his bag and pulls out a party popper, instantly joining in the festivities and running around crazily. That certainly exemplifies the duality of man.

Mingyu sometimes forgets that Seungcheol and Jihoon know each other rather well.

Minghao had mentioned on occasion that the two aren’t exactly close friends, but he’d still call them friends in a general sense. They go out for coffee sometimes just to talk about projects outside of work. Sometimes Jihoon shares his in-progress tracks to inspire Seungcheol’s writing. Sometimes Seungcheol sends a rough transcript to keep Jihoon’s imagination fueled. A ‘circle-jerk of creativity’ is what Minghao had deemed it however many nights ago.

“Happy birthday, Jihoon!” the honey-haired man shouts over the crowd, standing on his tippy toes to wave. Seungkwan is welcomed by everyone and Vernon moves the doughnuts over to the bench as Chan cues up the music—something peppy and bright to fit the birthday mood. Soonyoung finally relinquishes his grasp on Mingyu to pester Seungcheol for a party popper. The older man gives up the goods only after the blond stops shaking him so vigorously. Maybe that’s why Seungcheol doesn’t like him as much as Jun. Popper in hand, he slithers his way through the crowd and pulls the string with a firm tug, releasing a rain of neon paper into the air above Jihoon’s head.

While Seungcheol is no stranger to meeting new people and introducing himself, Vernon is carting Seungkwan around. He is literally pushing him here and there like a shopping cart because the shorter man’s worn Vans have no traction on the polished floors. He’s shy and a little awkward in such a crazy environment and Mingyu doesn’t understand why. DonutBoo’s is packed with people—regulars and strangers—every morning and he didn’t seem to have an issue handling them. Most of the people in the room are their age and younger; a wholesome crop of high school and college-aged kids. Why does he seem a little nervous now? Maybe he has a traumatic past with young friend-groups. Maybe he’s a germaphobe.

Whatever, maybe he should mind his own business.

Jihoon, unlike all the people around him, is just focused on Jun and the cake in his hands; unfazed by the streamers and silly string in his hair. He’s not really smiling—well, there’s a smile on his lips, it’s similar to the kind of tight smile that Minghao makes sometimes, but it doesn’t correlate with whatever’s happening in his head—he’s just staring. What, Jihoon, are you taken with the man’s sheer beauty? Are you enamored by his efforts? Regardless, he’s so concentrated that Jun’s taken notice and is shifting uncomfortably under his gaze; equal parts unsure what to say and unsure what to do with the cake.

Thankfully, Minghao takes his friend’s cue and calls him over to the side so they can dissect and distribute the tasty slices. He leaves Jihoon to be swallowed up by their crowd of friends. Jun
takes his summoning seriously and pours all his attention into cutting the tiramisu into fairly even pieces. There probably isn’t enough for everyone, but that’s why Seungkwan brought doughnuts. Mingyu shuffles to the side—getting out of the way—and thinks about helping the two with doling out slices a hand whaps down on his shoulder.

The roughly textured fingers feel unfamiliar, and his voice is what sends a chill down Mingyu’s spine, “So, Minghao didn’t come home last night.” All of Mingyu flexes at once, it’s his body’s way of preparing for Seungcheol to stab him in the gut after he kneads his thumb into the side of his nape. When he carefully turns around to face him, there’s a mischievous and knowing grin on the man’s face. It’s caused by that whole underlying parental mojo he’s got because his face says ‘just try to lie to me, I know what you did’ and even though he did nothing wrong, Mingyu feels like he’s been caught red-handed.

“Sorry?” he stammers, trying to mentally untense his shoulders and relax, but that’s hard to do when your significant other’s surrogate father is beaming up at you with the corners of his eyes wrinkled up, irises gleaming with impish curiosity.

“We’ll talk later.” He pats Mingyu on the back and wiggles a finger into his face, “Behave yourself, Mingyu.” before joining the group of people in their cheers. How can one person be so friendly but so intimidating? It doesn’t add up. Look at him. Look at him being all buddy-buddy with every person in the room. All of the instructors already know him, even Yixing pats him on the back with familiarity. He’s no stranger to the studio.

He really is in a league of his own and even though he has no reason to feel insecure or to compare himself to Seungcheol anymore, he can’t help it. He’s still out of place in what used to be his childhood gym. He still doesn’t know all of Minghao’s friends. He still needs a lot of time to adapt to new situations and people. Seungcheol does it effortlessly. He sways to the music and jumps around like the tunes flow directly into his bones—it’s not like he’s dancing professionally by any means, but he’s moving with the beat—, like he doesn’t care if he looks like a fool because he’s having fun.

Compared to his previously uptight image of Seungcheol, the picture of him now—with his gummy smile and wide eyes adding to his loud whoops and pseudo-aggressive partying—doesn’t make sense. Minghao rarely talks about Seungcheol and doesn’t bring him up unless he’s prompted, so Mingyu knows very little about him. He does know, however, that Minghao’s image of Seungcheol is that of a doting older brother who often acts childish. Like a plant, he needs to be watered with attention in order to grow. For Mingyu’s sake, Minghao usually lists off negative things about his roommate, but if you were to take those words and neutralize them, it’s plain to see that he and Mingyu share similar traits.

And he hates to admit it but ‘over-protective’ and ‘stubbornly nosey’ can easily translate to Seungcheol also making Minghao feel secure and safe. He can’t help it. He’s competitive, especially when the blond’s affections are on the line.

He only snaps out of his trance when Minghao bumps their hips together and sets him off balance. His bubbly laugh brings him back to reality, “You good?”

He doesn’t have any cake.

He and Jun had handed out all the slices already which is a shame because—while he and Minghao got to eat the leftovers—Jun didn’t get to have any. He made the cake, too, that’s just unfair, “No cake?”
Unsure if he’s allowed to touch Minghao in front of all his friends and coworkers so openly during business hours, he keeps his hands to himself, crossing them over his chest, “Nah, let the kids have it.” Is it bad that he finally feels grounded when Minghao leans into his side and wraps an arm around his back, holding him at his waist? It prompts his arm to come up and rest on his shoulder. The feather-weight dancer has become a sort of anchor. He’s glad that the arm brace has returned to its rightful place, “You tired? You didn’t get much sleep last night.”

The way Minghao speaks to him without looking at him isn’t as unwelcoming as he thought it’d be. His eyes are simply resting on the pool of people in the middle of the room. It’s actually a little nice that they can speak casually without the need to be so intensely into each other like the couples in movies and on TV, “A little. I’ll probably go to bed early since I have a long drive tomorrow.”

“Oh, right, you’re going home to see your parents, right?”

“Mhmm.”

“Hey,” he gives him a little squeeze, calling his attention, so Mingyu looks away from the party to meet him halfway. Those big, brown eyes hold all things good in the world. It seems like he hesitates just a bit before saying the next part, “tell them I said hello,” he wonders, briefly, why it takes so much effort for Minghao to request something like that, “and that their son looks like a squid on the dancefloor.”

“Um, excuse you?” Mingyu pulls on his ear, careful to avoid the piercings but hard enough so that Minghao yelps, “If I can’t dance, that just means that you and Soon sucked at teaching me.” He gives him a shove.

Minghao’s quick to push him back, “Yeah? Show me a move, then.” So, Mingyu waits for the beat and tries to cross his legs a moment before he drops low and spins as he stands again, carefully balancing on his heel to make an extra round. Fancy foot work, you know.

“Get it, Mango!” Soonyoung runs up to them, jumping with the beat as Minghao shakes his head. He grabs the other blond and makes him jump as well. Vernon, stiff arms down at his sides, flails over to them like a fish out of water.

His head bobs and whips every time he lands, “Eyy, what’s up, guys?”

“We’re teaching Mingyu how to dance.” What kind of stamina do these guys have? To be able to go through hours of practice and then bounce like this indefinitely must burn your calves.

“Oh, cool. Jump this way.” Vernon pulls on Minghao’s hood and drags their bumbling posse over to the crowd where he sucks Seungkwan and Seungcheol into the mass and pretty soon everyone is jumping at once. Without realizing it, he’s jumping exactly on beat, everyone is.

He loses himself in the music and in the energy of the people surrounding him. What sense is there in caring about how you look when everyone is acting childish and crazy together? They’re all having a good time and that’s how the next thirty minutes pass. We’ll say he danced, but in all honesty, Mingyu still looks like a loose squid. Instead of making fun of him, Vernon and Seungkwan copy his sloppy and floppy dance moves and pretty soon Soonyoung and Minghao are following them. Do they look like idiots? Probably. Is Yixing filming this for their YouTube channel? Probably. Does Mingyu care? Nope.

Some students spar on the wooden floor, taking turns to challenge their instructors and because this isn’t on class-time, Soonyoung and Minghao have shed their serious roles and have melted into
flexible and experimental moves. Of course, under the watchful eyes of Seungcheol and Yixing, Minghao’s not pulling any risky moves out of his ass. No flips, flops, or things of that nature. He doesn’t need those to keep up with their students. He moves with the fluidity and precision akin to that of a sewing machine. Look, he knows it’s a weird comparison, but it’s sharp and fast and he can tone it down so it’s achingly slow. Each movement is made with intention and he defeats each student with a pipeline of similar moves.

When someone challenges Jun while he’s halfway through a doughnut, Jihoon puts down his empty plate and pushes him out of the way to go head-to-head with the student. It surprises Mingyu at least—that Jihoon would be ready to play like this—but he supposes there are many layers to a grouchy ogre like him. And while he is surprised that Jihoon would be ready to throw down, it surprises everyone else that the audio engineer can hold his own in a freestyle battle. Soonyoung nods with approval, a bit of haughtiness as if to tell everyone ‘I told you so’.

He knows that the idea of including Vernon and Jihoon on the team is to gather people who vibed with their music the best. There’s something in the way Jihoon moves that’s a little hesitant. Every time a new song starts, he has to wait a few beats and he flicks his fingers around, like he’s counting or shooing off a bug. As soon as he finishes that ritual, he hits all the beats on time. Witchcraft, that’s what it must be.

Jihoon isn’t the only one being challenged. More so than Soonyoung and Minghao and Jun who are established in this studio, more so than the other part-time instructors, Chan’s the one being asked to duel. He’s still a student and everyone wants to pick a (friendly) bone with him. Most of them give up after the first two rounds, but it’s plain to see that more of them still want to see how good he is. Despite his past assumptions about the youngest on the team, Mingyu’s come to realize that Chan isn’t antagonizing any of the kids or rubbing his victory in their faces. He pats them on the back, says they’ve worked hard, and tells them to keep practicing.

As the party fizzes out—as it would have inevitably done because the kids have homework and the instructors have other classes to teach—the room empties. The only people remaining are the dance team headed to finals, their boss, Seungkwan, and Seungcheol- and Mingyu, can’t forget Mingyu. Everyone seems to be occupied with their own conversations except for Minghao who bumps into his side again.

“Thanks for letting me spend the night, by the way.”

“I still want to yell at you for cleaning up.” He hip-checks Minghao, making him stumble to the side only to boomerang back to him.

“Did you seriously expect me to leave your apartment in shambles? How rude.” He tosses his hair back into his cap, “What kind of uncivilized—”

“Sorry I snored, by the way.” How was he supposed to know? No one has ever told him, “I hope you slept okay.” He pats Minghao’s head idly, taking his hand back when he shifts the weight on his feet just slightly. He’s not sure if that’s a cue to stop or not, but it’s better to play it safe.

“It was fine.” He mumbles, “Slept better than I have the last few months, so, thanks for that.”

That’s just unfair. Are you telling him that you can only sleep well when you’re sleeping together? Because Mingyu’s been having that worry all day. It’s been in the back of his head since the first time he dozed off at the studio. How is he going to find peace if they win during finals and Minghao flies off to some faraway place? Nope, nope, nope. No time to think about that, he’s going to change the subject, “You said I was cute.”
“So?” He elbows him gently, “You said I was cute.”

“So, are we both cute?” He elbows him back.

“No way,” heavy arms sling over their shoulders, separating them, “Minghao’s way cuter.”

“It’s not a contest, Soon.” Minghao ducks and tries to throw the older blond, but Soonyoung quickly spins out of the way, pulling Mingyu with him, “We can both be cute.”

“Enough pillow talk,” he singsongs, suffocating the PT in a headlock, “let’s get a group picture in and get back to practice.”

“Fine.” Minghao fixes his hair again and pulls out his phone as he gathers the attention of the others, “August!” A dancer making his way through the hall startles and turns around to see who called his name. Minghao beckons him over from the doorway, “Can you take a picture for us? I’ll give you a doughnut.”

“Doughnut?” he pokes his head into the room, “Okay, sure.” Another cute boy with a cute accent. Geez, Minghao, do you just stockpile them in the back or something? He tosses his water bottle to the side and dries his hands on his pants. Soonyoung shuffles Mingyu over to their group of people where everyone is getting ready for the awkward family photo. He can’t help but notice that Chan frowns for just a second before August calls their attention back to the front, “Hào-gē, nǐ kěyǐ gào sù tā men smile yī diǎn, ba?”

“No.” Minghao shakes his head, smiling and settling into his place, “You can yell at students, you can yell at them, too.”

The student looks a little nervous under the expectant eyes of Jun, Minghao, and Yixing. He speaks slowly but as accurately as he can, “Can you guys,” What was he worried about? He’s speaking perfectly fine, “smile a bit more?” his accent is far stronger than Jun’s and he’s a lot shier. It doesn’t seem like he’s been speaking English as long even though he’s close to their age. Maybe he’s here on exchange.

“Okay!” Vernon cheers as everyone grins just a little harder, “Cheese!”

“Oh, too cheesy.” August waves a hand at them, looking into the screen, “A little bit less, please.”

Everyone gives him a little chuckle and straightens up to smile more naturally. Like any family gathering, one picture isn’t just one picture. Almost everyone hands August their phone just so they can have their own copy, “C’mon guys, let him go. He has a class to lead.” Minghao chides before Seungcheol can deliver his cell, patting his arm down forcefully, “I’ll put it in the group chat, okay?” That’s news. They have a group chat.

He hands August one of the few remaining doughnuts and sends him off.

Seungkwan starts stacking up the two empty boxes and hands them off to Vernon. The man tries his best to fit them into the small garbage can in the studio, but they keep popping up. The baker just watches him struggle for a minute before telling him to put them in the trashcan in the lobby. Yixing follows him out with handfuls of partially used napkins.

“Thanks for the surprise, everyone.” Jihoon speaks up over the music, “I appreciate it.”

“Yeah, Jun stayed up late making you the cake.” Seungcheol nudges Jun and makes him sway a bit like a branch in the wind, “Appreciate him.”
“Oh, nonono, Minghao and Mingyu did most of the work. I was pretty useless in the kitchen.” He flaps his hands in the air, pleading for less attention. Jihoon’s sigh shuts him up and makes him recompose, “It was a group effort. I hope you liked it.”

*You damn well better like it Jihoon.*

“Thank you,” Ugh, that’s not *enough.* Don’t just *thank* him, tell him he’s great and that the tiramisu was amazing and that it’d given you enough energy to power through the day. Tell Jun that he’s *enough,* you nitwit, “Junhui.”

The tension in the air is so thick that Minghao needs to cough to clear it up, “Anyways,” he stretches and pats Seungcheol on the shoulder to subtly tell him it’s time to go, “we’ve got to practice a bit more until Soon and Jun’s 8 o’clock with the couple and Chan’s night shift, so if you wanna just,” he pushes and pulls Seungcheol again. It somehow reminds him of an embarrassed kid in kindergarten.

The black-haired man is only moving at his own pace, laughing and fighting Minghao’s insistent hands off until he gives up, “Happy birthday, Jihoon.” He goes to get his bag and pulls out a medium-sized box that’s wrapped in sparkly paper, “For you.” the glitter flakes off onto the floor of the dance studio and Minghao looks absolutely repulsed.

“Did- did you wrap that on the dining table?”

Seungcheol shrugs, tossing the gift to Jihoon so he’s *forced* to catch it with his reflexes. The guy almost throws it back at him, “You weren’t there to stop me.” He teases, rubbing his glittery hands on Minghao’s back before turning to Mingyu. He backs away before the professor has a chance to touch him. He *just* finished purging his car of Soonyoung’s glitter bomb, he’s not about to revisit it, “Are you leaving, too?”

“Uh, yeah.” He looks down at Minghao who is trying to shake his jacket off only to sigh when the flecks float down to the floor. He’ll have to clean that, too.

“Hold up a minute,” he tugs on Mingyu’s sleeve, telling him to stay put as he jogs over to his bag, pulls something out, and comes back to him, “here.” He pushes the cold metal key into his hand.

Mingyu turns it over a couple times, weighing and thinking, and putting it back in Minghao’s hands, “Keep it.”

The sheer excitement on Soonyoung’s face might cause him to explode. Jun’s face is stuck in a frozen smile. Seungkwan, who overheard him from the back of the room, has his expression caught in utter shock. Everyone seems to be intruding on something that’s frankly none of their business and understanding the meaning of this exchange all at once, “And what am I supposed to do with this?”

“Steal his groceries.” Soonyoung mutters as he types on his phone. Mingyu doesn’t even need to ask, he knows he’s texting Wonwoo.

“Come and go as you please.” He’s still holding Minghao’s hand. This is usually a big step for people, isn’t it? Something that you only do after years or months of a serious, dedicated relationship. Does he seem desperate? He hopes it’s not coming across like that. It’d be nice for Minghao to accept his gesture without thinking that he has ulterior motives. It’s a lonely apartment and having him swing by whenever is just such a nice thought.
To be surprised with the best present fate could bring him is a nice thought, “You know I’m never going to come over when you’re not home.”

“It’s so you can leave in the morning, you idiot.” Soonyoung shoves him, “And now that you’ve done this grand gesture in the most awkward place possible, can y’all just smooch and say goodbye so we can get back to practice? Seungkwan looks scandalized.’’

“I do not. Congratulations, kids.” He yells and waves as he hurries out the door, “Bye.”

“Thanks for the doughnuts, Seungkwan.” Jihoon calls after him.

“Thanks for helping Hansol out!” the door closes behind him.

“You don’t have to keep it.” Mingyu coos.

“Keep it.” Seungcheol pipes in. Seriously, these friends- okay, so maybe he didn’t choose the best location or time to hand over his apartment key, but it’s not like he really wanted to take it back. Everything that falls into the trinket drawer is intended to disappear forever. This key was in there and now it’s not and it should find a new home on Minghao’s lanyard.

It’s also apparent that Seungcheol intends on walking Mingyu out, “Fine.” Is he going to rip him a new one? Please, don’t. He’s not doing anything bad to your son, please be gentle, “I’ll hold onto it until I can sneak it back into that drawer without you knowing.”

“We’ll see about that.” Minghao laughs at his challenge and pulls him into a nice, warm hug.

To kiss.

Or not to kiss.

That’s certainly a question right now, isn’t it.

Seungcheol’s right there and he made a promise to himself to kiss Minghao in front of his roommate, but the mood just isn’t right. Sure, he’s still a little intimidated by said man standing less than five feet away from them and—to a point—it even looks like the older man is expecting him to step up to the plate. He’s not feeling as bold as he was all those nights ago, but Minghao’s holding him close and when he lets go to send him off, he gives him that forlorn smile that needs to be satisfied.

So, he takes Minghao’s hat off and settles for a kiss on his forehead, “Text me. I want to see you before Friday.”

“Kay. Get some rest.” He smiles a soft smile and gives Mingyu a little push out the door to follow Seungcheol. That was easy and simple and soft. He doesn’t need to think so much. Minghao resonates with him on so many levels that he’s sure something like that won’t rub him the wrong way even if he did desire a kiss on the lips. He understands that they’re moving at an uncommon pace and that they’re figuring it out together.

At first, things seem okay. They find Seungkwan talking to Vernon in the lobby and leave out the front door. Vernon says goodbye by drumming on his boyfriend’s butt after every step, tutting him into the parking lot and dashing back inside to resume his practice. It’s only once they’re outside and alone that Mingyu feels like he’s been tricked.

Seungkwan and Seungcheol both drop their giddy smiles and fix their gazes onto Mingyu. He can almost feel the lasers beaming through his neck.
Chapter 116

His blood runs cold.

Of course, just because all of Minghao’s friends are unfairly attractive in their own right doesn’t mean they are superficial in any capacity. It’s evident that they care for him a lot—as he’s been shown time and time again—and that he intends to surround himself with people of good character.

However, naively joining the two in the parking lot feels a bit like walking into a lion’s den. Their gazes aren’t warm or cold, just searching and curious. It’s their resting bitch faces that make it feel a little antagonistic, but he’s not going to try and wiggle away. The only method to make headway with situations like this is to stand your ground like he did with Seungcheol before the banquet. There’s no sense in running when men like this mean business. Mingyu can only endure, return their stares, and try and speak well of himself without sounding egotistical. He’s ready to prove something—he’s figured he’d have to prove himself to these friends eventually—he’s just not sure what.

“I think we’re scaring him.” Seungkwan whispers to Seungcheol and drums on his shoulder with an insistent hand.

The older man’s hardened expression finally cracks just a smidge. The corner of his mouth twitches up in a short-lived smirk, “Are we scaring you?” Well, when you look at him like that how else do you expect him to respond?

Mingyu clears his throat with a hoarse cough, “A little.”

“Told you I could be scary.” Seungkwan shoulders past Seungcheol, “Minghao was right, he’s totally terrified of you.” and heads to the black BMW, opening the back door after it beeps and the locks click. Excuse you, Minghao, Mingyu isn’t terrified of him, just slightly perturbed. Huge difference.

“Wanna go on a short ride?” No. No, he doesn’t want to go on ‘a short ride’ with him and the baker boy. That sounds like a setup for murder.

“Sure.” Goddamn.

If Mingyu has one weakness, it’s Minghao.

And by association, he’ll do almost anything within his power to stay on positive terms with Minghao’s friends. There’s still a bit of curiosity there—about Seungcheol’s special pocket in his life—and he’d also like to know how Minghao has changed since high school. So, even while nerves are seizing up his gut as he gets into the passenger seat, there’s something calm and easy about it. However, he does glance back at the dance studio for strength every few seconds; either strength or hope that Minghao will bust through the doors and save him from his roommate and his coffee-date.

When the engine turns over and the doors lock, it eliminates all possibility of escape.

He’s going to be here whether he likes it or not. And what is he so afraid of anyway? This is just a new experience like any other. No one he’s dated before has had friends as protective as Minghao’s and probably for good reason. Since he’s never decidedly or intentionally gone long-term with anyone, he never found the need to get to know their friends and family. With Minghao, he
plans on staying as long as he’s welcome and friends and family will inevitably be introduced. Obstacles like this will have to be worked with.

There’s nothing aggressive about Seungkwan. He’s the softest person in the room—the man lives with pillowy doughnuts and sugary glaze for crying out loud—who couldn’t hurt a fly. Probably. Then again, from lifting all those trays and folding all that dough and stirring all those ingredients, Seungkwan is likely the strongest one in the car. No matter. It’s not like he’s going to strangle Mingyu from behind.

Right? Right.

“So,” he’ll break the silence just so he doesn’t have to sit in it, “how do you two know each other?”

Leaning his weight on the back of Mingyu’s seat Seungkwan brightly responds, “Seungcheol and I?“ he nods, “We went to high school together for a year.”

“Seungkwan was a wee freshman when I was a senior.” He reaches back to search the air for a second before finding and pinching the honey-blond’s cheek, “Just a baby.” His fingers are swatted away and Seungkwan fights his hands off just to pull at his face. It’s kind of interesting to see both men get into a childish fight especially while one of them is driving. Actually, no, this is incredibly unsafe. Please watch the road.

Mingyu clears his throat again in hopes to stop the two from play-fighting any further, “And you and Minghao?”

“We’ve been friends since he moved here.” He smiles, “He came by the bakery a lot in high school and my parents thought he was super cool and popular at Oakdale since he always brought people with him, so they made me talk to him and the rest is history.” In the rearview mirror, Mingyu can see that his eyes are pointed at him, “He hasn’t changed much since then. His taste in men hasn’t changed either.” excited but a little annoyed. It’s like he knows that these questions are just an attempt to test the water and be polite. He knows that there are other things on his mind. Seungkwan turns his attention to the driver, “You’re taking me home, right?”

“Do I have to?”

“I have work in the morning and I’m making something for Hansol for the competition this weekend. Super secret, so I can only work on it when he’s not home.” He pouts, “You’re going to finals with us, aren’t you?”

Mingyu shrugs, “He hasn’t asked me.”

“That’s weird, you’re going, right?”

“Of course.” Seungcheol smiles a rather cunning smile that Mingyu can’t quite read.

“Huh,” his brow pinches, “they all have two tickets, don’t they? Hm, well, Hansol was going to invite a friend from down south, but if-”

“Nah, I’m sure Mingyu will get his ticket soon.” Seungcheol waves him off. It’s not like Mingyu would accept a ticket intended for someone else anyway. He doesn’t have to be made into a selfish person like that, though.
“I was told to keep my weekend open, so I hope that’s the case.” He really is a little anxious about it. Wonwoo has been hyping him up about this final performance for quite some time. It’s a shame they weren’t closer a month ago, otherwise, he could have probably gone to semifinals.

Yet again, he’s reminded of the strange pacing of their relationship. Nowadays, he worries that they’re moving too fast, but they’ve known of each other for so long. It’s always a tug-of-war. Too fast, too slow, but since Minghao is a time wizard, does time even matter? It shouldn’t, but maybe that’s why all his friends are worried. Maybe that’s why he’s worried. It’s only been two and a half months since they’ve met up and if you don’t want to count the bumpy start, it’s only been a month and a half since they’ve been on civil talking terms.

But he wouldn’t trade this time for anything, not even more time.

“Anyways, Mingyu,” Seungkwan smacks him on the shoulder, “if you have any questions about Minghao, feel free to ask me. Seungcheol isn’t the type to openly gossip about stuff like this, but I’ve known Hao since high school and I know he probably doesn’t mind me oversharing especially if it’ll help you guys out in the long-run.” He claps his hands together, “Really, ask anything.”

This is 100% a test. It isn’t a trap, but it is a test.

He can feel it.

Being allowed to ask anything about Minghao? Hell, he could ask about sensitive material like the nature of his relationship with his parents, his past romantic relationships, about the person who passed in August, about his preferences in intimate settings, about anything, but the catch is that Seungcheol will be here listening to his request and judging him for every word.

He can’t just ask anything.

So, instead of asking about something he really wants to know about—like Minghao’s stance on the meaning of ‘true love’—, he asks about something more direct, “What does he want for Christmas?”

Seungkwan almost chokes, “Really?” his loud laughter fills the car, “That’s kind of random, but it’s cute that you plan on spending Christmas with him.” He tries to think, “It’s hard to buy things for adults.”

“Yeah, Minghao buys whatever he wants as long as he can justify the price.” Does that mean Seungcheol buys him all the things he wants when he can’t justify the price? Christmas is only a month away and looking at their relationship now—even if it wasn’t a romantic one—he would be in the range to get Minghao a present. He’ll probably end up getting something for Cacahuate, too. Wonwoo, Soonyoung, and Byeol are a given.

Even Seungcheol will probably get a present next month, “Did you really just want to ask about Christmas presents? Because, like, the point of presents is to think of them yourself. Minghao doesn’t really like material goods. His clothes end up being expensive because he likes fashion, but the price of them and how much he likes them doesn’t correlate—does that make sense?”

“He buys things because he likes them and not because of the brand.” Seungcheol drums on the steering wheel when they get to a red light, “I think he’s like that with people, too.” Was that a jab or a compliment?

He can’t tell, “But, hey,” Seungkwan taps on his shoulder again, “feel free to bounce ideas
with me because I have no clue what to get for Hansol. We can work together on this.” It’s nice that Seungkwan exchanges phone numbers with him because it feels like he’s acquired a blessing from another friend.

“What are you making for Han-Ver-,” he’s honestly not sure which name he should use.

“You can call him Vernon. He prefers it.”

He would ask why Seungkwan calls him Hansol, then, but it’s also none of his business. He’s sure that there’s some complicated backstory between the permissions of using given names and preferred names, so he’s not going to bother. He’ll cross that bridge when he gets there, “What are you making for Vernon?”

“Well, it’s not really making something.” He adjusts his jacket, “Uh, when he came to the US, he had this really pretty glass statue that his little sister got for him and it broke a few years ago. Up until then, it was kind of like a lucky charm for him. I’ve been trying to find someone to fix it, but there’s no one around here. Honestly, he doesn’t even know I kept the pieces. He probably thinks it’s long-gone and Sophie has sent him new ones in the mail since then, but this one’s kinda special.” He pulls out his phone to show Mingyu a photo of brilliant, shattered glass shards. Bits and pieces look like they could fit together to make something, but there are so many pieces that he doesn’t know what it was, “Superglue probably won’t return it to its original glory, but I’ve been watching YouTube tutorials for weeks.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.” Seungcheol turns down a street of townhouses. What a cute and quaint neighborhood. Is this where Seungkwan and Vernon live? Of course it is. He’s been here before. He’s seen this place before—in a different light and under different circumstances—and the last time was with Seungkwan and his tear-stained cheeks. Why are all those memories blurry? Why is it all a haze? Why is the only thing he remembers Minghao’s stoic face masking heaping amounts of panic and frenzy?

That probably says more about his own attention span than anything else. He can’t even recall the color of the house or the metal numbers screwed to the wall under the porch light. He can’t remember key details like the little, pinwheel flamingo in the planter by the window or the ornate curtains covering the top of their big, bay window. It’s all lovely and fitting of what he’d always pictured the Boo’s to be.

What a picture-perfect life. They even have a little, white picket fence. That’s adorable.

“Aw, here already.” Seungkwan sighs as Seungcheol puts it in park and unlocks the doors, “Okay, Mingyu! One more question. Make it a good one. Any question. Seriously. Your other questions sucked.”

“Oh, finally.” He opens his door, “But why’d you have to ask something so broad? He says a lot about you,” he groans, “to summarize, he thinks you’re a really careful person; a big softie who has led a good and safe life. I’m pretty sure he’s called you a puppy more than once- oh, and clumsy and a little naïve, but don’t take it the wrong way. He thinks those things are endearing. He says you think a lot, like, a lot a lot. Actually,” he steps out of the car and cocks his head to the side, “he asked me something similar. He always wonders what you think of him, so you guys should talk about that someday.” Like they haven’t? Well, Minghao probably hasn’t gotten a chance to talk to Seungkwan since last night.
“I see.”

“He likes you a lot, Mingyu.”

He can’t hide his smile at that one, “I know.”

“So, you better like him a lot, too.”

He laughs, “I do.”

“Good, let’s keep it that way.” He shuts the door, but waits until Seungcheol rolls down Mingyu’s window. “Hey, Cheol, if Minghao doesn’t want to cook tomorrow night, just come over. I’m sure mom will go overboard again.”

“Aw, we don’t want to intrude.”

“Nah, you guys are family. We’re happy to have you. Lord knows my mom loves you two.” He laughs, “And, if you’re not busy, you can come too, Mingyu!”

“Oh, I’m going back to my parents’ place tomorrow, but thanks for the invite. Will I see you on Friday?”

“For Friendsgiving? Absolutely!” he’s already shouting from the sidewalk. It’s nice to see that he’s back to the Seungkwan that Mingyu remembers from the bakery and not the one from the studio. He’s not shy or timid anymore, maybe because it’s just them in the car instead of a big group.

Seungcheol rolls up the window but stays parked until Seungkwan unlocks his door and waves goodbye. Then, he speeds off with Mingyu in tow.

They sit in silence for a while. The white noise of music playing on the radio fills the air with nothing in particular. It isn’t until they pass Main Street that Mingyu sits up, alert. They didn’t turn which means they’re not going back to the studio, “Um.”

“Calm down,” Seungcheol hums, “I want to take you somewhere. Just a short drive to clear our heads.” He doesn’t really have any other choice but to agree. He’s not about to barrel-roll out of a moving car going this speed, “I’ll take you back to the studio afterwards; under an hour.”

Mingyu nestles back into his seat. He doesn’t really want to talk, so he spends the next five minutes memorizing where they’re going just in case he has to make a break for it. They pass through uptown and head onto a backstreet where the speed limit is barely a suggestion. It’s paved, but rough and unrefined unlike most of the richer neighborhoods. Instead of streetlights and telephone cables, it’s all trees and acres of farmland. It seems like the contemporary block of residential buildings ends abruptly and the rural bridge between their town and the next takes shape.

It’s not exactly vast or open, but just looking at it really does make his head and chest feel like they’re being emptied out. He’d wind down the window to get a breath of fresh air, but it’s not his car and he’s not sure if Seungcheol likes driving this fast with them open. His eyes are pinned on the road ahead, quietly rolling his palms over the steering wheel and adjusting the speed when they come to sharp curves.

Mingyu doesn’t want to feel like a child about to receive a scolding, so he steps up to speak again, “So-“
“Nope, no talking until we get there.”

He rolls his eyes.

Nevermind, then.

Luckily, the drive isn’t too long. Within ten minutes, the river comes into sight and Seungcheol pulls over near the bank. It’s obviously well-frequented, but because it’s winter, there aren’t any people out here fishing. They both step out of the car, bracing themselves against a gust of wind that tousles their hair into a mess. Near the edge, Mingyu sees abandoned fishing hooks and short strands of fishing line that have been littered there. Colorful, rubber worms and dyed feathers are partially buried in the dirt.

He shuts his door and follows Seungcheol up a small hill to where a tree leans over the water’s edge. It’s a straight, ten-foot drop into a heavy current without any railing.

Wait.

This is looking rather ominous. This looks like the perfect murder location.

“I’m not going to murder you, stop giving me that look every time I take you somewhere.”

“Sorry.”

“Why do you do that?” The question surprises Mingyu. Shouldn’t Seungcheol know that he’s absolutely the most intimidating person, “You look at me like I’m going to rob you blind at any given moment. I thought I told you we were-”

And he finds himself speaking without a second thought, “Because you can.”

“Hm?”

“I feel like I can’t make a wrong move with you,” his eyes fall down to his feet. He kneads his thumb into the bracelet, suddenly aware that it can be repossessed. Seungcheol’s attention hovers around him, but he continues walking a few feet further until he can sit on the roots of the large tree, “because you can take Minghao away.”

“What do you mean?”

Mingyu sighs and takes a few steps closer to the edge of the large river. It’s easily fifty yards at the narrowest point and he can’t see the bottom of it even this close to the bank, “You mean a lot to him. You’re kinda like his dad, right? So, if you tell him to stop seeing me, he’ll listen, won’t he?”

Seungcheol kicks his feet in the dirt a bit, rubbing a rock under the heel of his shoe, “I’m flattered that you think I have that sort of power, but do you really think that lowly of Minghao? He may be filial, but he can think for himself.” Did he mess up by saying that? “And I can’t keep him away from you.”

He probably lets something akin to a scoff slip past his lips, “Sure.”

“Really. I can’t.” He crosses one leg over the other, “Maybe that’s why I was a little standoffish with you when he first started liking you romantically. I told him that you two were moving a little too fast. I know that you haven’t done anything landmark-worthy by general standards, but since you kept him out last night,” his lips wrinkle, “I felt like I had to say something today.”
“Nothing happened last night.”

“You guys didn’t have sex, but that doesn’t mean that nothing happened last night.” Seungcheol blinks slowly and patiently, waiting for Mingyu to regain his bearings, “Something happened last night. My parental gut tells me that it did.”

Mingyu swallows. He shouldn’t be in trouble for this. That’s simply unfair, “It’s not-

“You’ve never seen the way he looks when he talks about you when you’re not there.” Mingyu shuts his mouth, “When he talks about you, he looks like he’s watching the world revolve in his hands. Like he’s watching short clips of global happenings that restore his faith in humanity, watching pets get adopted, watching people save and protect each other.” He sighs and smiles this sort of despondent and complex smile that Mingyu can’t understand in full, “There’s this sort of childlike wonder in his eyes, like he’s curious about what tomorrow will bring.” He throws a rock over the ledge, attempting to skip it although the small waves eat it up, “There was a time where he really had to fight for that, really had to fight for his tomorrows, so to see that you’ve had this effect over him,” he shakes his head and trains his eyes on Mingyu, “of course, you can’t take all the credit. There are a lot of factors, but you can consider yourself a large proponent of it, I guess.”

“I’m sure you are, too.”

The black-haired man coughs, “You know, this backroad,” he looks past Mingyu and then at the river, “I drove back here a lot when I was in high school, burning gas, burning money, destroying the environment, whatever.” Okay? “It was just to clear my head and organize my thoughts when it came to university and the future. Nowadays, I drive back here on occasion when I need to sort out my thoughts for my novels or if I’ve had a rough day at work. It’s quiet and peaceful to just drive and breathe.” Mingyu nods, half-listening, half-curious about where this conversation is going, “Up until a few months ago, this was a road that I would only drive alone. I never took anyone else back here.”

“It’s nice to have a place where you can escape to by yourself.” He feeds him empty words because he doesn’t know what else to say. The roaring waters swallow up any sort of wall he wanted to build between them. The fresh and brisk air makes him feel vulnerable and frail.

“I took Minghao here in hopes that he could clear his head and open up, maybe that he could find peace and calm down. I told him what this place meant to me, what he meant to me.” The man returns to rubbing pebbles under his feet, “He stood where you’re standing,” he looks out into the water and suddenly it seems like the river calms itself, “and kind of like you’re doing with your bracelet, he would pluck at his earrings until they were raw and red.” The wind slows into soft wisps, “He couldn’t look at me. He just kept staring at the water, at the ever-evolving, ever-changing river.” The trees stop rustling, “He only stood to listen to my concerns.” His lips stay parted as he weighs his words and relives a memory, “and it was the first time I saw the strongest person I’ve ever met cry.”

What exactly happened so many months ago?

“You’ll learn, with time, what might have led up to that. It’s not my place to tell you and it’s not your place to pry, but I just want you to be aware that while he’s capable of laughing like you’ve made him the happiest person on Earth, while he’s capable of making you the happiest person on Earth, there are some areas where he’s particularly,” Seungcheol licks his lips, thinking of the right word, “fragile. And if you want to love him, you’ll have to be ready to love those parts of him, too,” and he rubs his hands together, “even if you might not know what they are.”

Mingyu sighs, letting out a long-held breath, and takes a few steps up to where Seungcheol is
sitting. He definitely didn’t think that today would become so heavy. It’s possible that the man in front of him didn’t either. Maybe driving out to places like this just opens you up and makes you overshare; makes you say regrettable things, “Well,” and he knows he must speak from his heart because that’s exactly what Minghao would want him to do, “I can’t promise that. I can’t promise that I’ll love him unconditionally like that. Obviously, there’s a big part of Minghao’s life that I’ve missed out on. That’s what happens when you have a crush in high school and abandon it for a decade.” Nothing sits on your tongue more tastefully and more heavily than the truth, “But I can promise that I’ll try my best.”

Seungcheol nods, accepting Mingyu’s answer and dusting off his pants to stand and overlook the edge of the bank, “I want to apologize, still, for my behavior last week.” It’s his turn to look down at his feet, “I’ll admit I tried to square you up, put on my hyung-pants and make sure you were a good fit for Minghao. And I knew you were concerned about my role in his life and I used it to my advantage.”

“Still a little salty about that.” That puts a small smile on Seungcheol’s face, “But, sure, I accept the apology.”

“Has Minghao told you why he hasn’t invited you to finals?” he shakes his head, “Before I left for my vacation in September, I knew I’d miss semifinals. So, Minghao promised that he would give me both of his guest tickets so I could bring a friend and enjoy the show at finals.” Ah, mystery solved, “Are you salty that you can’t go?”

“Of course.” Of course, things would just have to happen this way, “The last time I really saw Minghao perform was in high school. Pep rallies, school events, stuff like that. And if they win at finals, there’s the probability that the next time I’ll see him perform is on TV or something.”

“You’d like to see him perform in person, right?” Mingyu nods, “But didn’t he give you a lap dance a few weeks ago.” Is that his brain flatlining? That’s what it sounds like, “Lighten up, I’m just teasing.” And something finds its way into Mingyu’s hands, “Just know that Jeonghan will be incredibly disappointed that he won’t get to see his would-be patient perform.”

It’s matte black with the font printed in gloss—just how edgy do these dance functions have to be?—and in small letters on the back ‘Guest of B-Boy Infinite (Minghao XU)’ is printed in white, “Huh?”

“Well, you can’t expect me to give you both. This one is mine. Jeonghan or not, I’m still going to watch my friends compete, so, tough nubs, Mingyu.”

“No, not that, I-”

“Why am I giving you the ticket?” he nods, “I already told you. I can’t keep Minghao away from you, but when he makes a promise, he keeps it. Even though he and Jeonghan get along well, I’m sure he’d much rather see you in the audience.”

That explanation seems a little oversimplified, but he’ll take what he can get, “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me, thank Jeonghan.” Why does he have to thank the coworker that makes his life a living hell? “He knew about the ticket situation and still wanted you to have it. He told me to take you out here, talk to you, and give it to you.”

“So, he does know about me and Minghao.”

“Not really.” He wrings his hands together, rubbing them warm, “Hao said to not tell him
because he knows he and Joshua would give you a hard time at work. But he’s a sharp one. I’m sure he’s figured something out already.”

He takes one deep breath and starts shuffling back to his car.

Mingyu follows a few steps behind him, trying to trail as little dirt as possible into the clean BMW.

He would talk more, but his brain is a little exhausted with information now. Piecing together the last few years of Minghao’s life was hard enough but trying to figure out how their friends know each other is even harder. It won’t hurt to ask now that they’re on better footing with each other, “So, you and Jeonghan.”

“Me and Jeonghan.” He patiently waits for Mingyu to formulate his question.

“Why Jeonghan?” There had to be a better way of phrasing that. That’s not what he meant. He meant like-

“Why does it sound like I’m going out with Jeonghan?” Sure, we’ll go with that, “I’m not.”
Chapter 117

“You’re,” Mingyu squints, trying to remember Seokmin’s words, “you’re not?”

“It’s complicated.” Seungcheol’s face says that it’s not that complicated. He doesn’t look troubled in the slightest. Is that a smirk? Is he teasing him?

Mingyu’s known for some time that Jeonghan is (was?) very much so single and not looking. He’s definitely frustrated about it and there have been numerous times where Mingyu has suggested that he just look for someone to date if he felt so lonely, but those remarks usually earned him a gratuitous eyeroll and maybe a snide comment or two about his own dry love life, “Do you want to go out with him?”

The bump from dirt road to paved road jostles them just as that question seems to jostle the driver’s composure.

It would be nice for Jeonghan to find someone who can coddle and baby him as much as Seungcheol coddles and babies Minghao. He seems like the type who needs someone to dote on him and match his childish antics; keep him in check and give him a safe environment to play- what is he, a pet? Regardless, now that he has the information that he does, Mingyu can’t help but draw connections and reasons as to why Seungcheol and Jeonghan might make a good match. His opinions of Seungcheol are limited to the faces and phases of him that he’s seen, but in those tiny peeks there are parts of him that he’s come to like—just a little bit. Just a little bit, he only likes Seungcheol a little bit.

“Uh, well,” he tilts his head a bit as he makes a sharp turn, “I- hmm, well, it’s hard to say.”

Is- Is Seungcheol blushing? Oh my god, he is!

Despite wanting to claim this chance to give Seungcheol a taste of his own medicine—putting him on the other end of ‘do you have the right to date my friend’—Mingyu doesn’t think he’s actually close enough to Jeonghan to make a claim as bold as that. However, the older man seems a little flustered and red now that Mingyu’s given him a loaded question. It’s good to see him like this. It’s good to see that he has a soft side, a vulnerable side, a side that may or may not be smitten with Mingyu’s annoying coworker.

“But this drive isn’t about me. It’s about you.” he coughs, “And Minghao.”

Mingyu lets out an exasperated sigh. Way to change the topic. But was it a warning? Will he get reprimanded like this every time he encroaches on touchy territory? It can’t be. Seungcheol can’t be that impish—can’t be that much of a rascal—he’s the dad, right? But it doesn’t matter what Mingyu wants to talk about anyways, Seungcheol’s the driver and if he says that he wants to talk about something else, then they’re going to talk about something else.

It may be wishful thinking, but it seems like he picks up on Mingyu’s slight irritation. They don’t talk about anything romantic. Their discussion doesn’t even touch Mingyu’s potential boyfriend credentials.

Instead, they talk about basic things like Riverside and Oakdale’s century-old rivalry and how it’s evolved in recent years. Of course, the two schools still play-fight, but it’s all in good fun and no one is water balloon-ing anyone’s graduation rehearsals and cross-district dating is apparently
acceptable now. There’s still a little unrest in the diversity department, but they have social media and technology to thank for educating these kids about each other’s cultures and backgrounds in a broad sense. There’s still a lot of work to do, and Seungcheol points out that Performance Studio was one of the first places in town that both schools flocked to without bias.

Other than that, they talk about menial things like how Albertson’s on Citrus Avenue has been replaced with a Save Mart and how almost every chain store has been purged from the downtown shopping district in favor of local shops and coffeehouses. Seungcheol admits to having never set foot in DonutBoo during high school since he was a muscle head who hit the gym every day and often skipped cheat days. But since he met Minghao—and his cooking—he’s put on some pounds and enjoys every bit of food he comes in contact with. They both laugh about how going to the gym seems more and more like a hassle as winter creeps closer.

They chat a little about family, about how Mingyu is regretfully going to his parent’s house tomorrow to break bread with blood relatives and family friends, “If the food sucks, feel free to come home and have dinner with us.”

“So, you’re not taking Seungkwan up on his offer?”

“Nah,” he stops at a red light, “he and Vernon have their family to eat with. I’d rather not intrude.” Right, right, dead parents and everything. Neither Minghao or Seungcheol really have family to seek out during the holidays, “Besides, going to someone else’s house means that you have to get dressed and bring something. I’d much rather stay in my pajamas and shovel pumpkin pie down my throat without being judged.”

By the end of the less-than-arduous car ride, Mingyu feels a little better about the position of their relationship. It’s not quite a friendship yet, but it’s more than just being acquaintances. The biggest, immediate change is that he’s starting to notice things about Seungcheol’s car that he didn’t take note of before. He notices the prominent amount of dog hair on the carpet and in the upholstery. He notices the leftover canteens and the Febreze clip on the air conditioning. It seems like these things suddenly manifest. Was he really so focused on not messing up that he completely ignored actual things in his car? That’s both sad and weird.

Out of all the little things, the most peculiar is a pretty braided trinket that swings gently from his sun visor. It looks a little like those lucky Chinese knots that he’s seen in novelty shops, but there’s something a little sleeker and more contemporary about it. In the center is tied a long, rectangular glass bead with flakes of gold scattered throughout it. It’s certainly unique. He doesn’t know why his eyes keep getting drawn to it. There’s just something warm and homely about it that he can’t understand.

Seungcheol finally kicks him out of the car after they pull up behind his own. He waves him off, yelling something akin to a goodbye before he speeds out of the parking lot and out of sight. Well, good thing he didn’t leave his keys behind or anything.

Or his phone - where is his phone?

Mingyu frantically pats himself from head to toe, checking every pocket with panic until he finds the phone in his butt pocket where he never puts it. Right, it’s there so Soonyoung can’t throw it onto the floor again. That buffoon will be the end of him one day.

He checks the time with a quick glance which is really pointless because he already knows that he’s going to go back in and say hi to Minghao again. Don’t question him. Minghao is Minghao. He’s sure that Yixing won’t mind him coming in again. It’s already well-past 7 and they’ll finish soon anyways. So, if he goes in now and loiters for a bit, there’s always the chance that he can
swoop his dancer up for post-practice ice cream or take him out for dinner.

And if he can’t, then it’s perfectly okay to just come in and say hello.

Say hello. Say hello. Say hello and walk out like nothing ever happened-

Why does he have to be so awkward sometimes? What happened to cocky, haughty, hottie Mingyu who had the confidence to know he’d get whatever he wanted as long as he asked nicely? He supposes that part of Minghao’s treatment regime is to make him humble again.

Yixing is cleaning up the front desk and putting some things away when he comes in, “ Surprise part two?” he smiles while he tucks a couple folders away into a filing drawer. He wipes down the counter with a wet-wipe and gathers a few CDs to stack.

There’s something interesting about how meticulously Yixing cleans because he seems like the type who doesn’t care too much about organization or cleanliness. Maybe it’s something he picked up from Minseok who lint-rolled himself twice during the banquet, “No part two, unfortunately.” Mingyu affords him a little chuckle, “Just thought I’d come back to say bye.”

“Have,” his brow furrows, “have you been outside for two hours?”

“Nonono,” he irons out the situation, “I went on a short car ride with Seungcheol and- yeah, I’m back. Is it okay if I,” he gestures towards the back hallway.

“Oh, yeah, go ahead. You don’t have to ask, you’re part of the studio family now.”

Mingyu makes his way through the semi-familiar hallway until he parks himself at the edge of the windowed wall and peers into the room.

It looks like they’re done running through the group formations and have dissolved into personal practices. Sometimes one of them will correct another by pointing and shouting. He could never work in such a critical environment. He’s a trained professional. There’s no way his patients know more about his field than he does and every time they say something contrary to what he’s learned in textbooks he can’t help but feel pricked. Minghao and his infinite patience. That’s what this is.

Everything goes smoothly. He doesn’t understand how they dance with loose earphone cables flapping everywhere. The only two with wireless ones are Vernon and Minghao and even still, the short wires get caught over ears and in earrings. They look so serious while they get whapped in the face every few seconds.

It isn’t until Minghao notices him staring in the mirror that his stoic expression cracks and he smiles just a little bit, a little shy perhaps that Mingyu’s observing him. It’s not like he can offer any critique. Every movement that they make looks as graceful and awesome as the last one. He could slip and fall and wiggle his way up and Mingyu would probably think that it’s part of the planned choreography. That’s not to say what they’re doing is sloppy in any way. It’s- he’s not going to bother explaining because Minghao’s back to being focused on himself in the mirror.

Mingyu’s just a prop in the background and he’s totally fine with that. He’d rather not be a distraction.

But when Soonyoung calls for a water break, he can’t help himself. He puffs a little breath into the glass when Minghao comes over to retrieve his water bottle. Curious about his actions—and
He’s probably wondering why he’s still in the studio—, he lingers just a while, waiting to see what Mingyu does. He puffs again to fog up the glass before drawing a dime-sized heart in it with his pinky. He points at the heart and points at Minghao with the cheesiest grin he can muster, squishing his finger against the glass until the shorter man gives up and also pokes his pointer there.

Why is it that something so simple and so corny can send the blond into a giggling fit with his ears red and his face scrunched up in laughter? He waves like he wants to clear the air and tries to walk away only to come back to the glass and shake his head, lifting his canteen as a cheers, and swinging it back. The others get curious about whatever he finds so entertaining and look over to see the silly little heart before he can swipe his hand over it.

Vernon thinks it’s cute. He just shakes his head, smiles, and turns back to his phone. Soonyoung laughs at the gesture and probably makes fun of Minghao for it. Jun gags a little bit before joining Soonyoung in their teasing of the poor blond. Their mouths move, and they gesture towards him with a friendly mockery. Jihoon is too preoccupied with his laptop to even pay them any attention. However, he can read Chan’s lips say, “I’m done.” As he pulls down the indoor sunshades to block Mingyu out of the room. He scoots down one pane as Chan shuts them in succession until he reaches the door where there is no curtain, “We’ll be done in thirty. Get out of here, you thirsty weirdo. Minghao’s busy.”

Knowing that he shouldn’t push his luck with Chan’s thin patience, he nods and takes a seat on one of the benches lining the opposing wall. He’s still not on positive terms with him, but they’re almost back to neutral. Funny, isn’t it, how he’d entered his relationship with Minghao the same way. The goal to enter a state of true neutrality is already a thing of the past. Where they are now isn’t ‘better than what he expected’ anymore. It’s beyond that. He never even thought of being here. He never thought that he’d make a handful of new friends and care for a handful of new people. He never thought that he could come to like himself more, but Minghao keeps surprising him-

Yugyeom trips over his foot when he turns down the hall and fumbles a phone as he tries to catch himself. That’s right, ‘a’ phone, not ‘his’ phone because his phone has the anodized chrome-plated case—yes, very easy to remember—and the phone that’s flipping through the air is of that one outdated meme of a cat with its middle fingers in the air. Luckily, his reflexes save him a screen replacement and he throws Mingyu an exaggerated frown as he flounders to the door and yanks it open.

He screams at them because the music is simply too loud, “Hey, you fucks! Turn it down!” The music shuts off after a couple beats, “Junhuijun, someone keeps calling you.” He probably hands the phone over and receives a thanks, “Why don’t you just charge it in here?”

“The breakroom is the only place with USB wall outlets.” Mingyu hears the phone unlock.

“Just use Jihoon’s laptop.” Yugyeom is already on his way out. He’s very nonchalant about things—very touch-and-go. By the time Mingyu stands up, he’s already back out to the lobby.

Jun follows him out the door, speaking on the phone in some language that Mingyu doesn’t understand. It’s not Mandarin, that’s for sure. Some of the words almost sound Korean, but he knows it’s not that either because they’re a jumbled mess. Regardless, he’s gesturing the rest of the dancers to follow him.

Minghao is the last to exit the room and motions for Mingyu to come along as well. What’s so exciting? Whatever it is, Mingyu’s getting a little hyped up about it too. Is there a surprise part two? Yixing will be disappointed since he left already, “Jun has a lot of friends in a lot of places.” He appreciates Minghao filling him in. He’s completely lost and for once he’s glad that it shows on his face, “So, remember when we said that the guys at the Taproom agreed to swap out one of their
members? We thought we were getting lucky because one of their most experienced dancers was going to sit it out.”

“That guy from Underground Vancouver.” Soonyoung pipes in as they duck into the breakroom and Jun starts typing on the computer, logging into his Twitter to bring up a chat that was sent to him a few minutes ago.

“Yeah, UV guy. He was doing like four performance groups at once and destroyed his arm a couple weeks ago.”

Mingyu gives Minghao a shove, “Sounds familiar.”

“Shut it, his injuries are worse than mine-”

“He actually broke his arm, like, broke broke.” Wow, what clarity, Soonyoung.

“Anyways, they replaced him with some guy we’ve never heard of, so we’ve been asking around.”

“And I’ve finally got a chomp.” Jun hangs up the call and types a few comments into his chat before throwing a video up on one of the screens.

“Got a bite.” Minghao mumbles.

“Shut up. I know, but this is a big bite.” He hits space with such fervor that the video plays and pauses within the same moment and he has to press it gently a second time to get it to roll.

The music is bombastic and loud, rough, dirty, aggressive. It’s a music style that he hasn’t heard played in their queue nor in Minghao’s playlists. The guy on camera is dancing with an unmatched swagger. Despite being quite tall, he doesn’t move with any awkwardness or stiffness in his limbs. Perhaps he isn’t the sharpest dancer, but there’s something about the way he stomps and sways that just says he’s ready for a good fight. He’s dancing with such strength that Mingyu worries the floorboards of the studio he’s in will start coming up.

Soonyoung recites his thoughts, “Whoa, he’s good. Why haven’t we heard about him? Who is he?”

“Wang Xuxi, Wong Yukhei, Lucas Wong, he has a lot of names.” Jun’s eyes are also fixated on the screen, arms crossed over his chest, “He’s Chan’s age, apparently vlogs a lot, and that’s it.” Phone tapping incessantly on his bicep as he processes his thoughts and tries to squash his nerves, “We didn’t know about him because he only started dancing a couple years ago ‘on a whim’. He’s not an instructor and he doesn’t have a studio to associate with. I have no clue how Taeyong scouted him other than the random chance he found his vlogs and saw him dance a bit.” He clicks on the second link of an equally powerful choreography, “Seriously. That just has to be our luck that fate led Taeyong to him.”

“Yeah, thanks Minghao.” Soonyoung jokes, looping an arm around his shoulder and pinching his cheek.

Minghao sighs, shaking his head when the guy finishes his dance, “Okay, okay. So what, they have a quick learner.”

“Jihoon and Soonyoung would be the closest match to him-”

“But how is that going to work on their team? They have that one bendy guy from Beijing and
that flippity-floppity guy from Bangkok, right? How is that going to pan out?” Vernon rubs his chin. Ah, yes, ‘bendy’ and ‘flippity-floppity’, very technical terms.

“If they can make it work out, we’re done for.” Jun grumbles and puts up another video. This looks like it’s taken in America, somewhere on the coast- oh, that’s the Golden Gate. This must be a recent video.

Jihoon grabs the back of Jun’s chair and shakes him. It looks like a punishment for the negative talk.

“It’s okay. He’s super chaotic. They still don’t have any members who can do flips and shit. I think we’re okay as long as we up the acrobatics during the freestyle.”

“Acrobatics and tricking are one thing.” Chan stops Vernon from being too positive. It’s a little hard to pick out pieces when everyone is talking over each other, pointing out parts in the video and in how they’re worried about Lucas’ addition to the team, “It’ll wow the audience, but flashy moves won’t sway the judges-”

“Hey,” Minghao hits space and calls their attention, “when we started this, it wasn’t about winning. While winning is important,” he takes a breath, searching for a way to calm them down and raise their morale without downplaying the serious consequences of not winning, “Contracts and exposure are one thing, but we’re in it to give the best performance possible. We’re going there as performers and artists to entertain our audience, not the judges. We’re doing this for our studio, no matter what role we play in it, because we want to spread our teaching methods and encourage other studios to adopt a sense of community. We can’t change what’s already happened. Lucas will be on the Taproom team whether we like it or not. We aren’t going to wish poorly on him. He has his reasons for being there just as much as we have our reasons for being there.” His hands are linked behind his back, plucking at the ribbon around his wrist with difficulty thanks to the brace, “We aren’t doubting our skills, but we’re doubting our value now? What’s going on? We’ve made it this far, we can still keep going.”

Ah, there it is.

Those are the leadership skills that Mingyu remembers.

They’re deeply embedded in Minghao’s nature. Instead of leading with blind positivity and energy, he leads with words that make you reevaluate and think. You can call it manipulation if you’d like, but the way he speaks to these adults is the same way he would speak to his teammates before performances back in high school. It’s so firm and solid and stable. He really sounds reliable and realistic.

“Minghao’s right. There’s nothing we can change about it.” Looks like he’s inspired Soonyoung to buckle down, “We can only polish up what we have and try our best come the weekend. Go home, get some rest. Have a nice day off to enjoy the people around you. And we’ll give it our all on Sunday, alright?”

How anticlimactic.

Those parting words feel like they fall flat. Maybe Soonyoung isn’t used to talking sense into people. He’s much more suited to rallying the troops by hyping them up, so excusing everyone to mull over their own worries can’t be blamed. He’s not one to talk about deep touchy-feely stuff. Besides, it’s already 8. He and Jun have some fiancés to teach and Chan has to go to work.
Everyone exits the breakroom feeling pressed and stressed and all sorts of unrest, but there’s nothing they can do about it.

It’s just how you have to feel when there’s a threat. It’s overbearing, overhanging. It makes you anxious and exhausted. Despite looking calm and collected on the surface, it’s obvious that the more experienced dancers are worried about the situation at hand. Even as Minghao walks them out the door with unwavering confidence in their abilities, it’s plain to see that after they leave a little bit of that falters.

“It’ll be okay.” His words are empty. There’s nothing that Mingyu can do or say that holds any weight. He doesn’t know anything about dance. He doesn’t know anything about their competition aside from the new guy being very good. “You’ll be fine.” Maybe he should stop talking because he knows that feeling. He’s felt it before. It’s like when you have a huge test to take and all your friends just say you’ll do well because you’re smart. It’s so vacant and baseless. The intention is good, but there’s nothing to root the words.

As the last car pulls out of the parking lot and drives off to his next appointment, a heavy silence befalls the now-empty studio.

“It’ll be okay. It’ll be fine.” Minghao echoes as he hangs back and ducks into Mingyu’s arms, “It’ll be okay.” He rubs his forehead into his shoulder, “It’ll be fine.” And exhales a deep breath after recharging for a moment, “So,” his voice is slightly brighter, “why are you here?”

“Seungcheol and I had a little chat.” He ushers Minghao back into the studio to get his things and to get out of the cold, “If it’s alright with you, I’ll be watching you perform this weekend.”

The blond blinks a few times, not hiding his slight surprise. He then nods in approval, “Happy to have you.”

“You don’t sound very happy.” Mingyu chuckles, lifting up his face by nicking his chin, “I can give his ticket back.”

“No, no, please come.” He looks away, “It’s just that having my first performance in front of you,” he scratches at the back of his neck, “even if the performance itself is very good,” and drops his arm back down, “With the somewhat high probability that we won’t win, it’s a shame that the first time you see me perform might be on a stage where we lose.”

“Hey, hey, what happened to all that confidence a few minutes ago.” Minghao shakes his head, “Don’t be like that. If it takes away any of the pressure, this isn’t the first time I’m seeing you perform.” He doesn’t want to say ‘high school’ because he knows Minghao won’t like it, but those performances were what enraptured Mingyu in the first place.

It’s good that he seems to understand him, “I see.” He clears his throat, “But anyways,” Wow, way to sweep that under a rug discretely, “you came back in for something, right? Sorry I couldn’t get to you earlier.”

“Nah, I just wanted to say goodbye.” He has no choice but to smile and waddle a little closer, “But now that you’re free,” he singsongs, “do you wanna grab a bite or get some ice cream or something?”

He expects Minghao to say yes.

No matter what his gut would have said a few weeks ago, the Minghao he knows now should have said yes. He’s leaving all of tomorrow and he’s already resolved his worries about the
competition. There’s no reason to not say yes, but alas, “I can’t. I’m sorry.” He looks at the clock and looks at the empty studio rooms and looks at Mingyu and holds his hand, “I’m sorry, but there’s a lot of work to do.”

He expects himself to feel upset.

He feels a little disappointed—that’s inevitable—but it’s not overwhelming.

He tries to understand Minghao’s perspective. As the only true-blue b-boy on the team, there’s an entire style that he’s responsible for. Maybe he feels partially responsible for all of this team chaos. Maybe he just feels like he’s not up to standard after watching those videos. Whatever it is, Mingyu tries to understand and be supportive, “That’s okay.” He presses a kiss to Minghao’s forehead.

“Sorry, really.” Minghao holds him so tight, “I really wanted to do something before you leave tomorrow, but,” he shuts his eyes. His voice is so fragile and tiny and tired, he doesn’t know what to do with it. It’s almost like the words feel like a gentle breeze or the shaking of a cellophane skirt, “I’ll feel guilty if I leave the studio prematurely, especially after saying all those things to the guys. I hope you can understand.”

Mingyu doesn’t know why, but instead of telling him ‘I do’, it feels more right to give him a kiss on the lips. It feels better to do that instead of saying ‘Don’t worry, I understand’. He hopes it doesn’t come off as him trying to shut him up. That’s not the intent. He just wants Minghao to- he just wants Minghao. He wants him safe and happy and well fed and loved. He wants him tucked into bed with a bowl of hot soup on his lap and Cacahuate curled up by his side.

But he knows that Minghao can’t do any of those things and can’t feel any of those things until this competition is put to rest. It’s hard, you know, to willingly let someone you think so highly of mercilessly whip themselves into a shape you can’t imagine. Minghao’s the type of person who has an infinite potential, but that sort of thing grows on an exponential curve. There’s only so much more he can do.

He’s doing it for his team just as much as he’s doing it for himself. He’s sustaining injuries and enduring burning pain just to see this single competition to its end and Mingyu wants nothing more than to see the fruits of his labor reward him with pride and ease. Because as much as Minghao’s dancing is awe-striking, as much as his leadership skills are encouraging, it’s truly his strength in character that is admirable.
Unfortunately—or maybe fortunately depending on how you want to look at it—Mingyu doesn’t get another opportunity to see Minghao before Thursday inevitably comes around.

This isn’t anything new. A couple months ago he dreaded Thursdays as well. However, he’s never dreaded heading to his parents’ house more than today. There’s nothing bad about his parents’ cooking, nothing bad about their hospitality or their house itself, but when it comes to the prospect of stiffly sitting at a dining table with a gentlemanly smile seamlessly stitched onto his face, the idea of going to their place seems more and more awful.

He was smart to leave quite late in the day. The time it takes for him to get to the coastal city is just short of four hours. So, after spending all morning baking desserts and prepping a bit for Friday’s small feast, he leaves around 2. His parents were always punctual with dinner whether they had guests or not. Getting there around 6—assuming that the traffic will hold him up a bit and that he’ll probably use the bathroom on the way—means that they’ll probably eat close to 6:30 and wrap that up before 9 and he can bolt out the door before 10 and be back in town just after 1-

He knows what you’re thinking.

His parents raised him well. He should be grateful. He should be humble. He should spend as much time with the ageing couple as possible and cherish the time he has left with them (not that the two are anywhere near death). And he’s not sure how to respond to that. It’s not really about getting used to the newfound feeling of freedom after moving out. It’s not really about disagreeing with his parents or their friends. It’s just that there’s something a little daunting about reverting back to a state he had left behind.

Ping. Minghao, “Yeah, but wombats are cute as heck. You can’t beat that. Have you seen their faces? They’re like little furry potatoes with legs.”

The only thing pulling him through the day has been Minghao’s voice messages.

Yes, voice messages; not texts, not voicemail. He said it was popular with his friends overseas, but Mingyu’s never sent a voice message to anyone. Unsurprisingly, hitting play to listen and holding record to send a new message is a lot more efficient when driving. It’s even better than speech-to-text since you don’t need to proofread anything. And, yes, he always waits until he comes to a red light or gets clogged up in traffic before he tries to respond. He’s not about to ruin someone else’s Thanksgiving by hitting their car.

Driving four hours in what could be considered his Sunday best—if he went to church—wasn’t the best idea, but Minghao said he looked nice this morning so he feels just a bit better. His hair is gelled back and combed neatly into place. He looks like an upstanding fellow on his way to a banking job, but somehow the idea of being in his pajamas, flopped over Minghao’s couch and shoveling pie down his throat with Cacahuate vacuuming the floor for crumbs seems like a way better situation.

“Quokkas are way cuter. Look it up.” Their discussion has somehow veered from the origins of cooking into listing off cuddly animals and his delicate but good mood is strictly thanks to Minghao starting this conversation with the 9am text of ‘Soon said both the stupidest but most interesting thing just now and it has me thinking. What do you think the thought process was of the first person that ever drank milk/milked a cow?’
He’d been up for a while, too. His plans for today are very ‘Minghao’ in that he’s going to do the absolute most with his day off even if no one can come in for practice. Also, it seems like Seungcheol is determined to spend as much time with Minghao as possible on the now-rare chance that they both have a day off together. It started early in the morning with Cacahuate’s walk in the park and bringing treats and canned food to the animal shelter. “Oh my god. It smiles. Imagine how weird it would be to be born smiling forever. You could only project one emotion to other people.”

After they prepped a few dishes and got the slow cooker going for dinner, Seungcheol had roped him in for a few videogames and a bit of project planning.

Now that it’s getting closer to 4, they’re getting ready to head out to the homeless shelter and help them plate and serve food, “What kind of emotion or impression would you want to give off with your face if you had to pick one? Forever though, and don’t pick something boring like ‘neutral.’” Mingyu had only volunteered at soup kitchens when his college applications demanded hours of community service. Since then, he’d been busy or found menial reasons to laze about instead of doing something good for someone else—as the holiday would suggest. Looking back at it, it’s really a shame. He could have done so much in the last couple years compared to what he was capable of in high school.

“One expression forever? Maybe something approachable like ‘content’ or ‘thoughtful’, although that’s my boss’ face all the time and we can rarely take him seriously. What about you?”

Perhaps next year- no, perhaps during Christmas- no, perhaps when he gets back to town, he’ll make a move to do some good. He doesn’t like the idea of Minghao out-gooding him which is silly. There’s no contest. Minghao will always out-good him because it’s just in his nature to be extra good. His closet could do with a cleaning and all the extra clothes he finds can and will be donated if they don’t find a home over Minghao’s shoulders first, “Cryptic.”

“Oh, a man of mystery, huh. But what if you’re meeting up with some old people. You’ll look hella suspicious.”

“Under what circumstance will I be running into old people.”

“When you’re an ‘old people’,” his laughter fills the message suddenly, “Actually, the image of you as a shriveled, wrinkly old madman creeping around a retirement home like a cryptid is pretty hilarious.” He puts on a nasally and hoarse voice for the next part, “Beware, Dorothy, I’m going to steal your tapioca and replace your dentures with stale gummy teeth from Candy Corner.”

“There’s only one thing inaccurate about that story and that’s that Candy Corner doesn’t exist anymore.” True, the old penny and nickel candy store had slowly run out of business in its home in the mall’s shopping plaza. Simply put, no one wanted rock-hard, fruity candies anymore even if they only had to pay with the change they found under couch cushions. The store’s livelihood fizzled out a couple years ago.

“It doesn’t exist anymore? Man, I haven’t checked in so long. I would have bought out their inventory of grapefruit jellies and gummy sharks. Now where am I going to get my fill of lentil-sized jawbreakers?”

Mingyu can almost hear the pouty frown through the voice message, “Yeah, I haven’t had a s’mores bar in years. I would buy a warehouse full of them. And is ‘lentil-sized’ the only way you could describe what shouldn’t even be considered a jawbreaker?”

“Rude.”

Their conversation doesn’t die there. Their conversations don’t usually die, they’re just put on
hold until the next opportunity or until a random thought crops up. However, Mingyu’s pulling up to
the keypad of the gated community his parents live in and Minghao is getting properly dressed for his
volunteer work. Waking Seungcheol up after he already downed a third of a pie before dinner is
already proving itself to be quite the task.

Walking into a house that you’re expected to treat like a home even though you’ve never lived
there more than a few days at a time is not an easy task, you see. Even when his parents warmly hug
him and usher him into the IKEA-catalogue living room and introduce him to their guests, there’s
something very artificial and showy about it all. Despite how many times he’s been here, it just
doesn’t feel comfortable. While he knows he can go to the fridge and get whatever he wants or that
he can go to the bathroom without telling anyone, it doesn’t feel right. He knows he left his
childhood home with hopes to never return but coming into this new house feels so much worse.

It’s been like this other years, too, so he doesn’t quite understand why it feels oddly more stale
this year. He supposes it’s because these are new friends of theirs. Some of them also bring their
kids; an unsociable teen and two little kids who are running around behind the couch, but it goes
without saying that he’ll be seated at the ‘grownups’ table in the formal dining room with the crystal
chandelier, with the Cherrywood chairs, and the needless lace tablecloth.

For many years, he’d considered his parents simple people and at the very core, he knows they
still are. But when you step into a different tax bracket and gain neighbors and friends that might
have a certain expectation, part of you will want to live up to it. His mother had always said she was
happy living in a minimal and easy-to-maintain apartment as long as the appliances were nice and
everything was clean. His father likes the outdoors and he’d said before that it didn’t matter where he
lived as long as he could have a little garden of his own and go on brisk walks every morning
without listening to city traffic. This house is too much for the parents he knew a decade ago and in
some ways, it’s a little sad that they’ve given up those old, simplistic wishes.

However, he knows that people are made to change. Change is okay. He never cared about
where he lived either. He never paid attention to home improvement or getting things outside of
necessity and function, but Minghao’s explained a few times how getting tiny things to personalize
your space can actually make you really happy and he’d have to agree. Poof. If he could just teleport
Minghao onto this couch next to him, he’d feel a world more comfortable—even if he’d have to
bring Seungcheol in tow.

Before dinner is ready, his mom introduces him to their new friends. There are two other
people there around his age, maybe in their early thirties, but they don’t pique his interest in the
slightest. They’re too much like the other adults here. He doesn’t remember their names, any of their
names. It goes in one ear and out the other. They interrogate him out of etiquette and he responds
courteously: How old are you? 26. What do you do for a living? I’m a physical therapist working in
a small family-run clinic. Where did you study? UC San Francisco. Do you have any hobbies? I like
exploring different recipes and gardening sometimes. I volunteer at an animal shelter in my free
time. Oh, wow, so impressive. Are you single? I think I might know someone that would be very
happy to meet a man like you. Sorry-

Now that he has his stable career mapped out, there’s not much for them to talk about at the
dinner table other than the ‘obvious’ next step which is settling down and nursing a family of his
own. Of course, that has to wait until someone says grace and until after they make sure all the kids
are situated with drinks and food and copious amounts of pie and cobbler.

“He’s getting to the age where he should be settling down, right?” The university professor
toots, pointing his fork at Mingyu between bites of free-range turkey and organic cranberry sauce, “I know the perfect girl for him. She’s a little bit younger, just starting her career in optometry.” No thanks.

“Aw, that’s okay.” Thanks, mom, “We try not to interfere in Mingyu’s personal relationships. He’s an adult,” she rubs his arm and pats his shoulder, “he can make his own friends and find love for himself.”

His dad elbows him under his ribs playfully, suggesting something with his eyebrows, “And we’ll be very happy to meet whoever he wants to bring home if he ever brings them home.” At this rate, he’s never going to want to bring Minghao here.

Overall, the topics in their dinner’s conversations are less than savory.

While he supposes that some might say the topics of politics, class systems, payroll figures, and race issues are discussions left for adults—and he is an adult—he’s not going to participate. It isn’t his job to correct or explain himself to these people. It isn’t his job to educate them or provide resources. They are adults, too. It’s their own job to educate themselves.

His parents just nod along; not actively agreeing or disagreeing, but he’s entirely disappointed in their choice of company. There are so many things wrong with how they think and how they perceive the poor and disadvantaged. There are so many things wrong with how they cast stereotypes on an entire people because of one incident that the news capitalizes on. How outdated does it get? Wow, harharhar, Martha—if that is her name—man, racial typecasting doesn’t get funnier than that. Please kindly direct yourself into the nearest woodchipper.

God.

Okay, sorry, he’s sorry.

Because it’s Thanksgiving, he’ll try to let it go. He’ll let it slide and he won’t reiterate whatever they’re saying. They’re not worth the time.

But he notices that his doll-strung smile has been washed off his face. His hands are knitted together under the table and he tries to reestablish that welcoming grin even though it turns more into a grimace.

Maybe it’s because he’s friends with people who mirror the marginal groups they’re talking about. Maybe it’s because his job has introduced him to people he can see in those situations. He feels attached to them. He loves them. He’s upset because it feels like they’re attacking his patients directly, like they’re attacking his friends directly.

Remember when they said fighting would make him cry? If he really does say something now—in opposition to whatever absolute bullshit they’re vomiting—he might lose his cool. He doesn’t remember being this heated and angry about something that’s not directly referencing him. Maybe it was because he was too young to count pennies when they had to, maybe it was because he wasn’t mature enough to understand the circumstances, but now that he does, he’s ready to rip them a new one.

He digresses.

He digresses.

These are his parents’ ‘friends’ and even if the world would probably be a better place if they were educated- if they were less arrogant- if they didn’t exist, it’s none of his business even if they
spoil his appetite. He doesn’t even remember what the first three-quarters of his dinner tasted like. He’s sure it was good, but he fills his mouth with water just to ensure he won’t say something regrettable.

After another ten minutes—he’s watching the large clock on the back wall like a hawk—it becomes unbearable. He wants to yell, to say something, to do something, but it isn’t his place. Is this how royal advisors felt when their majesties were speaking? He knows he’s an adult and that his opinion should be valued, listened to, and respected, but he’s from a different generation. They’ll belittle him no matter what he does, but he can’t stand it anymore.

His fingers find themselves picking at his bracelet and he digs his nails between the grooves to pluck at the red ribbon. There’s comfort there.

And instead of saying anything, he just excuses himself to patter back into the living room where the two kids are cartwheeling and the teen is typing on her phone. Minghao wouldn’t want him to fight people who aren’t worth his breath. Those are fights you just can’t win and—if anything—it would look bad on his parents. Minghao would remain cool and collected and try to work things out if he couldn’t avoid them. He can avoid the situation. He can take a breath somewhere else, somewhere that’s not this suffocating dinner table.

Okay, he’s a little dramatic. In fact, he doesn’t recall this year being different from any other year where his parents had their friends over. Had he just been too aloof and ignorant to say anything? This year, he’s the one that’s different. He’s the one with his eyes open.

He’s the one with someone to stand up for and something to protect.

“Mind if I sit?”

Her eyes dart up at him, unamused. Considering that the couch is big enough for five people to sit comfortably and he’s sitting on the opposite end, he probably didn’t need to ask, “Sure.” Her attention returns to her text messages after passing him a bewildered glance, as if saying ‘isn’t this your house’. The little kids are playing with Hot Wheels and rolling them over any surface they can find. They bonk them into each other and argue about who is winning and who is evil. The simple-mindedness of children is precious and unassuming, “Hey, do you have like any videogames or anything?”

“Uh,” the sudden question catches him off-guard, “me?”

She looks to her left and right before blinking her green eyes a couple times, flipping her brown hair over her shoulder, “Yeah.”

Teens are so damn weird and random, “Oh, no, I don’t actually live here. Ever.”

“Lucky. This town sucks.” She leans back into the couch and resumes tapping away on her phone.

This is one of those opportunities, isn’t it, an opportunity to start a conversation with someone from a different generation and understand what’s hip-n-happenin’ with the ‘kool kidz’ these days, “It’s not so bad. Better than the town I grew up in.”

“Riiiight.” She drags out, giving him a side-stare. Clearly, whatever is happening on her phone is more interesting than some awkward twenty-something-year-old.
And it should have been a sign to stop talking, but there’s seriously nothing else to do. He could go outside, but it’s dark and he’s not too fond of the dark—c’mon, Mingyu, you’re a grownup. Is he really going to admit to someone ten years younger than him that he’s afraid of the dark, “In my town growing up, we had only two main streets and the most fun thing we could do in the summer was go and walk up and down a single-story mall.” That’s a lie. There was an arcade somewhere in town—and a skatepark—but his friends only ever wanted to hang out at the mall and window-shop.

“What, no hopscotch or hoop-and-stick?”

“How old do you think I am?”

She kind of laughs- no, she definitely scoffs and looks away. It’s not that she has a bad attitude, she’s just a little standoffish and unapproachable; prickly, “Fair.”

“So, what’s your name?” Is Mingyu doing that ‘adult thing’? Yeah, but he’d like to know her by a name instead. His question is asked in earnest and not just as a courtesy.

“Scarlet.” That’s pretty, do all your friends call you ‘Scar’, “But I go by Letta.” Wow. Edgy, “Edgy, right?” Oh, are you a mind-reader?

“That’s cool.”

“What’s your name?”

“Mingyu.”

Awkward introductions aside, there’s something awfully familiar about meeting Letta. Maybe it’s just her disposition, but it somehow feels like he’s talking to Minghao from high school; edge-lord supreme who could probably kick his ass in five seconds flat—clothing choice to match. Everything is kept basic because they’re meeting for the first time, but he tells her about college prep and about university choices. He learns about her love of human rights campaigns and how legitimately interested she is in politics. It goes to show that there’s always hope for the next generation and her viewpoints are so different from her parents’, it’s a wonder how she managed to retain her identity.

However, the most important fact that he learns about her is that she’s the captain of her school’s dance team and that she’s really worried that their club is falling apart. The timing couldn’t be better, “Look, I know absolutely nothing about dance, but my,” boy, “friend does. And he and his friends are going to this big championship dance off this weekend.”

“Really? Are they going to cheer for the team from New York or California?”

Whoa, “How-”

“The internet makes the world a small place.” She sits up, “There was a Twitter post about it being the first time in national history that there would be two Asian-American teams going head-to-head for this competition in particular. It hasn’t happened before.” She scrolls a bit on her phone to show him the tweet. Sure, it’s not a major news article or anything, but the tweet has decent amounts of attention. There are subtweets under it and many comments, but the main picture is a snapshot of the leader from the New York Taproom. What was his name again? Taeyang? Taehyung? Taeyeon? Tae-something.

He wants to tell her that they aren’t going to be there cheering for anyone but themselves, “Well-”
“Oh my fucking god.” She slaps her hand against the couch, “Not to be racist, but,” Oh no, what racist thing is she going to say? And why does she sound so excited and ready to say it, “Mingyu, is this you?”

Oh.

Letta shows him the phone screen before tapping on a set of four press photos from the event. Thinking back, he often wasn’t included in the group photos and he tried to keep his distance from cameras. He actually thought that Jun was the only one who got direct press in the group, but it looks like there were several outlets that had passes into the event. This photo, in particular, is not flattering in the slightest. He looks pissed; it was taken towards the later end of the night.

“Oh, yeah-”

She punches him in the arm, “You know Hoshi?” Who now? “Dude, I’ve been watching him since I was, like, five.” Ah, the generation raised by tablets.

“Who?” Does she mean the little green dinosaur?

“Hoshi!” she zooms in on the picture and points at Soonyoung. What happened to the prickly sixteen-year-old he was talking to ten minutes ago?

“Oh, yeah.” There are stars in her eyes. This is his chance to look cool in front of a teenager, “I mean, I call him Soonyoung.”

“Soonyoung.” Letta nods and repeats the name again and again until Mingyu has to give her a weird look. Is his name really so ‘exotic’? “Sorry, my girlfriend is kind of obsessed with Hoshi and—not gonna lie—I kind of copy his dances to impress her, but he doesn’t have any social media, so we never learned his real name.”

Oh, gosh, she has a girlfriend? That’s so precious. Come here, sweet child, I’m so sorry you have to live with such shitty and close-minded parents, “Yeah, they tried to teach me to dance during that party. It didn’t work out.”

“They taught you how to dance? I would kill for an opportunity to learn from him.”

“You know he teaches, right? Like, they have a studio in my town,” she looks a little amazed, “where they teach,” he cocks his head to the side, “teenagers,” like Letta, “how to dance.” He thought Performance Studio had a pretty strong presence online and within the dance community. This shouldn’t be any news to someone who follows the group religiously.

“What do you live?”

Mingyu bursts into laughter and Letta follows soon after realizing how forward and awkward her question was. It’s forgivable. She’s an awkward teenager.

Letta apologizes for not knowing. Her girlfriend only follows him when he performs or on the rare chance she finds a video on YouTube. Maybe they’re both tech-illiterate just like him and don’t know how to click on the uploader description. So, he has mercy and offers her their YouTube URL after navigating through Instagram. From there, she should be able to find the class information and address. Now, it’s no secret where he lives.

“But why were you at the conference? I thought you said you didn’t dance.”

“I don’t.” And because she came out to him first, he feels like it’s probably safe for him to do
the same, “I was a date.”

She slaps him again, “Shut up, are you dating Hoshi?”

“Shhh,” he shushes her. He’d rather not come out to her parents if possible, “No,” how public are he and Wonwoo anyway? Ah well, this should be safe. Teens are sensible about this stuff, “it’s a little complicated.” He never thought that the first person outside their friend-group he’d be showing off this relationship to would be some random teenager that he’d meet at a Thanksgiving party of all places. Quite frankly, this is the first time he’s ever bragged about dating someone. Before, he’d preferred to keep things hush-hush—relationships should be private and discrete—but when it comes to Minghao he can’t help it. He’s so damn wonderful and warm and good-hearted; he’s like a nightlight by his bedside. He wants to slowly share how lovely he is with everyone.

Her eyes scan the phone, obviously, the press photos have grabbed her attention again, “It’s Infinite, isn’t it.” Who now- Oh, Minghao? Wow, teens really are sensible.

“How did you-“

She shrugs, “You two are wearing matching bracelets. It’s not that hard to tell.” She double-takes at him, “Aw, that’s cute.” Is that sarcasm? “My girlfriend and I have matching tattoos.” She pulls up her sleeve to reveal a little treble clef. Is that even legal? Can teenagers just go out and get tattoos? He doesn’t remember any of his friends getting tattoos in high school. That has to be illegal.

“Scarlet, time to go!” Ugh, the adults are back.

“See ya.” She gets up and straightens out her clothes, “Have fun at the conference this weekend. Smooch your boyfie for working hard.” The last part is whispered.

Ah, she must know the struggle.
Chapter 119

The oldies and their kids shuffle out the door along with a couple other ‘family friends’, leaving just him and his parents to clean up. If he hates one thing about classist bullshit, it’s that these people think they’re above using paper plates. He understands being fancy and getting out the fine china for special occasions—and his parents may consider this a special occasion—but when you have more than twelve people over, no one wants to wash this many dishes and forks.

Upon hinting to his distaste in his parents’ ‘friends’—whose names he still doesn’t remember—they brush him off.

The words and ways they use to do it aren’t anything new. They’ve said it a million times before, but today, it just rubs him the wrong way, ‘Sweetie, sometimes different people have different opinions. If you want to make friends, you just have to tolerate that and try to see where they’re coming from.’ And while he understands that notion—while he understands that it’s hard to make friends—God, does he know it’s hard to make real friends—as an adult you can pick and choose who you want in your life.

It’s not impossible to be surrounded by a group of people who love and support you and share your values. Opinions can vary, sure, but only if they’re opinions like ‘red or blue Gatorade’ or ‘milk before cereal’. Disagree on and discuss those things all you want. Debating another person’s worth solely on what someone who remotely looks like them did is ludicrous. It’s not even childish, it’s idiotic and outdated and shallow, it’s so shallow. He’s so disappointed in the people that his parents have hand-selected to bring to dinner. He’s so disappointed that he once believed in that whole ‘tolerate your bigoted friends’ thing.

You shouldn’t have to tolerate anyone. You shouldn’t have to pretend you’re someone you’re not just to make friends and if you’re not pretending with people like that, then it really reflects on your own character, doesn’t it?

If someone makes you unhappy and they don’t try to understand why they make you unhappy and fix that behavior, then they don’t deserve to be your friend.

Okay, fine. Maybe it’s the generation gap. Maybe it’s because his parents are immigrants and they are accustomed to succumbing to peer pressure in order to blend in and be safe. Maybe their friends were good company at work or on the golf course where they didn’t talk human rights and politics. He’ll try to give them excuses, these are his parents after all. He loves them. They love him. Toleration and patience, Mingyu, it’s Thanksgiving and you’re a guest.

He doesn’t push his comments any further, though. It’s not worth his breath, not worth his time. Minghao would probably lecture him about ruining his parents’ night instead of just gritting his teeth and bearing the weight. So, he straightens up, coughs to clear the air, and resumes his filial duties. He’s a good boy—a good son—and he helps his dad take all the dishes into the kitchen as his mom rehomes the leftovers into Tupperware, “Honey, do you want to take some of this home?” Wasn’t this supposed to be ‘home’?

“Sure.” He hopes that Seokmin, Wonwoo, and the clinic guys will like it. There’s only so much he can cook before tomorrow and he’s sure they won’t mind day-old goodies especially when there’s this much butter in it. Paula Deen would be ecstatic, “I don’t mind taking some of it off your hands.”

His mom laughs and sets aside a few containers for him to take and his dad thwaps a heavy
hand on his back, startling him, “We’ve missed having you around. Are you sure you can’t find a job in the bay? You can live here, there’s plenty of room.”

This happens every single time he returns to them. They always beg him to stay, ask him to move back, propose a few job sites they have lined up, “Nah, the clinic guys will miss me too much.” There are too many reasons to stay in his hometown.

“Have you made any new friends? You never tell us anymore. How’s Jungkook- oh! And how’s that friend that helped you when you were sick? Did he catch your cold?” A slice of cherry pie is slid over to him as an incentive to talk since he left the table before they had cut it.

Bribery at its sweetest.

He gives in, taking the fork in his hand and scooping up a heaping bite. It’s been a long time since he’s had molten hot cherry pie with creamy, cold vanilla ice cream. It’s a childhood staple; a recipe that his mom had learned from her host family when she came overseas to study back in the late 80’s. However, there’s something outstandingly average about tonight’s pie. It falls flat just before perfect- no, it falls flat just before ‘enough’. Why is that?

“I’ve met a few new people. We go out for lunch together sometimes.” And sometimes they go on long car rides and have deep talks about the future, “I haven’t talked to Jungkook since college, mom. You probably interact with him more than I do.” It’s not their fault. He hyped up the idea of Jungkook a lot and he’s the only post-high school friend that they’ve met (over video chat). At that time in his life, he naively thought that Jungkook might have been ‘the one’ if he ever got the courage to ask him out officially, “Minghao didn’t get sick,” and I’m in a not-so-ambiguous relationship with him, “and he’s doing fine.”

He can’t help but wonder how his parents would react to him dating Minghao. It’s not that he cares what they’ll say, but it’s the fact that they’ll have something to say and it probably won’t be positive. It still stands, when you compare Jungkook and Minghao—it doesn’t matter that they’re both men—it’s plain to see that Jungkook has a better background. That’s why his mom liked him; top student, MBA valedictorian, probably successful, a little shy but professionally approachable. Minghao barely scraped by his first two years of college. His career is slightly unstable, and he’s constantly tailed by bad luck and a sharp tongue.

He has his achievements though, possibly too many to count. He’s hardworking and determined, and street smart to the nth degree. He’s incredibly capable and quick-witted with a million thoughts about everything. He’s pulled himself up by the bootstraps and chugged through life with the bare minimum of help. And let’s not forget that he has a heart the size of the moon.

But what should be the most important to his parents—above all those other nice things—is that Minghao makes him feel valued.

He makes him happy in the healthiest way, something that this pie can’t do like it used to.

“Do you know if you’ll be coming home for Christmas?” his parents lean in the archway of the foyer as he slips his shoes on. His dad is holding the canvas tote out for him to take.

“Uh, honestly, I have no clue.”

His mom smirks, “Is it because you have someone to consult first?”

Mingyu gives his laces a firm tug and loops them together quickly. He’s a man of habit. After
the end of every workday, he comes home and unties his shoes. There’s something therapeutic about undoing the laces like he’s free himself from something, but tonight, he regrets not tying them for ease of access. He could have been out the door at least thirty seconds ago, “Huh?”

“Someone to consult about coming home for Christmas. Like, perhaps, someone special?” While he’s also thankful for his soft, brown puppy eyes getting him things that he wants, he also is reminded who gave them to him, “Someone from back home maybe? Someone that you’re thinking about?”

He chuckles and shakes his head, taking the bag from his dad and thanking him before unlocking the door with a clack and stepping out, “Yep.”

A coward. Mingyu’s a coward.

No! He’s not a coward, okay, he just doesn’t think it’s right to tell his parents right now. After tonight’s conversations, he definitely wants to keep Minghao as far away from his family and their shitty friends as possible. He doesn’t want this image to rub off on him. He’s not like that, at least not anymore. Sure, there was a time that he was ignorant, but just like Minghao wants to leave the past in the past, he’ll follow suit.

He can hear his parents call after him about his response as he sprints down the driveway and hops into his car with a swing. Ignoring them, he shuts the door and backs off their property, lightly tapping his horn to say goodbye like he’d done every time he’d leave since he’d moved out. That conversation will be left for another time, a time where he’s on better footing. For now, he’s glad to be out of that posh house and on his way back to his humble and simple apartment. He’s exhausted and ready to take a shower and sleep until work in the morning.

But just like clockwork, no more than two minutes into his drive—before he even gets to leave the gated community—his phone buzzes in his pocket. Did he forget something? Should he just leave it, ignore it so he won’t have to turn back and face his parents again- Minghao.

“Minghao?”

“Hey.” the clang of metal bowls rings in the background. Is he cleaning up after dinner?

Mingyu pulls over to the curb by the manicured park in the middle of the neighborhood, “What’s up?”

“Uh,” a crinkle here a rustle there. What is he doing? “I don’t really know why I’m calling.” His laugh pops the receiver. He sounds a little shy or hoarse—it’s hard to tell—did he just wake up from a foodcoma, “I don’t know.” You already said that, “I don’t know, I just,” he clears his throat, “I just had a feeling that you weren’t doing too good and wanted to check in.” His voice seems a little brighter, “But if you’re good, I’ll hang up and let you get back to your dinner—”

“I just left.” Mingyu nestles into the back of his seat, relaxing his tense shoulders and taking a deep breath. Tonight has been exhausting in a bad way, not like the marathon that was the banquet, “Thanks for calling. I was in a really bad mood.”

“Are you coming home soon?” Yes.

“Mhmm.” But, “It’s getting late. Why are you still up? It’s so hard to stay awake when you’re full.”

“It’s not that late.” Mingyu plugs his phone in to charge so he can continue listening to Minghao’s voice fill his car as he starts driving again, but he’ll readily admit that sitting still in the
dark with nothing but his words filling the air was nice while it lasted, “How far away are you?”

“The traffic is gone, so I should be back in three hours or so.” He turns left to get on the highway, “What are you doing? I keep hearing noise in the background.”

“Nothing. Just cleaning up.”

Idle conversation keeps him up. They could have gone back to voice messaging, but the white noise that occupies the line when he leaves the phone on the counter so that he can cut saranwrap seems more suited for the night than loud music. Mingyu’s only concern is that the wind from his air conditioner is making his end of the line staticky.

They talk about this and that just like earlier, but after an hour or so of listing off what they had for dinner—most of which Mingyu has to reference the tote bag for—a new conversation is prompted by Minghao and his aforementioned big ass heart, “So, what happened tonight that put you in a bad mood?”

Minghao just wants to hear him out, to listen to his troubles so he doesn’t have to bear them alone. There’s nothing either of them can do to fix what happened at his parents’ house. Even if he has a time wizard at his side, he doesn’t want to forget what happened. He feels better that he’s aware of this distance between his heart and his parents now. It’s better to live like this, with your eyes open.

“But try to understand them. Try to talk to them about why those things make you upset. They love you so much. You’re their only child. Everything they’ve done is for you to grow up happy and healthy. I’m sure they’ll try to listen to you.” Minghao reasons, “They can’t see what’s in front of them if their eyes aren’t open, so try to help them understand what’s wrong with the situation. If you can educate and change them, then they have the knowledge to change others.”

He loves when Minghao is right, “I can’t say I have the nerve to talk to them about stuff like this yet, otherwise I would.”

“Yeah, and it’s Thanksgiving and they just threw a big party. They’re probably tired, too.” He’s very reasonable and fair. He thinks about every party involved.

Minghao’s like that. His brain is detailed and everywhere. Mingyu’s brain is sometimes everywhere, but he knows his thoughts are rather straightforward and simple. It’s okay to be simple, nothing wrong with that. Although, he’s often left wondering if there’s always something going on behind Minghao’s eyes, “I want to say sorry.”

“What? Why?” There’s a loud bang in the background and Minghao most definitely fumbles his already shattered phone. He really needs to replace that screen.

“Nothing. Just- can you just accept it?”

“Um,” Please, Minghao, “no? That’s fucking ominous.”

Why does he have to be difficult like this- no, he should have expected this. This is Minghao after all. So, Mingyu spends the next ten minutes building up the situation, elaborating on the touchy topics of the night and completely ghosting over any mention of Jungkook. He doesn’t know why he does—perhaps it’s out of habit—but he knows you’re not supposed to mention (not)exes to your current partner. Although, Minghao probably wouldn’t care either way. He’s rational and isn’t the jealous type.

In the end, it simply concludes with Minghao laughing. Mingyu can almost see the eyeroll and
headshake through the phone. He never accepts the apology because he says there’s nothing for him to apologize for, “And, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll call you back in, like, thirty? I gotta shower.”

“Sure.”

“If you get sleepy, pull over and I’ll wake you up!”

“Thanks. Enjoy your shower.” Ugh, did he just tell Minghao to enjoy his shower? That’s kind of awkward and creepy. Why is he so weird? Sorry, Minghao. “I didn’t-”

“I’ll take an extra long shower then.” And he hangs up.

If he wasn’t doing 80 on the freeway, he would have smacked his head against his steering wheel a few times just to knock the cringe out of his body. However, despite ending that conversation on an uncomfortable note, he can tell that his mood is back up. It’s not like Minghao was cracking jokes or intentionally making him laugh, but the sentiment of his phone call was enough to make him feel better about the situation. He doesn’t feel as cornered up anymore. If and when his parents call to ask about the next holiday, he’s confident that he’ll be able to say what he wants to say.

He’ll get to say that he’s in a relationship with someone very sweet and caring, who has a laugh like fizzy soda candies, who loves animals and dogs a special amount, and who fills his existence with so much vivacious color that even his dreams are stained with lush hues.

He’ll get to say that Minghao will be the most endearing person they’ll ever meet.

He’ll get to warn them about his fatherly roommate and brotherly friends because they’ll want to adopt him-

Mingyu frantically hits his steering wheel and drums on his lap and wheezes as he cranks up the volume on the stereo. That’s embarrassing that this is where his brain has taken him. Ah!

There’s only one way to please all parties if his parents want to adopt Minghao as their son and the only way to do it involves- nononono, we’re getting ahead of ourselves.

He slaps his own face to snap out of it.

His cheeks are sore from smiling so hard. He’s being silly. If anyone was watching him drive, they’d think he was a madman. What is he, some high school dunce in a late 2000’s Asian drama? Those things are such lies. It never starts with a kiss. It never ‘starts’ it just happens over time and all at once.

The music cuts off and ‘Call from [Doggy Daddy]’ streams across his dashboard screen. He forgets that’s what he set Minghao’s name to sometimes since he doesn’t look at it when picking up. He’s always too focused on the ‘slide to answer’ and not botching the simple motion of swiping his finger across the phone.

“Miss me?”

That was way longer than thirty minutes, closer to an hour, “Absolutely.” Look what your absence does, Minghao. You turn Mingyu into a lunatic.

“Sorry, I had to tuck the roomie and his friends in.”

“Oh, you guys had guests? I didn’t know it was a party.”
“It wasn’t supposed to be.” Minghao scoffs, “They showed up out of the blue.”

“Did you feed them well?” It’s Jeonghan, isn’t it?

A little more rustling and the soft jingle of Cacahuate’s collar, “They weren’t here for dinner, but they ate all our dessert and mashed potatoes.” He sighs, “I really wanted more mashed potatoes.”

Mental note: If Minghao comes over for Christmas, tell parents to make copious amounts of mashed potato, “Aw, poor baby, no mashed potato.”

“No mashed potato.” He can hear the pout, “So, how far are you from home now?”

Mingyu looks at the next roadside sign and down at the clock, “I’ll probably be back around 1.” Too late for Minghao to be up, but by now he understands the way his head works, “But go to bed, I’ll be good.”

“I’ll keep you company until you’re in the county at least.” He yawns, “I’m already in bed. Huatito says hi.”

“Aw.”

“Say ‘hi’, I’ll put you on speaker.”

Is he really going to say hello to a dog while he’s- yes, yes he is because Cacahuate is the best boy, “Hello, Cacahuate! Hello, little Huatito!”

“His ears are perked up and he’s looking for you.” Shuffle, shuffle, rustle, rustle, “I don’t think he understands the concept of phones. He never got this excited when Cheol called during his trip.”

Mingyu easily melts back into their conversation from earlier.

Every now and then, Cacahuate will crawl up on Minghao’s chest and sniff the receiver, idly begging his dad to sleep and not talk so noisily about how rubber bands are made. But Mingyu’s aiding and abetting, he could listen to Minghao talk for hours and having a conversation about how to improve traditional kitchen tools into optimized culinary weapons turns out to be more interesting than you’d expect. Minghao’s especially proud of his idea to attach steel wool or a clean toilet brush to a power drill in order to rapid-clean and peel a bucket of potatoes at once “in order to maximize my mashed potato production, obviously”. Mingyu doesn’t have the heart to tell him that YouTube figured all of that out more than a decade ago. He’ll let his man have his dream of an electric potato cleaner.

He feels a little guilty when Minghao’s words start slurring together. The blond has been cooking and cleaning since the morning on his one day off; he’s painfully tired.

But he insists that he’ll stay up to make sure Mingyu stays awake until he’s in town. What happened to passing the county line? As much as Mingyu tries to carefully overspeed and get back faster, he can only drive so recklessly. He’d much rather get there in one piece even if it’ll take an extra five minutes.

“I’m just going to rest my eyes and put the phone on my pillow, okay? I’m still awake. Keep talking.” At least that’s what he thinks Minghao mumbles out when he snuggles into his covers.

He makes an exception—just this once—to lie to Minghao, “I passed into town. You can go to sleep.”
“Well, I’ve already stayed up this long.” Another drawn out yawn, “I’ll wait until you get home.”

“Minghao.”

The sleepy guy just grunts into his pillow, “Are you home yet?”

Mingyu counts in his head. It only takes ten minutes on average to get from the outskirts of town to his apartment, but since there’s no traffic, would it be realistic for him to reach the parking lot yet? This is why he doesn’t lie. It takes too much work to make sure everything is mapped out correctly, “Like, two minutes away. Sleep. I’m hanging up.”

“I’ll just call you back.”

“I’ll ignore your call.”

“Heartless.”

“Good night, Minghao.” His thumb hovers over the ‘End Call’ button.

“Good morning, Mingyu- but,” his breath fills the phone with static, “don’t,” his attention lapses again just as Mingyu actually passes into town, “don’t hang up until you’re safe, okay?”

Safe? He’s perfectly safe where he is. The road is empty and open. The streets are bare. Everyone is asleep with full bellies, “Okay.”

It’s faint, but he can hear it. He hears Minghao’s breath even out and steady as he slips from consciousness. He’ll take his time, then, to get back to his apartment in one piece.

So what if today wasn’t great? He expected this. He expected worse but he never thought it would end with him talking to Minghao until he fell asleep. He’s done this in person, too—spooled his lanky limbs up in his arms and under his covers—but there’s something kind of cute about hearing him breathe over the phone.

He hangs up when he gets into the parking lot. If Minghao had the notion to check call-times, it wouldn’t look too suspicious. Maybe a road was closed for maintenance or something; he’ll be able to make an excuse. When he lugs the somehow-heavier bag of leftovers up to his door, part of him fantasizes about Minghao curled up in his bed and waiting for him with sleeves so long they cover his hands.

But a fantasy is a fantasy, and when he kicks his way in, the apartment is cold and dark. In the absence of the crickets outside, it’s totally silent. Mingyu flicks on the kitchen light with his free hand and plops the leftovers into the fridge before he notices a purple, glass container. Rounded and square and filled with chocolate? That wasn’t there when he left.

Beside it sits a small note, ‘Sorry your dinner sucked :( I hope these make you feel better :) Cheol made the ugly ones :P – S. S. A. HaoHao’

Upon further inspection, it is definitely a box of chocolate which is kind of random because-wait. Minghao didn’t take an hour-long shower, did he. He drove across town to deliver surprise chocolate. Things are adding up in his head. It didn’t take him so long to do the dishes. He’s sure Seungcheol wouldn’t let him do the dishes if he cooked dinner. So, was he already making the chocolate treats before he called Mingyu? Was it that little bit of psychic intuition that spurred the candy-cooking? That’s so sweet.
He picks up a treat and tries to snap it in half, just one before he showers. They’re surprisingly light and filled with marshmallow fluff and graham cracker? Minghao (and Seungcheol) hand-dipped some homemade s’mores bars just for him because his night was slightly less convenient than he expected it to be. He went out of his way to make something for him just because he was worried and wanted to cheer him up.

Calling to offer up the highest thanks seems like something he should do, but Minghao’s tired and already asleep. He’s not going to disturb him just to say thank you. He’ll reward Minghao when he thinks of something. Right now, however, his heart is just so full and giddy. His cheeks are warm and he doesn’t even have to taste the chocolates to know that they’re amazing. Seungcheol’s are ugly, though, laughably so. Mingyu’s such a whiny baby sometimes.

He’s spoiled and showered with affection he doesn’t deserve.
Mingyu wakes up before his alarm.

Terrible.

Sleeping alone is terrible. When did it become terrible? It doesn’t matter. It’s 6am and his brain feels like a pool floatie with a hole poked in the lining; sometimes deflating, sometimes the pressure keeps the air in.

He’ll explain it like this. Sometimes you wake up and you just have a word stuck in your head. Often, it’s a random word like ‘pancake’ or an idea like ‘Pringle canister armor’, but for Mingyu, today’s theme is ‘forgetting to tell his parents that Minghao said hello’. He can’t believe that he forgot to deliver the one thing that Minghao wanted to send to his parents as a first impression—that and the more-ignorable fact that their son dances like a squid—and now he’s botched everything.

In his haze of being half-awake, he picks up his phone and quickly types a message to his parents’ group chat, ‘I forgot to tell you last night, but Minghao wanted to say hi.’ Wait. He backspaces, ‘wanted to say hello.’ Send. The difference between ‘hi’ and ‘hello’ is very obvious to him. Hellos are much more professional and mindful of manners. Saying ‘hi’ is casual and should be reserved for friends. That’s probably silly, but Minghao did say ‘hello’ instead of ‘hi’ and he’s going to help his parents’ impression of him as much as possible.

But that’s a little empty, he shouldn’t just end it there. One of them is bound to wake up after hearing their phones trill as the sun rises.

He’ll give them the little nugget that says something about Minghao’s personality, albeit small, ‘and to tell you that your son dances like a squid.’

That suffices. He’s done his job and she should be able to sleep soundly now, put his head back down on his squishy pillow, dream about inhaling Minghao’s scent, and snooze until he actually needs to be up for work.

Ping. Mom. ‘I like him already.’ Good. You’ll never get to meet him until you toss your friends into the garbage where they belong.

Alas, he can’t sleep anymore. There’s no point in napping before work. The sleep inertia will propel him into an entire day of drowsiness and he has to be bright and ready to be a suave and excitable date in about twelve hours. He laughs to himself to get his spirits up. This muss-haired, sleepy-eyed man will have to clean up nicely in just twelve hours—eleven of which will be filled with work and cooking.

Cooking. Ugh.

Normally, the idea of cooking a large meal or a meal with many parts and pieces wouldn’t perturb him. He thinks it’s fun to set out all the ingredients and measure things meticulously and multitask over a burning stove and open oven. Luckily, he has some of those leftovers from his mom, but if he’s going to serve his friends and coworkers something, he’s going to do it right. And it’s not right to serve people reheated leftovers when you promised a homecooked meal. Sure, he didn’t tell Wonwoo it would be from scratch or anything like that, but he’s not going to half-ass something like this. He’s going to impress them all.

But, still, it’s just past 6am. He’s not due at work for another three hours, but he doesn’t want
to be up in the kitchen right now. He just wants to bake evenly in his bed until all of him is toasty
and cooked all the way through. Mingyu would much rather curl up in his blankets until his alarm
rings than step into his tiled kitchen and chop produce. It’s cold and it’s cold and, oh yeah, it’s cold.
No one in their right mind would want to emerge from this warm and cozy cocoon of comforters.

Mingyu is a man of principle, though, and he wouldn’t be caught dead breaking a promise.

He swings his legs off the bed and tosses the comforter back into place, smoothing it out with
a few sweeps of his arm and puffing the pillows to perfection before he drags himself into the
bathroom to brush his teeth and comb his hair and look a little less dead inside. As he’s shutting off
the tap after washing his face, his phone pings quietly, muffled by his covers where he had tossed it.

‘Did you get home okay?’ Minghao.

Mingyu towels his face off and rubs a random moisturizer into his skin before wiping his hand
on his shirt and responding, ‘Yep. Thanks for staying up with me.’

‘Sorry I fell asleep in the final stretch.’ Mingyu smiles. He’s not bothered in the slightest that
Minghao was too tired to stay awake the entire ride, ‘Can I call you or is it too early?’

That’s a little odd, but it’s also a little odd that Minghao’s up at this hour considering work
doesn’t start for a while and today is supposed to be rather slow considering many classes were
cancelled on account of students leaving town for Thanksgiving weekend. Regardless, instead of
saying ‘yes’ or typing a reply altogether, Mingyu calls first, “It is really early. Why are you up?”

Minghao sniffs, sleep still laced heavily in his voice, “Sorry, did I wake you?”

“No. I woke up a few minutes ago. What’s up?”

He chuckles, sighs, sniffs again—Mingyu really hopes that he hasn’t caught a cold right
before finals, “Nothing. I just,” what’s with all the breathing today, “I just wanted to hear your
voice.”

That’s so corny. Please, Minghao, this early in the morning, “Oh, thanks for the s’mores by the
way. They were really good.” The dancer just hums. Does he really want Mingyu to keep talking?
He really doesn’t like being the speaker during one-sided conversations, “So, why are you up so
early, Agent HaoHao?”

“Oh,” he clears his throat, “just a bad dream. I also have some things to prepare for the potluck
tonight.”

“What did you dream about?”

“Nothing.”

“You can’t just say you had a bad dream and then say ‘nothing’. C’mon, Minghao.” Let
Mingyu do away with the nightmares.

He paddles into the kitchen after putting on a pair of socks, “I had a dream about you.” and
promptly puts his knife and cutting board down. What?

“About me?”

“Yeah. No big deal. It’s reoccurring, so, whatever.” No whatever’s, “It just felt really real last
night, so I wanted to hear your voice and make sure I was actually awake.” Mingyu feels the need to
press for it more, so he puts the call on speaker phone and sets it on the counter next to his workspace, “I can’t believe Joshua’s making you guys work today.” An abrupt change in topic, very Minghao, “How many old folks are even in town after Thanksgiving?”

Mingyu cuts through carrots and celery, potatoes and fennel, “Well, we have our regulars and sometimes they just don’t have family to visit during Thanksgiving. A lot of them are from the old folks’ place down on Spruce. Once you get put into a place like that, I guess no one really visits.”

“Wow, you’re such a downer in the morning.”

“You’re the one who called because you had a bad dream.” Mingyu points his knife at the phone as if Minghao could see him before realizing how silly he looks. He gathers all the ingredients into a large pan and slides it over the stove with a knob of butter, “But you really should tell me. Maybe I can fix it.”

“Fix it?”

“You’re dreams are a projection of your subconscious, so sometimes what you dream about correlates with real life.” Reading all those psychology books in his spare time and scrolling through wikis on dreams for hours is finally paying off, “So, if you’re dreaming about me, then maybe there’s something—”

“Sorry, but can we please not talk about it? I appreciate the help, but it’s 6am- actually, wait, why are you awake?” Is that another not-so-sly topic change?

He’ll let it go today. Only today. If Minghao doesn’t want to talk about it, they won’t talk about it. It’s not like Mingyu would be very comfortable talking about all the nightmares he’s had either. The blond was probably startled awake or something, it’s senseless to pry after he said not to, “Cooking for the clinic guys.”

“It’s 6am.”

It’s actually closer to 7 now, sassypants, “My plan is to sous vide the turkey while I’m at work and then actually cook when I come home after lunch until around 5?” This plan seems to be falling apart rather quickly.

“Okay, but, like, you know everyone is coming to Friendsgiving, right? You probably don’t need to cook a bit of everything. They’re going to eat it again in a few hours anyway.”

Mingyu immediately switches his stove off, “What?”

“Don’t outdo yourself?”

“Everyone is coming to dinner?”

“Yeah. Jeonghan, Josh, Wonwoo, everyone.”

“Oh.” That might be true, but that doesn’t include Seokmin who Mingyu would very much so like to celebrate on Friendsgiving. And what about the cherry pie that he’s already planned to make for him as thanks for his advice? Well, he supposes that he could deliver a pie whenever he wants, like, surprise office pie, but isn’t pie better consumed on a day like today in the company of friends? Then again, Seokmin isn’t really friends with anyone aside from Jeonghan, “Would it be okay if I brought a friend then?”

There is a lot of background noise behind Minghao’s call. What exactly is he doing this early
in the morning and why isn’t Seungcheol telling him to be quiet, “Huh? Sure. It’s Friendsgiving, the more the merrier.”

“What are you doing?”

“Cooking.” A sequence of clacks and clangs follow, “I need to make something for the potluck and I have no clue what to make so I’m just looking through our pantry and slapping together whatever I find. Also, you probably won’t believe me, but our stupid oven decided to work again last night.”

“A Christmas miracle.”

He never thought that he’d like talking passively on the phone.

Since high school—since he was able to use a phone, calls have been a thing of convenience and instant fulfillment. Texts were where he held all his long conversations because you could have time to think of a response and compose yourself. It provided a means of communication that you didn’t have to be ‘on’ for. Calls, on the other hand, are still a little nerve-wracking to make because you have to think on your toes and call shots as they come. You’d think it’d be the same as a face-to-face conversation, but in the absence of body language and facial expressions, it feels oddly alien.

Having Minghao on the phone as some omnipresent voice in his apartment puts him at ease. The large spans of silence that clutter the line with static aren’t awkward or empty. It just feels natural, like they’re both working on their own projects and—whenever they please—looking up to find company is easy. He just has to say one word and he’ll have Minghao’s attention until they lapse back into cooking.

Of course, Mingyu has to hang up before he can leave for work with less than 50% of his battery remaining. He’d love to keep talking, but Minghao also has places to go and people to see. Despite not wanting to overdo himself for the potluck, he had resolved to bake a pie and make mashed potatoes and curry. Why curry? No reason other than “it’s cold outside, curry sounds good” and, to be fair, this will be a potluck where all the guests just aren’t that interested in traditional practices. It’s also safe to assume that most of them had those very traditional meals yesterday.

Because he’s bitter about Wonwoo’s entirely silly proposition of him making an entire Thanksgiving feast by himself without telling him about everyone meeting up for Friendsgiving anyway, he decides that they’ll only get leftovers. He’ll pack them nicely in the untouched meal prep containers he’d bought last summer and reheat them in the oven with a few fresh spices and herbs, but he’s not about to spend a few hours cooking something entirely new when he just needs to bring one or two things to a potluck at the end of the day. Wonwoo totally duped him and he fell for it. The only one in the clinic with any redeeming qualities is Seokmin who hasn’t lied to him and who hasn’t made him promise to do something ridiculous.

Okay, so, maybe agreeing to the whole homecooked meal quest was Mingyu’s fault and he should have seen right through that one ever since Minghao said that he and Soonyoung were plotting something diabolical—he never said diabolical, but it was implied there were up to no good.

As a punishment, he’s going to slip a bead of wasabi into Wonwoo’s stuffing. And his cornbread. And his garlic knot.

Yeah. That’ll teach him.
Mingyu comes to work with a canvas bag full of prepacked lunches for each of his coworkers. The smell already wafts through the lobby when he enters and has Joshua sitting at attention early on which is rather out of character for the lethargic desk attendant. In fact, he looks positively chipper.

He really hopes that the manager-boss had stopped his habit of skipping breakfast these days. It just isn’t healthy to skip meals as an adult if you can avoid it, “What’s that?” In addition to skipping breakfast, Joshua’s lunches are often unhealthy, over-processed cold-cut sandwiches with chips and a soda. On the rare occasion he goes out to lunch with Seokmin or Jeonghan, he’ll have something similar with little nutritional value.

It’s not that the man can’t take care of himself- well, Mingyu’s not sure where he gets that conclusion, but having the experience and ability to run a clinic alone should mean that the ability to make yourself a decent lunch comes innately, “I made a small lunch for everyone.”

“Lunch?”

The thing is, Mingyu didn’t really have enough for everyone to have a Thanksgiving-sized meal which he supposes is okay now that he knows everyone will be filling their bellies to the brim tonight, “Yep. I’ll put them in the fridge.” Joshua will be coming as Seungcheol’s guest. It’s a random thought, but he can’t help it. He doesn’t know how they’re connected or how they met. They don’t seem anything alike, “Everyone’s box is labeled.”

Joshua, surprisingly, gets up from his desk and patters after him into the breakroom where Wonwoo is already brewing a pot of coffee. Mingyu makes a note to remind Wonwoo that his food is in the fridge and that everyone should remove the lids—and cover them with a paper towel—before microwaving them. That’s right, he feels the need to give grown adults instructions on how to properly microwaves something. They aren’t the ones who have to clean it after spaghetti sauce explodes and turns into a hard enamel against the metallic walls, “You actually followed through with Wonwoo’s plan?”

“Yes.” He picks up his lunch container and gives it a hard look before sliding it into the fridge and offering a hand out to help Mingyu put the rest away. Why’s he being so nice today? He knows, it’s a stretch to say that this simple action is an act of kindness, but for Joshua who is normally a step away from his grave in the morning, this is a momentous feat.

“I have it in writing.” Wonwoo rests his elbow on Mingyu’s shoulder, leaning his weight against him as the taller man hands the boxes over to Joshua, “But I’ll be honest, I didn’t think you’d actually make us lunch. I was hoping for a pie at best. Thanks.”

Mingyu smiles a sinister smile after hearing those words, “Well, we did make a deal.” Oh, Wonwoo, if only you knew how much you’ll enjoy your lunch later.

He quickly tries to hide his mischief when he turns around. If Minghao hadn’t told him about everyone going to the party tonight, he would have gone all out. Instead, he’s just going make a nice, toasty potato gratin and some caramelized marshmallow yams; stuff that doesn’t take a bunch of effort and hours of cooking- oh, and a pie for Seokmin since he’s determined to invite him. He wonders what everyone else will be making and sincerely hopes that Wonwoo and Soonyoung will opt for Costco pies that don’t need to be touched with their fire-prone hands.
Work proceeds slowly. So, so slowly.

Normally, Mingyu doesn’t mind waiting for Mrs. Hutcherson to shuffle slowly towards their equipment room and it’s always possible that her joints might have swollen a bit with all the sodium from a retirement-home dinner, but it’s almost painful to watch her move at a snail’s pace, “Sorry, dear, can an old lady run to the restroom first?”

Why. Just why, “Absolutely.” She’s not going to be anything close to running, “I’ll be waiting back here, so just call for me when you’re back in the lobby.” She had almost twenty minutes to relieve herself before her appointment time. Whatever, Mingyu takes a seat next to Joshua and whips out his phone to tap around. Recently, he’s been playing this really difficult game where you’re a tiny fish and you have to eat other fish to become the biggest fish. It’s straightforward, but the controls make it difficult to surpass the fifth level without dying a handful of times. There’s just something nice about the feedback and instant satisfaction in making it a couple points past where he’d been before.

Today, however, the in-game minefield is out for vengeance and he has trouble getting anywhere, “Hey, is Joshua in?” That’s what you get for not wearing nametags and only having a tiny Toblerones with even smaller nameplates.

“Yeah, that’s me.”

Something is placed on the counter, “Oh, cool, uh,” The voice sounds oddly familiar, “these are for your patients or something.”

“Oh, thanks. I thought he’d bring them in himse-”

“Mingyu! Hey!”

Mingyu almost drops his phone—this thing is using up all his luck—when he’s called and scrambles to look professional. Normally, Joshua didn’t care if they were on their phones or lazed about if there were no patients, but he knows the appearance of a young man on his phone just projects a bad image to the old folks that come in, “Vernon?”

The man is standing with a pink, striped shirt with a starched collar and a brown bowtie with fake blue sprinkles peppering it. On the counter sits a single, baby blue box, too small to hold a dozen doughnuts, “Sorry, did I interrupt you?”

“Oh, no, it’s fine.” Joshua smiles—genuinely, at that—and takes the box, “I just thought Minghao would be bringing them over.”

“Nah, he’s been in the studio all day since we’re shutting down early for Friendsgiving- oh, no tip needed.” Vernon shakes his head and pushes the money back over to Joshua, “I was on my way to practice, so I told him I could bring it by- and I’m running late, so I’m just gonna skedaddle. See you both tonight!” The curly-haired man skips away before Mingyu can say much. Should he even be driving? Is it legal to drive after having a seizure?

He turns back to his phone, hoping to ask Minghao what all that was about, but a hand grabs his nape and swings him around in his swivel chair. Joshua yelps as well, feeling his chair fall back as he’s dragged a few feet over.

“What’s that?” Jeonghan looms over them both.

“You cut your hair again?” he hadn’t seen the man all day and almost didn’t recognize him. Jeonghan had only changed his previous hairstyle out of frustration. He’d just grumpily hacked off
his silky, long locks in favor of a shorter, mahogany do with an asymmetric fringe that always got in his eyes.

Today it’s wheat-colored, even, and incredibly soft-looking. It’s parted to the side, curving with two swoops towards his ears and matches his features very nicely - what alien abducted his two seniors and replaced them with these obvious clones? “I don’t know, did I?” Nope, that’s Jeonghan.

Joshua leans back in his chair to look up at the (barely) older man, “These are cookies for the patients.” He carefully opens the box to reveal two, neatly filed lines of various cookie types. No wonder the box was so small. There are at least fifty cookies packed tightly into it along with a stack of napkins. A piece of parchment paper is used to fence a quarter of them off with a sticky note on the inside of the lid saying that those are sugar-free.

Something tugs at Mingyu’s heart.

Minghao put in this order, right? This delivery, for some reason, he feels like he’s the reason behind it. Was it because he said that the old folks that come in today are the ones that likely didn’t have family to go home to for Thanksgiving? Does Minghao feel bad for them? Does he want them to find some warmth and comfort in the heavenly taste of DonutBoo secret menu cookies?

It’s just a box of cookies, nothing huge or expensive, but it’s the gesture itself that makes Mingyu feel warm inside. It’s highly likely that Jeonghan and Joshua feel moved by it as well since neither of them moves to partake from the box, “For the patients?”

Jeonghan lets Mingyu go to put both his hands on Joshua’s chair and bend it back even further, to the point where his feet lift off the ground. If he let go, their boss would likely fall on his back, but the trust between the two is nothing new. He’s seen Joshua climb a ladder only supported by Jeonghan’s presumably weak arms. It’s not like Joshua weighs much—he’s probably lighter than Minghao—but it’s not like Jeonghan is the picture of strength, “Yeah, remember what Minghao said this morning?”

This morning? “Oh,” it seems like that memory comes back, “I thought he was going to send flowers.”

“No, he told Cheol not to send flowers.” Hello, Earth to Devil1 and Devil2, did you forget that Mingyu’s sitting right here no less than three feet away from you? He can hear everything and even though his brain is short-circuiting a bit, there are plenty of questions accumulating on the tip of his tongue-

“Mingyu, dear, I’m back. Sorry that I took so long.”

Mingyu stands immediately and moves to help Mrs. Hutcherson advance down the hallway, swallowing his inquiries with a gulp, but letting his curious eyes trail back to the two chatting at the front desk. He doesn’t blame Minghao for not saying anything about them coming over. It’s none of his business and maybe they told Minghao not to say anything since they’re coworkers, but since when did they look at each other like that?

It doesn’t matter. At the trajectory all his relationships are evolving, he’ll find out with time. What does matter is that Minghao is quite possibly the most thoughtful person he’s ever had the honor of meeting. He’s likely the type that helps little old ladies cross the street and get splinters from climbing up trees to save cats in the dead of winter. He’s already the type that gives himself away in bits and pieces and Mingyu almost feels guilty that he’s been given a little bit more than everyone else.
After he reminds Mrs. Hutcherson to lay off the sodium so she doesn’t retain as much water and after Joshua brightly—again, who is this—reminds her to take a cookie on the way out, Mingyu retires to the breakroom where he catches Seokmin clocking in for his shift. He looks exhausted, but that’s likely caused by too much gravy and not enough sleep. The black-haired man slings his bag onto the counter before he slides onto the couch.

“Long night?”

“Hmm?” Seokmin looks up at him and closes his eyes again, squeezing himself into the corner of the cushions as tightly as he can, “Yeah. I binge-watched Naruto last night.” What a very Seokmin thing to do, “It’s been almost twenty years since those episodes came out, can you believe that? There are people younger than those episodes.”

He—Mingyu blinks—he does know that there are kids born, like, every minute, right? They literally have patients that are children and teens, “What are you doing tonight?”

“Oh,” he rubs his face, “probably crying over my thesis and ordering pizza, why?”

“I wanted to bring you to a party.”

Seokmin sits up, expression open and puzzled, “Something happen between you and Minghao?”

“Oh- not like that.” Mingyu laughs. Why do people jump to conclusions like that? “It’s just like a snowball-Friendsgiving kind of thing. Friends of friends are invited and- yeah- uh, it somehow ended up that Joshua and Jeonghan are going. And Wonwoo’s going, too.” He tries to explain as well as he can what this whole set up is, “You didn’t go home for Thanksgiving, right? Otherwise, you wouldn’t be here today.”

He shakes his head, “Getting a one-day, roundtrip flight to and from Austin would have been ridiculous during this time of year. I Skyped the folks for almost three hours, though.” He combs his bangs off his forehead and sighs.

“That sucks.”

“It’s not terrible, but, full disclosure, eating alone felt really pitiful.” Seokmin chuckles before sitting up and beaming, “But I really don’t want to intrude.”

“No, no you’re not intruding!” Okay, sure, Seokmin might be the one person at the party that doesn’t know anyone else from the core group, but that’s okay! Mingyu just knows he’ll get along well with Minghao and Soonyoung and maybe Jun, “Everyone is really easygoing.” That’s a total lie. The Performance Studio workers are anything but easygoing, but he can’t imagine Seokmin agreeing to go if he said otherwise, “There are a couple people attending that I think you’ll really have a good time with! It beats sitting at home, trust me, and,” he shakes him from behind the couch, “and you’ll get to eat a lot of good food.”

“Do I need to bring anything?”

“Nope. I’ve got both of us covered. Just be ready to have fun.”

He’s not exactly sure why he’s pushing so hard for Seokmin to go outside of the obvious. Maybe it’s because he doesn’t want to feel like the only outsider anymore. Is that mean? He doesn’t mean anything bad by it, but the feeling you get from not being ‘the new kid’ anymore feels better
than what he sometimes feels entering the studio alone. Even if Yixing said he’s part of the ‘studio family’ now—and whatever special permissions it entails—he still isn’t comfortable in that environment.

Again, he’s sure that with time he’ll melt easily into their niche culture and understand their jokes and adapt to how everyone behaves, but because he’s still new to it all, having a crutch like Seokmin to lean on might make him feel a little less hesitant to be a hundred percent himself when Minghao’s not around.

Seokmin hisses, shaking his head in mock defeat, “Ah, fine, fine, I’ll go with you. When and where?”

“Yes!” Mingyu cheers, “I’ll come back here to pick you up at 5:30. Don’t worry about anything else. Just get ready for food.” Yeah, he knows he’s hyping it up too much. Subjecting Seokmin to the relentless wrath of Soonyoung’s cooking might not be the best way to introduce him to a new group of people, but it’s the best he can do for now. Once Seokmin sees how well he fits in, all the sugar-coating will be a thing of the past.

Before the sharp-nosed PT has a chance to object or change his mind or ask any more questions that may sway his opinion, Mingyu dashes out the door after hollering something about enjoying the lunch in the fridge and to not switch with Wonwoo no matter what.

The last thing Mingyu thought would happen today actually happens today and he’s not exactly furious, but he is frustrated.

C’mon, oven, please. You were working so well two days ago when Minghao needed you so why are you so determined to not work today? It beeped when it was done preheating. It was warm when he opened it to pop the cherry pie in twenty minutes ago. Usually, at this point, he’d rotate whatever’s inside to get an even bake, but when he picked the pie up it was incredibly soggy and sad-

And the pie slips off his oven mitt and lands face down on the oven door, coating it with red syrup and pitted cherries. It spills everywhere—almost comically—even onto the floor where Mingyu slips because he was too focused trying to find his roll of paper towels.

This can’t be happening. He has three whole things to bake within the next three hours. There’s no time to waste trying to figure out the wiring of this stupid hunk of junk, please work, pleasepleasepleaseplease.

He groans, pulling his sore ass off the ground and straightening out his back. Calm down, Mingyu, it’s just a pie.

Today wasn’t stressful until this point. Almost all his ingredients are prepped and he has the proper dishes set out and everything. He just needs a working oven. And to remake this cherry pie. Ugh, he has to remake this cherry pie. Luckily, he had the foresight to buy premade crust from the store just in case his own didn’t work out. It’s hit or miss and every few times he tries, the crust ends up weird and doughy. The only issue now is that he doesn’t have an oven.

But Minghao does.

“Hey,” he raps his fingers against the counter impatiently, “are you home and can I use your oven?”
Minghao laughs—he has the audacity to laugh—, “Really, Mingyu?”

“Minghao, please. I need your oven.” He rubs his face with his free hand, “Please.”

“Uh, well, I won’t be home for another hour or so,” right, practice is a thing that Minghao forces himself to do sometimes, “but Cheol’s home since school’s out today. He’ll let you in probably.”

Mingyu would rather not be at Minghao’s apartment with his (not) dad, but that also means he gets to see Cacahuate and there isn’t much time left to dawdle on the situation because this stuff needs to go in the oven and needs to come out in time for it to cool before he has to zoom off to pick up Seokmin from the clinic that is across town from both the studio and their flat, but goddammit, if he’s set out to make all this food, he’s doing to make this fucking food.

Tonight’s going to be one of ‘those’ nights, isn’t it? One of those nights were nothing goes right, “It’ll be okay, Mingyu. I believe in you.” And hearing Minghao say that is really all he needs to feel a little more motivated. Even if tonight is one of ‘those’ nights, Minghao will be there supporting him every step of the way.

But, seriously, making pie crust is such a finicky headache that he’d rather not go through these motions again.

The best part, however, of having a significant other who has a roommate-dad who loves him very much is that that roommate-dad already has the oven preheated to 350 by the time Mingyu arrives with two glass baking dishes and a bag of ingredients to remake the stupid cherry pie that decided to take a jump. Seungcheol also has a shot of sweet rum waiting for him on the counter along with a slice of pumpkin pie.

Part of him is surprised that there’s any pie left at all, but the bite he takes is sweet and homemade. It’s not too sweet, not over-spiced. The top hasn’t cracked and the crust is just a little dry, but a dollop of whipped cream makes up for it. There are hints of nutmeg and cinnamon, and the very faint taste of freshly ground ginger that warms it up. If he was Seungcheol, he probably couldn’t save any of this pie for someone else (minus Minghao).

It’s a little funny to think about their relationship now in contrast to how terrible and antagonistic it was a week ago. Seungcheol is seriously babying him because Minghao could hear his frustration and absolute doneness over the phone, “Will you be mad if I turn down the shot?”

“It’s sipping rum.” He half-yells from the couch, over the sound of lasers and guns firing on the screen. Cacahuate is knocked out next to him, not bothering to wake up and greet Mingyu at the door (which is a little disappointing). “You don’t need to drink it as a shot, but it’ll take the edge off of things.” Seungcheol’s eyes don’t leave the TV for a second. He’s still in his pajamas, fully enjoying his time off of work and indulging in his pie consumption with no one around to judge him.

After he takes a courtesy sip of the rum and quietly slides it over to the sink, Mingyu spends the next half-hour or so putting the potato gratin in the oven and roasting the yams until they’re fork-tender. While they’re baking, he starts assembling a fresh cherry pie, “Do you guys have almond extract?”

“What?” Seungcheol yells.

“Do you guys have almond extract?” He matches the volume of the entertainment center.

“No clue, ask Minghao.” But Minghao’s not here, so Mingyu returns to macerating berries in a
bowl, trying not to stain himself.

Cacahuate finally perks up and passes a glance towards Mingyu before sprinting to the door and wagging his tail furiously, bouncing slightly on his front paws and panting in a happy laugh. The lock turns over and Minghao shuffles inside, throwing his bag onto a chair at the dining table and petting his dog on his head. After ripping off his beanie and shaking out his hair, he offers him a treat and says hi to Seungcheol. The older man pauses his game and turns around on the couch to ask some question that Mingyu’s not paying attention to.

You would expect him to react giddily, put his things down and prance over to Minghao himself, but he’s mesmerized.

What happened to being blond?

Minghao pats Seungcheol on the shoulder and rounds the corner to come into the kitchen. Mingyu can only stare as he approaches. He should make sure he doesn’t drool, but the only things that can move are his eyes. The shorter man places a hand on his bicep and smiles that wide and gentle smile, finding humor in how strangely Mingyu’s acting.

Receiving a soft kiss on the cheek makes him realize how hard his heart is beating, “Do you not like it?” Minghao shakes his silver locks to the side as he moves from one end of the kitchen to the other, “It’s just temporary, for the performance. I fully plan on shaving this crispy nest all off the second it ends.” It looks very soft, though. It bounces when he takes a step or two.

“It,” Mingyu’s mouth is a little dry. He wonders if this is how spouses feel when they see each other walk down the aisle, “You look nice.”

“He thinks you’re hot.” Seungcheol says, returning to his game.

Well, Mingyu would have said that if the roommate-dad wasn’t monitoring them from the comfort of his living room. By the time he can find Minghao with his eyes again, he’s looping something over his head and giving him a hug to tie something behind his back, “You should have asked for an apron. Cherries stain everything.” But Mingyu drops the fork into the bowl and pulls Minghao into an actual hug, kissing his lips that are still slightly sweet from the clear Gatorade he just took a sip from. He hums against his mouth until it parts slightly and he gently grinds his teeth on his bottom lip. They’re making out in the kitchen, not in front of Seungcheol who is too absorbed in his game to even care. It’s also unlikely that he can see him from his spot on the couch, but after just a few moments, a hand comes over his chest and pushes him back, “Okay, eager beaver, we have some cooking to do, so if this can be put on hold for a bit, that’d be great.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” Minghao pulls an apron over his own head, not bothering to tie it as he quickly darts around the kitchen to gather ingredients and mixing bowls. His knife skills are so fast and precise that he can’t help but be hypnotized by his professional work pace. He tosses a variety of things into one of the large bowls before taking two baking sheets out of the cupboard and kicking it shut.

“You’re only using one oven, right?” Mingyu nods. Seungcheol had preheated both.

The silver-haired fox slides spices and vegetables this way and that, “Are you going to bake a salad?” Brussels sprouts, carrots, onion, green onion, his entire work surface is covered in severed plants.

“Look, we have, like, two vegans and the rest of the studio kids never eat their vegetables, so I’ve taken it upon myself-” Ding dong.
Cacahuate boofs quietly before Seungcheol shushes him by putting the dog in a headlock and rubbing his pouted mouth into his fur as he advances to a new stage in the game. Minghao wipes his hands on a dish towel. Who else is coming?

Mingyu hears the door unlock and Minghao greet whoever is visiting, “Oh hey, yeah, just take it to the kitchen, I’ll help.”

“Thanks.” The rustling of plastic bags, “It should be pretty easy, right?”

“Yeah, I think so. It just takes a while to cook down.”

Whoever it is walks with heavy, rhythmic steps and their voice is light and grainy. Part of it sounds familiar, but he doesn’t think he can match it to a face. Not that he has to since that person is very obviously coming into the kitchen to set up shop and cook their share of the potluck meal, “Cool. The recipe online was pretty simple, so I think I can manage,” their sentence cuts off as they round the corner and come into the kitchen with Minghao a few steps behind. He takes one look at the cluttered counter before rolling his eyes at Mingyu, “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Mingyu certainly didn’t think he’d be seeing this kid before the potluck.
Chan slides by the counter and drops a rather hefty bag onto it.

He dusts off his hands and leans his weight back, crossing his arms over his chest and staring at Mingyu with a straight face—an expression that is unreadable but simply comes off as unhappy. Mingyu has no idea why the dance team’s youngest member always has a bone to pick with him. Minghao has been good and going to practice and keeping on schedule for the most part. This is misplaced aggression.

His black hair is tossed messily into a backwards red cap and—did he always look this young and petit?

Minghao wordlessly gives Chan a firm shove to get him to start unpacking his things as he whips out a third cutting board—seriously, who has this many cutting boards—and places two knives next to them before resuming his work. Unfortunately, because of all the ingredients on the island counter, Mingyu and Chan have to work next to each other. They bump elbows on occasion because of their opposite-handedness. It’d be much more efficient if Minghao were to switch them or swap places with him, but alas, the man is very busy setting up his vegetables for roasting and boiling a pot of water.

He peels potatoes quietly, not saying much to help break the silence.

However, a little notion pops up in Mingyu’s brain. It’s just a little scratch at first, but the idea grows as his mind explores the possibility that Chan may very well be jealous—envious maybe, perhaps something like that. Everyone on the dance team is essentially paired off in one way or another. They’re all in that ballpark age to start relationships and settle down, and while Mingyu doesn’t mind axing the ‘settle down’ portion off his and Minghao’s relationship indefinitely, he personally feels comforted that he’s not alone anymore.

Is it selfish to think this way?

Maybe it’s less selfish and more self-absorbed.

He has to shake it from his brain. Mingyu had grown accustomed to being the center of envy growing up and immediate habits like that are hard to kick. Chan could probably care less about dating and—his eyes wander over to Minghao—kissing and hugging and holding hands and having long, late-night talks and supporting and protecting. Although the rewarding feeling of taking care of yourself is significantly lower than worrying about someone else, only having to focus on your personal happiness without anyone to restrain you must be a world easier. Simpler.

And for that, he wonders if Minghao’s ever been burdened by Mingyu’s seemingly permanent job and idealization of stability in order to have a comfortable and ‘perfect’ lifestyle. He wonders if he’s felt troubled over— he’ll stop himself there, casting his eyes back to his menial and repetitive work. If he doesn’t stop soon, these berries are going to turn into jam. There’s no point in thinking about stuff like that now. Minghao came home and kissed him no more than half an hour ago. Minghao felt safe enough to sleep in his bed with him and he likes him enough to make him s’mores and find him stupid mint plants that he now has the responsibility to care for.

Minghao’s already said that he ‘likes him too much’, so he should stop feeling so insecure about it.
And for that, he smiles, reliving that time a couple nights ago with the then-blond man’s
weight pressed down against his body and holding hands against his chest. He never thought that
he’d like to profess his feelings again and again if only the situation ended up like that.

A weird mood takes over the room because he lets out a short laugh just as Seungcheol saves
his game, offering a moment of silence as the new screen loads. Both sets of eyes dart over to him,
one warm, one impeccably cold.

It’s as if he feels like he’s in trouble somehow. Mingyu can only peer up under his bangs to
glance between the two to test the atmosphere every now and then. It’s very difficult to not be
distracted by how anxious Chan’s cutting skills are making him. Has this boy never used a knife? It’s
not like he’s cutting himself, but he doesn’t curl his fingers and he keeps lifting the blade off the
board. If he’s going to cut leeks like that, it should be okay, but Mingyu’s eyes are anticipating the
very spherical onion on the edge of the counter. Part of him wants to say something—offer help to
the inexperienced cook so he doesn’t cut his hand off—, but part of him knows it isn’t his place and
offering to help might bring forth more hostility.

Alas, he decides to let fate run its course and remembers what he was in the middle of, “Oh,
hey, do you have almond extract?” He’s been idly macerating cherries and apples for a while now.
It’s a good thing he still has some whole cherries on the side because this is turning into an
untextured paste.

Minghao perks up a bit, feeling the air clear as he mentally searches his kitchen, “I think there
should be some in there.” He points his knife to the cabinet behind Mingyu. Our tallest chef
rummages in the cupboard, careful not to disturb the bigger bottles of oil and wine too much. Some
of this stuff looks gourmet and expensive, a couple bottles he recognizes from his parents’ place can
be upwards of a couple hundred dollars. After a minute or two of searching, he comes up
emptyhanded, “Hm, let me take a look then.”

Minghao rounds the island and bumps Mingyu out of the way with a gentle elbow under his
ribs.

He plucks a couple bottles out to get a better view of the back, but when he doesn’t find
anything, he searches the second shelf. And when the second shelf yields no extract, he carefully
climbs up onto the counter. Mingyu places his hands on Minghao’s thighs to make sure he won’t be
falling or losing his balance as he uses his knees to peer over the highest level, “It’s okay if you don’t
have any, I can make the crust without it.”

Sulking and sinking into himself, Minghao sighs and slides off the counter, feeling Mingyu’s
hands run up his sides and wrap around his middle to steady him before letting him go with the
smallest hint of a lingering touch. You can’t blame him, Mingyu just wants to feel him. It’s been a
long day, “Why don’t you just add almond flour to it then?” His eyes follow the streamlined dancer
to the other end of the kitchen where he digs through another cabinet.

“It’s okay. I’ll just leave it out. I think the filling has a sharp enough flavor.”

It’s extremely adorable when his head pops back out of the cabinet and his hair bounces when
he gets back to his feet, “Your pie, your responsibility.” Minghao leans over to check on Chan who
has just finished haphazardly slicing his leeks and he offers him a large bowl to hold them in, “Do
you need help with the potatoes?”

“Dude, I can peel.” Chan actually chuckles.

Mingyu thought he would be met with a scoff or something a little bitter, but the younger man
doesn’t have any bite in his words. He’s just stating a fact, probably not wanting to be babied anymore.

“Okay, but you need to start browning your onion and celery so you can get the chicken stock going. The leeks and potato have to boil for, like, 20 minutes before you can blend it up.” Minghao scrapes together his second sheet pan and whacks them both into the oven before throwing a handful of salt into the large pot of water. The potatoes are quickly worked through as if he has some sort of muscle memory for things like this.

“Hey, Hao, the washer is doing that thing again.” Seungcheol is leaning in the doorway, having come from down the hall. Mingyu’s not sure when he’d moved from his cozy nest on the couch, but he’s beckoning for Minghao to help him. As he rinses his hands in the sink and dries them on his apron, Cacahuate slithers his way into the kitchen.

“What do you mean that thing?” The golden dog sits and looks up at them, panting with his tongue out and waiting for something to fall to the ground.

“That thing when the water comes out in spurts and the pipes start screaming.” Now that he mentions it, there is a little peculiar noise muffled through the walls of the flat. It’s hard to hear over the whir of the hood, the oven fan, and the music from the menu screen on the TV. It seems to be enough of a description to convince Minghao to leave his current task and aid his helpless roommate after tossing all his potatoes into the pot.

On his way out, Minghao grabs one of Chan’s celery sticks and hands it to the pooch who happily swings it back and forth for a minute before coming over and showing it to Mingyu. He shakes his head and whaps Mingyu’s leg with the limp vegetable, tail wagging furiously, “What, you’re saying hi to me now? You didn’t even care about me when I got here.” If he was cooking for himself, he would have pet the fluffy dog immediately, but because his hands are slightly damp and dog hair probably doesn’t taste too good in a pie, he foregoes the patting and scratching and opts for a smile instead.

Clearly not satisfied with Mingyu’s return of affection, Cacahuate walks behind him and shakes his head again, hitting Chan’s legs and pawing at his calves, “Ow! Hey, Huatito, please stop.” The man steps away from him, avoiding any further attacks by dancing around the attacks (of love). It’d be entertaining if he wasn’t going at it with one of Minghao’s very sharp knives in hand and a half-peeled onion in the other, “Huatito, hui jia.” The dog just tilts his head and chomps down on the celery stick. Is it possible that he can’t understand him without the proper intonations?

What a smart dog.

“Huatito,” and Mingyu digs in his memory and curls his tongue to warm it up, “huf jiá.” Watching old Chinese variety shows doesn’t seem to be doing the trick because Cacahuate’s expression seems a little crestfallen. It’s possible that Mingyu just didn’t get the tones right, but it’s also possible that the dog just hates him today.

The golden retriever-mix takes his celery stick and leaves the kitchen but not before standing in the doorway and looking back at both him and Chan with what can only be described as a glare. He wonders if he and Byeol have been talking because this is an unheard of amount of sass from the dog, “What’s his problem?”

It’s said under his breath, but—to Mingyu, at least—it’s an invitation to start a conversation. Or try to, “Right? He’s usually pretty sweet.”

“I know,” sometimes Mingyu forgets that he’s not the only one that’s come over to their place,
“maybe he’s not feeling well. Minghao said he sort of sprained his leg the other day on a walk with Seungcheol.”

The conversation dies just like that. He wonders why Minghao hadn’t mentioned Cacahuate’s injury to him. Well, he supposes that the dog hadn’t come up in conversation much and the fact that it was a Seungcheol-related event usually means that Minghao wouldn’t have mentioned it anyway. No matter, it looks like the former good boy is perfectly fine, running through the living room and jumping from couch to couch with his celery stick in hand-mouth.

Mingyu goes on to roll out the premade piecrust.

Normally, he’d make it from scratch, but he’s pressed for time and even though preparing the dough only takes ten minutes or so, it has to chill at least 4 hours and he doesn’t have the time today. He hopes that the cherry filling is enough to carry the pie into the hearts of his friends. If not, then he’ll be sure to make something extra special for Christmas.

After getting his pie—and its very delicate and pretty decoration—into the oven, he doesn’t have much to do. Part of him wants to check on Minghao and Seungcheol. He imagines that moving and wrestling with a washer and dryer is difficult even with two people, but something keeps him rooted to the kitchen and that’s the fact that Chan is about to tackle his onion. It’s obvious that he was avoiding it because, after peeling it, he’d moved onto cutting potatoes instead.

“Do you,” Mingyu wipes his hands on his apron, “need help with that.”

“No, I’m good.” He holds the round veggie with his fingertips flat against its outermost layer and positions the knife to slice it in half. He does the thing that most amateur chefs do which is to create a semi-stable arc with their pointer and thumb. Sliding the knife into that space, he’s able to cut the onion in half with a slight wobble.

But Mingyu’s frozen in place. Watching Chan cut this silly onion with his hands at risk is making him incredibly anxious. If he gets hurt, he feels like Minghao or Seungcheol will probably chew him out for not helping the poor guy. He is a hobby chef after all and while he isn’t obligated, he feels a twinge of responsibility, “Uh,” Chan looks up at him impatiently, ready to turn down the help. Calm down, soldier, he’s not about to take over his entire project and do it for him, but Mingyu will be damned if he’s going to let this not-child hurt himself under his watch, “can I at least show you how to do it safely?”

It sounds like a couple gears turn in his head and there’s the possibility that a creaky gate opens, but Mingyu won’t push his luck, “Okay.”

He picks up Minghao’s knife and rinses it off in the sink before quickly peeling a small, spare onion. It can be added to his soup without changing the flavor too much, “So you cut in half, that’s good, but when you cut things,” Mingyu scoots over slightly so that his workspace is almost touching Chan’s. He adjusts his grip on the knife, “you’ve got to hold your knife properly, so do what I do, but with your right hand.” Ah, the pain of being a lefty, “The side of your pointer and middle finger should be flush against the blade for better control and you hold this side with your thumb. Your wrist will rest against the wooden handle.” The man follows suit, watching Mingyu with intent eyes, “And your opposite hand,” he points at Chan’s left, “when you hold things, you should curl your fingers like this so your knuckles protect your fingers. You’re still holding it down with your fingertips and nails, but the blade should rub against your knuckles kinda like a guide.”

“Like this?” Chan does a couple swipes against the cutting board.
“Yeah.” Mingyu checks his position, still not feeling entirely safe, “If you want to be safer, like, if whatever you’re cutting is kind of slippery or is super small like when you’re mincing garlic or other herbs, try not to lift the tip of your knife off the cutting board and just rock it back and forth like this.” He shows him a very clear example, cutting through a clove of garlic that Minghao will probably use later with the potatoes, “Are you going to cube or julienne the onion?”

“Well, sorry I’m not a Michelin star instructor. I just didn’t want to see you fandangling that sharp knife around and cutting yourself.” He scrapes the onion into the bowl that Chan’s been keeping his leeks in, “Those can go in at the same time to caramelize and cook down. Don’t waste a bajillion bowls holding things separately.” He says this even though he’s guilty of doing the same thing. It’s better to show that he knows how to properly act in a kitchen.

It doesn’t seem like Chan’s up for any more conversation, but he does let Mingyu monitor him for a bit and when he nods to reward a job well done, a quiet “Thanks” slips past his lips.

“Okay,” Minghao claps once to get his attention, “get those things browning and start the boil so I can do your hair before the dinner. Mingyu can watch it for you.” The sizzle of the leek and onion hitting the smoking olive oil in the bottom of the pot is music to his ears. And while Chan is busy making sure nothing burns, Minghao takes this opportunity to wrap his arms around Mingyu’s waist and peck a little kiss on his cheek for the second time today, “Thanks for helping him.” He is also rewarded for a job well done. Mingyu can feel his heart flutter just a little, light and airy and full of microbubbles.

Minghao laces their fingers together for a moment, just to watch the younger man stir the pot and drop his potato chunks in, following three containers of broth, “I didn’t help him.” A short pause in Chan’s actions says that he heard that, “I just showed him how to do it properly.” The low hum he emits says that he accepts.

“Thank you for teaching him, then.” Mingyu pulls him closer to kiss the top of Minghao’s head before he pulls away and takes Chan’s spoon from him. He puts the wooden spoon into Mingyu’s hand, “C’mon, we don’t have much time.”

“But I want to blend it.” Was that a whine?
“You can blend it later, _after_ we’re done bleaching your hair. It won’t take long. Let Mingyu watch the kitchen for a bit.”

Unwillingly, Chan is dragged out of the heart of the home and down the hallway, presumably into Seungcheol’s bathroom where there’s likely more counterspace. Mingyu is left alone in the kitchen, no dog, no roommate-dad, just like earlier, but now he has nothing to do. Watching things bake in the oven—with the exception of puff pastry and souffle—is like watching paint dry. It’s especially true since all his stuff will take upwards of an hour to cook through.

Minghao’s stuff, on the other hand, probably needs half an hour, maybe less, but there’s still a world of time to wait. So, Mingyu distracts himself by cleaning up.

He picks up where his dancer left off, rinsing off cutting boards, filing away knives, and wiping down the countertop. He feels bad throwing the shot of rum down the sink, but he’s definitely not going to drink it all. He can hold his liquor, but it just doesn’t suit his taste. It’s not like Seungcheol will be pouring it back into the bottle or drinking it himself and he knows that Minghao doesn’t like alcohol much either. So, he takes a little sip to cut the guilt in half before rinsing the glass out and putting it on the rack to dry.

All that’s left by the time Chan and Minghao come back are a couple bowls with ingredients still in them and one workstation in case there’s more work to do.

Most of the young man’s hair is still black—dark brown at best—and it’s actually hard to tell if they did anything to it at all. Wasn’t there bleach involved? Upon further inspection, there are little peeks of yellow in his underlayer, “What’s the point of bleaching hair if you’re just going to bleach that much of it?”

“I like my hair soft and not fried, thanks.” Chan stirs his soup and starts looking for the stick blender.

Minghao pulls it out of the drawer near the stove and hands it to him, “Check if it’s fork-tender first, then blend.” He backs up to lean on the counter near Mingyu, “We bleached an underlayer.” He lifts up a section of his own hair to show Mingyu what he means, “We bleached an underlayer.” He lifts up a section of his own hair to show Mingyu what he means, “The top layer covers it so you can only see the color when he moves. I think it’ll look cool.”

“It better.” Chan grumbles before attacking his soup with the emulsifier, splashing hot liquid everywhere.

“It has to be under the surface.” Mingyu corrects him, “Keep it under and move it around to crush bits and pieces with the blade, but you have to keep the blade going. It’s probably better to set it on low since there’s a lot of stuff inside.”

“It’ll look fine. I’ve done it before. Trust me.”

As it turns out, Chan’s soup still has to simmer for another half-hour before he can add any cream and finish it off. So, after throwing in some salt and spices to the mushy mix, he retires back to the bathroom to finish the dye job. Minghao is close to follow. He pulls his vegetables out of the oven, “If you could fish out the potatoes for me, that’d be great. We’ll be out in a sec.”

He does what he’s told, but his feet itch to be where the people are. Seungcheol hasn’t emerged from his bedroom and Cacahuate followed them into the bathroom. Mingyu drums quiet rhythms into the black granite countertop and wipes it down for the third time. His phone is
surprisingly quiet today. No Jun puns, no Wonwoo emoji storm, no broken-text Soonyoung. He supposes that everyone’s busy doing their own thing. He sure as hell has been busy, too, but even Seokmin hasn’t messaged him. The clinic guys are still at work, he knows, but they usually text during business hours anyways. There’s so much time to kill between patients.

“Hey, Gyu, could you lend me a hand?” Minghao’s head pokes into the kitchen archway.

“Yeah, what’s up?” Mingyu follows him down the hall, a hand barely ghosting the small of his back.

They quietly pass through Seungcheol’s room, said man is busily clacking away on his computer. He doesn’t pass them a glance or pay them any attention. Mingyu’s never seen someone so focused on finding a new washer. Cacahuate is sleeping under his desk, resting his head in the small space where Seungcheol’s feet are crossed.

“We’re short on time, so if you can towel, I’ll blow-dry and we’ll be out of here.”

The expression on Chan’s face says he’s not very comfortable with this situation, but Mingyu’s not all up for it either. However, they both listen to their hair stylist who hands Mingyu a black towel that’s been speckled with red from being bleached too many times and arms himself with a high-end blow-dryer and a round brush.

Mingyu would like to formally apologize to Chan who he is drying like a dog. He still doesn’t have enough experience drying other humans to know how to do it well, but it’s a good thing that he doesn’t have any earrings in lest they be caught in the loose strings of the old towel. Minghao combs his hair up, starting from the top of his head, and curls the wet locks over the brush as he dries them from the roots to the tips. Mingyu’s hands are scratching at Chan’s scalp through the towel, drying sections before Minghao can get to them.

How oddly intimate is this?

He’s dried Minghao’s hair before and they were at the same standing, a little prickly, a little better than before, but he never thought twice about Minghao’s situation. He felt flustered and a little embarrassed. He felt shy and a bit self-conscious, but it wasn’t like this. This just feels awkward, kind of like he’s a stepdad trying to make good with kids that aren’t biologically his—at a limbo between legally being part of the family, but not being adopted into it.

It’s a good thing that Minghao is sensitive towards their defensive behavior.

He breaks the silence, explaining that he always cut and styled his own hair since high school to save a few bucks. It’s surprising how much hair stuff adds up. He buys all his dyes and bleach online and watches a million tutorials before starting, but he doesn’t usually do other people’s hair. After hearing that, Chan seems to get a little nervous, but Mingyu assures him.

“It looks cool.” He mumbles. It really does. After they passed through the middle section, it was clear that Minghao knew what he was doing. Drying what looked to be black hair, turned it into deep shades of emerald, garnet, and sapphire. The natural hair that flopped over it hid the colors until the stream of air from the blow-dryer stirred them up again. Mingyu—with his limited knowledge on fashion—thinks this is what they call ‘peekaboo galaxy hair’. It was popular a long time ago and had a recent revival.

“It’ll look awesome when you do your solo break.” He nods and gives in to their kind words.
One way or another, Minghao leaves them alone for a moment.

And in that moment, some sort of heat returns to Chan’s eyes and he quietly brushes off Mingyu’s hands and continues to run his own fingers through his hair with the blow-dryer at full force. Despite the loud noise and obvious distaste, he feels like it’s another opportunity to talk seriously.

If he’s going to be with Minghao, he’s going to have to be with his friends and coworkers as well, and up until now, he’s still not sure where Chan sits. Are they actually friends? Or are they just coworkers? Regardless, the easiest way to shift a grumpy person into a conversation is to apologize even if there’s nothing to apologize for, “Sorry.”

Perfect.

Chan’s eyebrows lift and he doesn’t look as standoffish as he did a minute ago, “What are you apologizing for?”

Absolutely nothing, “I don’t know, it just seems like we got off on the wrong foot.”

His expression is more open than it’s ever been, “Are you making amends just because Minghao asked you to?” he turns off the hairdryer, “Or because you like him, you think making friends with me is somehow going to help you?”

“Minghao hasn’t asked me to do anything and I know you two aren’t that close. I just want to know why there’s still some hostility between us. We’re both adults.”

Chan shrugs, “I don’t know. I guess I was just surprised that you were here. You’re really clingy.”

“I showed up uninvited. My oven broke.”

“I call bullshit, but sure, whatever.”

It seems like that explanation isn’t good enough for the young performer, “Just be straightforward and tell me why you hate me and we’ll try to work something out for Minghao’s sake. I’m sure having us not get along is stressing him out-”

He chuckles and shakes his head, “I don’t hate you, Mingyu. Do you always assume that you’re able to move mountains like that? Please.” He rolls his eyes and stacks up the plastic bowls Minghao was using to hold their hair dye, idle cleaning seems to be something they have in common, “I don’t hate you.” It comes out softly the second time, like he’s had space to calm down and reevaluate something, “You’re just a big distraction to Minghao,” so it really is that simple. He was told the same thing before, he’s a distraction to an important team player, “and we need Minghao. We need all of him- and don’t flatter yourself. He’s not putting you before his career, but,” Chan’s voice crescendos and mellows out again, “but we’ve never worked together like this.”

“Like what?”

“His attention is divided. There have been times where he’s been distracted before, all of us have situations where we’re distracted by one thing or another—finances, work, politics, family—but when it comes to a person,” his lips wrinkle like explaining things has become difficult, “when it comes to a special person, our team hasn’t dealt with that. Sure, sure, Jun and Jihoon have always had this weird attraction to each other and Soon and Vernon have always had steady relationships, but this is the first big competition we’re in where the dynamic of our team is a little different.” Chan fluffs his hair again, “And while I would call Soonyoung our leader before Minghao, it’s obvious
that he’s a very important person in controlling the dynamic of our performance.”

“I know—”

“And you’ve probably heard or thought that I just want to win this thing so I can get a steady job,” his eyes move around the base trim of the mirror, the lights illuminating his irises in a pictorial fashion, “and you aren’t wrong. I’m really selfish sometimes. I really want to win and get a job. I’m only human. But I’m not heartless.” He wonders if Seungcheol can hear them, “The older guys like to baby me and I like to fight with them. It’s a cat and mouse relationship, but it’s a family-like environment nonetheless.” His words felt bright for just a minute, “If I’m totally honest here, I think I’m just worried about that changing.”

“Chan, I promise, I’m really not out to steal Minghao away from you or the team.” He knows he can be possessive and clingy sometimes, but the last thing he wants to do is ruin what Minghao has worked so hard to hold dear, “I just want to support him. I’m still learning how to do that. I’ve never been in a relationship quite like this, so excuse me if I flounder a bit, but I’m also not going to give him the cold shoulder just because you think your team is better off that way. That’s unfair and you should trust Minghao to be wise enough to balance.”

“Whoa, hold your horses, Mingyu.” He turns around to face him, the lights give his form an interesting halo, “I’m not about to become some petty obstacle in your relationship. I could care less about stuff like that. It’s just that Minghao’s so driven to see you sometimes, it’s become a hindrance to the team,” Chan’s hip leans against the counter, “more so than his injury, he’s taking time off to see you.”

“I—”

“And we’ve talked about it. I understand Minghao’s concerns to a point, but to me, they’re a little immature and silly.” He crosses his arms.

Mingyu folds the towel over and hangs it over the side of the raised sink, “Then, is there anything I can do to make you feel,” feel what? He doesn’t know what Chan’s getting at, “less shitty about this whole thing?”

“Honestly?”

“Honestly.”

“Honestly, I don’t think that there’s anything you can do. There’s not really anything that Minghao can do either.” He scratches behind his neck, “You make him happy. He makes you happy. That’s plain to see.” Meeting eyes with someone has never been harder because Chan’s aversion is top notch, “There’s nothing anyone can do to better this situation, so that’s probably why I’m frustrated. The others don’t think it’s so serious, but, you know, me and my need to make a living, right?” He gets off the counter, kicking his legs out to stretch them and starts walking towards the door.

“So, you’re just going to endure this without trying to change anything?” That kind of solution doesn’t seem very viable to Mingyu. If you want a situation to change, you have to put a plan into motion.

Chan shrugs, “There’s nothing I can change. I kind of realize that now, I guess. Doesn’t mean I’m happy with it, but it’s better than feeling helpless.” There’s likely more to Chan’s internal dialogue than he gives him credit for. He feels like it’s akin to a mood swing, but the guy probably has a lot going on in his head. A lot of thoughts that he doesn’t like sharing, “Besides, whatever you
did to help his choreo with Jun was ace, so, I hate you a little less.”
Chapter 123

Mingyu quickly patters after Chan as he leaves the bathroom and strides through Seungcheol’s dark bedroom.

So, the team really did see the performance Minghao gave him—that’s embarrassing as heck—but the way Chan says it so nonchalantly makes him think there’s more to the situation. There’s the possibility that not all of them have seen it and he’s not sure why the lack of commentary or teasing makes him more nervous, “What did I do?” It’s usually safer to play dumb.

“No clue, but whatever it was, it helped Jun with his expressions.” The shorter man puts a hand on the edge of the wall as he swings himself back into the kitchen. It doesn’t seem like he’ll have any luck trying to pry with him. He’s better off asking Minghao when they’re alone.

“Ow! Why?!?”

When Mingyu enters, it’s plain to see that Minghao has just rapped Seungcheol’s knuckles with a wooden spatula. The older man is cradling his hand and the dropped baby carrot on the counter is evidence that he was stealing a bite before the party, “You have to wait,” Seungcheol tosses away his pout before smiling and chuckling. He’s not mad, he’s just playing with Minghao, “until everyone’s sitting together.” The dancer points the handle of the spatula down at the carrot, “You can have that one, but no more munching. If you’re hungry, eat the leftovers or something.”

Chan’s soup is sitting off to the side, removed from the stove and cooling so it can be packed away. Mingyu’s dishes are also sitting on the side. Minghao must’ve moved them when he came to stop his dishes from crisping up too much.

“Not cooking tonight?” he asks.

Seungcheol props his elbow on Minghao’s shoulder as he points the trimmed, baby carrot at Chan, “Nope.” He proceeds to inhale it, “We agreed that I would supply the ingredients and Hao would cook.” He ruffles Minghao’s hair with his clean hand and shuffles back into the living room to resume his game, shouting over his shoulder, “I’m a disaster in the kitchen.”

The silver-haired man rolls his eyes and continues to organize the honey-roasted vegetables in an orange, glass baking dish. The color makes it look even more appetizing and warm. It’s a little comical to watch him clumsily lift the heavy tray with a mitted-hand and scrape with the wooden spoon in the other, but aside from two Brussels sprouts that run away together, most of the dish survives the avalanche.

“Need some help?” Mingyu grabs the towel hanging on the oven door and takes the heavy sheet pan from him. His wrist still isn’t steady and shouldn’t be overworked.

“Thanks. Can you toss it into the sink? I’ll get Seungcheol to wash them later.” He strains the last part just loud enough so that the gamer can hear him. He grunts some sort of acknowledgement. Mingyu follows his orders. His stuff is cooling on the counter by Chan’s soup, he has time to spare.

The youngest of the chefs has his arms crossed over his chest, staring at his large pot of soup, unsure what to do with it. It has to go from point A to point B but it’s also a boiling hot pot of soup that won’t be easy to carry around. It’s then that Mingyu learns that Chan biked here. He doesn’t have a car which is understandable considering Minghao said he’s working a handful of part-time jobs and trying to pay rent and utilities at the same time, not to mention living expenses. But, damn,
the lack of foresight on this is kind of laughable.

“I can take it for you later.” Minghao wipes down the counter with large sweeps, “But Cheol and I won’t get there until after 6.”

Mingyu looks at his watch. It’s almost 5:30 already. Wow, time flies when you’re cooking and drying a stranger’s hair, “I can take you and your soup.” Olive branch offered, “I need to pick up a friend, but if you don’t mind that, we’ll head straight to the studio afterwards.”

Chan’s lips become a tight line as he weighs his options and for the longest minute, Mingyu thinks that he’ll be turned down. It’s obvious since they aren’t on good terms yet and he’d probably sooner down a bowl of bitter melon than ride anywhere with him. Mingyu knows that he would rather swing back an entire bottle of Tapatio than ride anywhere with Seungcheol a week ago. However, these studio boys are always full of surprises, “I’ll take you up on that offer.” He puts a lid on the pot and Minghao helps him rubber band them in place, tying the handle of the lid to the handles of the pot. Not the most secure, but if he holds it, there won’t be any sloshing.

“Yeah, sure. Uh,” he glances around the kitchen, “hey, Minghao, can we, like, get something to put under the pot so it doesn’t burn anyone? I think it’s better if he holds it in case the bump over the railroad shakes the car too much.”

“Good thinking.” Even though Minghao says it passively, it sparks something comforting in his heart. Maybe it’s one of those moments where infatuation hits you like a truck—unannounced and out of the blue—because it transports him to a headspace that he hasn’t appreciated before. Minghao thanks him for parts of himself that have been overlooked in the past. No one’s ever complimented his thoughts. His physique, athletic capabilities, and looks, sure, but very rarely has anyone ever pointed out that his thoughts are valuable and meaningful and- okay, so thinking that they need a towel to prevent Chan from burning his thighs to a crisp in the front seat isn’t anything Nobel Peace Prize-worthy, but it isn’t the first or only time that Minghao has naturally complimented him on something that other people don’t really see.

Making mountains out of molehills, that’s a habit he has to kick. Minghao probably didn’t mean anything by it, “I have a jacket I can put under.”

“No way, Chan.” Minghao scoots by him and heads down the hall, “I’m getting you a towel. We have a bajillion of them.” Mingyu and Chan stand in silence as they wait. Mingyu busies himself with his own dishes, wrapping them with the foil that he brought—a true king of being prepared—and carefully covers the yams and the potatoes with overturned, shallow plastic boxes. This way, he’s able to stack them in the bag without them squishing into each other. He’ll put them in the trunk later, inside the boxes so they don’t spill, but from the flat to the parking lot, it’s much easier to move them like this, “I was going to take this towel to the studio anyway.” He hands Chan a blue towel folded into a square.

“Thanks.” The younger man puts it on top of the pot so he can carry it to the car.

“And do you need any help?” Minghao looks up at him with those pretty doe eyes.

There are a few strands of hair that Seungcheol tossed out of place earlier and Mingyu seriously must fight his urge to fix them, “I’m good.”

After Minghao helps Chan get settled in his car with the pot of molten soup and helps Mingyu line the potatoes and pie up in the trunk, he manages to pass him a gentle smile and stops him from
shutting it prematurely. He lazily turns on his heel and shakes his head.

“Ah, a little moment of alone time.

“Yes?” his hand automatically goes to Minghao’s waist to pull him closer.

“Well,” Minghao’s voice is quiet and airy, “we’re done cooking, so,” his eyes glean from side to side, shyly avoiding Mingyu’s half-lidded gaze and knowing grin.

Are we picking up where we left off, “So?”

“I’m not going to say it.” Minghao’s red ears are saying enough, “And there’s a child in your backseat, so,” it’d be nice if he could stop trailing off his sentences, but it’s also very cute to see him so flustered. He knows Minghao’s a bit of a romantic but getting him to say corny and embarrassing things absolutely destroys him.

“So?” he draws out, nuzzling him. As much as he hates being the victim of it himself, he quite likes playing the role of a tease. Getting his partner all worked up over nothing is fun.

Minghao slaps him on the chest and pushes him back a step, “Don’t ‘so’ me. Have fun driving.” He crosses his arms and turns to leave.

But he laughs and pulls him back into his chest, “Fine, fine, don’t be salty.” Mingyu presses a kiss into his temple, making him wink involuntarily and pout when he takes a better look at him, “But when you look at me like that, it’s a little hard not to tease you.”

“Sweet talking won’t get you anywhere.” C’mon, Minghao, it’s just a game. You were being so nice just a few minutes ago-

Mingyu’s almost 100% sure that kissing Minghao will never get old.

“Now, you can have fun driving.” He pats Mingyu’s shoulder and closes the trunk for him, turning to leave again with a lighthearted huff, “I’ll see you soon.”

Who taught him to be so rude? Was it Seungcheol?

Whatever.

Even when he gets into the driver’s seat and turns the engine over, the feeling of Minghao’s lips hasn’t left his mouth. There’s still a tingling in the back of his throat, a sizzle in his stomach, and as he backs out of the spot and hits the road, he remembers that Chan is sitting in the back seat.

He sighs, “Do you and Minghao have to make out at every opportunity?”

“Absolutely.” The boldness quickly fades when he sees the man’s expression in the rearview mirror, “We didn’t make out. It was just one kiss. Okay, maybe two, but only one on the lips.”

Chan shakes his head, rolling his eyes. He doesn’t look very perturbed and there’s actually a lack of bite in his words, “Gross. Didn’t need to know.”

“What? Kisses feel nice.”

“Wouldn’t know.” He grumbles, and before Mingyu can speak up again or ask any questions, “And wouldn’t care to know.”

“You’ve never kissed anyone?”
“Ha. Ha. Very funny, right?”

Mingyu’s brow pinches. He’s not going to make fun of him for it. There’s no need to be so defensive. Now, more than ever, he understands that everyone has their own pace when it comes to relationships. Everyone and their partners—or lack thereof—don’t need to follow some nonexistent set of rules, but he’s not sure how to respond to Chan’s sarcasm, “Eh, everyone has their own means of moving into romance, I guess.”

The car falls into silence for the longest while, and if it wasn’t official that he won’t be comfortable going anywhere with Chan alone, it’s apparent now. All he can hear is the engine and the wind blowing through other cars—maybe the slight whir of the AC—, but there isn’t much else. He doesn’t want to put music on because he doesn’t know Chan’s taste and he seems like one of those people who would decide whether or not he likes you based on your song selection and how loud you blast your playlist. It’s safer to avoid showing him that material and stick to their personal interactions.

Right, personal interactions. Sitting in silence probably doesn’t count for much. If anything, it might be knocking their relationship meter down a few pegs. Talking ought to help, but he doesn’t want to talk about Minghao, so there’s little to speak on, “I’m actually surprised you chose to ride with me.”

The comment seems to briefly take Chan’s attention off his dated phone, but his eyes snap back to it when it buzzes again, “Yeah, thanks.”

Dead again, this cursed conversation, “You’re welcome.”

“Anything beats sitting in a car with Seungcheol’s weird friends, trust me.”

“ Weird friends?”

“Yeah, ugh, I know I said you’re clingy but John-whatever is way worse than you.” Part of Mingyu is glad that he’s not the only one that Chan holds something against. An enemy of my enemy is my ally, right? But at the same time, he hopes he doesn’t have to be on this side of the battlefield much longer. He mutters something under his breath. It sounds something like, “He’s a fucking starfish furry or some shit.”

“What was that?”

“If he likes you, he’ll just stick on you like this.” And Chan juts out a hand to splay firmly against Mingyu’s shoulder, “And you have to scrape him off. It’s the worst. Ugh, I hate that guy.”

The fact that he initiated (almost) unprompted physical contact makes his heart warm. Ah, are these friendship points slowly building themselves up? “And there’s two of them?”

“Yes! The other guy isn’t as bad,” he taps his fingers on the lid of the pot, drumming a metallic and hollow sound into the silence of the car. It’s expected that every member of the dance team has a very good sense of rhythm, “and all he did was sleep the whole time. I don’t remember him much, but I assume Seungcheol will be bringing him, too.”

As they pull up to the clinic, Mingyu gives a brief introduction about what he does and where he works and what his job is like. He’s not entirely sure if Chan’s paying attention to all his words, but he hums every now and then to say that he at least knows he’s speaking. He talks about how he helps people recover and about how he also has his own set of demonic coworkers and tries his best to relate the environment in the clinic to the studio, but he’s just grasping for straws. There’s not
much in common.

He tries to conclude his short monologue without much luck. Chan still has his eyes pinned on his phone and he has to awkwardly exit the car and jog down to the lobby where he hopes Seokmin is already waiting.

And thanks to his allotted luck for the day, Seokmin has just finished packing up his things. He picks up his black leather bag and happily greets Mingyu. However, after passing a quick peek at the clock, his smile drops instantaneously, “Whoa, what’s up? Why the long face?”

“Hey, Mingyu.” His normally effervescent voice is somehow a bit timid, “Sorry I didn’t text you earlier. It’s been a busy day.” That’s a lie. It’s the day after Thanksgiving. It’s not a busy day. He saw the entire patient list earlier today. It’s not busy. Why is he lying? Why is he looking for an excuse, “I just,” he knits his fingers together, “I just don’t know if it’s a good idea that I go.”

No, please go. You’re the only person that has the ability to make Mingyu feel slightly less like an outcast, “What? Why?”

“Oh- I mean, I don’t really know anyone there, you know. It just feels like I’m inviting myself and,” he picks at his sleeve, “I don’t know. It just feels kinda weird.”

“No, it’s fine, really. A lot of people are inviting other people. It’s just a little dinner-”

“And I’m not really dressed—sorry for interrupting—and I really appreciate the invitation, Mingyu, but I don’t know about showing up to a party where I don’t know anyone.”

“Hey, you know me, don’t you?” he puts on a big grin to hide his current anxiety. He hates people who are manipulative, but he supposes that everyone is to a point. He hates people who guilt trip others into doing what they want, but he really wants Seokmin to go, “And I already made you a pie! Twice! And you won’t get to eat any of it if you don’t go.”

“Well, if you put it like that.” He finally takes a step forward to follow Mingyu out the door. Joshua is still shutting down for the day, not paying them any attention, and Wonwoo and Jeonghan are nowhere to be seen. Everything reaches radio silence. The heels of their shoes clack against the linoleum and it reverberates off the walls and windows. It’s interesting how the clinic feels so vacant at the end of the day, like it’s a shell, like it’s just the corpse of something that once was.

It never looks or feels this way in the morning, but since today is one of the rare chances he gets to see it shut down, makes it feel a little eerie. Sure, they’re medical professionals, but it’s not like anyone has died here. There wouldn’t be any ghosts to occupy the premises. There’s no reason for it to feel so cold and desolate, but even the once-colorful art prints on the walls seem a little less lively with their late afternoon light. Even that doesn’t make sense. The late afternoon light is arguably a warmer hue than whatever they see during midday, “What are you even worried about?”

Mingyu walks Seokmin out of the building and waits for him to toss his bag into the trunk of his own car. The shorter man shrugs, “I don’t know. This event is for dancers only, right?” Mingyu nods, “Okay, cool.”

“Yeah, I actually have one of them in my backseat and the more you hesitate, the closer he gets to suffocating.” To avoid the undoubtable concern on Seokmin’s face, Mingyu tries to liven up the mood, “Don’t worry. He’s friendly. He doesn’t bite or anything.” That’s also a blatant lie. With a jawline as strong as Chan’s, he’s pretty sure the guy could chew through a metal fence if he had to.

Still, Seokmin approaches the shotgun seat with caution.
He barely bows a curt greeting to Chan as he ducks in and mumbles a soft hello before fastening his seatbelt, “Chan, this is Seokmin. Seokmin, this is Chan.” Mingyu gestures to them, “PT,” pointing to Seokmin, “professional dancer,” pointing to Chan.

“Hello.” The youngest’s voice is surprisingly bright and welcoming. It seems to put Seokmin at ease a bit more than whatever he said earlier. It’s very possible that he tries to put on a professional face in the presence of someone he holds nothing against. It’s not like Seokmin is stirring up his projected wellbeing in any way. Still, Mingyu has to admit that he’s a little jealous that Seokmin’s greeting is so much warmer, “I’m not exactly a professional dancer, but I hope to be one someday.” And jealous that he gets an actual introduction.

“Oh, hi!” It seems like his mood has already gone up a bit, likely comforted by the fact that not all dancers are somehow sharks out to get him, “I’m not exactly a PT either,” he laughs, “I’m still on trial while I’m finishing up my masters whereas Mingyu here is waiting for his permanent residency approval.”

This is absolutely unfair. What the hell?

The two unlikely passengers have an actual conversation without Mingyu. Hello, yes, Mingyu here, he exists. He sincerely hopes his plan on bringing another outsider doesn’t backfire on him. Seokmin, in the past month or so, has become someone he’d consider a friend and friends don’t abandon friends at parties, right? He shouldn’t be worrying so much. He’s not that socially stunted. Minghao will be there and Minghao will make sure he doesn’t feel like a fish out of water, but that’s not Minghao’s responsibility—he supposes that isn’t Seokmin’s responsibility either. He just needs time to adapt to the dynamic of the studio. It’s still a new energy that he doesn’t quite understand.

When they arrive, they’re obviously early. It’s barely 6.

It’s thankfully extremely casual. In fact, he feels a little overdressed in his business-casual work clothes since most attendants are showing up in fashionable streetwear. Everyone walking down has something in hand and it seems like Soonyoung is making sure that everyone has brought at least one dish—or a good excuse—to the door. Anyone caught without a tray is immediately subdued in a headlock.

He helps Chan get out of the car, the toasty pot isn’t so hot anymore and he wonders how they’ll keep all the food warm, “Yixing got a bunch of party tray heaters since get-togethers like this happen pretty often. I think Minghao said he’s bringing a hotplate for me, though.”

Handing Seokmin the tray of marshmallows and yams, he grabs the potatoes and the pie out to carry. No headlocks here tonight, Soonyoung. Wonwoo must be driving himself later, but it’s possible that he already left the clinic by the time he swung by for the pickup. Of course, Soonyoung’s greeting is as loud and bombastic as the music playing in the background. Chan attempts to duck under his arms by blocking him with the vat of soup, but Soonyoung insists on squishing their cheeks together and tutting him along, complimenting his hair with all the air in his lungs and thanking him for being so cool.

Is that his thing? He does know that Thanksgiving is more or less about- eh, whatever. It’s not like they’re the most traditional party of people anyway. Friendsgiving doesn’t have rules.

“Mango! My favorite awkward puppy boy. Thank you for being so cute!”

Mingyu’s already ready to fight him off, but he has to make sure he doesn’t frisbee the pie into
his face. Instead, the two trays go up as the blond wraps his arms around Mingyu’s midsection and hoists him off the ground. Holy shit, Wonwoo was right, Soonyoung is incredibly strong, way stronger than he looks especially since Mingyu hasn’t hit the gym in at least two months—it’s so hard to go when it starts getting cold—and has put on a couple pounds, “Hey, hey, hey, put me down.” This offers a new perspective. No one has ever picked Mingyu up before—at least not after he turned, like, twelve—and suddenly having your feet lift off the ground makes your instincts flail. It’s very uncomfortable and he regrets sweeping Minghao off his feet before because this feels unsteady. Then again, he’s also carrying a slippy-sloppy au gratin in one hand and a warm cherry pie in the other.

Soonyoung sets him down with a huff. So, he was heavy, “Now, you thank me for something.”

“Wow, is this your toll booth of thanks?”

“Yes, now, thank me.”

“Oh,” he feels a bit caught in the headlights of a neon teal—the color of Soonyoung’s jacket—semitruck, “thank you for being so strong, like, wow, you’re the absolute strongest.”

“Yes! I’ve been acknowledged.” Seokmin snickers after hearing the blond’s response, “And who do we have here? I don’t think I’ve seen you around before.”

“Are you going to pick me up?” he stutters and backs up a hair, but his bold smile is still on his face, crinkling his eyes. He seems more comfortable than before.

Soonyoung puts his hands on his hips, “Not if you don’t want me to. I know Mingus, so I can roughhouse with him. He can take a beating.”

“I absolutely cannot.”

“Yes, he can.” Soonyoung whispers to Seokmin before jutting out a hand to shake, “I’m Soonyoung, a senior dance instructor here at Performance Studio, but you can call me Soon.” And he winks and now Mingyu wants to curl up into a ball and hide because his friend is so cringeworthy.

Seokmin shakes his hand, “Seokmin, I work with Mingyu at the clinic doing physical therapy. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Oh! You're Seokmin! I’ve heard about you, too!” There’s absolutely no need to shout, Soonyoung, he’s only two feet away from you.

“Did you really backflip in the Eiffel Tower?”

“Does Wonwoo tell you guys weird stories about me at work?”

“Yes.”

“Then, yes. I mean, look, the lady with the ice cream was at least twenty feet away when I started and who the hell speed-walks in the Eiffel Tower anyway.”

“Yeah, but I can’t believe you almost got kicked out.”

“We played the ‘sorry, we’re foreigners who don’t speak English’ card and got off scot-free.”
The two talk for what seems to be minutes at a time. Mingyu wonders what other stories Wonwoo has shared while he isn’t there. His desire to work fulltime is currently at a high just because it seems like they have an awfully good time closing up for the day and winding down with funny stories. They talk and talk and talk nonstop and Mingyu’s arms are starting to get tired with the two trays.

“Hey.” At first, the pinch at his nape makes him think of Seungcheol, but the voice is slightly deeper and a lot less intimidating, “You think you can just shove a ton of wasabi into my food and get away with it?”

“Wah-noo!” Soonyoung coos and runs over to his boyfriend just to sweep him up bridal style, “Thank you for finally building that shelf we bought a year ago.” and swings him around twice. It’s a good thing that the big bowl of fruit salad he’s carrying has saran wrap over the top or else there’d be grapes and blueberries flying everywhere, “How was work?”

He drops Wonwoo back down to his feet and takes the metal bowl from him so that he can straighten out his clothes again, “Work was good.” The two share a quick kiss, “Thank you for dropping the rubber mallet on my hand.” And he smacks Soonyoung on the rear before he takes the bowl back, “Are you just going to keep Mingyu and Seokmin here forever? They’re holding stuff.”

“Oh! Sorry, yeah, guys,” Soonyoung’s attention turns back to them as more attendants shuffle in through the door, “you can follow Wonwoo back to A1 where all the food is.”

Mingyu trails after the senior PT with Seokmin in tow as they file into A1 and slide their trays and dishes onto the counter. Mingyu has a bit of a time setting it up on the rickety aluminum structure above a puck of blue flame starter, but Wonwoo comes over to help him. He advises using the deep-set trays that came with the heaters, filling them with water, and plopping his dishes into them so they stay warm all around.

It works out quite well, the only difficult part being carrying a sloshing tray of water through a hallway filled with people talking and discussing things. Feeling almost like a pinball, Mingyu shimmies through the hallway, bouncing off of and receiving support from a number of dancers and friends-of that steady him on his journey. He doesn’t spill any of it, however, and feels like he ought to receive a pat on the back for that.

By the time he returns, Seokmin and Wonwoo have been given a cup of cider each and are waiting over by the snack table, “Yeah, yeah, grab a cup, hang out, but you ought to keep an eye on it. There’s a good amount of pepper at this party.” Is that a threat? Wonwoo nudges him over to the stack of plastic cups.

Before he can put his hand on the mountain, he’s grabbed by the waist and swung around. Mingyu almost loses his balance and swats the cups off the table, scrambling for solid ground just a second before steadying himself and looking left and right. He realizes the person is behind him as Soonyoung bolts into the room. His shoes slide against the ground when he turns and heads straight for Mingyu, but he’s suddenly spun again, “Minghao! There’s no point in hiding! Give me a thank you!”

“That’s not what Thanksgiving is about!”

Realizing that it’s his significant other, Mingyu spreads his arms out wide, shielding him and turning willingly to stop Soonyoung’s advances, “Give him to me, Gyu. He needs to be thanked.”

He can’t imagine that Seungcheol and his guests would be okay with Soonyoung tackling them like this, “Let’s play nice, do you really have to-”
“Absolutely!”

Mingyu feels the weight behind him shift as Minghao fakes Soonyoung out and makes a mad dash for the other end of the room only to be caught by the hood of his jacket and pulled into a struggle-filled hug. In the end, the two dancers wrestle until Soonyoung has Minghao pinned to the ground, “Get of—”

“Thank you for being an asshole!” he grabs Minghao’s face and squishes a loud kiss to his cheek, “Happy Friendsgiving.”

Soonyoung doesn’t get off. He’s obviously waiting for Minghao’s return, but whatever he says is just quietly muttered under his breath. It’s clear that there’s a strain on his hips and his back from the way Soonyoung is sitting on him and the man is certainly not light. He doesn’t get a chance to move— doesn’t get a chance to step up as a hero—because Wonwoo’s hand is knotted into the back of Soonyoung’s collar and he pulls him to his feet, “Let’s calm down a bit, okay?”

The blond huffs and waits for Minghao to get to his feet with a shaky step that quickly corrects itself, “Sorry.”

“Thank you for not completely snapping me in half.” He brushes off his butt and Mingyu moves to fix his hood. It’s the next best thing he can do, “Cheol and his bromos are on their way, so you bett—”

“Jun is here!” Jun announces, jumping onto Soonyoung’s back and almost getting punched in the face by Wonwoo, “Thank you for thanking everyone.” And he gives him a kiss on the back of his head as the shorter man kicks it into full throttle and tries to throw him like a wild bull. The black-haired man has a death grip around Soonyoung’s neck which makes shaking him off harder a formula for strangulation. The two run off somewhere, likely to the lobby to greet the rest of their friends.

“Is everyone always this energetic?” Seokmin chuckles, watching as Jun trots after Soonyoung and clings to him again. Where’s that damn Jihoon when you need him?

“Yeah, pretty much.” Wonwoo sips from his drink and returns to the punch corner to refill.

Mingyu feels Minghao’s fingers curl into his sleeve, “You okay?” Without speaking, he nods and twists his spine once or twice to loosen up. Mingyu kneads the palm of his hand into Minghao’s side, carefully trying to isolate a cluster of pain-points and relax them.

“I’m good.” His silver-haired beauty links their fingers together, but that makes Mingyu frown. He hadn’t noticed right away, but there’s no knee brace, no wrist brace; what is he doing? He sighs, “Did you guys get here okay?”

“Yeah.” He decides not to pry, “Where’s the roomie?”

“Oh, he went to go pick up his friends and insisted he should bring the food in his truck.” He has a truck and a car? “But he probably ran into traffic or something.” His weight shifts on his feet a couple times.

“I see.” It’d be nice if he understood Minghao a little bit better now. Because there are so many people related to his field here, so many coworkers and peers here, he probably doesn’t want to worry them or show that he’s not at his best. His grip tightens just slightly, I’m here if you need me. Minghao glances up at him and offers a small smile, “I totally forgot to introduce you,” he gestures for them to move over to his clinic friends, unsure if he still needs a few more moments to
recuperate, but he follows in step, “this is my friend Seokmin. Seokmin, Minghao.”

Seokmin already knows Minghao, but there’s no familiarity on his face.

And what’s worse is that Minghao doesn’t seem to adjust and put on a friendly face right away. His eyes are pinned on the bright PT, but he doesn’t move for a handshake or offer a welcome; very un-Minghao-like.

Mingyu passes Wonwoo a helpless glance. The older man usually knows everything, but he looks equally as puzzled.

It’s a standstill.

In one hand, he has the leash of a frightened and timid dog. In the other hand, he has the leash of one that’s just biding for a chance to snap. That’s the feeling in the air.

“Hello.” Thankfully, Seokmin breaks the (very thick) ice with a shaky greeting and an outreached hand, “I’m Seokmin. I’m Mingyu’s friend. We work together.” The words come out stiffer than he was with Chan not more than thirty minutes ago. More rigid and careful than he was with Soonyoung earlier.

Because Minghao likes Mingyu and because Seokmin is Mingyu’s friend, he blinks a couple times and meets the handshake halfway, “It’s nice to finally meet you.” He’ll really have to ask about this later, but the stark silence that muddles the space between them feels weird. Minghao lets go of his hand to put his hands behind his back, rubbing a thumb into his bracelet and showing a lack of aggression.

“Minghao!” The happy, clear and floral voice rings through the room and steals his attention away from their little punch party. Mingyu’s almost glad that his partner itches to leave, but the look he gives him before jogging over to Seungkwan is anything but content. He looks so serious, like something is wrong with whatever is happening.

“Sorry, gotta go.” His voice sounds a little livelier and he’s sure to tag on that itty-bitty bit of comfort to reassure Mingyu that he—in fact—didn’t do anything inherently wrong, “I’ll be back in a minute.”

And when Mingyu turns to look at Seokmin, his eyes are following Minghao up to Seungkwan and the smile on his face is frozen and a little frantic. It’d be really nice if someone could fill him in, but even Wonwoo looks like he’s still trying to puzzle things out, so he doubts Soonyoung knows about their relationship either.

Things start to come together when Seokmin simply can’t look away from the honey-blond baker who giddily hands Minghao a couple boxes and tiptoes after him, feet light on the studio floor and his mouth is moving a million miles an hour. Mingyu doesn’t blame him. It’s sometimes hard to take your eyes off of someone that pretty, but then he realizes it’s not exactly the reason why Seokmin can’t rip his eyes off of him. He excitedly tells Minghao something and grows concerned when Minghao doesn’t reciprocate the excitement. He smacks him on the arm a couple times, trying to ask what’s wrong, but Minghao locks his gaze and—Mingyu can’t hear them, but—his lips move slowly as he explains the situation.

All at once, it seems like all the color and life is drained out of the small pâtissier. His expression looks lost and in the haze of the room’s commotion, his eyes waver before they have enough courage to glance over to where Mingyu’s standing. He quickly looks back down at Minghao’s hands—making quick work to line the hotteok up in a tray under a hot lamp next to some
samosas that someone else brought—and he mumbles something and cracks a tiny smile. Mingyu wishes he knew what they were saying, but Seungkwan just puts a hand on Minghao’s bicep and gives him a little squeeze. That sort of gesture is enough for Mingyu to read that he’s telling him ‘it’s okay, I’m okay’.

Minghao flattens the box and rubs his hand into Seungkwan’s shoulder. He’s yelled at because it’s probably a nice shirt that he’s just wiped oil onto, but they both break into stiff laughs that are muffled by everything else happening. Seungkwan does some more explaining and Vernon sneaks through the crowd. Mingyu can see his head bob and weave between people before he arrives behind Seungkwan and spooks him by zapping his sides with a pinch. He’s the victim of a playful slap and Minghao shakes his head, waves his finger like a parent should, and folds the box in half. Hands around his waist, Vernon leans in to listen to whatever Seungkwan wants to whisper to him.

His eyes go wide in surprise and he ducks in again for a repeat of what he said, probably assuming that he’d heard him wrong. His arms tighten slightly around his boyfriend’s middle and he rests his chin on his shoulder to snuggle his ear closer. When Seungkwan reiterates and gestures over to them, the slightly taller man stands at attention and finally looks over, his jaw slightly slack, lips parted with anticipation.

He’d liked Vernon a lot up until this point. He was usually funny and ready to bounce around; a real roll-with-the-punches kind of guy who easily adapted to the situation. A man true to the meme who seemed to be cut out of a late 2000’s Nickelodeon series.

The last thing Mingyu expected was for the seemingly spacey and playful man’s expression to melt into something so seethingly serious.
His initial instinct is to remove Seokmin from the situation, get him out of the room and into the lobby or into the hallway—anywhere that’s not in direct sight. He’s terrified of the idea that Vernon might march over and deck him with his giant hands because giant hands make giant fists and giant fists mean giant bruises and they’re PT’s, they can’t go walking around with giant bruises—

Stay calm.

He needs to learn that the worst possible thing won’t usually end up happening.

Vernon is a simple guy. He’s not going to cross the room and knock out anyone’s lights. If anything, Minghao will probably stop him before he does anything regrettable. However, it’s Seungkwan who knits their fingers together and rubs Vernon’s arm to call his attention back to their conversation. His gentle demeanor and actions are subtle and understanding. He combs his wavy hair out of his face and offers him a piping chocolate chunk cookie from the racks of sweets off to the side.

The distraction is successful for the most part. Vernon’s not smiling, but he throws one arm over Seungkwan’s shoulders and nibbles idly on the cookie. He nods along to whatever Minghao is saying to both of them and seems to ask questions every now and then, but most of his communication is through nodding.

Up until that moment, he could have sworn that the man was a pacifist at heart, but that goes to show how much Mingyu doesn’t know about him, “What’s that about?” If he can’t figure it out, then maybe one of his two nosey coworkers can fill him in.

Wonwoo shrugs and Seokmin looks away sheepishly, suddenly finding the salad bowl incredibly interesting. There’s only so much intrigue in romaine hearts and parmesan shards. What are you hiding in that big head of yours, oh sunny Seokmin? How many secrets are tucked away in your hair? It’s no surprise that he loses interest in the leafy greens quite quickly—salad can only hold a person’s attention for so long—, but when Mingyu follows his gaze into the crowd again, it’s no surprise that his eyes are back on a peppy Seungkwan and his pretty, open button-up. He radiates pastel softness in contrast to Vernon’s black band-t with acid green font.

Mingyu prays for a new distraction, something that’ll either crack this case or make Seokmin look a little less forlorn. Clearly, someone is looking out for him today because Soonyoung jogs his way back into the room, cell phone hanging dangerously out of his jacket’s pocket as he plucks a dolma from one of the tables and stuffs it into his cheeks, “Sup fucks, ready to eat?” Or at least, that’s what Mingyu thinks he says. It’s kind of hard to understand him when his mouth is full, “Is everyone here?”

“Soungcheol and his friends aren’t.” Wonwoo hands Soonyoung a cup of water. Good choice. The man probably doesn’t need any more sugar, “You still have to wait for them.”

“They’re taking so long to get here.” The blond whines.

He decides to spend the next five minutes or so getting Seokmin up to speed with what’s happening with the studio. Mingyu appreciates the refresher and the fact that he actually knows more than his coworker, but the feeling of not being an absolute outsider is short-lived. It’s fleeting and temporary because Soonyoung starts talking about the studio and pointing out people that he’s never
met before. He introduces the classes they offer and the different age groups they cater to—only
because Seokmin says that his niece was interested in tap—and pulls over the tap instructor for a
quick rundown of their beginner’s class.

It’s surprising how involved Seokmin is.

He takes notes on his phone and collects a business card or two. He even asks a fair amount of
questions in regards to pricing and the learning environment. Wonwoo had explained the ‘growing
together, valuing oneself’ teaching methods in brief before, but Seokmin pays keen attention when
Soonyoung tries to explain it in his own way. It’s longwinded and he doesn’t really remember any of
the words that were said because the blond talks like a firecracker. A few pops here. A few pops
there. It never really ends when he gets started—at least not until he’s run out of fuel—and
Seokmin’s questions are just fanning the fire.

He’s very careful to ask precisely and exactly about every single thing that could ever become
a detriment to his niece’s wellbeing. Mingyu never took him for much of a family man since he
rarely spoke of them during their lunchtime conversations, but it’s possible that they just avoided
talking about family matters subconsciously. Soonyoung is receptive of whatever Seokmin inquires
about but is far more ready to talk about other things—like how silly Wonwoo is sometimes and
about how terrible the winter is on their moods.

The two easily converse like reunited childhood friends.

After a while, Mingyu tunes them out, searching for Wonwoo’s attention instead. He’s happy
that Seokmin is warmly welcomed by at least one person in this studio, but there’s only so much idle
conversation he can handle and the two seem to fence themselves off in their own world. Thankfully,
the senior PT is more than welcoming. He shuffles them over to the snack table and offers Mingyu a
cookie that he pulls from a closed box, “We brought these.” If it wasn’t already obvious, Mingyu’s
going to hesitate before popping this thing in his mouth. If Soonyoung so much as associated these
cookies with his own oven, he’ll have second thoughts about eating it, “Bought, not baked.”

“Right.” He flips the cookie over a couple times, noticing that it looks like it’s from the general
market; very cookie-cutter shaped with a uniform distribution of white chocolate chips.

“Don’t worry.” Well, it’s not like Wonwoo could have found time to grab a pepper shaker and
install the peppercorns into the dough. He’s been in his company this whole time.

Carefully, Mingyu gives the cookie a sniff and takes a cautious and small bite. Absolutely fine.
He shoves the whole thing in his mouth; not too shabby for a store-bought cookie. It’s a bit crumbly
and dry, but that’s to be expected when something is made to last on a shelf for at least a few days
without turning stale. No, not too shabby at all. And don’t judge, he’s hungry. He’s been surrounded
by delicious-smelling food for the last few hours and hasn’t allowed himself a single bite.

Wonwoo’s smile widens.

At first, Mingyu believes it’s because he’s happy that Mingyu enjoyed the little, delectable
disk. But as his grin turns a little more sinister, a burning sensation sears the back of Mingyu’s throat.
His brain isn’t sure where to focus; should it be piecing things together or should it be searching for a
solution for this scorching pain. Regretfully, it gets caught up doing both of those things and he ends
up swallowing the little cookie, wincing before glowering at his coworker. He’s been poisoned,
“You,” is all he can manage before the words evaporate out of his mouth and he pants, in search of
salvation.

Wonwoo shakes his head and shows off his devilish teeth, “Goodbye, Mingyu Kim. It was
nice knowing you.”

He reaches for his cup of cider and downs it one gulp after swishing it twice. No use, it’s not helping. With every sharp intake of breath, he’s reminded that nothing will help unless it’s creamy and cold. It’s too bad there’s no milk and there’s no ice cream, “What,” he stutters, even his voice is shaky, “what was in that?”

“Carolina Reaper flakes.”

Wonwoo’s answer is too casual. Vengeance is clearly not a new game for him, “How?”

The cookies were definitely store-bought. How did he get pepper flake into them without baking them? “I used an X-Acto and a damp swab to cut little pockets into it. It was a pretty seamless job if I do say so myself.” He rubs his hands together, relishing in Mingyu’s suffering, “I hope that’s the last time you’ll think to play such a dirty trick on me. Your wasabi had me in tears at work. Made quite the scene.” He crosses his arms, looking down at our hunched-over protagonist with a sly smile on his face. He’s basking in the glory that is revenge, “Joshua almost sent me home early.”

If his brain wasn’t so focused on putting out the fire, he would have regretted not assuming that Wonwoo was a vengeful man. It’s so obvious now, of course, Wonwoo is the type of person that has to have the last say in everything.

“Is everything okay?” He can barely catch the concern in Minghao’s voice because he’s snickering ever so slightly.

“You knew-” he’s cut off by another wave of needles jabbing into his tongue. So, instead of talking, he juts out a finger and points it into Minghao’s face.

“I didn’t.” Mingyu drops his hand in defeat and grips the bottom corners of his jacket, pulling him closer until he can smoosh his face into his stomach. Minghao’s a cool dude, but it’s not helping in the slightest. He rubs a hand into Mingyu’s hair, “I mean, you kind of deserved it for feeding Wonwoo an entire lunch full of wasabi. He probably hasn’t eaten all day.”

When Mingyu gets enough strength to look at Wonwoo again, the man’s toothy grin is smug as ever. He’s taking pride in earning Minghao’s favor, “Is this betrayal?”

Minghao laughs and tries to unfold him from his hunched over position, “Someone brought rice pudding. Do you want me to get you some?” In an ideal world, he would like to believe that the silver-haired man’s touch is enough to cure any ailment—including the ailment of menacing friends—but because this is the real world, his mouth is still on fire.

“No. I’m strong. I can do this.” His hiccup quickly bowls over his half-hearted lie and the spit that shoots back into his throat sends him into a coughing fit. He would appreciate some rice pudding and Minghao knows. He’s already halfway across the room to get a small cup of it, diving and ducking between people.

“You should let him suffer a little longer. He can endure.” Wonwoo sneers when the dancer shoulders past him to offer Mingyu the cup of cardamom and cream. It’s all in good fun, he knows his coworker isn’t that mad about lunch. He’s an adult. After figuring out that his lunch was tempered with, he could have just thrown it away and gone across the street to grab a safe meal from any of the tens of locations.

So sweet, so good.

He’s not sure what’s better, the rice pudding or Minghao spoon feeding him because his hands
are a little frantic and shaky and getting that stupidly tiny dessert spoon into his mouth is more
difficult than simply opening his piehole and waiting to be fed. His brain can’t really focus on how
silly he must look because he’s overcome with pain and petty distaste. Luckily, as he reaches the
bottom of the cup, his anger fizzles out.

Now, he just feels exhausted and—oddly enough—wants to cuddle.

However, he remembers that they’re in the studio and that there are people around giggling at
him and asking if he’s okay. Cuddling with Minghao will have to wait until he can speak again.

Minghao dabbles up the thick saliva that’s dribbling from his lips and folds the napkin into the
palm of his hand. He feels like he’s an absolute mess. Even though it might be wishful thinking, even
Wonwoo looks a little sorry for the prank. It’s a little embarrassing to appear like this in front of so
many people. The composed, mature, and professional Mingyu gets completely obliterated when it
comes to his friends and for some reason, he doesn’t feel that bad about looking like a complete
imbecile.

He *does* take the napkin from Minghao and clean himself up, drying the tears forming at the
corner of his eyes and wiping off the sweat that had formed over his brow. Ultimately, he’s filled
with laughter. It bubbles up out of nowhere, but it feels far better than mulling over how stupid he
looked a minute ago. It’s better to laugh at yourself with others than to let the moment overwhelm
you. He *did* deserve the demon cookie, but—he’s sure even Wonwoo will admit that—he went a
little too far. He can’t blame him. Mingyu never thought that Carolina Reaper chilis were going to be
that hot. It was a new experience for sure.

“You good?” Now at full height, Mingyu throws one arm around Minghao’s shoulders and
holds him close. Feeling the thin arm around his waist is a little assuring.

“I’m,” the second he speaks, a little bit of the heat comes back, “I could use a glass of milk to
stick my tongue in, but I think I’m okay.”

“We might have some creamer in the breakroom. I’ll go check.” Minghao rocks back on his
feet to leave, but Mingyu pulls him back.

“It’s okay. I gotta get stronger, Minghao. I gotta endure.”

He shakes his head and chuckles, plucking at the lint stuck in Mingyu’s sweater and flicking
off a couple strands of Cacahuate fur that had probably clung to him whilst getting thwacked by the
celery stick, “Whatever you say.”

After another fifteen minutes of mingling and getting introduced to at least twenty new people
—all with names he won’t remember in the following five minutes—Mingyu excuses himself to go
to the restroom. The pepper flakes are still tingling the tip of his tongue and he figures that scrubbing
off the remnants might help. Of course, eating soap was likely not on today’s menu, but keeping that
peppery burn was doing worse for his appetite.

He locks the door behind him and uses his nails to scrape the bed of his tongue. There’s only
so much more he can do. Soap doesn’t really help, but the cold water makes it better. By the end of
his five-minute escapade, he’s almost 85% back to normal.

Good enough.

He straightens up his outfit for the fifth time and makes sure his hair is at least decent before
exiting the toilet and making his way back down the hall. The odd thing is that everyone’s scheduled to be here, but he hasn’t seen Jihoon. There’s always the possibility that the guy is just too hard to spot. He’s quiet and doesn’t quite stand out in a crowd, but when he catches Jun to ask, the man just shrugs.

“I think he’s hanging out with his band friends instead.” Band friends? You mean he’s prioritizing ‘band friends’ over Jun and studio friends? Whoa, watch that bite, Mingyu. Jihoon doesn’t have to be here. He’s not obligated to be here even if he said he would be. After all, his birthday was just two days ago and he has to spend it at practice. His other friends must want to celebrate him as well, “He said he’d swing by if we’re still here.”

“Hopefully he makes it, then.” Mingyu pats Jun on the shoulder.

But the man looks more surprised that he should. He backs up from Mingyu’s touch just slightly and cracks a wry smile that he can’t really read, “Hey, Gyu,” Jun puts a hand on his shoulder, too, and looks down at the wooden slats lining the studio, “you don’t need to push it. We already talked and worked things out.” But he doesn’t know that Jihoon’s mind hasn’t been changed, “I appreciate what you’re trying to do for us, but even if things don’t explode after finals,” he lets the words hang in the air for a minute. He’s trying to convince himself, “Jihoon and I are still friends. I’m happy enough as it is. It’s okay if nothing,” and he searches for a word that’ll help his case, a very ‘Wonwoo’ word for the situation, “transpires.”

That’s not enough, Jun. That can’t be enough, “Okay.” Mingyu puts his hands up and smiles, “I’ll take your word for it. I won’t meddle anymore.”

“Thanks.” Ugh, that smile again, the one that seems as fickle and frail as dried dandelions.

He wants to call Jun back and say- well, he doesn’t know what he can say or what he should say. He was on the get-off-my-ass end of this situation no more than a month ago, so he understands the feeling of wanting the privacy he deserves, but Jun is his friend and the thought of Jihoon hurting him only enough to keep him where he is simply isn’t something he can sit on silently.

Mingyu opens his mouth to speak, to stop Jun from slipping his way into a studio with opaque walls, but Soonyoung’s voice stops him, “Mingyu! Head back to A1, it’s time to eat!” He jogs past him and swings himself into the doorframe, “Junnie’s in here, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool, thanks.”

Crickets.

He waits for Soonyoung to emerge with the taller man under his arm and leads them both back to the food room. If it was up to Mingyu, he’d hang back and wait until the others have at least gone through most of the line. He doesn’t really care about first dibs. There’s more than enough food to go around, “Where’s Minghao?”

Seokmin looks around the room and shrugs, “He was just over here a minute ago.”

“He’s helping Seungcheol clean up a spill in his truck.” Wonwoo leans his elbows between their shoulders, humming as they watch everyone start to line up with paper plates and clip up pieces of food.

Through the murmurs, Mingyu gathers that Jihoon won’t be coming and that Yixing’s still out of town visiting Minseok in Long Beach—something about them trading off every year so Minseok
will be here during Christmas—and that he’ll be flying in day-of for finals since Chan gave him his second ticket. Long-distance still baffles him. He’s kind of clingy, he can’t help it. The warm feeling of having someone next to you and physically there when you need them is something that he can’t replace with a phone call or video chat. He also hears that a few people are excited to meet Seungcheol for the first time. Apparently, his good looks are no secret to the studio, but Mingyu wonders if they’ve ever seen how big of an asshole he can be.

“Why are you guys just standing around? Go and get food.” Minghao’s voice is light and airy, full of good vibes and microbubble happiness. He tosses a wad of paper towels and sinks the shot into a trash bin halfway across the room. He gets a few miscellaneous claps.

The dishes he made can be spotted between bodies of hungry staff, “We’re waiting for the line.” Wonwoo doesn’t take his eyes off the said queue of people. Soonyoung and Jun have opted to stand amongst them with empty plates flapping against their palms. People readily talk to them—unlike these clinic regulars. Sure, there are only about thirty or forty people waiting around and the studio can certainly hold more than that, but it’d feel awkward to stand in line before them.

Mingyu turns to welcome Minghao into their chain of leaning bodies, but he’s called back to the door by a grossly familiar voice, “Minghao!” Upon hearing it, Seokmin and Wonwoo also turn around to look at the new arrival.

Arrivals.

It’s like a scene from one of those terribly cliché Korean dramas.

You know, the type of scene where three dashingly handsome but dramatically different bachelors strut in through French doors with the wind stirring their perfectly styled hair. He can almost hear the classic soundtrack start up in the background and see the teeny boppers swoon as Seungcheol’s eyes crinkle into long-lashed crescents. He can see the curtains billow and the birds flutter when Joshua shyly peers over to them and waves.

But, alas, this is real life. The only music playing in the background is a dated remix of Baby Bash’s Cyclone and Jeonghan is beckoning Minghao into a hug. Mingyu still has a hard time recognizing him with his light brown hair, “Minghao,” he pouts? “feed me.” He whines? “I need sustenance.” He’s clingy? Excuse you, Mr. Alien, please kindly return the Jeonghan Mingyu’s grown to (sorta) know and (not really) love.

Minghao’s laughter is enough to echo through the crowd. Since when were those two so close? “Well, go get in line.” Um, Soonyoung, did you do your mandatory thanking with those three? “It’s going down pretty fast. The wait isn’t too long.”

“Did you eat yet?” Seungcheol puts both his hands on Minghao’s shoulders and spins him around to cart him over to the queue.

“No, we were waiting for you guys to get here.”

It’s truly a scene to see Minghao’s feet slide over the ground just from the oldest pushing him forward and Jeonghan stuck to his arm like a starfish. Oh, this must be who Chan was talking about even if it is difficult to imagine Jeonghan getting so affectionate with anyone. What happened to the coworker who always hated romance and dating? What happened to the Jeonghan who dreaded physical contact and showing his goobery side in front of other professionals? Well, this isn’t the clinic, that’s for sure. Maybe Mingyu isn’t the only one who sees a change in character from entering the studio’s glass doors.
It’s a good thing that Joshua isn’t clingy in the slightest, but he doesn’t look put-off by the other two. It’s like he knows their antics already and casually strides along with them. He knows to give Minghao a little breathing room as he tries to politely free himself of Jeonghan and Seungcheol, but those two are like gum on a shoe.

They’re not letting him go.
“Actually, I’m waiting with them. You guys go ahead and get food first. Soon and Jun are already almost done stacking their plates.” Minghao attempts to usher the three ahead of him—duking under Seungcheol’s hands and trying to scramble out of Jeonghan’s grasp—but they’re being difficult. He sends Mingyu a helpless glance, asking for some sort of assistance since two of the three are ‘his party’, but he hesitates.

Joshua. Well, Joshua probably wouldn’t be that difficult to deter. He’s not laying a finger on him. He is completing their little border, though. Jeonghan, on the other hand, is fawning over Minghao like a long-lost son or something. He and Seungcheol make two halves of an entire helicopter parent.

However, seeing Minghao struggle and wave towards him pulls on some sort of heartstring. It’s reminiscent of the night at the banquet.

And his legs move him in large strides over to where the four are standing. He takes Minghao’s hand and pulls him away with—what he didn’t intend to be—a rough jerk. More so than being graceful and charming, Minghao almost trips into his arms and he earns more than one frown because of his rather rude actions. Recovering with a forced smile, Mingyu steadies Minghao and pats him on the shoulder before holding his hand.

Well, the cat’s out of the bag. Hello, fellow coworkers, I’m in a relationship with this child you’re trying to adopt. Please don’t touch him when he doesn’t want to be touched.

He certainly didn’t expect the space between them to fill with an awkward silence. To some degree, he supposes that this means that he’s supposed to figure out their innate secret. But if he’s honest, he’s just as puzzled as ever. Which one of them is seeing Seungcheol? Is it Jeonghan or Joshua? Seungcheol said he’s not dating Jeonghan, so that leaves Joshua, but Seokmin never brought Joshua up, so he can’t draw conclusions like that.

There’s the slim chance that they’re both caught in some messy love triangle. Maybe they’re still undefined, more so than him and Minghao. He can sympathize with that, but there’s no reason to glare at him like he’s done something harmful, “Sorry.” He apologizes just in case the stumble hurt the dancer’s leg.

“I’m good.” It doesn’t look like Minghao’s affected by any of this tension. It could all be imaginary, just Mingyu’s mind building mountains out of molehills again.

“No need to be so rough, Mingyu. He’s still recovering.” If he saw the words on paper, he wouldn’t be surprised if they were from Seungcheol; a parent being a parent as he’s already grown used to in the past few weeks. Hearing them from Jeonghan with such a coy and slightly condescending tone rubs him the wrong way. It’s like he’s just popped out of nowhere and is laying claim—something close to it—on someone he shouldn’t even know. Mingyu’s not some meathead that doesn’t know anything about the man holding his hand.

This person is the most precious person in the room, “I’m fine, Jeonghan.”

The PT’s eyes click down to Minghao’s knee for a split second before he nods and shrugs, beckoning Seungcheol and Joshua to follow him into the queue. There’s some sort of warning glance that he passes on his way to the food. It’s far, far, far too different from anything Seungcheol
or Soonyoung or Jun have ever given him. It’s not necessarily more intimidating—as if Jeonghan could ever be incredibly intimidating—but it was a warning nonetheless.

“Eat soon, Hao.” Seungcheol waggles a finger towards them before resting his other arm on Joshua’s shoulder and pulling him along, “You too, Mingyu.” It’s offered as a bit of an afterthought, but it’s progress.

His boss stops walking before Seungcheol can pull him too far, “Thanks for the cookies today.”

Minghao perks up immediately, “Oh, no problem. Did you get to have any?”

“Nah, the old folks wanted to take some back to Windchime for the others. But it was very sweet of you.”

“I can’t take all the credit. If Mingyu hadn’t said anything this morning, I probably wouldn’t have put the order in.”

Joshua looks at him like he’s just manifested out of thin air. They were never particularly close or paid much attention to each other outside of their professional boundaries, but Joshua was never the type to have tunnel vision. He’s quiet and soft-spoken, but there’s always some sort of unrest behind his eyes. If he isn’t too tired, his brain is always moving—in what direction, Mingyu doesn’t know—it never rests, “Ah, then, thanks to you, too, Mingyu.” The way his boss looks at him is also different from the way he looks at Minghao. The way he speaks seems so stiff.

It’s probably Mingyu’s imagination, but it feels like there’s a gap between them. Maybe the three of them are just uncomfortable in the studio. Maybe Mingyu’s not the only one who feels like he doesn’t quite fit in here, “No need to thank me. I’m just glad the old folks enjoyed them.” Joshua just nods and continues on his way, following the two slightly older men to the laid-out feast.

But he can only pay him so much attention. Minghao’s hand is so warm in his—not to the point where either of them has sweaty palms, but there’s a heat that permeates his skin and snakes up his radial artery and into his chest. If it wasn’t Minghao, he’d want to let go, so he looks down at his counterpart with questioning eyes, curious as to why he’s being a little clingy tonight of all nights. If he doesn’t have to, he doesn’t leave Mingyu’s side. He’s always within an arm’s reach.

Realizing that he might be making Mingyu a little uncomfortable, the silver-haired man lets go with a soft grin and gives him a little push towards an ambiguous direction.

It’s not really towards the food or back towards their friends but in a general direction a step away from him. No instruction follows his action, so Mingyu supposes that he’s free to choose where he goes. He picks the direction he wants to go the most—right back to Minghao. Rocking on the balls of his feet, he raises his hand up to his chest and gives him a little shove, “It’s not nice to push.”

The shorter man only smirks and looks up at him, shaking his head slowly as he blinks. From the outside—if anyone was paying them any attention—this weird courtship dance might look silly and redundant, but something draws him in. Despite not being a huge fan of PDA, Minghao’s expression makes him seem a little needy tonight.

“But what does he really want? Is Mingyu back on corner duty? Does he need to go search the lobby couch cushions for dimes? Is he supposed to kiss Minghao to the tune of—oh god, is this Thrift
Shop playing in the background? How high are the royalties for this song if it’s been playing continuously for a decade? It’s 2023, how much more must we mackle? He has to laugh at the stupid pun in his head, “What, what’s so funny?” Minghao bows to look under Mingyu’s bangs to see an expression that he’s trying to hide. Jun’s rubbing off on him in the worst way possible.

“That, nothing.”

Minghao rolls his eyes and takes a lazy step towards him, “Hey, Gyu.” Mingyu coughs, trying to rid himself of the giggles because his significant other is sounding rather serious. He hums in correspondence and catches his eyes, “Is it okay if we hold hands for a little bit?”

Silly, silly, Minghao. Of course, it’s okay!

“Are you guys going to keep dawdling?” Wonwoo’s deep voice freezes Mingyu’s hand midway and his fingers instinctively curl into his palm. It’s a reflex he wishes he didn’t have because Minghao notices and shoves his hands into his pockets instead.

The one downfall of having friends is that they sometimes ruin the mood.

“Yes, the food’s gonna be cold.” Jun struts up to them, waving his warm plate of food in Minghao’s face before turning on his heel to do the same to Mingyu. The smells are nothing short of amazing and he’d almost forgotten how hungry he was prior. He only ate a small meal for lunch and—based on past experiences, he can assume that—Minghao hasn’t eaten either.

Soonyoung hip-checks him, setting him off balance for the nth time today, “Go eat!” It looks like he’s tired of being a pinball and finally agrees to grab a paper plate from the first table.

He hands one to Mingyu before shuffling down the winding line of food. Since everyone was asked to bring something, there certainly is enough to go around. He’s sure that all the dancers have appetites to match their amount of physical activity on the daily, but the amount of food present at the party seems copious. Who can eat this much spaghetti? Who can eat this much mashed potato? Did five people really need to bring their own mashed potatoes—for the record, Minghao’s taste the best—and Mingyu’s pretty sure that there’s at least fifty pounds of potato at this party.

Whoever brought the turkey should receive a champion badge because roasting three turkeys with such good consistency in flavor takes dedication. The various salads—leaf-based and starch-based—make a colorful assortment on the far end of the second table. There are several vegetable dishes that range from puff pastry-wrapped asparagus to baba ganoush that do little to cut the guilt from eating such calorie-dense foods. Whatever, it’s Friendsgiving. Who is counting calories? Who cares? As long as the food tastes good, it’s zero calories in his heart.

But, again, the copious amounts of food that will be impossible for them to finish make Mingyu feel like he has to take more. He’d hate to see it go to waste. The thirty-or-so people who got food before them have barely made a dent in it.

Regardless, he stacks together a napkin and bamboo spork under his plate and follows Minghao instep. They sometimes get the same thing, but more often than not, they agree to get different things so that the real estate of their plates can be maximized. They want to try a taste of everything and between telling Mingyu which staff member brought what, Minghao sometimes hovers his hand near Mingyu’s hip to move them along to the next section of the potluck buffet. He doesn’t touch them, though, and that’s a little suspicious to him.

The way Minghao sometimes says things to reassure him that he’s not mad or brushing him off, he wants to learn how to do something like that, too. So, at every opportunity present, he bumps
their shoulders together or nudges him with his elbow. There’s no way they can hold hands right
now, but this is the best he can do, and he hopes it doesn’t go unnoticed— actually, he knows it
doesn’t because Minghao shoots him a somewhat annoyed glance near the end of the food train.

Okay, so maybe bumping arms while carrying heaping plates of food and a cup filled to the
brim wasn’t the most considerate thing but Mingyu had no other option! The silver fox shoulders
past him playfully, making strides towards where their friends are standing in absence of Seokmin
who is eating across the room with Jeonghan and Joshua. He’d like to check in on him, but the
sunny student seems to be having a good laugh watching Chan run away from Jeonghan’s sticky
arms.

As good as dinner was—yes, he and Minghao went back to the food room for seconds and
thirds—, the thing he’s been waiting for is Seungkwan’s hoddeok. It’s something he vividly
remembers from going to DonutBoo that one time with his mom where she introduced him to the
street food for the first time. Mrs. Boo had mentioned that they only came out on occasion and after
she stopped working there as often, the hoddeok had disappeared from their Friday menu
indefinitely. Mingyu’s not sure when they came back into production, but he’s ready to stuff this
piping hot, gluten-filled, fried goodness into his mouth.

Of course, the next couple moments are filled with instant regret because the interior is still
molten sugar and cinnamon paste. Vernon cackles at him, soda spurting from his mouth as he swats
at Seungkwan who leans away from his flailing hands. It still tastes good, though, and Mingyu’s
determined to eat it while it’s hot. He would have hurriedly stuffed the rest into this mouth had
Wonwoo not stopped him. Unfortunately, the way Wonwoo seizes his wrist causes his fingers to
tighten around the pastry and a small dollop of the steaming filling drips down on to the back of
Minghao’s bare neck, making him writhe and almost knock over Soonyoung’s drink on the way
down.

Rescuing the cup with a swift hand, Jun tries to clean him up, but his napkin is already
covered in salsa. Soonyoung offers his napkin, having forgotten that he blew his nose in it five
seconds ago. Thankfully, Wonwoo stops him, too and in the end, Seungkwan scurries to the
bathroom and grabs a handful of clean paper towels for everyone to share.

You could say that sitting above someone with a magma-filled hoddeok is a bad idea, but they
wanted to come sit in this empty studio and eat in the dark. Without folding tables to sit at, Mingyu
opted for the long bench that seems to be stationed along the wall of each studio space. Next to
Vernon and Seungkwan, Minghao decides to sit on the floor ‘like old times’, but he’s also using
Mingyu’s shins as back support.

The waterfall of apologies floods out of his mouth only for a little shard of toasted walnut to
fly from the corner of his lips and pelt Minghao’s cheek.

Geez, he’ the worst date.

But everyone is consumed by a fit of laughter, Minghao included. Jun and Soonyoung are
rolling around in hysterics and more than half their party is wheezing after Mingyu holds Minghao
still long enough to thumb the little piece off his face and bow his head in shame. By the time he can
rub it back onto the edge of his plate, there’s Fanta coming out of the blond’s nose.

They’re in high spirits and it seems like Soonyoung wants to keep the party going, “Games?”

“No games.”
“Games!”

“No games.”

“Games!” Vernon backs Soonyoung up.

“No games.” Wonwoo backs Minghao up, “It’s already 9. We all have to wake up early for the drive tomorrow. We should start wrapping things up, people have started leaving already.”

Soonyoung pouts and scoots his butt across the wooden floor to peer out the glass door. People are indeed leaving in droves, foil-covered plates full of leftovers. He flops over and sprawls out on the ground, lazily swinging his arms and legs like he’s making a snow angel, “But games.” Did they not have enough of a traumatic experience playing games at the banquet?

Jun gets up and grabs his ankles, dragging the blond across the floor in order to walk out the door himself, “We can play games at the hotel if we have time tomorrow.”

“Fine.”

Wonwoo offers a hand out to collect empty plates to that the rest can start cleaning. That’s the pain of working here, right? You’re in charge of making sure that it stays clean and pristine even if you’re not on the clock.

The bright side of this situation is that Mingyu’s charm-point as a young bachelor is that he’s a pro at cleaning. He and Minghao clean up the floor in only a few strategic sweeps with the remaining napkins. In the main hall, a few people—whose names escape Mingyu’s memory—are having people take their casserole dishes home and they’re starting to fold up the disposable tablecloths and discard garbage, recycling pop cans in a separate bin.

Before he gets too carried away with the cleaning, he figures he ought to text Seokmin, ‘Hey, I’m going to stay to help clean for a bit. Is that okay?’

It’s not like Seokmin could say no. Mingyu gave him a ride here, ‘Yeah, that’s fine!’ So, he picks up one of the large brooms poking out of a utility closet and starts sweeping up the area surrounding a trashcan where the aim was notoriously bad. Ping, ‘Actually, String Chirp said he could take me back to the clinic since he’s taking Joshua and Jeonghan back. Do you mind if I go early? I know you could use some alone time with Mumbai ;’) Ping, ‘*Seungchul*. Ping, ‘*Minghao*. Looks like Seokmin learned the hard way that you can’t Swype traditional names easily.

‘You sure?’

‘Totally! It’s fine!! I’ll see you at work on Monday! Have fun at finals!’ So many exclamations. It’s not that different from how he normally talks, but to see it in text makes it more apparent. He sometimes wonders if Seokmin’s narrative voice in his head is constantly screaming like he makes it out to be.

Despite filling their dinnertime conversations with topics that were general enough that everyone could participate, Mingyu’s a little disappointed that he couldn’t ask about Seokmin and Seungkwan’s situation since the honey-blond was in the room. He also didn’t get to ask about Seungcheol and his relationship with his boss and senior, but now that everyone’s moving the food out to the lobby for packing and dumping, he finally has a moment to ask whatever he wants.
However, the questions about secret relationships and tragic backstories seems to fade away when his attention returns to his dancer. Tragic, right? The mind of a man in love is quite fickle sometimes.

He’s making wide motions, cleaning off the faux-wood tables with large sweeps of a damp cloth. There usually wasn’t much to wipe, but some curries and soups had seeped through the disposable tablecloth and dried to the surface. Minghao’s bent over the folding table, scrubbing diligently so that they can go home early. However, Mingyu’s mind can’t help but take a fieldtrip to the gutter.

After folding the legs of his current table and neatly stacking it off to the side with the others, he picks up his own damp rag and winds it up as he sneaks behind the unsuspecting dancer. With a sharp flick of his wrist, Minghao jumps up in surprise when the tip of the towel whips against his rear. Before he can turn around to yell at Mingyu, he traps him against the table, hands holding onto the edge of it as he presses their bodies together and smoothes his crooked smile into Minghao’s shoulder, “Sorry, was that too hard?” Minghao chuckles and doesn’t answer him. He just continues cleaning the table, not seeming to mind the hands that are keeping him in place. It’s Mingyu who is hoping for a little more, “What happened to being my date?”

Minghao cheekily ignores him again.

So, Mingyu holds his hips still with one hand while the other slides over to the one with the rag and tugs it away, “What happened to wanting to hold hands?” He holds it just out of reach as the shorter man paws at him.

“We can’t really hold hands while cleaning tables.” Minghao rotates around in the tiny space that he’s boxed in by. For a moment, they’re so close that Mingyu can feel his peach fuzz brush against his cheek. It’s electrifying, “Give it back.”

Teasing Minghao has always been fun, “And why should I do that?”

“So we can practice one more time before packing up for the weekend.” Mingyu doesn’t appreciate the deadpan. He knows Minghao must be tired from rescheduling most of his weekend classes for the week and trying to find someone to sub in for him. If anything, he knows he feels bad that he’s essentially overloaded Yugyeom and BamBam with new choreographies to teach for the next two days, “Give it back.”

“How about you make me?” Mingyu licks the inside of his lips in anticipation. Flirt-mode activated.

“How about,” his fingers dance along his hip bone and hook into the belt loops above his pockets. He tugs him forward with a jerk—with the likely intent to deliver a wedgie and failing—before he gives Mingyu a push and makes him stumble back a few feet, “we’re in the studio and there’re people around.” He takes a big step to get back into Mingyu’s personal space.

He tries to keep his cool, but ends up stuttering the first word anyway, “I don’t think they’ll mind.”

“Aren’t you worried about getting caught?” His long fingers curl into the collar of Mingyu’s shirt, pulling him as close as he can get without touching him directly. Mingyu could lean forward, do away with this menial space, lock lips with him- god, why does he have to be so enticing? Wasn’t it Mingyu who wanted to be the one in control this time? So much for that. This man makes him weak. His mouth hovers next to his, to the point where he can feel his breath in wisps over his skin, “Thanks.”
Mingyu’s eyes open as Minghao backs away and gets back to work, rag in hand—he has no idea when he took it back, but he’ll take that as a sign to give up and resume folding tables and stacking them against the wall. He sighs, a little disappointed that he didn’t get any sugar for his efforts, but surprisingly his mood isn’t down. It’s not a game of cat and mouse with Minghao, but a game of tag. Mingyu’s ‘it’ and he has been for some time. He has to get Minghao to crack to tag him back, make him lose his cool for just a moment of their flirtatious sessions.

“Sorry if I’ve been a little too clingy tonight.”

Mingyu looks up, “What do you mean?”

He polishes off the last table and hangs the rag off the side of the garbage bin. Sliding the table over to Mingyu with slow steps, he purses his lips and speaks again, “I don’t know if I’m being annoying or something.” If anything, Mingyu was also having those worries from his own end, “I don’t want to guilt trip you or pressure you into being all touchy-feely if you don’t want to.”

He tries to ensure that his voice is as bright as can be because his partner’s mood seems to be rather downturned, “I’m your date, it’s okay.”

“No, really, Mingyu.” He helps turn the table over as he unlocks and folds the metal legs, “I just,” he loses his train of thought briefly, “Like we talked about before,” they both move the table to the side and turn off the lights, “if we win, we’re going to be on the road a lot and I keep fighting myself. Do I make the most of the next few days with you or do I try to keep a distance just in case?”

Oh, that hurts.

That part really hurts.

“I’m not going anywhere.” Mingyu puts a hand on his shoulder, trying to rub those words into his bones, “Win or lose, I’m still going to be here.”

“I know.” Minghao’s eyes hit the floor. It’s evident that there’s still a pinch of doubt that he’s not proud of. He knows that Minghao doesn’t doubt his loyalty or his earnestness, but he knows that sometimes fate has a funny way of working and sometimes it isn’t fair to every party involved, “I must sound like a scratched record. Sorry, I’m being stupid.” He shakes his head and forces a smile back onto his face.

It looks like he wants to speak again, but the words don’t come out. His lips part and close, part and close, and nothing is heard. Mingyu speaks instead, “You’re not being stupid. I know you’re worried, I know I’m worried, but this competition means a lot to you, your friends, and your studio. I’m glad you talk these things out with me. I appreciate how considerate you are,” he leans against the section of wall by the door where the light from the hallway barely reaches his shoulder. He holds Minghao’s hands and pulls him a few feet forward, “but if you want to kiss or hold hands or whatever, just do it. You don’t need to think. You don’t need to ask.”

“Those are some dangerous claims, Mingyu.”

He knows they are and he knows that there will be moments where he’ll prefer Minghao to ask, but he hopes that the invitation comes off as an open gesture. He wants to be closer, he wants to be closer, he wants to be impossibly close.

But Minghao matches him well. He reads him like a daily horoscope, he reads him like a children’s book. And because he can read him so well, he closes his eyes and waits with his lips
lightly pursed. It’s an invitation that he doesn’t have to ask to send.

And like clockwork, Mingyu responds with a warm kiss, hands on his hips, hands on his sides, hands supporting him and tracing him in the dark.

Hands on his body, hands in his hair, hands over his heart.

“Are you sure you can stop at kissing?”
Fingers knot into his hair, pulling him back and away for just a moment, just long enough for a breath of air, “I think we’ll have to.” Minghao mumbles against his lips, smiling into another kiss before he burrows into Mingyu’s neck with his signature, effervescent giggle that never gets old.

It’s aged like he has—refined, improved—but most of all, Mingyu gets to enjoy it and appreciate it now and it’s regrettable that he didn’t let himself do so a decade ago. He could have bathed in his champagne laughter for ten years. Ten years were wasted because his head was so far up his ass that he couldn’t see the potential of what was right in front of him.

And there’s no sense in dwelling in the past anymore. Minghao is here in the present.

He hopes that they can continue like this, then, that every intimate moment with him can bloom into a full epiphany of how much he’s enamored by a single, living being. How does one live on so humbly with a heart so rich? Will Mingyu have to be the only one bragging about his existence?

That’s okay, he supposes, the fewer the better.

He knows it’s still a little unhealthy and he’ll work on kicking the habit, but when Minghao’s fingers are curling into his shirt with their chests flush and his breath puffing at his neck as he laughs, Mingyu can’t help but feel an overwhelming sense of protectiveness and possessiveness.

This is mine.

He’s lucky he even gets to think about words like that.

He knows, he knows. Minghao’s not a thing. He’s not to be owned. But, gosh, when his heart beats this hard—when he feels this alive—he sometimes hopes that Minghao feels the same way. He hopes that Minghao wants all of his attention; all of him.

Everything about their movements is slurred and lingering—drunk on diet Pepsi and La Croix—feeling just short of a high, just above happiness.

If invited, Mingyu wouldn’t mind doing whatever Minghao contested. Gladly, he’d go in no-holds-barred, but it really was just a tease. He knows they’re in a professional workplace. He knows there are still people around, but the idea of getting caught while making out in the dark with a cool draft winding through the vents makes it all a little more exciting. Then again, if Seungcheol was the one doing the catching, he might have to think twice.

Actually, whatever, with Minghao in his arms, he doesn’t have the slightest care in the world. He’d also get to make good on his resolve to kiss in front of his roommate.

Who knows how long they would have stayed in each other’s company had Jun not texted to ask where Minghao went.

The last ten minutes were filled with soft pecks, kisses after reassuring words are mumbled in delivery, holding—oh, so much holding. Mingyu could get used to this even though he’s not afforded the luxury.
The shorter man wipes the little smear of spit from the side of his mouth with the back of his hand before looking up at Mingyu and giving him a tight smile, raising his eyebrows to show a goofy, lighthearted expression. He turns to fix his clothes in the reflection of the window but finds that an arm loops around his waist and pulls him away, nipping a kiss into his neck. He didn’t intend for it, but the action pulls Minghao’s shirt up and his fingers graze his stomach before he lets go and apologizes when he flails and shudders under reflex.

Aw, his neck really is sensitive, isn’t it.

It probably looks a little silly, but they’re grooming each other simultaneously, arms constantly getting in the way; what a tangle of limbs. Do they look like monkeys? He shouldn’t have kissed so passionately, he laughs to himself. There’s a level of disheveled messines that can’t be removed from Minghao now.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” He tucks his shirt back in, “Don’t apologize. You should look at yourself.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, nothing.” Minghao puts a hand on the door handle and uses his other hand to block Mingyu lest he gets up to his funny business again. He opens it and steps through the threshold of the doorframe, “Don’t you need to take your friend home?”

Mingyu checks his reflection again, this time with slightly better lighting and using the mirrored wall, “He hitched a ride with Seungcheol and all of them.”

As they walk out into the hallway, it’s plain to see that all the guests have packed up and left, leaving their party waiting, one dancer short. Jihoon never showed.

Wonwoo is flopped over on one of the lobby couches, a hand on his stomach and the other arm blocking out the light from above. Soonyoung is in a similar position, folded over a single-seater across from his boyfriend. His spine bends in such a way that it looks like a ragdoll cat that’s just been picked up. His tongue is poking out from between his lips as if he was playing dead and Mingyu gets the feeling that he’ll try to spook them if they get any closer.

Chan is showing Vernon something on his phone, laughing about it before Seungkwan asks to be filled in. Instead of tuning him out, Chan quickly obliges, and he and Vernon explain the video of a kid falling off the playground. Despite chiding them about laughing over a child’s misfortune, Seungkwan can’t help but crack up when they replay the video with sound. Part of him is relieved that they’re too preoccupied with themselves to care about their untimely arrival and apparent state of ‘jostled and flustered’. He’s sure if Wonwoo and Soonyoung weren’t half way to comatose, they’d tease and whoop about all the misplaced hair and wrinkled clothes.

Jun, unlike the others, is sitting behind the front desk, slowly turning back and forth in a half-circle as his eyes focus down on the small mini keyboard sitting under the ledge. Based on the number of stickers, he’s going to assume it’s Vernon’s and not Yixing’s, “Can we have a group vote? All in favor of going home and resting, hands up.”

It’s unanimous.

The two who want to practice, Chan and Minghao, put their hands down after the rest raise theirs—Wonwoo and Seungkwan included. Mingyu didn’t think he’d be in a position to vote otherwise he’d also vote to go home and rest, too.
The blond grumbles from the couch, “Let’s go home then.” He slides down the seat onto his knees and then onto his butt until his entire body is like a limp slug on the rug, “Wonwoo, are you driving?”

“Wonwoo’s not home. Try again later.” Seems like the food coma is claiming everyone.

He gets up from the floor to tug on Wonwoo’s sleeves, shaking him until he sits up, hair sticking up, “We still have to pack! Get up!”

And, of course, Wonwoo yawns and pokes his boyfriend in the stomach, tickling him until he submits and rolls away, defeated, “What do you mean we? I packed my clothes two days ago.”

The two eventually clamor over each other until they’re both on their feet. Barely. Wonwoo has an arm slung over Soonyoung and they’re both leaning together, using the other as a crutch for standing. A cheek is squished against a shoulder, a head is resting in some hair. Minghao ushers them both out the door, asking for a picture of Byeol when they get home safely. The senior dancer yells something unintelligible over his shoulder before Wonwoo shushes him for screaming near his ear, but Minghao agrees regardless and watches them make their way into their car.

Seungkwan offers Chan a ride back to Minghao and Seungcheol’s flat. It seems like extra driving and a completely needless hassle and the youngest doesn’t really catch on to the reasoning until the baker whispers into his ear, at which point he sends Mingyu a mockingly disgusted face and agrees. Vernon, also not understanding the reasoning leans his ear in for an explanation as well, to which he laughs. He makes one of those childish and silly scrunched up faces, as if to say ‘ew’ before cringing and pulling Chan along with them as they exit with a loud goodbye.

That leaves the three of them standing in silence, an awkward silence that Jun is fine breaking, “You two go ahead, I’ll lock up.” He walks them to the door. It almost feels like he’s herding them past the glass panes and into the parking lot.

Some inch of Mingyu—some part of his instinct as a person—says that Jun’s not willing to depart from the studio himself. He’s caught up over something and that something isn’t hard to pinpoint. Jihoon didn’t show up to Friendsgiving. That asshole didn’t have the decency to show up for even five minutes to say hello. He shouldn’t jump to conclusions. The audio tech probably has his reasons—if he’s optimistic about it, maybe he doesn’t want to be ‘just friends’ with Jun anymore—and they’ve likely had enough of each other after meeting every day for months, but still. He knows he means a lot to them. They’re all friends. Even without Jun there, he should have gone.

Minghao turns to grab Jun’s forearm as they step into the tar paving, “Go home soon, okay?” He gives him a single, firm shake. It’s good that Minghao can read his friend as well. Mingyu would have sat him down for a talk, but it’s possible that the silver-haired man has already tried and failed that approach for many years. Sometimes, you just can’t help the situation, “Get some rest before you drive tomorrow.”

Especially not if the party in question is unwilling to change, “I will.” He puts his hand over Minghao’s to peel it off. It’s not angry or bitter. In fact, Mingyu could never imagine Jun getting mad or worked up in any way. He’s too soft spoken and easy going for aggressive dealings. But unlike other nights, tonight he doesn’t try to smile as he bids them farewell, returning to the studio doors and pulling out his keys to lock up the front, “Wǎn ān.”

He closes himself inside and upon giving his partner a concerned look, Minghao explains that they usually lock the front door and leave out the back. Taking Mingyu’s hand, he leads him to his car with even, peaceful steps, “I wish I could say something to make Jun feel better about whatever the mess is.”
A sigh, “I’m sure he appreciates the effort you’ve made.” Parking Mingyu at the driver’s door, he waits. His old car is parked a few spaces down, no chance to get snuggly between their automobiles tonight, “But they just have to work things out themselves after this competition stuff.”

“Does it really have to wait until then?”

Minghao nods, “Even if it looks like he wants to talk about it, I don’t think Jun will jeopardize the team’s chemistry this late in the game and even if he wanted to, I don’t think Jihoon would let him. It’s like,” he snaps his fingers a couple times, trying to find the right word, “checks and balances? I guess.”

Mingyu reaches up to pluck a stray piece of lint from his wiry hair. It looked soft, but bleaching it that many times can’t go unnoticed because the coarse locks will need more than enough deep conditioning to be tamed in the future, “Is that how it is?” He nods, not exactly wanting to continue that conversation but also not excusing Mingyu since he won’t let go of his hand. It is getting late, though, the clock isn’t waiting for anyone. While they had outlined who was driving with who and Mingyu’s worries about hotel arrangements were squashed by Seungkwan pointing out that the event company had already booked their hotels weeks in advance, there was still a lot unanswered about what kind of city it was and what kind of activities they’ll be doing on Saturday in preparation for Sunday’s large audience. All he knows is that he should bring swim trunks for the heated pool and that there is ‘plenty to do in the city’ according to Soonyoung, “As much as I like your clinginess,” it’s better to go to bed and get enough rest for the five-hour drive tomorrow morning.

He doesn’t get to complete his sentence because he can’t bring himself to tell Minghao to leave, but the latter takes the hint and sways in the wind. Still unwilling to move or unhook their fingers, he wrinkles his lips and looks at the ground, “So, you’ll pick me up?”

“Mhmm.” He gives up, Minghao obviously doesn’t want to go. So, he drops his hands and wraps his arms around his shoulders, crushing him in a big hug, “I’ll be there bright and early at 8.” It’s not that early considering the hours they’ve been up recently.

Minghao’s hands crawl up his sides and latch onto him, “Hey, Mingyu?”

“Yeah?”

“Is it okay if you come a little bit earlier so we can walk Cacahuate?”

‘One last time’ seems to be edited out of his sentence. It’s not going to be the last time—especially if they don’t win—but as a precaution, he feels the need to mention it. It’s just the momentum of the night, as if tonight was the last normal night they’d have in their little, homey town in the middle of nowhere, “Yeah, I can come early.”


Mingyu takes a deep breath and tightens his grip around the slender man in his arms. He embeds the chilly night air in his nostrils, inhales the brisk wind and embroiders the tiny, spec-sized stars in his eyes. He tries his best and his hardest to remember how Minghao feels in his arms. In this moment, he aims to replace the old image of him from high school, he wants to take another snapshot to stitch next to their nights together. His heart isn’t done healing, not in the slightest. Minghao still has a lot of work to do.

This isn’t goodbye because he’ll be seeing him in a handful of hours.
Tomorrow won’t be goodbye because his performance is on Sunday.

Sunday won’t be goodbye because they’ll still have forever regardless of victory.

Minghao can’t see the future, so why does he feel so sad?

Maybe he’s just tired. These last two weeks have been the most stressed that Mingyu’s been since his finals in university and those studies pale in comparison. It might be casual for Minghao, but even Superman would find this breakneck pace exhausting. Being tired makes you vulnerable. The prospect of being continents apart from your significant other makes you needy.

“Okay, okay.” Minghao rubs his back, “Let’s go. We probably look like a couple of hormonal teenagers.” There’s no lie there. They’ve been all over each other for the last couple hours. He’s pretty sure that Seungkwan was going to gag with how much he was playing with Minghao’s hair during dinner—stealing glances in the studio mirrors, playing kiss-tag with their hands, poking each other—he would probably gag if he was on the outside looking in.

He takes a step back, disengaging from their hug, but not letting go of him entirely, “Can you blame me?” Planting a warm kiss on Minghao’s forehead to show him that he appreciates his thoughts, “I, like, totally have a gargantuan crush on you.” He kisses the bridge of his nose, then the tip.

Then his cheek, “I can tell.” And his other cheek, “I almost like you enough to send you a candygram.”

A fake and exaggerated gasp, “A candygram? I feel so special.” The sarcasm is heavy in his voice, but candygrams were considered the grandest gesture of courtship—pfft—in high school. You had to pay money to get the choir to come into your class during Valentines and sing to your object of affection and that was true infatuation back then. Of course, the cherry on top was a chocolate rose—likely bought in bulk from some cheap retailer, it usually tasted like Dollar Tree chocolate—and a little sachet of grab-bag hard candies. No one really cared about the index card-sized note that came with each delivery, but the point was that this was basically a declaration of love.

For a teenager.

Admittedly, Mingyu’s received many during his high school career, “Yeah,” many, many, many candygrams. His record was five in the same year, “a candygram.” And sometimes he’d pick one of the people who sent them—usually the first—and take them out for a movie or a dinner or something, just to show that he was thankful, just to keep up his image. During senior year, he’d dated one of them briefly, “And I’d make sure they’d embarrass the heck out of you.” After freshman year, he didn’t get embarrassed anymore. He took it like a champ, “And you’d have to sit in front of your whole class,” He got a few anonymous ones, but most of them were addressed by people he knew personally. On the occasion that they were from someone he didn’t know, he would make an effort to send them one in return before spring break, “And face the fact that Minghao Xu has a— what was it?—gargantuan crush on you.”

He stops nipping at his jawline, “But you didn’t, right?”

“Nope.” Minghao leans forward and pecks him on the lips, “Not for a second.”

“Good thing we’re not in high school anymore.”

He nods, closing his eyes, “I like us better now.”

“Me too.”
How he ever managed to pry himself out of Minghao’s arms, he’ll never know, but he still feels bad about it.

It’s very obvious that Minghao would like to spend as much time with him as possible. He wants to touch him as much as possible. Hold his hand as much as possible. Kiss him as much as possible. It’s a sudden shift in their relationship dynamic that he doesn’t quite understand and that he isn’t very used to yet. It’s not that he doesn’t like it—he enjoys the affection a little too much—but because it’s a sudden and unannounced change in Minghao’s behavior, he feels like he has to be the responsible one and take a step back so they don’t do anything regretful.

He doesn’t know who is to blame for the clinginess. Was it Jun? Seungcheol? Wonwoo? They all seem to have feasible experiences to impart some ‘words of wisdom’ to his significant other. The idea of Minghao being manipulated to feel a certain way doesn’t sit right with him, but there’s always the chance that his own thoughts have led him to these devices. Still, Minghao doesn’t seem like the type to change course within a couple hours or a couple days. There had to be an event.

Thoughts like that keep Mingyu awake past 2am.

It’s bad, he knows. He’s due at Minghao’s apartment five hours from now. It’s a good thing he planned what to pack for the weekend trip the day Seungcheol gave him the ticket and stuffed his duffle bag accordingly a few hours ago.

To lull himself to sleep, he repeats his packing list over and over. He has his toiletries, two sets of clothes, a more-formal outfit just in case, and his swimsuit if they really do decide to go to the pool—which he doubts since the end of November has always been cold. However, knowing his friends, they’d be the first to dive in headfirst.

Right, he has to set his alarm. He has to walk Cacahuate in the morning. He hopes that whatever bratty behavior the dog had last night has bowled over and he’s back to normal. So fluffy, so good. The best boy.

That night he dreams of still water, of silence and starry skies.

He’s enveloped in darkness with an ambient navy-blue light that he seems to emit. The expanse of water is only shin-deep but it expands for leagues. He can see it on the horizon, barely outlined by a thin, silver thread. The more he stands and stares up at the beautiful sky, the more the silence evolves into an omnipresent hum. It slowly changes pitch but remains low—like the music they play at aquariums—and just as the music crescendos, a large whale forms out of constellations and curls above him. It’s absolutely massive, consuming a large fraction of the sky and flying slowly; steadily. It’s truly a sight to remember.

But it emits a voice, a bellow that shakes Mingyu to his very core. He can feel it in his guts, in his bones, and in his skull. The whale cries quietly as a single star shoots over the horizon as fast as a satellite would move across the sky. Despite its efforts, the whale can’t follow it as it seems bound to its spot, in a small tank that it has overgrown. The song it’s singing is so cripplingly sad, but the harder Mingyu tries to listen to it—tries to pick out the notes and hear it out—the hazier the tune becomes. It fizzles out into nothingness. And when he opens his out mouth to speak, nothing comes out.

Naively, he reaches out to touch the whale in the sky. If he can’t speak, at least he can try to communicate nonverbally. For a while, the animal doesn’t notice him. It continues to swim in a sluggish, distressed pattern. He calls for it again, his throat straining despite falling to silence. Mingyu
catches his breath, resting his hands on his knees and looking into the dark, clear waters. He can barely make out his reflection and most of that is due to the fact that his face isn’t his. He runs a hand through his hair and pulls his bangs forward to see silver, not brown. He feels for the keloid scar near his left ear. He runs his hands over a slimmer, less muscular body. The bracelet on his left wrist moves to his right in his reflection and that doesn’t make sense, but neither does a constellation whale moving in the sky.

When he looks up again, the marine mammal has acknowledged his existence and moves over to him slightly. It only occurs to him now that the animal might be more inclined to attack him as opposed to listen. It could easily swallow him in one bite, but he stands firm. He doesn’t want to, but his body refuses to move. The whale cries again, even louder than before, and the soundwaves pound against him like a strong wind. It knocks him down to his knees.

Mingyu or Minghao, Mingyu and Minghao—however you want to look at it—sinks his hands into the water, trying to steady himself before he’s blown away by the rippling force. The poor whale roars and wails as its spots start fading, as the stars start dying. It shrinks and flounders like a worm stuck in sap, writhing slowly as it descends from the sky. He runs towards it. There’s no way of telling that the whale is falling out of the sky until it passes the horizon line, but he runs nonetheless. Cupping the wounded and weak whale in his hands, it emits a diminishing light that illuminates the bracelet on his right wrist. He’s now wearing two.

His voice is still silent, but he mouths out words like ‘I’m sorry’ and ‘it’s going to be okay’ as the limp whale shrinks to the size of a goldfish. Until it’s to the point where it is but a single, dim star, he watches it die. There’s nothing he can do to save it and even though it grew small, its hum remained as something that consumed the entire sky.

As he holds the lonely star to his chest, he feels slightly different. His body hasn’t changed much, but when he rubs his tongue against his teeth, he can tell that they’re his. His hands are his. His hair is his. The other bracelet is gone.

And he’s alone.

The star in his palm flickers a few times before he closes his fingers around it. Instead of dying, the glittery light shoots through his veins. It instills something warm in his chest, in his heart. It’s almost constricting and the more he sits with the feeling, the more it seems like a sort of hug; a hug from the inside out.
Chapter 127

Very regretfully, Mingyu sleeps through his alarm, something that’s only ever happened once when he was in college and suffering from strep.

It’s ridiculously difficult for him to stir from his clouded mind and foggy dreams even when they shuffle like the old playlist he made after leaving for college. Maybe it’s so hard because the scenes are a combination of a dream and a memory; reality and fantasy and something bitter and cold. He doesn’t remember his room looking like that back then. He doesn’t remember the sky being seafoam green or his walls being made of glass. He throws off the sheets he doesn’t remember buying, being caped in a blanket of black with silver sequins peppered over it like stars is (was?) just too hot for the summer.

Right.

Something about stars, about a whale. He doesn’t really remember because his body aches. He’s groggy and feels hungover; nauseous and stuffy. His throat burns when he breathes.

Jungkook hadn’t bothered to wake him, favoring his health over his 9am lecture on American politics—going to class this sick probably wasn’t a good idea for anyone. His roommates hadn’t tried to stir him either, but Carson was kind enough to write him a ‘get well soon’ message on the communal whiteboard and Madeline set out her Advil and a cup of salt water—which was a huge gesture for her considering how much they’d fought over the cleanliness of the bathroom two days ago. Two days ago? Where was he two days ago? At the studio? What studio? Where>

Mingyu had woken up well-past noon to the blaring sun shooting through his blinds and the heat of summer vacation cooking his room while a fever baked his brain. Summer vacation? Wasn’t he supposed to go to class? No, he signed up for classes during summer term—not because he didn’t want to see his parents but—because he wanted to spend more time with him.

In the kitchen, there sits a cold breakfast that was once hot and fresh because someone took the time to make it for him before leaving for work. In the late afternoon, the same person delivers a care package of Jamba Juice—Peach Pleasure, if he remembers correctly—and some fancy greens from the off-campus salad bar. They accompanied a shot of over-the-counter salvation and a friendly kiss on the forehead. In the dark of his room, he lies awake with sweat beading on his temple and a terrible loneliness in the pit of his stomach.

There’s a longing, a desire, a simple wish to not be so alone anymore. There’s an answer that’s just a phone call away, just a few blocks away, just within reach but this coward can’t say anything. He’s not a viable solution, but he’s the cause of the problem. He’s all the work done. He’s the past and the present. He’s everything and nothing. He’s desolation and… he’s Jungkook.

Mingyu sits up immediately, shaken by an imaginary earthquake in the back of his brain.

Of all days, of all times, why is he coming to mind now?

The sudden change in acclimation makes his head swim a bit in addition to whatever nonsense was clouding his drowsy brain, but he’ll thank his accumulated karma points for waking him up at 7:28am before his dreams got the better of him. Ripping off his cream-colored sheets like a Band-Aid, his feet contact the carpet and the harsh chill of winter crawls up his legs. He still has time to
make it to Minghao’s place before 8, like he’d promised. He still has a little time to get dressed, get presentable, get ready before he has to book it out the door.

And book it he does because—like Mingyu so often does when he’s rushed and frantic—he forgets his wallet the first time and his phone the second time. It’s a good thing that this door has a deadbolt that can’t be locked without his keys on him or else he’d be in trouble. He manages to trip over his own feet and stumble over the parking block next to his car. Catching himself on the hood, he swings his door open and gets in.

And catches his breath.

The engine revs as loudly as the garbled silence drains out of his head. Today is not the day his heart will be muddled with faint memories and an inflated sense of importance. Everyone is happier now. He’s happier now. He’s happier now.

Ping, ‘Morning’ Ping, ‘♡’

There’s a tightness in his chest and the feeling of irrevocable guilt consumes him. He’s in a relationship with the most wonderful person the universe has to offer, and he has the audacity to dream about someone else; someone from the past. He knows that it isn’t his fault. It’s the fault of his subconscious—the fault of not getting enough sleep—in combination with label stress, performance stress, and future stress. You can’t control your dreams, but it just feels gross.

As he makes his way to Minghao’s flat and parks his car, the only thing ringing in his skull is how much of a traitor he’s been. He’s apologetic and upset and all sorts of unsettled from a simple dream about someone he hasn’t talked to in months if not years. Most of all, he doesn’t want to think about it anymore, but he can’t. Images of what could have been, what used to be, what he wanted to have keep rolling through his head and while his heart doesn’t care for those things now, he can’t shake the feeling that he once did.

Raising his hand to knock on the door, a short boof catches him off guard and forces him to recompose his expression and take his eyes off the ground. He’s not guilty of anything. He’s not guilty. His heart is very much so still in the right place.

But when Minghao swings the door open with the wind whipping up his hair and flooding Mingyu’s nostrils with the smell of sweet maple syrup and toasty pancakes, he can’t help it. He rushes him—crushing the smaller man to his chest and clawing into his jacket as he picks him up to get a good look.

This is his past. This is his present. He hopes this will be his future.

The man is positively radiant this morning despite the dark rings under his eyes. His voice is clear as day and he has the faintest trace of cologne under his chin. When Mingyu smoothers a kiss into his lips, there’s just the slightest sweetness that isn’t all in his head, the sourness and bitterness from coffee. He’s getting ahead of himself. They’ve just woken up and he’s already pressing heated smooches all over his face.

“Well, good morning to you, too.” The dancer runs a hand through his hair, asking to be put down in the softest way, “I made a little breakfast. You didn’t eat yet, right?”

“No.” His voice comes out in an unfamiliar way like he’s choking on it.

“Cool. Do you wanna walk Huatito first or eat?”

Mingyu licks his lips, trying to push for normalcy, “Either is fine.”
He grabs the black leash from the hook near the door and shoves a plastic bag or two into his back pocket. “Walk, then?” He nods. The fluffy, golden dog sits nicely as his owner loops the leash over his head and wags his tail, looking up at Mingyu, nudging his hand, and gesturing towards the door. Looks like the bratty spell is over.

The morning air is brisk and bracing.

It sweeps over them and a dog hair—or two—finds its way into Mingyu’s mouth as he walks hand in hand with the loveliest time wizard of their era. There’s still a lot on his mind, but he’s still a smitten twenty-something that’s trying to steal glances at the silver-haired magician. Just one little giggle, a peek under his bangs, a shy smile—and Mingyu forgets about everything. The weight in his chest is lifted with ease and the heat of summer is replaced with the warmth in his hand. His sharp knuckles, his dry skin, his slight scars, they capture Mingyu’s attention more than whatever transpired this morning, “You okay?”

Cacahuate looks back at him before refocusing on the sidewalk, tail sweeping in smooth curves, “I’m,” the truth is always the best option when it comes to Minghao, “I’m alright. I just had a weird dream last night.”

“You wanna talk about it?”

Those big doe eyes are hard to deny, “Not really.” Mingyu purses his lips and chews on the inside of his cheek, “It was just something small.” Something small that shook him to his core.

“Suit yourself.” Minghao singsongs as he waits for the Spitz-mix to relieve himself on a wild poppy, “At least you got to dream. I couldn’t sleep.”

“Stressed?”

“Excited.” The dog tugs Minghao to the right, forcing their shoulders to bump together, “And, now, exhausted.”

“You can nap while I drive.”

But Minghao shakes his head, “I’ll keep you company.”

He had predicted this walk to be a little more somber, a little more eventful or emotional, but Cacahuate has been minding his own business. Maybe he’s finally satisfied that they’re together. Maybe he’s bored. Without the awkward pining and skirting around their feelings, there’s not much left for the pooch to do aside from being his cute and friendly self.

There is no running through puddles, no chasing after a loose dog, no screaming. It’s too early for the neighbors to be up on a Saturday, and it’s Thanksgiving weekend, a lot of them are probably out of town. There’s no rain. The skies are overcast with the sun peeking through the clouds as the wind moves them along like a lazy river overhead. A few birds chirp bright notes from their refuge in the trees. A squirrel scurries along quickly when Cacahuate assumes his power-stance and points at it with his entire body.

It’s nice.

It’s calm.

It’s how things ought to be for as long as possible.

There’s no room in their lives for turbulence right now. As long as it’s Minghao, he never
wants to fight, he never wants to argue. He wants to talk about his dream. He wants to talk about Jungkook and about why he feels guilty. If it was anyone else, they’d probably laugh, but Minghao would hear him out and put his worries to rest. But not now. If it was a month ago, two weeks ago, then maybe. If it was months in the future, then sure. But now? Right before a huge competition where the potential to be apart indefinitely hangs in the cold space between victory and defeat? He can’t talk about these things right now.

Minghao doesn’t deserve that.

“And that’s why we don’t let Soonyoung eat chocolate cake before performances anymore.”

“But he loves it so much.” And Mingyu absolutely loves hearing about old studio stories whenever they crop up in conversation.

“Too much if you ask me.”

“Should we go buy one for your win?” Optimism.

Minghao’s eyes move to the ground, following their steps instead of looking ahead, “Do you want me to win?”

“That’s a loaded question, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” He tugs on his hand to stop walking. Their lap is almost done, the door to his apartment is just around the corner, “It is.”

“Of course, I have my opinion but if I’m honest, as long as you’re happy with the result, I’ll be happy, too. The idea of,” Minghao gives him this look—like he knows that Mingyu’s just trying to sugarcoat something—and he’s suddenly not so sure about his answer. He was telling the truth, as much truth as he wanted to believe; an ideal truth, “I want you to win.” He puts up his pointer, “One, I’ll have bragging rights that my significant other totally crushed an international dance team.” His middle finger, “Two, this will be super, mega awesome for your career and for your studio.” His ring finger, “Three, being apart will be hard, but we’ll be stronger for it in the end.”

The man nods and continues to his door, unlocking it with a small, red key, “I’ll try my best, then.”

Breakfast is eaten over lighter conversation, thank god.

Seungcheol won’t be joining them in the car—also, thank the heavens, thank every known god—because he’s got some business to attend to and upon hearing that, Mingyu inquires about his whereabouts since he’s not home. Minghao shrugs and simply says that he goes out sometimes and that he didn’t come home last night. He’ll be flying to the venue the day of the performance, so—and Minghao gets a little red while catching himself mentioning this part absentmindedly—they’ll have the hotel room to themselves, “I mean, you’ll have it to yourself. Along with two tickets, we were given two hotel rooms each—one of us, and one for our guests or whatever—but since Seungcheol didn’t need to spend the night, I gave my extra room to Jihoon and planned to room with Jun and—”

“You don’t want to sleep with me?”

He pouts, “Eat your pancakes, Mingyu.” Minghao shovels a bite of egg and sausage into his mouth.
He’s glad that the wrist brace and the knee brace have returned to their rightful place even if it means the bracelet has to be rehomed for a short while, “We could do away with the sheets, the pillows.” He’s going to tag the shit out of Minghao. Look how flustered he is.

But, of course, the man always has a good rebuttal, “And build a fort?”

He grins, ear to ear, “Yes, Minghao, we can build a fort.” It’s probably not too early for sex for many couples, but it’s too early for them. He can feel it. In fact, he hadn’t even thought about buying condoms since the idea of having sex this weekend didn’t even come up. He was just flirting, he had no intention of actually committing to doing the dirty this weekend, “I’m sure our room would be the most popular if we did.”

Spooning and snuggling, though, are some attractive thoughts.

“Knowing Jun, he’ll probably start building the second we arrive.”

The two of them wash the dishes the way they used to. Minghao washes, Mingyu dries. The plates are stacked to the side and he packs away a meal for Seungcheol to heat up when he comes home. The professor might be Minghao’s parent in theory, but in practice, the roles seem reversed.

Cacahuate is given one last chance to go to the bathroom before his dad goes to grab his bulging luggage, “Whoa, what do you even have in there?”

“No much.” Minghao whines, pulling it along behind him, “Nicer clothes for the fancy dinner Wonwoo booked,” So, Mingyu was right, there would be a dinner. Good, it’s getting easier to predict what his friends will do, “one set for the ride home tomorrow, one set just in case something spills, pajamas, a pair of shorts in case it suddenly gets hot.” It’s the end of November, it’s not going to get hot, “but who am I kidding, I hate wearing shorts. Um,” he counts in his head, “one set of clothes for rehearsals and practice, and the performance outfit.” He scoots the luggage forward again, inviting Mingyu to feel how heavy it is to wheel around, “Shoes, toiletries, makeup, and a metric fuckton of accessories because Soon told me to bedazzle everyone.”

No swimsuit, so no swimming, which is expected since it is—again—late November, “Do you have, like, an entire vanity packed away?” Mingyu tugs on the Samsonite container—let’s be real, it’s barely considered a luggage anymore—and almost gets hit by it since it has its own momentum.

“Ha. Ha. Very funny.” Minghao takes it back, “Wait, do you have enough room in your trunk?” They step through the threshold of the door and he locks it after giving his child a squish, a pat on the head, and a kiss on his nose.

Slinging a small tote over his shoulder, he drags the luggage with the other. Mingyu helps him push it over to the parking lot. He surely hopes that his lack of gym attendance won’t hinder his ability to lift this thing into the back of his car, “Probably?”

With luck, it fits and Mingyu doesn’t throw his back out hoisting it over his bumper. Minghao gives him a light applause before sliding into the passenger seat and settling in. He connects his phone and plugs in the USB charger next to Mingyu’s cell.

He’s noticeably less clingy today than he was last night.

No kisses, no excessive touching or holding. And it should be a good thing, but is it bad that Mingyu misses all that physical contact even just a little bit? Overall, he seems like he’s rationalized something and returned to normal. He doesn’t apologize for last night anymore—which is the one good thing that Mingyu will take from this car ride—and he hasn’t brought it up.
They easily converse about anything and everything they can think of even if Minghao’s slurring his words after two hours of chatter. He’d spent the better half of the last hour trying to get him to take a nap, but the man has a death grip on consciousness.

He learns that Soonyoung’s favorite movie is Cars for an unknown reason. He learns that Wonwoo is obsessed with veggie straws and keeps a bag of them in his nightstand. He learns that Vernon makes music just like Jihoon does, but he doesn’t have a formal education in it, so he just bonks around until he gets something that sounds good. When Minghao puts on one of his tracks, the car is filled with a spacey, atmospheric vibe. It’s what he’d classify as ‘psychedelic reverb’ or ‘something my parents would listen to in college if they had the music technology of today’.

He learns that Wonwoo and Soonyoung had left town around the same time they did, and they could have driven together like last time, but there was likely no way for all their luggage to fit in the same car. Each of the dancers was driving down on his own—with or without their guests—except for Chan who hitched a ride with Jun. Vernon and Seungkwan had left before them since the baker was accustomed to waking up before the sun.

It left Jihoon to his own devices and after his name is mentioned, Mingyu can’t help but gossip about what the audio tech had told him.

Minghao nods and nods, only half-listening to his words and as he’d guessed, he’d been through the motions before, “I think it’s better not to force it. If it’s meant to happen, it’ll happen.” Which would be good advice if it wasn’t absolutely terrible advice, “Jun’s one of my best friends, okay? I know he likes Jihoon, but I don’t think he’s really, like, infatuated with him. You already said it, right? They idolize each other, but in my opinion, they can’t see each other romantically.”

“I mean, I guess.”

Sensing his irritation, Minghao rubs his arm and gives him a sympathetic smile, “They’re adults, they can figure it out.” And Mingyu would believe him if they were adults that figured this thing out by themselves, but it was the constant meddling of their friends that helped get them here. So, by default, isn’t it time that they all band together to help Jun out?

Alas, he decides to leave it. If it’s meant to be, it’s meant to be. There’s no convincing Mingyu that all the love songs Jihoon publishes on his SoundCloud aren’t about Jun; if there’s one thing he won’t let go of, it’s that.

There’s a little talk about the plans for the evening, most of which Mingyu forgets instantaneously because his brain is only awake enough to focus on the road. There’s a rehearsal, a dinner, and free time before they have to turn in. Checking in at the hotel is first, though, so they’ll head there directly. Traffic is light in most parts because no one is driving around for fun on a full stomach, but there’s been a very annoying black Mustang that keeps catching up with them. It seems to be in a rush and weaves through the other cars only to be caught up in congested lanes. It has most of Mingyu’s attention since his top priority is getting there in one piece.

Driving in the rain has always been a little scary on the highway and driving in the rain on the highway with Minghao next to him is a little scarier. However, the dancer’s head dips every time Mingyu stops talking to focus on the winding road ahead of them. He tries to make simple conversation, asking if he wants some water or a slice of apple. And while he does indulge in having Minghao feed him a piece of food every mile or so, once they hit city traffic, he stops.

It’s pouring and there are too many cars propelling over the speed limit for Mingyu to be comfortable snacking.
Once they’re at a complete halt, his attention turns to the man who is dozing off. His eyes are
in a daze and when he blinks, it’s slow and hard. Mingyu caresses his cheek with his knuckle,
nudging him and getting his attention, “Seriously, nap,” you big baby, “we’ve still got, like, three
hours in this awful traffic.”

“It’s okay, I’m awake.” He yawns and sits up in his seat. Minghao tosses his hair and slaps his
face a couple times, “I’ll stay awake. I’ll stay awake. It’s your turn to request a song.” They’d been
taking turns playing music off of YouTube since the ride started. It was a good way to share their
music taste and it’s very fortunate that he has an unlimited data plan.

Mingyu makes a risky move and takes Minghao’s phone to put on a lullaby. He’s at risk of
falling asleep, too, but if he can last the four minutes of this song, then he’s golden, “Enjoy.”

“This is unfair.” Minghao pauses the video, “I want to stay awake.”

“Why are you so hellbent on staying up? You haven’t slept!” He presses the button on his
steering wheel to play the song again.

And, of course, Minghao pauses it after only two notes, “Because I don’t want to do anything
embarrassing.”

“What are you talking about?”

“When I sleep, I dream a lot and sometimes I say things.”

“Then say things, it’s fine.”

“It’s not fine.”

“Minghao.” Mingyu hits play again, “Just sleep.” He reaches over and covers his eyes with his
hand, forcing them shut with a gentle touch. The breath from his nose is hot against his pinky.

Surprisingly, a little grumble slips past his lips after he hesitates for what feels like five
minutes, “Fine.” And he wriggles around in his seat until he’s leaning over the console just enough
to hold Mingyu’s hand and lean his head against his shoulder, “I’m still awake, but I’ll just rest my
eyes for a bit.”

“Fine by me.” Okay, not the safest position, but Mingyu will take it over not sleeping at all.

He presses play after Minghao gives up and within a minute, he can feel his breath deepen and
steady. He feels his weight press down against him, limp and cozy. The lullaby pushes and pulls at
Mingyu’s eyelids, too, begging them to close for just a minute. Thankfully, it finishes just as the
traffic picks up again and he switches the song to something a little more upbeat.

All is good. The road ahead is relatively clear and he just has to worry about getting to the
right address—which shouldn’t be a problem considering it’s programmed into his car’s navigation.
It’s easy sailing. Just Mingyu, the road, and Minghao snoozing on his shoulder. It’s nice and peaceful
and absolutely nothing could make his heart or head feel more at ease.

Ping.
‘I’ll see you there.’

That’s great Wonwoo.

Please don’t text and drive. He shouldn’t text and drive either, but the traffic is congested again. Oh well, safety first, no phones for now. It’s not like he can crack open any games or watch a movie. Besides, Minghao’s shuffling playlist is providing enough good tunes for the time being— their musical taste is remarkably in tune even if Mingyu’s never heard most of these songs.

Dropping the phone into the coin tray he refocuses on the road for the nth time. There’s only so much he can do as they near the city. Passing that stupid black Mustang, he has half a mind to give it a middle finger for endangering everyone but digresses when he feels his passenger’s fingers knit into his sleeve as he burrows a centimeter closer. Indeed, unconscious Minghao, hate breeds hate, he knows. Getting his petty two cents in is pointless in this situation and might do more harm than good.

It’s okay.

When they stop again, his nails pick at the window switches, digging into the grooves and counting them idly again and again. When they start again, he counts the stitches on the inside of his leather-wrapped steering wheel.

And just like that, he’s not miffed anymore.

Minghao’s cheek rubs into his shoulder and he mumbles something unintelligible, “What was that?” his jilted voice teases as the other slurs something again, “I can’t hear you.”

It almost makes him jump when he repeats himself a little clearer than before. He didn’t know that people can respond in their sleep, “Don’t want to miss,” the rest is sealed between his teeth and parted lips.

“Miss who?”

And for a second, Mingyu thinks he hears his name.

“What do you mean?”

It’s not the clearest, but it seems like Minghao says something about repeating himself a million times and not wanting to go over it anymore, “Longer.” It’s unfortunate that these troubles plague him in his sleep as well as his wake, “-ng as possible.” And most of it is gibberish, he knows, but the way he grumbles over the next ten minutes is really upsetting. When they reach a halt—cars stacked like trains—he presses a kiss to the top of his head and inhales the sweet scent of his shampoo from his shower this morning, “Is it?”

“Is what?” Mingyu chuckles, running his thumb over his knuckle, giving his hand a firm squeeze to readjust their arms as the latter mutters something again. Let’s get a little more comfortable, shall we? “Is what, babe?” He bites his tongue after trying out the pet name. There’s no harm in saying the corniest, most cliché things when your partner is asleep, but there is some shame and embarrassment behind it. ‘Babe’ is definitely not the right pet name for Minghao. ‘Babe’ is reserved for those people who can’t bother to think of something more suitable- okay, that’s not true, but to him, ‘babe’ feels like a copout.
Mingyu eases off his brakes as the traffic rolls ten feet forward.

It doesn’t take a genius to figure out what the question is. Obviously, Minghao wants to know if that bird is a dove. Obviously, Minghao wants to know if they have any gloves. Obviously, Minghao wants to know if he should give him a shove into the grove of cloves as they rove away from the stove where a spider was trying to prove that this was the place where its web should lie unmoved, interwove-

“Is it love?” he echoes, defeated.

Minghao doesn’t respond, he keeps sleeping. There’s always the possibility that the guy is pulling his leg, pretending to get some shuteye to delve into his thoughts innocently, but there’s also no way he could have kept a straight face through that ‘babe’ remark. He would have choked a little for sure. Nope, Minghao’s dead tired and absolutely under. His warmth makes him want to pull over and snuggle him up in the backseat with a jacket, change them into their pajamas and call it a day. He wants to go to bed and wake up knowing when Minghao will start calling him ‘boyfriend’ even though the title of ‘significant other’ has started to grow on him. It has much too many syllables. ‘Boyfriend’ just has two, but that’s beside the point. It’s more or less about time now, not titles or labels. In his heart, those things don’t matter as much as they did before so long as Minghao will call him his with a smile on his face.

His happiness—not unexpectedly but perhaps Mingyu hasn’t had the time to evaluate it—has become a priority, if not the top priority- no, no, he digresses. The top priority is their happiness; genuine, unadulterated, intimate, wholesome, long-lasting happiness. He wants that for them, the kind of happiness that settles itself into the marrow of your bones and weaves itself into your veins, a happiness that will become an integral part of their existence whether they want it to or not. It can come in any form, but as long as it comes, he’ll be more than satisfied.

Of course, he knows it’s naïve, silly, stupid, and unrealistic to even imagine a situation where any person can literally be happy all the time. They’ll have their ups and downs, they’ll struggle, and they’ll grow, but if he can lie next to him—wake up to him, fall asleep to him—in that very moment before he shuts his eyes and in the very moment he opens them- if they can both feel happy and warm and safe, then that’s enough.

That settles everything.

Against his better judgement, Mingyu decides to respond.

“I want it to be.”

Minghao stirs awake when they reach the toll booth to cross the bridge.

He gets that the fair is needed for maintenance, but there must be a better way for the city to pay for the upkeep that’s more efficient than stopping every single commuter like some capitalist troll. The car is essentially parked at the end of a long line, squeezed between an old white van and a formidable Ford Expedition that’s been edging out of its lane for the last twenty feet. Minghao yawns and stretches, pulling Mingyu’s right arm along with him, “Good morning to you, too.” He kisses the back of his hand before letting them fall back to the console.

“How long was I out for?” He wipes at the corners of his eyes and claps his face a couple
“Not long enough.” Twisting a bit to look at him, Mingyu pushes a few strands of hair here and there. Half of Minghao’s fringe looks like a hot mess and the part that was scrunched against his shoulder looks nothing short of a tumbleweed. That’s what heavy bleaching gets you, “Go back to sleep.”

“Nah, I’m up.” He pauses the song to check his messages before switching it with a brighter track, “Do you wanna move over to FasTrak? I can pay online if you tell me your license plate number.”

He agrees, quickly switching lanes and almost getting nicked by a speeding Mazda convertible—for the record, he’s always hated those little things—and scraping by with the residual prickliness from getting horned at. Sometimes he forgets that they made mobile payment instantaneous—albeit nonrefundable and not editable—since the last time he came to the city they were still doing that ‘pay 48 hours ahead’ thing which was terribly inconvenient, “Technology is amazing.”

He laughs, “It really is, huh.”

In a flash, they pass through the toll and it’s almost open road for the foreseeable distance ahead of them. The vast expanse of water under the bridge is glorious and humbling, they’re reminded about how small they are and the mention of aquatic life and the whales that occasionally swim into the harbor prompts Mingyu to speak about his dream in light. Very light.

Mentally editing Minghao’s name out of it completely, he talks about the constellations and how they moved. His passenger seems wholly intrigued by this narrative, absorbed in the visuals that Mingyu is trying his best to convey through menial words, “Sounds lonely,” he pops a piece of gum into his mouth, “but hopeful.”

“You think?”

“I mean,” he rakes a hand through his hair, tousling it before combing it into order, “you tried to save it and it made you feel all warm and fuzzy, right? It died,” air quotes included, “but it kind of lived on in you at the end.”

“I guess that’s one way to look at it.” He links their fingers together again, not minding the slight stickiness from the apple slices he ate a few minutes ago. It’s clear that Minghao minds, though, trying not to let the tips of his fingers touch Mingyu’s skin.

“They’re just dreams, Mingyu, they don’t need to mean something. Look at dream translators all you want, I think each person has their own unique take on the symbolisms. Like, what does a whale mean to you?”

“A whale?”

“Yeah. How do you feel about whales?”

“They’re,” Mingyu shakes his head, caught off guard by the random question, “big?”

“And?”

“And cool?”

“And?”
“I don’t know, mysterious? Awestriking?” He chuckles, “How am I supposed to feel about whales? They’re just giant mammalian fish things. They’re interesting, but I guess I’ve never had an opportunity to analyze my thoughts on whales.”

“Do you feel closer to whales now?”

“Kinda?”

“Be one with the whale, Mingyu.”

“I’m one with the whale.”

They both burst into laughter.

Conversations often get weird with Minghao. They go one of two ways eight times out of ten. They’re either super thought-provoking, interesting topics rooted in random bits of knowledge that he just has stored somewhere in his big, beautiful brain or they turn into hilarious hypothetical situations. There are times like this where the two paths converge into one and it’s no less intriguing. He loves talking to Minghao and he never put much thought into why, but like most things involving the dancer, it simply feels nice.

He takes Mingyu seriously and Mingyu takes him seriously. They talk about high-fashion candy-jewelry for crying out loud—and have worked out the logistics of manufacturing it with their Food Network facts—right after talking about the disparity of affordable resources for disadvantaged AP students. And yes, these days, Minghao buys the updated study guides and scans them into (illegal) PDFs for kids on the web to share. He has yet to be caught since he uploads from a different public library each time-

“Hey,” Minghao turns to him, suddenly curious, “I didn’t say anything weird, right?”

“ Weird?” He sticks his tongue out, blows a raspberry, makes mouthy farting noises, “No.” He probably looks like he’s short-circuiting.

“Well, that’s not very convincing.”

“A little gibberish is all. Why?” Playing dumb is a foolproof plan even when he’s ready to push his luck, “Did you dream about something weird?” and find out if Minghao even remembers anything about their pseudo-conversation, “Did you dream about me?” He squeezes that one out with the most tooth-rotting voice he can muster.

The color Minghao turns is nothing short of adorable, “About you?” and his attention moves away from Mingyu to focus on the walls of the tunnel they’re passing through. Cement and caulking never seemed so interesting, but instead of a clever rebuttal—like calling Mingyu weird and agreeing—he purses his lips and covers his mouth shyly, “Why would I dream about you?”

“Did you not?”

“And what if I did?”

He grips his steering wheel before drumming on it and tapping his free foot. He’s never prepared for these types of things. He’s never able to foresee what’ll happen. And he’s certainly never able to conjure up enough possible responses to make the stiff air between them disappear. It shouldn’t be hard to respond! Minghao isn’t going to hurt him in any way- but the idea of someone dreaming about you, saying things to you of such a sensitive nature even in a dream—things like that are hard to respond to, “Was I cool?”
Minghao scoffs because Mingyu is absolutely not cool right now.

“Did I have superpowers? Did I beat an Iron Chef? Did I climb Everest? Did I do a sick ollie on a skateboard? Did I adopt fifty dogs? Did I become a barista? Did I-”

“Yeah,” he humors him, “all of those things.” Minghao pulls out his phone again, this time to check the schedule with the event organizers. They’re already running late, so they’ll likely have to head to the practice before checking in to the hotel, “You were busy.”

“What’s *that* supposed to-”

Minghao locks his screen and passes him a coy look, “Sometimes dreams have no meaning, remember?” Sometimes Mingyu forgets he’s dating a cryptid.

“So, performance hall first?”

He hums, texting someone and flapping his phone against his hand a couple times, “I think so. It’d be too rushed if we take our stuff down.” *Blip-blip*, “Soon says they’re already there and they’re just waiting on us and Jun and Chan.”

Of all the times Mingyu’s sat in Wonwoo’s car to go to lunch, the man has driven precisely on the limit—no more, no less, “How fast does Wonwoo even drive?”

“Slow, but Soonyoung is a little speed demon.” It explains why Wonwoo was texting him, “He usually goes fifteen or twenty over the speed limit.”

“How does he get away with that?”

Minghao holds out his hand to trace a shape, “He’s got one of those little box things on his sun visor. At first, I thought it was for his garage door, but I think it’s one of those *things*—I don’t know what they’re called—that ambulances have. It turns all the lights green.”

He doesn’t even want to know how Soonyoung came into possession of such a token, but he imagines that it wasn’t by any legal means. There’s no way they’re handing out remotes like candy. It’s not really a stretch, though, the blond is usually up to mischief so borrowing (re: stealing) a fancy device like that doesn’t seem out of character. It makes Mingyu wonder what other cool toys he’s swiped in passing.

Eventually, they get into the real heart of the city, and after about five minutes of screaming and missing two turns, Minghao navigates him towards their dry rehearsal venue using his phone and a lot of pointing. ‘That way’ and ‘turn!’ don’t really mean much when you have your eyes on the road, so Minghao’s resorted to leaning forward and smacking his side of the dash when he means ‘turn right’ and jabbing a hand in Mingyu’s peripheral when he means ‘turn left’. It’s not mature or convenient, but it works and that’s all that matters.

And, no, he’s not just saying that because he takes a chomp at Minghao’s arm every time he almost smacks him in the face. Not at all.

The back entrance of the performance venue is quite casual aside from the draw gate they have to pass. When he pulls up, a security guard asks for his pass and Mingyu has a mini heart attack because he doesn’t have his ticket ready. Luckily, Minghao reaches into his bag and pulls out a laminated badge and his driver’s license to show him. After scanning both items and handing them back with a curt smile, the man hits a button and lifts the boom gate, “Ooh, fancy-schmancy, I’m
with a VIP.”

“Oh, shush.” His passenger elbows him and loops the badge over his head, wearing it like a necklace. As Mingyu pulls into a parking space next to a large hedge, Minghao mumbles something about overpacking because he doesn’t have time to dig around for a change of clothes. They debate opening his luggage in the trunk but ultimately decide against it. His outfit today isn’t that different from his outfit tomorrow.

Suddenly, a heavy weight attaches itself to Mingyu’s back at a high velocity, almost knocking him over. Two or three weeks ago, he might have assumed it was a rabid monkey or a crazy person attacking him, but today he doesn’t even second guess himself when Soonyoung’s loud voice bellows a grand hello in his ear, “About time you slowpokes arrived.” He jumps off with a bounce on his heel, “Junnie and Chan just got here. Let’s go.” Latching onto Minghao’s arm, he tugs, “We only have two hours before the other team gets here for their rehearsals and I want to be out of here before that.”

“Why the rush? Isn’t it better to see your opponents?” Mingyu asks as Wonwoo strolls out of the back door with a bottle of water in hand, a little winded.

Soonyoung squints, shaking his head at him and directing his attention to the silver-haired dancer that’s fighting against his pulls, “Have you taught him nothing about competition manners.” He shrugs, “You can’t see your spouse before your wedding!”

It’s Mingyu’s turn to give him a doubtful look. What an old and boring tradition and what does that have to do with dancing? It’s not like they’re going to melt into one giant dance group at the end of this thing, “It’s like screen-watching in videogames during local co-op.” Wonwoo rephrases, “It’s not legally cheating, but it’s morally cheating.” Wow, what a great explanation. It takes Mingyu a minute to dig up a memory of playing anything local co-op in his childhood but finds that his only outstanding memory is playing Mario Kart with Minghao in the dim lights of his living room, wrestling with him on the couch and later, on the floor.

“So, let’s get a move on, Minghao.”

“One sec, one sec.” He scrapes Soonyoung off and shoves him into Wonwoo before turning to his driver, “Hey, an idea, why don’t you go check in with Wonwoo? You can take a break and nap a bit while we’re practicing. I can get a ride there with Jihoon or Jun or something.”

“Oh, yeah!” Soonyoung decides he’s going to help Minghao’s cause, “You guys go check in and we’ll go to practice then we’ll go to the hotel, change, and go out for dinner later.” And he gives him another heave before Minghao stumbles a few feet away.

Mingyu’s the one who follows them, “Alright, just call if you need me to come back-”

“We know, we know, just go.” The blond is two sentences away from throwing Minghao over his shoulder and dragging him to practice kicking and screaming, so his partner digresses and follows him willingly, “You can’t see Minghao before the performance!”

It’s not like they’re getting married.

Wonwoo walks them back over to their cars and opens the trunk, “If you have room in yours, we can move the luggage and leave one car to them.” Mingyu nods, not paying attention to what his friend is saying. He’s a little too tired to focus on words at the moment and—in all honesty—he wanted to see a little sneak preview of tomorrow’s choreography in order to make sure he wouldn’t be caught off-guard with his jaw on the ground, “Want me to drive? You’re a little out of it-”
“No- No, I’m fine.”

“If you’re wondering about the performance,” he shoves his and Soonyoung’s bags into the middle section, “you’ll have to tell me if you’re prone to jealousy before I disclose.” Closing the door with punctuation, he makes his way over to the passenger seat.

Mingyu’s never coined himself to be ‘the jealous type’.

Jealous types—in his head—are defined by possessiveness in an absence of control and he’s not about that life. He’s not a controlling person. His past relationships were founded on simple terms: exclusivity, fun, and satisfaction. In general, he’d say that as long as he was happy, he didn’t mind staying someone’s boyfriend. If the other person wanted to break up, he’d be okay. If the other person started spending time with someone else, it’d be his loneliness that’d drive him to be unhappy, not that he was jealous. Only in recent years has he felt a sense of envy when seeing other couples walk together happily—with a mutual understanding of each other and their existence—and that’s as close as he’s gotten to jealousy.

He remembers the singular time he’d caught a boyfriend cheating and the other time he’d learned that a girlfriend was planning their break up. Having those people feel unhappy with him is what made him unhappy. He wasn’t jealous. If anything, it was those past partners that had felt jealousy towards the people and places he’d spend time with and jealous behavior didn’t sit well with him. Sometimes it’d be cute, but more often than not, it’d quickly grow annoying and burdensome. Back in high school, back in university, he didn’t like feeling tied down. He wanted to move freely like so many people do. Commitment in the short-term was fine, being serious and exclusive—he understands the pleasure of those things—but he didn’t like the idea of throwing himself away for someone else.

It’s different now.

Because when he looks at the past, he feels one way.

When he looks at the present with all these hijinks and situations involving Minghao, the resolve he built up as a teenager has been compromised. It’s not healthy—he knows Minghao would say that, too—but when it comes to him, his heart easily sways towards jealousy, envy, and greed. Maybe it’ll just take time for him to feel completely secure. It’s better now. He’s not jealous of Soonyoung, not jealous of Jun, not jealous of-no, he’s still a little jealous of Seungcheol, but at least he’s open to admitting it now.

“I wouldn’t say I am.”

“You wouldn’t?” Wonwoo lips curve into a knowing smirk, rolling down his window for some fresh air and rapping his fingers on the door handle.

“Probably. I haven’t really crossed a path that would make me-”

“Well, if you’re going to cross that path, it’ll probably be tomorrow.”

“I somehow doubt that.” He’s seen Minghao dance already—a very private, sexy dance—so the idea of him doing the same thing on stage isn’t too crazy.

Wonwoo scrunches his nose to adjust his glasses and spins the ring on his pinky, “Don’t say it like it’s set in stone. For all the years Soon and I have been together, sometimes the persona they put on for the stage gets me jealous, too.” Don’t speak so nonchalantly about it, Wonwoo. Mingyu knows he’s definitely the jealous type when it comes to Soonyoung and he knows that Soonyoung is
a huge tease. He likes to rile him up and he knows what buttons to push, “I’m just saying, Minghao is going to step into a light that you probably haven’t seen him in with someone that’s not you and you’ll have to be able to let it go.”

Mingyu gives him a look. It’s a little dumbfounded, a little impatient, and a little exasperated. Minghao is a damn professional, he knows that much. It’s not like Minghao gets jealous when he has to touch his patients, he has no reason to feel jealous when he touches his coworkers and friends. He’s not so easily shaken, Wonwoo, “I think I’ll be fine.”

“You never know.” He singsongs before pointing out the last street they have to turn on to get to their accommodations for the night.

He doesn’t know, but he doubts that seeing Minghao grind on Jun, Soonyoung, or any of the others will provoke him. What will provoke him is Minghao going at it too hard and hurting himself. Again, he still doesn’t believe that the fifteen minutes of fame is worth the arduous recovery process years down the road, but because this is something that makes him feel happy and fulfilled, he can’t say much. Minghao’s all about living life to its fullest even though his personal life is quite modest and hum-

Holy shit.

This hotel is **fucking nice**.
Mingyu doesn’t know why he’s never questioned it—maybe because he has some sort of prejudice about exactly how big the dance industry is—but this place took his expectations and threw them into a blackhole of curiosity. He’d assumed their one-night dorm would be something a little more casual, but this building is just outside the business district and looks more like a resort than it does a hotel.

Wow.

Because they’re from a small city-town in the middle of (essentially) nowhere, he’d assumed that the rather small studio wasn’t entering something so grand. They were really playing things down when they said it was a ‘somewhat large competition’ but ‘not a huge deal’. There are limos pulling out of the back, there’s security at the door, there’s a big-ass fountain and everything. Even on Mingyu’s more luxurious getaways during university or for conferences, he’d never stayed at anything so expensive-looking.

A valet asks them to park to the side and take their luggage down to check in. Wonwoo calls for him before he shuts the door, “Hey, don’t forget your phone.”

“My phone?” Mingyu pats a hand over his pocket. Nope, his phone is here, so he turns back to the car to see a cracked phone in the cupholder, still plugged into the charger, “Shoot, that’s Minghao’s.” He reaches in to take it with them even though he doubts that anyone would be willing to take it, pocketing it as he returns to help the senior PT heft the luggage down.

“I’ll tell Soon to pass the message along.”

After getting a bellhop to help them out, they move to the front desk. He’s very glad that Wonwoo’s done this before because he knows that the names are registered under the event company. Their ticket in is quite literally the black tickets in their wallets that are scanned and registered. Mingyu is handed two silver cards to get into their room—there’s such a special ring to it—and a small pamphlet with meal tickets for the breakfast buffet in the morning. The attendant quickly reviews a small handful of happenings for the day and for tomorrow before wishing them a lovely evening.

Quickly, they show their receipts and keycards to the valets out front and Mingyu unwillingly hands over his keys. He absolutely dreads the idea of anyone else driving his car and potentially hurting it, but they probably won’t let him go and park it himself. To add salt to his wounds, he forks over a five for the spritely, young man who takes his car keys—please, take care of the car.

“Feels like we’re on vacation.” He grits.

Wonwoo laughs that hearty, dadly laugh and pushes him back into the lobby where their luggage is waiting on a bell cart, “I know, right? What room are you?” He flashes him the lacquered ‘218’ on the passport-sized card holder, “Cool. We’re two-sixteen.” And, unsurprisingly, that means Soonyoung and Wonwoo are right next door. He certainly hopes that the two aren’t embarrassingly loud at night, “Don’t give me that look. There’s a rule in place.”

“A rule?” For what?

“A rule. You’ll find out.” It’s not that he’s naïve or stupid, he’s pretty sure he knows what Wonwoo’s hinting at—no ‘strenuous activity’ the night before a big competition, he had the same
protocol during sports seasons in college and high school—, but he wants to know if the man has the gall to say it to his face. Mingyu’s a big boy, he wouldn’t risk Minghao’s health just for a little fun. There are plenty of other ways to enjoy each other’s com-

Is that a two-story high waterfall slowly trickling down like exotic rains to hide the elevator? You bet your ass it is. Is that intricately carved crown molding on the ceiling where no one with below-average vision will be able to see it? Absolutely. He and Minghao had talked about tasteless, frivolous luxuries before and he’ll admit that the high life isn’t really his taste, but there’s something about the grandeur of a place like this that gives him some perspective. Seeing painting reproductions taller than his apartment is somehow a little awestriking and amusing. He can even see the brushwork at this scale-

Wonwoo grabs his arm and realigns him with the open elevator, shaking him from his thoughts again but before he can run straight into a potted plant. They share a laugh at how silly he’s being; entirely surprised by the grandiose atmosphere of the single hotel. The senior PT ensures him that he was also surprised when Soonyoung had him tag along for the first time although, back when they started carving this mountainous path, the hotels used to be motels, “There was even a time when the limos were police cars.”

“Exactly how big is this thing?” They step out on the second floor and make a walk through a hallway that overlooks the pool and spa down below. There are a couple kids who are braving the cold since they’re on break for a couple more days and want to make the most out of their schoolhood freedom, but it’s plain to see that most of the vacationing families have gone home by now. The other guests seem to be businesspeople travelling for work—based on their clothing choice—maybe a few reporters and adults visiting for Thanksgiving weekend.

“It’s televised.”

“It’s televised?” Mingyu stops walking. He really ought to stop repeating everything that Wonwoo’s saying, but maybe he misheard. There are some people running down the perpendicular hallway, yelling at each other as they try to make some deadline. The soft rumble from the manmade waterfall that cascades into the largest of two pools outside also eats up some of Wonwoo’s quiet words.

“Minghao didn’t tell you?” The amusement in his voice isn’t welcome, “I mean, try to not misunderstand, it’s just a small feature to wrap up a ‘progression of dance’ documentary on MTV. They’ll probably have interviews when they win tomorrow.”

When.

Wonwoo has a hankering that they’ll win. He wants them to win even if it means he might not see Soonyoung for a long time.

“He mentioned interviews, but,” this is a lot more than interviews, isn’t it? The only time Mingyu had been interviewed was for the local news and for his university’s paper. This has to be how Letta knew about them. Is the world of entertainment really so popular and broad these days? Has Mingyu been living under a rock? Maybe they just avoided talking about this grand finale like it was taboo. Outside of the moments it was absolutely necessary—like when Mingyu needed address details or when they talked lightly about the itinerary for the sake of his anxiety—Minghao had casually moved their conversations into the realm of the hypothetical, changing topics with a deft hand all the while quelling his curiosity and stress with just enough information.

Wonwoo slaps his shoulder a couple times, “Based on your current reaction, maybe he just didn’t want to scare you off.”
“Maybe.” Minghao wasn’t avoiding talking about cameras or TV or interviews. He was avoiding talking about the end.

After sliding the keycard into the respectful slot, the door beeps and he tosses his bag onto the dresser. He lets Minghao’s heavier luggage sit on the designated luggage rack before he finally takes in the room. Sure, the view isn’t great from their balcony, but at least there’s a balcony with a little table and two chairs. Inside, there’s your standard hotel fare: a desk, a desk chair, a bed. There’s also a pretty rug, a flat screen TV mounted to the wall, the floor is a nice, plush carpet, and the curtains are made of heavy material coupled with soft organza. Everything has a nice color palette of warm and neutral tones, crowned with rose gold, white marble, and deep cherrywood. Everything has a *polish* to it that he can’t really explain but it looks like the backgrounds of Instagram-famous models.

The room service catalogue is half-useful, half-Skymall, but other than the copious amounts of wall outlets, the complimentary wine, and the sleek control panel near the door, there’s nothing else fantastically magnificent about the room. There’s probably a good thing, considering how over dolled the entrance and hallways are. It’s *very* nice, don’t get him wrong, but the hotel’s budget is obviously spent on the upkeep of the outdoor spa area and the lobby.

He has this mentality until he runs his hands over the bed.

Of course, he knows that you’re supposed to do away with the comforter. Those things only get washed, like, four times a year and even though this is a nice hotel, he’s pretty sure that they still don’t wash things like that between guests. It might be pretty and warm, but he’ll be a snob for once and have room service deliver some extra layers of clean sheets because, *damn*, these are some soft hotel sheets. 500 count *at least*, probably 800. He doesn’t know. But the layered sateen and flannel make for something that might possibly rival his own Egyptian cotton sheets at home. Coupled with silk pillows, it’s just inviting him to take a lazy afternoon nap until Soonyoung drives back with Minghao.

So, Mingyu shoots Wonwoo a quick text, apologizing for his sudden sleepiness and stacking his phone and Minghao’s phone on the nightstand closest to the sliding door of the balcony—he picks this side since he has first dibs and because he would very much so like to wake up first—, he moseys into the bathroom to wash up a bit and chill. Cracking the balcony door open just a hair to get in a waft of cool, fall air makes the already nice room just a bit more welcoming; cycling out the sterile smell that reminds him too much of the clinic. He gathers the two little boxes of fancy chocolates that sit atop the pillows and puts them off to the side lest he roll over and melt them into the ivory sheets.


And Mingyu doesn’t know how or when it happens but he’s out cold in a matter of moments, sprawled on top of the sheets like an ungraceful starfish. The chilly air isn’t enough to permeate his jacket and shirt. He’s perfectly comfortable and this bed feels like he’s snuggling with a giant fluffy dog, sleeping on the belly of a well-groomed Snorlax, basking on a fresh, white pancake made of meringue and taffy. He’s off to the land of clouds—don’t worry, it’s just a short trip. He’ll make sure to take a longer one with Minghao spooned up in his arms.

Ah, Minghao.

The smell of his detergent-laced jackets.
The feel of his bird-like hands and the dip of his spine.
The sight of his closed eyes.
The taste of his mouth.
The sound of his even breath.
All the memories of their impromptu sleepover are making him flushed.
He’s smiling in his sleep, isn’t he.
He can’t wait for all of his senses to be filled with-
*Rrrriiiinng*.

He cracks an eye open. Is Minghao calling?

Wait, that’s not his ringtone. How long was he out for? The clock on the wall says almost an hour and a half. Ugh, sleep inertia—he barely wakes up before the call goes to voicemail.

‘Missed Call (2)’ sits on the screen of Minghao’s cracked phone with an unknown number underneath it. The same number has a few texts that he can read from the queue and, yes, he knows that he shouldn’t be reading Minghao’s texts, but they’re right there and what if it’s an emergency?

They seem harmless enough, ‘Congrats dude, I’m so excited to see you on stage tomorrow!’ ‘The company assignment was totally last minute too.’ ‘Meeting you again, here of all places, after so long, it has to be fate :D’ Aw, cute, Minghao gets to meet a friend or a fan tomorrow. It’ll be cool to meet another person from his past—probably from a chunk of time that Mingyu missed out on. He’ll get to learn more about Minghao! That’s exciting-

*Knock knock*.

Maybe it’s just because he’s out of his element today, but it feels like everything is a little frantic. His thoughts keep getting cut off halfway and he hasn’t been able to complete many of them before being interrupted. Well, he did forget to put the ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign on the door, so he can’t be mad if hotel staff are swinging by as mandated by their managers.

Dragging his tired corpse out of bed and quickly smoothing out the sheets before fixing his hair in the rim-lit mirror above the dresser, he takes slurred steps over to the door and swings it open, not even checking—Minghao!

“You’re here!”

Minghao’s bright laughter fills the doorway like it has for so many nights in the past months, “Yeah, I’m here, Mingyu.” Not to say he doesn’t look good, but his dancer is looking a little worse for wear. Running on little-to-no sleep and dancing to several full sets must be exhausting. “Did I wake you up? Sorry. I should have asked the front desk for another keycard.” He adjusts the brace on his wrist.

“It’s okay, I woke up just before you got here.” His hair is sticking to his forehead in jagged streaks. His lips are dry and there are some leftover scuff marks on his pants from sliding on the floor. There’s just something a little rugged and beautiful about him, soft and hearty about him.

“Can I come in? I wanna shower before dinner.” Right! Dinner! Was he this hungry before his
nap? Probably not.

“How was rehearsal?”

Mingyu steps aside to let the silver-haired man pass and rummage through his luggage for his dressier clothes. He should teach him to roll his shirts so they take up less space and are easier to find, “It was okay. The front of the stage is a little shorter than the area we’ve been using to practice at home, but I think it’ll be fine. Jun and I just have to stop our flips a bit early.” And he’s not sure if it’s just his tired brain or if he’s somehow inhaled a bunch of sleeping gas because while Minghao’s words flow out of his mouth incredibly fast, all of his movements—down to the way he blinks—feel incredibly languid and slow.

He has a feeling that he’ll be chided if he asks for a kiss right now, but even when he’s a little sticky and sweaty, Mingyu doesn’t mind. He wonders if this is how dogs feel when their humans come back from work. If he had a tail, it’d be wagging, “Nervous about the filming tomorrow?”

“Not really.” He shrugs, pulling out his bag of toiletries, “It’s nothing new. Yixing and Jun film us all the time.” It looks like he takes notice of Mingyu’s staring, “If you’ll excuse me, I have a shower to take because I smell like hot garbage.”

“You don’t smell like hot garbage.”

“I smell like hot garbage. Bye.”

Sometimes it doesn’t occur to Mingyu that Minghao might be self-conscious about parts of himself that he doesn’t see or experience. It’s just that Minghao comes off as a person who wholly loves himself and has enough confidence that things like BO or acne can’t deter him, but he’s human after all and he didn’t get a chance to lather up the deodorant before practice. Mingyu would be very hesitant to hug or get any closer if he was in the same position, “Someone called you, by the way.”

“Oh, who?”

“Unknown number. Do you want your phone?”

“Sure.”

Mingyu swings himself back over to the bedside table and picks up the rather fragile phone and raps a knuckle on the door before Minghao opens it a crack. He tries to offer him privacy by looking away. If he’s going to see Minghao in any sort of nudity, it’s going to be in one of two places—the bed or the pool—and it’s going to be because he wants to be seen. Mingyu’s not a peeping tom—which would be a great punchline if this was a few years back and he was with any of his former flings, but this is Minghao and even if he wants to act cheeky and have a little bit of flirtatious fun with him, it’s Minghao. It’s Minghao and there’s something- well, not exactly pious, but chaste and innocent about their current romance. Forget the lap dance, have you ever held hands with this man? It’s like your heart is flying over the moon.

He decides to lounge around after quickly changing his clothes. Mingyu wouldn’t mind if Minghao walked in on him mid-strip—he’s still got a semi-solid build, a significant amount of definition lost thanks to it being cold and Minghao feeding him delicious food—, so he could have taken his time, but the man seems to be enjoying his shower because a lovely melody streams out from under the door. It’s quiet and faint, akin to a lullaby or ballad, and Minghao hums in such a peaceful way that Mingyu worries he’ll fall asleep again if he dares get horizontal.

So, he gets back to his feet and tries to do his hair justice in the sink outside the bathroom.
There’s something so domestic and familiar about hearing someone hum through a wall while doing some menial task—and he says this in the least creepy way possible—, that Minghao’s small gesture is plucking harder at his heartstrings than he could ever imagine.

Combing a piece here, a strand there, and hairspraying the life out of them until he manages something somewhat decent.

He’s fastening his left cufflink when Minghao opens the bathroom door and blindly rams his face into his elbow before spewing a handful of apologies and shaking out his damp hair. He scrunches his nose with his left eye shut, easing out of the pain from the impact a second ago, as he straightens up his collar and starts to button up his shirt over the black tank he already has on underneath. It’s a little clumsy to fumble them with his wrist brace on, so he starts to take it off.

Not caring about his suit-up struggle, Mingyu smirks and claws his fingers into the hem of Minghao’s shirt to turn him around and press a kiss just under his eye, near the side of his nose where he had hurt himself a moment ago. He takes his hand and properly tightens the Velcro of the brace before he takes it off completely, “Let me help you.”

Sure.

He said ‘let me help you’, but if we’re honest, they probably didn’t need ten minutes to button a shirt. Touchy-feely tinglies would be how Mingyu would describe trying to maneuver the godforsaken buttons while Minghao was intent on kissing him harder after each one after drying his hair into a poofy mess. He absolutely dreads being babied when he’s not in the mood, so he’s trying to make this as difficult as possible for the poor PT. When he’s done with the top one, the dancer nips a little sting into his bottom lip and rolls his eyes before double-checking that they’re all matched correctly.

Mingyu loops his tie around his neck as Minghao digs through a bag of accessories to find a minimal and thin metal rod strung on a silver chain. It’s perfectly curved to fit under the collar of his shirt in place of a tie, but he’s—again—having difficulty with the tiny clasp in the back. When Mingyu approaches to help, he turns away with his elbows in the air. Stubborn as usual. He misses the loop of the chain at least twenty times before it drives him crazy and his resolve crumbles, “Could you, um,”

He crosses his arms and leans against the counter, “Could I?”

“Wipe that damn grin off your face, I’ll just get Soon to do it.” He swerves around Mingyu with graceful steps until he stands at the foot of the bed, using the mirror over the dresser to make sure his outfit is alright. The sight of Minghao in black on black on black will likely never grow old. Even the way his slightly oversized shirt settles nicely over his shoulders has a brand of elegance to it that Mingyu can’t place.

When he doesn’t immediately chase after him, the dancer raises an eyebrow and tweaks his lips, looking him up and down once before shaking his head, “What? Do I look funny?”

“You look nice.” He continues to play with his hair, smoothing out the dry locks into something a little more manageable.

“Just ‘nice’?” Mingyu thought long and hard about this maroon top and black tie with silver-threaded diagonal pinstripes. He’d appreciate a little more praise, “Nothing else?”

“I mean, extra nice?” It’s a very well-fitted top if he has to say so.
But by now, he’s taken the hint. He wants to be chased, “Not anything else? Like ‘hot’?”

A chuckle, “Are you asking me to tell you something you already know?”

“Yeah.”

“Then, no.” He takes a seat on the footboard, cocking his head to the side with a snide smile on his mouth and the necklace balled up in his hand. He rests his left leg over his right.

Mingyu looms over him, standing a few inches away from his crossed legs, “Please.”

“Make me.”

At this rate, they’re never going to make it to dinner because Mingyu’s pushed Minghao onto his back and is crawling over him, bracing himself with his arms fully extended. Play-fighting is what you’d call it with kids and puppies, but what do you call it when it’s two adults wearing rose-tinted glasses in a nice hotel room? His nose is filled with the light smell of shampoo. His nose is filled with the smell of cologne. He trails kisses from Minghao’s temple, under his ear, to the corner of his jaw, and to his chin before he nips at the skin over his throat and elicits a yelp.

Minghao covers his mouth with his free hand, stopping him immediately with a laugh, “Okay, you win, you win. You’re hot. Geez.” Like many other things, he doesn’t have to hear them come from his mouth to feel them.

He’d never considered himself a master of half-lidded stares, but because he’s trying his best right now, Minghao’s fingers loosen and he loses the necklace in the sheets, so he can cup Mingyu’s face in his hands and pull him in for a sincere kiss. He drops to an elbow just so they can be that much closer, one hand holding his waist, the other pulling back crisp, grey bangs because they’re tickling his forehead and making him itchy. Minghao tastes like the toothpaste he probably used in the shower, a multitasker if he’s ever heard of one. He feels supple and soft and careful.

“Quit looking at me like that.”

What? Like he’s going to devour you?

Mingyu smiles and gets up, straddling Minghao’s hips—sure to keep most of his weight on his own knees, only sitting on him enough so he can feel that he’s there—and flips up the collar of his black shirt, “Where’s your necklace?”

He didn’t mean to provoke him, but the smaller man has to buck his hips up slightly to reach underneath himself for the metal piece. Without speaking, he hands it over. What happened to having Soonyoung do it?

Looping it behind his neck, Mingyu pulls the clasp of the chain to the front for easy access. He begs any and every god for his clumsy self not to botch this simple task. He focuses on it as hard as secret agents focus on snipping the right wire in old movies. But this bomb doesn’t need to be diffused. It’s still ticking. Because, as he successfully hooks the clasp into place and turns the centerpiece of the necklace to the front, Minghao’s eyes are scanning every square inch of his features and committing them to memory. He wonders how many moments have passed like this—just moments he wasn’t aware that he was being watched or studied—because it’d be nice if they shared them in equal amounts.

Minghao looks like he doesn’t want to move, “Thanks.”

And Mingyu doesn’t really want to go to dinner anymore. The ‘you’re welcome’ is sealed in a
kiss and another kiss, and three, and five, and t-

“Hey! Are you guys ready yet? I’m starving. Let’s go eat.” Vernon’s voice easily breaks through the barrier of their door as he knocks, stopping Minghao’s mouth as it’s pressed to Mingyu’s cheek.

“We’re going to miss the reservation if we don’t get a move on.” Seungkwan’s naturally melodic lilt flows afterwards, slightly softer, slightly quieter, “Wonwoo and Soonyoung are down in the lobby already.”

“We’ll be out in a minute!” Mingyu shouts back at them, unable to move because Minghao’s holding him in place with his arms wrapped around his neck, chest to chest.

A raspberry is blown into his cheek, “Ugh, Mingyu, gross!” Minghao feigns a complaint as he wriggles up from the space between Mingyu’s arms, letting go of his neck and turning over to playfully squirm away.

“That- that wasn’t me!” Fart jokes, Minghao, really? How old are you? “We’ll meet you guys in the lobby.”

He easily catches the dancer and pulls him under him again, crimes like that can’t go unpunished.

“Alright!” They both shout in unison before leaving.

Mingyu gives it at least ten seconds, counting in his head the number of steps the average person takes within that time before he presses his forearm into Minghao’s back, flattening him out and into the plush mattress, “Playing games, are we?”

He’s very aware that this master of martial arts could have him on his back pleading for mercy in five seconds flat, but in this moment, it’s a little fun to feel like he’s even the slightest bit close to overpowering him, “And if I am?” He turns slightly to look at him, popping a section of his spine in the process. Looks like it felt good.

“Don’t we have a dinner to go to?”

“We do.” Mingyu presses his palm to another section of his back, ironing him out again and pushing quickly to crack another section. It’s not the best thing to hear, but he knows it feels great when he moans into the sheets.

Oh, the places his mind is running off to, “Then we better get going.”

“Would,” he latches onto one of the pillows, curling into it before launching the marshmallow into Mingyu’s face, “but you’re sitting on me and after making out for twenty minutes, we don’t look half decent.”

“We look fine.” Mingyu removes himself from the bed, stretching before pulling Minghao along with him to stand and shimmy their clothes into place—re-tucking, re-ironing, and rebuttoning things quickly—before lacing up their shoes and grabbing necessities.

He makes sure to take both of their keycards, handing one to Minghao before stuffing the other into his wallet. The reality of life settles in just as they open the door and drop the ‘do not disturb’ sign on the knob so no one can dig around in their things while they’re out. If you ask Mingyu, they both look nice and yappie—at least he does, Minghao looks like an artist from uptown.
This is a date, a dinner date, the best kind of official date in the textbook of dates and his date is Minghao Xu.
When they reach the lobby, there are only four pairs of polished shoes waiting for them.

Confused, Mingyu looks left and right, but the rest of their party doesn’t seem to be joining. It’s—dare he say, “Couples only?”

Hearing the words mumbled out in such a shy manner, Minghao chuckles and nods, “Yep.” Maybe a part of him finds Mingyu’s less-than-bright antics a little endearing, “I guess it ended up being like this after all. Everyone else is going out with their guests.”

In his typical—and considerably uncreative—black-jacket-white-shirt outfit, Soonyoung throws one arm around Minghao’s shoulder and one arm around Vernon, “Let’s get this over with. This suit is itchy as hell.” He doesn’t know how Wonwoo convinces him to dress up for their dates in the city if going out to a semi-formal dinner already has him this irritated. It’s not like it’s a cheap suit either and whereas bargain collars are normally scratchy, Soonyoung already has the top few buttons of this shirt unbuttoned and loose.

The platinum blond drags his two lackeys out of the lobby and turns towards the sidewalk heading into a busier, livelier area of town. It’s not downtown per say, but there was a small strip of restaurants and cafés coming into view that Mingyu anticipated when they found parking earlier. A practical man like Wonwoo would have the foresight to book something close to their hotel.

However, that very smart friend of theirs doesn’t have the brain to warn them about the trek. If he’d known they’d be walking twenty minutes to their reservation, he would have worn more comfortable shoes. These are arguably his nicest pair of oxfords. They’re also his newest pair of oxfords and it’s clear that he hasn’t broken them in yet, but damn do they make his legs look nice.

They all look spic and span and nice.

He never had the chance to see Vernon and Seungkwan in formal wear—only ever catching them in their work clothes—, so having the dancer strut around in a sharp, navy coat with a pressed, pink button up seems somewhat out of character, especially since there are a number of golden accessories peppering him and embroidered collar clips adorning his neck. There’s no way a simple-minded person like Vernon picks out pretty, shiny things by default. Details like that are left for anal people like him and Minghao.

Sure, it’s not like he’s walking down the street looking like decked out royalty, but in contrast to his date and the rest of them, it really stands out. It could be because Seungkwan is dressed far more cutely. There was once a time that he though the DonutBoo uniform was the cutest professional outfit in existence—with clean sophistication topping the cloyingly sweet outfits of themed cafés in Asia—, but tonight’s outfit suits the baker incredibly well. It’s a different kind of formal wear, Mingyu supposes. His pinstriped, baby-blue button-up is covered by a cream sweater and both of those are sitting cozy under an oversized cardigan. What really sells the outfit is the blue ribbon that sits where his tie should be.

Oof, he’s absolutely the cutest out of the six of them—no doubt there—but the man seems inherently self-conscious about tonight’s outfit choice. As he hastens his pace to remain in stride with him and Wonwoo, he picks and plucks at the slightly fraying bow and tugs his heavy cardigan.
closed several times. Mingyu decides to not address his distracted behavior and, instead, tries to include him in their casual discussion about the city they’re in. There’s nothing worse than being the third wheel in an unsung bromance.

The weather is notably warm compared to the freezing cold nights they’ve been getting back in their town. It’s entirely possible that the bay breeze will cause temperatures to plummet as the night deepens beyond vivid, sapphire skies. Despite being a city with heavy foot traffic, this section of it seems quite quaint with more fairy lights than neon signs. Most of it seems homegrown with the absence of more familiar chain stores and the locals appear happy and friendly.

Offhandedly, Seungkwan mentions that Mingyu looks like he’s struggling to walk and asks if he’d like to rest for a minute even though they’re only a couple blocks from the restaurant. Wonwoo turns to look at him as well, “Wouldn’t want to get a bunion at this age.”

Seungkwan snickers and—even though Mingyu appreciates the vigilance—he’s not about to slow everyone down just because the back of his shoe is cutting into his Achilles tendon and might make it recoil like a Fruit by the Foot, “I’m good.” He continues on, gently pushing the backs of his two counterparts to make them face forward again.

Beauty is pain, beauty is pain, beauty is pain.

But their little commotion poking fun at how Mingyu’s (not exactly) hobbling on his tiptoes is enough for Minghao to stop Soonyoung’s adamant stride and turn them around, “Everything good?”

“Need a piggyback?” the blond offers, reclaiming Minghao under his arm and dragging Vernon at such an angle that he teeters off balance and crashes into his side. He looks like he’s having fun, though. He’s sure if either of the two actually looked unhappy, Wonwoo would intervene.

While he knows Soonyoung would have no trouble carrying him, he won’t be subjecting himself to that much public embarrassment. People walk longer distances in stilettos. He can endure these stiff oxfords for just a bit longer! “Nope. I’m fine.” The blond rolls his eyes and says something about his ‘macho act’ wearing thin and that Minghao wouldn’t care if he admitted to being uncomfortable. Mingyu knows all of that. He knows Minghao wouldn’t care and wouldn’t think any less of him if he asked for a break, if anything he’d probably be glad, but this is a matter of Mingyu’s own pride. He hates slowing people down, he hates holding people back.

The troupe continues on, Minghao sending Soonyoung and Vernon ahead of him as he hangs back slightly to hold Mingyu’s hand—and, no, he didn’t gesture or request for the hand holding—because he knows even the slightest bit of support will take his mind off his aching feet. Of course, his feet are definitely not comfortable, but Minghao proves to be an invaluable distraction from them. The way his hair bounces instep, the way his grip is just firm enough that Mingyu’s brain registers its changes before the ache of his heels, the way the warm lights from shop windows pass over his skin and highlight the bits of jewelry he has on—sometimes it’s still hard to believe that this ethereal being is breathing next to him.

Then again, Minghao trips over some uneven pavement and it’s Mingyu that has to steady him. Right, right, he’s still human and it’s only human to err and be clumsy and have faults. He pulls him closer for just a moment, “Do you need a piggyback?” He jokes, whispering into Minghao’s ear, lips ghosting its curves in their fumble for balance, and earning a shove because his date’s heart is drumming in his chest.

Mingyu whines, the stumbling causing his heels to dig further back into the stiff, processed leather. He catches his arm and hooks his hand into the crook of his elbow- my, how gentlemanly,
Minghao, “We’re almost there, I think. Soonyoung said it’s on 3rd and we’re on 4th right now.” Their party is almost two buildings ahead of them.

“Leave me, Minghao.” It’s a good time for corny theatrics, “Go on, save yourself.”

Minghao just rolls his eyes and tugs him along. Push and pull, push and pull; he knows that he can go just a bit further. If Mingyu was really at his limit, he’s sure Minghao wouldn’t make him move. If he couldn’t carry him, he’d probably get a Lyft to take them back to the hotel.

But, today, Mingyu’s a little sensitive and prickly.

He’ll be glad to get back to the hotel and burn these shoes in a trashcan but going down to the jacuzzi for a few minutes will probably be just as satisfying. Too bad Minghao didn’t bring a swimsuit—it is the beginning of winter after all—otherwise he wouldn’t have minded wading in boiling waters with him.

When they arrive at their restaurant, Oxblood, it’s painfully obvious that Vernon’s overdressed. Wonwoo apologizes for the confusion as they’re seated towards the front of the restaurant, in front of their biggest window. Apparently, he thought the suggested business casual dress code on their website was a bare minimum. As it turns out, the locals seem to have foregone that suggestion. Most of the male diners are in jeans and polos.

Whatever, doesn’t matter. As long as the food is decent and they have a good time, Mingyu could care less about what he wears to the local equivalent of Outback Steakhouse.

The waitress takes their drink orders before giving them a few minutes to look over the menu. It’s to everyone’s surprise that Soonyoung orders a round of champagne for the party to ‘celebrate getting this far’. They all have a good laugh when Seungkwan is the only one carded and another laugh when he gives them shit for it, “At least I still have my youth, what does that say about how old you all look?”

As the Pol Roger Cuvée is poured into their bubbling tulips, the table falls quiet. Everyone watches Soonyoung, at the head of the table, spin the delicate glass between his fingers and meet eyes with each of them, “I’ll save the toast for our victory.” A blanketed sigh of relief, “I’m hungry.”

He sets the glass aside and everyone else follows suit. Seungkwan gives it a sniff or two before putting it behind his plate and resuming the menu. It’s kind of cute to see Vernon bug him every few seconds to ask a question about something or point out an item and it’s nice to see that Seungkwan’s patience with him is long-burning. They probably don’t get out very much considering the nature of their careers, it’s probably why they’re dressed this way.

It’ll take Mingyu another half hour of idle chitchat to understand that the reason they look kind of awkward tonight is because Vernon and Seungkwan made a deal to pick out the other’s outfit and that their shenanigans had backfired. Still, even though the baker has complained at least five times about feeling silly with a ribbon around his neck tied in a floppy bow, “People are staring. I look ridiculous.” Vernon says he can’t take it off.

“You look fine. We said we would try something new and we did!” The two are facing each other, sitting in the seats closest to the window. Indeed, several people have passed a glance into the eatery, but Mingyu thinks it’s just because they look a little too nice, “Don’t quit on me now.”

“If you let me take the bow off, you can take the rings off.”
Ooh, a wager. Vernon does look like he’s a couple rings short of being a pimp, “No way.” He bends to the side to let their server put a plate of food down in front of him, “It’s just for, like,” he checks the time on his phone, “one more hour. You can take it off when we go to the airport.”

“Shake on it.”

“Fine.”

More so than the cute, budding, flourishing couple next to him, Mingyu’s watching Minghao who is also watching Vernon and Seungkwan’s little spat with a fond smile. His food has arrived, but he’s not eating just yet. Mingyu has a feeling they’re waiting for Soonyoung to say something even though he said he’d save the toast until tomorrow. Feeling a little better about the shoe situation, he leans back in his seat and reaches a leg further under the table to tap at Minghao’s shin.

The latter peers up at him with friendly, wide eyes and a sort of pout or smile, it’s a little hard to tell. He’s waiting for him to speak—why else would he call his attention—, but Mingyu just gives him a toothy smile. Slightly confused—but not against the gesture—the dancer tilts his head to the side and gives him an equally sweet smile. He feels a tap against his heel. Oh, is he asking if his feet are okay? Maybe he’s asking why he kicked him. Maybe it was an accident. Nonverbal communication with Minghao has a learning curve because sometimes he wants to flirt and sometimes he’s serious and sometimes he flirts seriously; he’s barely gotten any footing in terms of understanding him in this sense.

Regardless, Mingyu nods. His feet feel better so long as he doesn’t kick his heels back or rub against the rim of his shoe, there’s no harm done.

“Are you two just going to stare at each other all dinner?” Soonyoung already has a fork into his steak and he’s pointing at them with his knife, “Either eat face or eat food, you can’t do both.”

“So, no toast?” Minghao turns his attention towards the senior instructor.

“Nope.”

“Then, I’ll make one.” Scooting his chair out, Minghao stands and raises his glass. It all happens a bit hurriedly and it’s apparent that everyone at the table is caught off guard, “And I’ll make it quick.” He grinds his lips together, grasping for words and piecing together sentences. Mingyu can see the bit of panic and regret behind his quivering eyes, “A toast,” And while he expected a long-winded speech, he certainly didn’t expect for Minghao to end it here, “to good health and happiness.”

It’s a simple and general toast—nothing Mingyu hasn’t heard at a family function—but the sentiment behind it makes it feel heavy in his heart.

To good health.

And, regardless of tomorrow’s result, to happiness.

The clink of all six glasses clashing in the center of the table makes a beautiful noise and everyone drinks to the humble toast. They finish their glasses with another round of cheers and dig into their food.

In Mingyu’s opinion, it’s nothing special. It’s not bad by any means. It’s good food, but it stops there. There’s something unsurprising and unimpressive about it—much like some people are generically good looking, but don’t look unique—he would call it an ‘average good’. What makes this dinner nice is the good people he’s in the company of. Soonyoung and Seungkwan keep things
lively and Wonwoo has more than enough to discuss regarding the choice of alcohol for the night.

Champagne isn’t his jam and he makes that obvious.

He says that they should have ordered rosé if they wanted something sweet. Mingyu thinks they should have just ordered sparkling water if they wanted the taste of disappointment in their mouths. The occasional glass of wine isn’t something he’d turn his nose up to, but champagne reminds him too much of beer and bad choices.

The chatter of their party of six is a low rumble, nothing louder than the buzz of the restaurant surrounding them. The only person that is getting a little loud is Seungkwan who starts speaking at a slightly higher volume after his second glass; Vernon had handed his over after a sip or two since he was going to be the one driving to the airport. They all know that one flute of champagne isn’t going to get anyone drunk enough to be impaired, but no one forces the alcohol on him and that’s something Mingyu can appreciate.

When Vernon stands after finishing his meal to excuse them, there’s a little protest.

The night had been going so well! Everyone has a warm, toasty feeling in their tight chests. Your guest can get an Uber or a taxi or a Lyft or whatever. Don’t go. This is friendship bonding time, Vernon!

“Hyunggu’s flying in from Vancouver, I don’t want him to get lost.” The brunet pushes his chair in and signals Seungkwan to follow. The fluffy, soft baker sticks himself to Vernon’s side, holding his arm just because he wants to cozy up.

“They speak English in Vancouver. He’ll be fine.” Soonyoung grabs the navy coat that’s hanging over Vernon’s free arm, “Sit, sit, let’s go get ice cream. You like ice cream.”

He’s not sure what’s funnier: the fact that Vernon seriously considers ice cream as a good bribe against picking up a friend from the airport or that Seungkwan in his slightly buzzed state has to be the voice of reason, “Ice cream will not deter him.”

Vernon turns to his date, “But that one Honey shop looked really good.”

“We can get ice cream after we get Hyunggu. It’s only a thirty minute drive. It’ll be fine. Ice cream can wait.” He tries to push him towards the door so they can pay their tab, but Vernon just wraps an arm around his waist and stops him, hefting him to the side with a huff.

His attention focuses back on Soonyoung and Minghao as he leans forward on the blond’s seat, “Hey, so, if it’s really good, could you guys send me a picture of their menu and, like, tell me what the best one is?”

“Sure.”

“No.” Seungkwan cuts them off, jutting a finger into Soonyoung’s face, “We’ll go exploring later and we’ll ask our guest where he wants to go.” He pushes Vernon again, “Now, go, I wanna take off this bow.”

“But you’re so cute with the bow.” Vernon whines as his loafers slide across the wooden floor.

“I don’t care if I’m cute with the bow. Hyunggu’s not seeing me with the bow.”

The bickering continues as they patter to the register and make their way out the door. As they
pass the open window and Minghao waves goodbye, Vernon seems a little giddy and links their fingers together. Begrudgingly, Seungkwan indulges in the enthusiastic arm swinging even though it looks more like he wants to go back to the hotel and sleep. It must be getting late for someone who wakes up at 4am regularly.

“So, ice cream?” Soonyoung calls their attention back from the couple outside.

“It’s kind of cold outside.” Minghao gestures towards the people passing by with scarves up to their noses and jackets wrapped tightly around them. It’s always windy near the coast and the ocean breeze is making the night’s air chilled.

But because Wonwoo picks up the tab for the four of them—with an uproar of protest from Mingyu and Minghao—he guilt-trips them into going out for ice cream if only to settle the score. They didn’t want to make a scene. Nothing like a bunch of Asians fighting over the bill caddy to propagate a stereotype— but, seriously, it looked like Minghao was ready to throw hands. Soonyoung slaps down a tip before the two of them can even reach for their wallets. This was clearly an orchestrated plan from the start.

He passes Minghao a look and his date meets his eyes.

They can just feel that something is up, that a plan has been set in motion since the two younger men left.

Still, with suspicions high, they depart for ice cream—Minghao with his credit card already in his hand, ready to slap down onto the marble countertop of the creamery as they enter. Honey Bear Parlour has a clean finish and bright feel to it. The room is entirely white aside from the pops of color. Neon rims and gummy bear lights are sprinkled around the place with silvery metal accents lining the walls. It is, indeed, icy cold in here and not much better than the temperature outside.

The first thing Soonyoung does when he enters is collapse into a hug with the massive, rainbow teddy bear sitting on a chair near the entrance. Mingyu’s sure he hears Minghao and Wonwoo both mutter something about germs and tell him to think about how many people have touched that thing—a ‘bacterial sponge in the guise of a children’s toy’ is what he remembers the senior PT saying—and he couldn’t agree more. He would have hugged it if he didn’t take biology. Germs are a magical thing.

They let a few guests order before them, scanning the menu for specialties and peeking into the cups of tourists to see what they got as a point of reference. In the end—and much like the botched trip to Penguin Shop—, they decide they’ll each get something different and share it.

Worried about his intestinal health after a rather heavy dinner, Minghao gets a coconut sorbet with freeze-dried kiwi and raspberry chunks. It’s not too sweet and it’s super refreshing, but it seems like his appetite has diminished since it’s so cold. The only seating in this place is outside where the wind is whipping up closed sun umbrellas. Mingyu rubs his forearms, pulling him into a tight hug in an attempt to keep him warm until the door swings shut after another customer enters.

Wonwoo, a man of debatably vanilla taste, gets something akin to matcha froyo. No toppings, just a single scoop in a cup with nothing notable about it except that he uses a (baby) sample spoon to eat it instead of the standard plastic spoons that come with every order. They even have color changing ones. How could he pass that up?

Mingyu was thinking about trying the lemon meringue flavor. It’s pretty and there are bits of
compote whipped into it. He would get it on top of a strawberry and lime sorbet, but after seeing that
the likelihood of Minghao finishing his dessert is diminishing with every gust of wind that blows by,
he gets a kids’ scoop of the lemon meringue and says he’ll help Minghao with his, “I’ll make you eat
those words.”

“That’s-” a spoon of creamy coconut is shoved into his mouth, so he has to garble the rest,
“that’s the plan.”

He doesn’t know why but having Minghao thumb the dribble of ice cream off the corner of his
mouth and suck it off his own finger does something to his head. They’ve swapped spit a handful of
times already, so it’s a little silly to get flustered over such a gesture, but when it comes to him,
sometimes simply looking a little too long makes his chest churn, “What, do I have something on my
face?”

“Yeah.” Now that they’re outside with two short-stacks of napkins to shove into the back of
his demon shoes, all Mingyu wants to do is bundle Minghao up and snuggle him until they’re both
asty. Unfortunately, he also lacked the foresight to bring a jacket on this outing, so they’re both
freezing—again, another good reason they should go to the jacuzzi when they get back to the hotel
—and it’d be nice if Soonyoung and Wonwoo could hurry up and get their orders to begin the
arduous trek back.

But, for now, he’s preoccupied with Minghao trying to wipe nothing off his face, “Did I get
it?”

“Nope, still there.” He paws at his face again, to no avail because there’s nothing on
Minghao’s face, “Almost.” Maybe it’s a good thing that it’s cold or else his ice cream would melt,
“Almost.” He’s trying to block as much wind as possible. It’s not that he’s warm by any means, but
his body temperature tends to run a little hotter. Mingyu’s not feeling as cold. He doesn’t mind being
a shield for a little bit, “Almost, it’s on your lips now.”

“What the fuck, it moves?” Minghao’s trying to wipe it off with his napkin, slightly frantic
because having something crawl over your face when you’re not able to feel it might be a little
terrifying.

“Here,” he grabs his wrist to stop him, “let me get it for you.”

He can tell that confusion crosses Minghao’s face for a moment because how is he supposed
to get it if one hand is holding his ice cream and the other is holding his arm? But Mingyu answers
his curiosities by locking their lips together. He kisses him once and twice and stops, pulling himself
away from Mingyu with a firm shove, “You’re so damn cheesy. You’re lucky I didn’t gag into that.”

Mingyu licks a chuck out of his ice cream cone, “Did I taste sweet?” Minghao shakes his head
and wags a finger in his face, warning him to stop, “Do you want a taste?”

“Ohmygod, we’re in public. Do you have to?” Yes, he absolutely has to with how red
Minghao is getting. It’s always the smallest, corniest things that get him to blush.

“Hey, Minghao.”

“Please, no-”

“If you were a booger-”

“Oh, dear god, I’m not hearing this right now-”
“I’d pick you.” And he presses a sticky kiss into his hair as he lets out a prolonged whine. He sounds like a squeaky balloon, a little mousey, a little jumpy, and absolutely adorable.

“Your pickup lines are atrocious. Please keep them five miles away from me.” Minghao pushes him away again, using his ice cream cup to block any more kisses and sidestepping prying touches.

Lucky for Minghao, Soonyoung finally gets his dessert and is entirely too proud of it. He almost has a right to because whatever a ‘deep fried rum boat’ is smells like caramelized heaven. Upon closer inspection, it seems to be a handful of fried banana nuggets on top of rum-infused vanilla ice cream. However, when Soonyoung offers him a bite, Mingyu quickly discovers that these banana bites are injected with straight up rum jelly; just rum and gelatin. Discretely, he spits it into a napkin and tosses it. It’s almost gross because it’s so sweet, but the flavor of the rum goes well with the bitter, burnt caramel undertones. It’s really just the unappetizing burn that sours his palate.

Minghao turns down a bite after hearing about the rum and it almost looks like Wonwoo wants to stop Soonyoung from downing the entire cup by himself. That’s quite a bit of alcohol for a guy his size. He doubts, however, that these little banana things have much rum in them at all. Rum is alcohol and alcohol is money and businesses try to make a profit. It’s probably fine to let him have it.

“Are you nervous or something?” Wonwoo loops his arm over Soonyoung’s shoulder and pinches his cheek as they head back towards the hotel. His voice is light and airy, asking for a bite.

“Nah,” he gives Wonwoo a large, collective bite before scooping another two spoons into his mouth, “just trying to get warm.”

Mingyu takes the last bite of his ice cream before tossing the remaining cone and wrapper into a nearby garbage can. He was right, the colder it gets, the less and less Minghao is willing to finish his. Every few steps, he’ll offer Mingyu a bite and as they progress closer to the hotel, the bites get bigger. Four blocks before they get back to the main entrance, the ice cream is finished and discarded and because he’s still cold, Minghao lifts up Mingyu’s arm and loops it over his head and pulls himself closer. They let Soonyoung and Wonwoo lead the way so they can pay attention to the sights surrounding them.

Shops are already gearing up for Christmas, some of them even have ornaments and lights up, others are still celebrating the fall harvest and Thanksgiving. They’re entering the magical part of the year; full of whimsy and wonder. It’s a part of the year that he gravely wishes to spend with Minghao but almost knows that he can’t.

“Do you think they got the cakes?” Soonyoung walks backwards, incredibly coordinated for someone who might be a little buzzed. Also, cake? What cake? Why wasn’t Mingyu informed about cake? He’s really good at making cakes, he could have helped.

“Probably?” Minghao answers, rubbing his cheek into Mingyu’s shoulder, seeking warmth and shelter from the abrasive chill. He’s likely still tired and on a full stomach, nothing sounds better than sleep.

“Cool.” He checks his phone intermittently as they round a corner, “Chan says they sent us a package, too.”

Chapter End Notes
you have voted to drink. the champagne was nice and light, but you've had better. 13% ABV.
you have voted to drink. the rum burns in your stomach, but the ice cream makes it good. 45% ABV.
♡
“What’s with the cakes?” he cards a few fingers through Minghao’s crispy hair, trying to comb down the flyaways the wind kicked up.

Soonyoung turns around to walk backwards, speaking more with his hands and arms than he is his mouth, “Pregame gifts, y’know.” Wonwoo grabs his sleeve and pulls him to the side so he doesn’t crash into a bike rack. Instead, he stumbles over the uneven sidewalk and flounders for his boyfriend’s hands to steady him, “It’s like telling them to break a leg.”

“Jinxing the competition.” Wonwoo clarifies, twirling the blond around once before forcing him to walk forward again, “It’s a little, passive-aggressive tradition they have.”

“Does,” knowing these men, he expects nothing less mischievous, “does the cake have laxatives or something?” He wouldn’t put it past sneaky Soonyoung to dupe their rivals like that. The guy seems like the type to bring a gun to a knife fight.

Minghao chuckles, shoulder rubbing into his side. The weight of the hand on his waist pulls them even closer, “No.” His eyes only curve slightly when he smiles and it’s unfair that even those soft and minute details are charming, “We ordered them from a local bakery, so if they get the runs tomorrow, it’s not our fault.”

“Sure-”

“Hey, I’m all about fair competition, Gyu.” Soonyoung puts his hands up in defense, showing he means no harm and cutting him off before he can draw any conclusions. He backtracks to them with a few lazy steps, “If they get sick, we’re not going to compete. Easy.” He throws his arm over Minghao’s shoulder again, brushing fingers into the hair near his nape and pulling him away from Mingyu slightly, “Assuming no one is sick tomorrow, we’re going to give it our all. Right, Hao?”

Something about him is a little off. Maybe it’s the pre-performance nerves wracking his brain with stress, but he sounds uncharacteristically calm about the situation. It’s not even that he sounds extremely mature but it’s somewhat of a caricature of maturity, “Hao.”

Cued for a response, Minghao nods with a tight smile, “Right.”

The warmth at his side detaches when Soonyoung finally drags him away so they can walk and talk. It’s probably about the competition tomorrow, about what to expect from the opposing team. Stuff that he can’t offer any help with, so he doesn’t mind letting go. Maybe learning more about the situation will put them both at ease, kind of like studying for a test.

Suddenly, Mingyu feels something.

Come back.

Was it not just a few days ago that Vernon was in the hospital?

Was it not just a few weeks ago that Minghao hobbled into the clinic barely able to walk?

It might be a vice of the competitive members, but as someone looking in from the outside, he simply can’t stand the tunnel vision. You can’t just forget things like that because of one competition—they even said this wasn’t a huge deal if they didn’t win—there will be others in the future. It’s not worth furthering this people-pleaser’s injuries; Minghao should have stopped weeks ago, months ago. Minghao should have stopped. Mingyu should have put his foot down.
He feels something.

It compels him even though he’s not really sure what it is, “With caution, right? Give it your all but within reason, right?”

Sensing the concern in his voice, “Of course.” Minghao whips around before his senior can drag him further away, “We’ll be careful.” No, he knows that’s what Mingyu wants to hear. He knows that’s what Mingyu wants to hear. If Soonyoung- If Soonyoung- if the studio asks more of him, he’ll deliver like he always does. They’re the same in that aspect—hating to let others down, hating to disappoint— and he ought to understand that by now, but Mingyu can’t compute. His head won’t let him.

His heart won’t let him.

Minghao, it’s chilly out tonight. Aren’t you cold?

He’s pulled away to be shown a video. By the sound of it, Mingyu can deduce that it’s a performance of some sort with grand applause and cheers in the background. It doesn’t take a genius to put one and one together and if the only dimension to Minghao was that he was a dancer, he wouldn’t mind him giving the competition 110%. He’d advise against hurting himself more, but— because dance would be all Minghao is—he wouldn’t speak against his livelihood or existence. He wouldn’t have the right to and- and he knows that he still doesn’t have the right to.

But Minghao is so much more than dance.

He’s a wholesome person with a heart at least twice the size of his intricate and amazing brain. He knows a little about everything and he has so many random skills stored in his back pocket. He can do so many things. He can persevere through anything. He has such a subtle and kind way of empathizing with living things, it’s almost profound.

It’s not a shame that he’s spent all his efforts on dance—it’s something he loves and enjoys and resonates so perfectly with—but it is a shame that he’s willing to put everything on the line for it.

Okay, that’s an exaggeration.

There are plenty of other things that Minghao is capable of that don’t involve him flipping and flopping around or pulling tricks out of thin air and defying time and gravity. Ending his dancing career in the future will not be the end of him as a person, but it might be the end of his livelihood-

Minghao’s amusement carries over to him through the wind as he huddles closer to Soonyoung. He pats his friend on the back as he sways away for a second, anguishing over something in an exaggerated and comedic manner. He exclaims loudly, something about the competitors and about their luck and about feeling too worked up to wear starched clothes, but Mingyu isn’t really listening.

Rejoice all you want now, hope that you can celebrate tomorrow.

Mingyu’s grasping at straws but, goddamnit, he’s feeling protective tonight even if he must protect Minghao from himself, “If you keep scowling like that, your eyebrows will get stuck.”

“You and I both know that’s not a thing.”

Soonyoung strips off his jacket after proclaiming that it is entirely too warm—and with how much he’s jumping around and emoting, no one is surprised—, but when he throws it over
Minghao’s shoulders, it’s a move Mingyu doesn’t appreciate. He’s not jealous of Soonyoung, no, of course not. His boyfriend is slowing his pace to walk next to him. They’re just friends, best friends with years packed full of memories and Minghao is freezing, he needs the warmth. He’s not jealous of Soonyoung.

But he should have worn his coat out tonight.

“Muscle spasticity is absolutely a thing.” Wonwoo’s lyrical and hearty voice pulls him from his thoughts and brings him back to reality. He unfurls the fist that he’d unknowingly balled in his pocket, knuckles already stiff from the cold, “It’s in our repertoire, isn’t it? We give patients advice, but it’s up to them to make their own decisions in the end.” He feels an elbow weigh down on his shoulder as the hotel comes into view. Wonwoo pushes his glasses up and scrunches his nose, sniffing back some sinus fluid.

“I-” he sighs, “You’re right.”

But something itches.

He knows it feels like he’s beating a dead horse and he’s sure that Minghao will get annoyed with him if he keeps bringing it up—hell, they’ve been talking about it since day one—, but at this point in their relationship, doesn’t he have a right to fret?

This is someone he wants to spend the foreseeable future with and he wants to see him happy and pain-free, but at this open-ended point in their relationship, Minghao can easily get tired of his nagging and call it all off. He won’t. Mingyu knows he won’t and that it’s probably the sleep deprivation coupled with the stress of the grand finale that’s making him see through these mother-hen glasses, but that’s his— that’s his— that’s his person that is going to destroy his body for a single trophy. That’s Minghao Xu and his stupid, boyish pride that’s—

Wonwoo roughly grabs his arm, stopping them immediately under the overhang.

The two dancers have already entered the building, enjoying the toasty air inside. Minghao rubs Soonyoung’s jacket into his face with a shove, clearly trying to cheer him up. The latter reciprocates by putting him in a headlock.

“You’re not just his doctor anymore, Mingyu.” No shit, “You have a power over each other now,” his eyes bore into his face. He absolutely dreads and craves the moments where Wonwoo is serious with him. He looks to him for guidance despite all his past grievances with the dance crew because Wonwoo knows. Wonwoo’s been through it already. Their professions and upbringings line up so well, “and if you earnestly told Minghao not to dance tomorrow—”

But there are just some things that Wonwoo doesn’t nail, “He’d still go.” He doesn’t mean to, but he shakes off his hand with the slightest movement. Regrettably, he misses the reassuring, fatherly touch, “Besides, I wouldn’t tell him not to. He loves this stuff. He worked hard for this. I’m just telling him to take it easy. He knows his limits.”

Even though he ought to be slightly peeved that Mingyu would brush off his words so easily and disregard them without a second thought, Wonwoo smiles a wise and humble smile, “You know him better than I do.” He singsongs into the air as he continues walking, “But how well do you know yourself?” Mingyu catches up. He wants to hear the end of this, “You know what Minghao will do, so why bother worrying and stressing over this unchangeable course? Is it because you’d rather see a different outcome? Is it because you’re still trying to receive a more direct answer?”

“What’s that mean?” It’s official. He’s not just dating a cryptid, he’s friends with one too, “In
simple, Layman’s terms, please.’

“This situation’s rather black and white. Win or lose, there’s no middle ground.” The lobby is filled with a quiet hum. The sound of the heaters moving air above them and the rhythmic dripping of the fountain, the rustle of papers at the front desk and the sloshing of the custodian’s mop over in the corner, it all adds to the vacancy in Mingyu’s head. He’s guilty of tunnel vision as well. All he sees is the man standing by the elevator with a hand on his hip and his eyes pinned on the screen in Soonyoung’s hand. He’s still pressing the black jacket to his chest because the blond refuses to take it back, “You know and understand both outcomes, so why are you so worked up over what you can’t change? Is your concern just a formality?” Wonwoo continues on his way, over to the two, “Don’t get me wrong, perhaps I should better word it; are you just pushing your concerns because you feel like it’s something demanded of you through the nature of our profession? Maybe because you were raised to be a caring and doting person? Or is there another reason altogether that you’re trying to hold Minghao back from this theoretical end?”

“Remember when I said ‘simple, Layman’s terms’? You completely missed that.”

“Sorry-”

“I just worry because my gut says to, that’s all. It’s just my nature. If it was Soon, I’m sure you’d worry as well.” Wonwoo nods, “As much reasoning as I want to put into it, I can’t help myself.” Mingyu shakes his head, “When it comes to him, self-control is something I really have to fight for.”

“I know the feeling.” He lunges forward to press a kiss to Soonyoung’s cheek and pull him into his grasp, earning a short whine. He wants to continue watching videos and reluctantly takes his jacket and his phone from Minghao, “Let’s go check in on everyone else. Jun says they’re all upstairs.”

Minghao quickly agrees. He can probably feel the storm brewing or maybe Mingyu’s gaze has made it obvious that he wants them both in bed as soon as possible. Exchanging a look with Soonyoung, he yields the first elevator that comes down, “You two go first. We’ll catch the next one.”

But there’s a ding, the second elevator also descends and opens its doors. So much for giving the two a minute alone, “Race you.”

Despite knowing that all elevators travel at the same speed, they shuffle into the second one as Soonyoung quickly waves them off—like a cue to start—and slams his fingers repeatedly against the ‘close doors’ button. Minghao takes his time, not even pressing the button for the third floor after the doors shut, “We’re going to lose the race.”

“I know.” Well, it’s not like they were going to win anyway. With a two-second head start, Soonyoung and Wonwoo would have won regardless, but it’s still fun to try. However, Minghao’s not in the slightest rush, fixing his hair in the mirrored walls of the elevator, “Let Soon have this. He needs the morale boost.”

“Won’t it be suspicious if we’re behind them by, like, a minute.” Mingyu rubs a thumb into his bracelet, adjusting it so the clasp sits perfectly in the center of his wrist. He polishes the topaz with his fingers. He doesn’t mind being trapped in an elevator with his favorite person, but shower and bed also sound quite nice—mmm, jacuzzi sounds nice, too. And do you know what sounds better than all those things? Taking off these godforsaken shoes and burning them.

Minghao ducks under his hands and comes up in the loop created by his arms. He puts a hand
at either side of Mingyu’s waist, trapping him against the handrailing, “So?” With their chests pressed this tightly together, he wonders if his heartbeat can be felt through their clothes, “What’s there to be suspicious about?” Minghao’s wide, doe eyes glean every inch of his face for just a moment before landing on his lips and snapping up to meet his gaze.

Sometimes, Minghao makes him feel small.

And he knows what you’re thinking. Big boy Mingyu feeling small? What a joke. But sometimes the dancer’s presence swells until it can no longer be contained in his slender form. It can no longer be jailed by spindly bones and imperfect skin. It’s a switch, like a lever has been pulled and the floodgates are opened, washing away every thought in Mingyu’s mind because witnessing Minghao like this is a little intimidating.

Their reflection in the mirror of the opposing wall is barely a distraction, but it’s interesting to have a 360 view of every movement they make.

He feels hands crawl over his hips and fingers loop around his belt and jerk him forward as Minghao leans into him, craning his neck as if he’s begging for the smallest kiss. Begging. Hm. That’s a thought that hadn’t crossed his mind, but the scene unfolding before him is doing a doozy. It should be illegal to be this attractive at the most inconvenient time. Despite the anxiety of having strangers walk in on them and the slight embarrassment that would follow being caught breaking his composure, he wants to please his needy partner. The moment Mingyu reciprocates—lips at the ready—, the corner of Minghao’s mouth tweaks upwards in a smirk right before he backs up and slaps a hand on the number three, “Just two bros in an elevator, nothing suspicious about that.”

Oh.

You sly fox.

That was a punishment, wasn’t it, a little slap on the wrist for the ‘suspicous’ comment. He supposes that Minghao’s also tired of Soonyoung piledriving their relationship into his head. He doesn’t want them to do the steering. He doesn’t want them to call the shots on what he and Mingyu do. How exciting. At the same time—as much fun as being teased can be—, he’d appreciate if Minghao would just sit pretty for a moment and let himself be showered with affection.

Buttons have been pushed, not just the ones inside the elevator.

Hell, he has half a mind to hit the emergency stop so he can cozy him up to the opposing wall and give him a taste of his own medicine, but he has a feeling that hotel staff won’t be very happy to respond to that.

“Sure,” he grabs Minghao’s belt from behind as the elevator kicks into operation and starts ascending. One firm tug makes him stumble backwards into Mingyu’s body, back meeting chest. He slides one hand over his stomach, holding him in place with an arm around his waist, while the other hand spreads to cup his chin and squish his cheeks, making his lips pucker like a fish, “just two friends being bros.” A chuckle slips out because Minghao looks ridiculous in the reflection; his face is slightly contorted and his annoyance is clear as day.

“Warning shots, huh?” is what he thinks Minghao says before he lets those supple cheeks go and adds this arm to his other, hugging him against his front by the waist, “Two can play at that ga-”

A single, hot puff of air into his ear is enough to stop his sentence because his shoulders scrunch up in a tickled reflex. He attempts to turn around to get a better vantage point for a retaliating attack, but Mingyu holds him in place. No escape in sight, Minghao, you better raise your white flag
and quit while you’re ahead, “What was that?”

“Unfair.”

“All’s fair in love and war.” Minghao smells nice and sweet, the scent from his shower preserved by the chilly night and fresh clothes. It’s probably his imagination. He mumbles into his shoulder, moving his lips against the fine fabric, barely reliving their walk in the park. “Too bad I don’t have you a puddle to throw you in.”

“Well, there is a pool.” He gives up his light struggle. Does he want to be thrown in the pool? The idea of having a dress shirt slicked to your body with chlorinated water sounds incredibly uncomfortable but the image of Minghao dripping wet with his button up clinging to his skin is rather enticing. He leans his weight back against Mingyu, letting him embrace all his mass and warmth.

“Let’s get you wet, then.”

What starts as a scoff evolves into a laugh that’s cut off by a sharp inhale of air when Mingyu ghosts his lips along the side of his throat. He’s going to kiss him there by the end of the night, a million times over if he’s allowed, but it seems unlikely because Minghao’s a giggly mess and starts squirming just as the doors open; legs kicking up lightly, hands clapped over his forearms and trying to pry himself free.

They didn’t hear the ding over all the bubbly commotion.

Facing them is a very unimpressed Chan, dressed down in sweatpants and a baggy t-shirt. He’s tapping his feet impatiently and spinning his phone in his hand.

It’s only 8:30-something.

Well, kids have to turn in early, right?

Right. It’s also best not to be improper in front of children. So, Mingyu lets go of Minghao. He’ll probably get slapped on the wrist again, but he’d be lying if he said he didn’t enjoy it, “Can you please go and stop Soon and Jun from destroying the hotel room?”
Chapter 132

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Minghao doesn’t even question the lack of urgency in his voice because he rolls his eyes and saunters along like he’s done this a hundred times.

Chan leads them down the hall with quick strides before crossing his arms in front of 222, gesturing to the commotion with a pointed hand. It seems like this little cluster of rooms will belong to them for the night as their room is a couple doors down. They can already hear the music from a few doors away. The likelihood of hearing it inside a closed-off room is slim, but with their door wide open, the beat travels. Wonwoo’s leaning in the doorframe, shaking his head with mock disapproval, but Mingyu knows he loves seeing Soonyoung bounce up and down on an overturned mattress and leap onto a hill made of pillows and an upturned office chair.

Clearly, someone asked room service to bring some extras. The idea of building a fort in a hotel room was always a teenage fantasy of his but he never had the opportunity or gut to. The repercussions of getting in trouble as a child was ingrained in his soul. He couldn’t break the rules so easily. Causing a ruckus after the sun went down was to be punished, so seeing Jun, Soonyoung, Jooheon and three other guests jump around like a bunch of sugar-high adolescents at Chuck E. Cheese a day into summer break gives Mingyu the subtle feeling of culture shock. It’s not like they’re breaking rules—and he’s sure that his friends won’t leave the room in such a sty for the hotel staff to clean up—, but there’s something about performing such an act that feels inherently wrong.

That’s Mingyu’s problem, not his friends.

Minghao sighs, “Guys.”

And goes unheard because one of the three people Mingyu doesn’t recognize is picking up Jun and swinging him around, squeezing out a high-pitched yelp before Soonyoung and a Jooheon join the dog pile on the floor. They tumble over each other without a care in the world like a bucket full of puppies.

He clears his throat and tries again, “Guys.”

“I’ve tried.” They didn’t see him earlier, but Jihoon is leaning against the wall on the inside of the room, surprisingly bemused by their antics. Mingyu can only guess that everyone already knows each other, “Just let them be.” He will give himself kudos for recognizing him by his voice alone, however.

Chan leans an elbow on Minghao’s shoulder, open and ready to negotiate, “We should be resting.”

But the taller man just shrugs, “I know.” And cocks his head in defeat. There’s no stopping adults that want to have fun, besides, whatever nerves Soonyoung had wound up earlier seem to be relaxing slightly, “But it’s probably best to have a little fun before a competition.”

“That’s rich coming from you.” The youngest chews on the knuckle of his pointer finger, watching Soonyoung do a hands-free front-flip off the bed and onto the collapsed fort. There’s risk. Is that what he’s worried about? There’s the risk of injury and not performing well. There’s the risk
of partying too hard and waking up exhausted. There’s the risk of getting kicked out of the hotel because of the ruckus they’re causing even though it’s only half past 8 and—by the looks of it—this is a party town of night owls.

Sometimes it’s okay to take a little risk.

If it means that everyone’s high stress levels get lowered a few notches, it’s worth it. If it means that they’re bonding and will be a stronger team tomorrow, it’s worth it. If it means that they’re making memories worth holding on to for decades to come, it’s worth it. There’s no need to be so uptight about something so casual. Chill, Chan. It’s the weekend and they’re in a nice hotel with endless amenities. Enjoy it, even if it’s just a bit.

However, Mingyu doesn’t account for Minghao pushing him to join the fray.

He ushers him into the room with soft, gentle nudges and before Mingyu knows it, his shoes are off (bless) and he’s finding his footing on a pillowy mattress. Jun takes his hand and coaxes him into a tempo-driven jump. The dent of his weight in the mattress bends his feet and relieves some of the strain that was on them from curling into those demon shoes. That was probably Minghao’s intent, but Jun’s idea of a good time is giving Mingyu a hard shove into a face full of pillows.

For a moment, he can’t breathe—mouth and nose snuffed by the silky clouds.

In the next moment, he has his fist in a pillow and he’s wildly swinging it at Jun, tossing it at the last second to pelt him in the head and send him crashing into the mattress. Mingyu thinks he hears someone speak in a tongue he doesn’t understand before Jun yells, “Attack!” and he’s buried under a barrage of down blankets and clobbered with fluff. The room is loud—music flowing from the window to the door—but not loud enough to shake walls. Probably. “You think you can best me, silly Mingyu? Think again!” Jun swings a thin body pillow around like a sword, trying to slash at him, speaking in his best pirate accent.

Okay, so, getting into a pillow fight with a bunch of athletic adults is probably not a good idea because every hit sends him back to flag football scrimmages in the summer.

But partying so hard they get Chan and Jihoon to leave their stoney facades at the door and join in is something. It makes blowing up a feathery bomb worth it. Mingyu thinks this is the first time he hears Jihoon laugh, enunciated and light. They come in little bursts as if they had to be physically beaten out of him—which Jun is doing with his squishy sword—and he gives up after he’s out of air. Rolling him off the mattress with his shoulder, the tallest on the team playfully smothers the shortest with the weapon, laughing into the attack.

Chan’s not laughing, but he is smiling—smiling bigger than he’s ever seen him smile! Mingyu will count that as a sort of victory. He’s hitting Jun’s friends rather hard with his double-fisted pillows and shouting hearty roars every time he lunges at one of them. Taking the top of the pillow fort as a vantage point, Chan is snapping at people with an unused bathroom towel. Soonyoung is the one to knock him off his claim, using all his might to throw Jun’s long pillow like a javelin.

Even though Minghao’s on standby with Wonwoo—and who he assumes to be one of Jihoon’s guests—the energy of the room is alive and bright. He feels giddy and hyper, ready to tackle the next person who comes for him- he takes that back, he probably won’t be tackling either of the two petite women in the room even though they both look like they could hold their own. He probably won’t be tackling Jihoon either. Being a big, clumsy person, Mingyu’s always a little self-conscious about how much space he’s taking up. In a room full of people running around like chickens with their heads cut off, someone is bound to trip over someone else. He assumes that most—if not all—of them are professional dancers and simple slip-ups can result in actual career damage,
but it doesn’t look like anyone wants to take a break anytime soon.

Of course, it’s all shits and giggles until someone slips off the mattress and slams his head into the alarm clock on the nightstand.

“I am getting too old for this.” His accent is stronger than Jun’s and he’s heavier set with a build that looks stronger than Soonyoung’s, but Roi—the oldest of all of them—isn’t so fast to spring back to his feet, “I need to take my kids to the theme park next week.” He groans and rolls over onto his back, “Ah, wǒ de tiān. This is the end.”

“Calm down, grandpa.” Her accent is also very pretty, significantly lighter than Jun’s and Mingyu knows it’s a little stereotypical, but he’s going to assume that Roi and—what’s her name again? It was something complicated—are both Jun’s guests, “Don’t be such a salty sea dog.”

“I don’t know what that means.” He groans and gets up.

“Maybe we should tone it down a bit.” Mingyu’s not sure when Minghao crossed the room to lower the volume on Jun’s Bluetooth speaker, “Let’s turn in for the night before someone else gets hurt.”

“Fun police.” Soonyoung grumbles as he starts throwing pillows onto the desk in the corner, stacking them haphazardly. They go from sugar-high children to weary daycare supervisors in a snap, setting Jun and Roi’s room back in working order and by the time the clock hits 9:30, it looks almost normal. The only thing out of place is the mountain of pillows that have been stacked on the side and the copious amount of inch-long down feathers sprinkled here and there, “Oh, hey, Chan, where’s that thing that the Taproom sent?”

Chan, a little dazed after all the activity with tiny beads of sweat pilling at his temple, narrows his eyes and thinks for a second. He takes out his key card and walks down the hallway—presumably to go to his room—and returns with a large black box.

Like it’s show-and-tell in preschool, everyone gathers into the room to sit on the nearest sit-able surface. Jihoon even perches himself on the headboard as Mingyu uses his legs and hips to knock out a space between Jooheon and Roi—pillow fighting with a bunch of strangers is certainly a good icebreaker. Without a spot to wiggle into, Minghao waddles around until he’s beckoned over. Slightly self-conscious about the potential PDA, he almost turns him down until he’s offered the spot. Not wanting him to move, he begrudgingly places himself in Mingyu’s lap. Oh, good, right where you belong. Arms acting as seatbelts, Minghao’s strapped down and held securely to this spot; his spot.

Alas, after egging everyone’s attention onto him, Soonyoung moves the black box to the center of the floor. Their eyes are wide, like they’re opening a gift on Christmas morning. It stands almost two feet tall and it looks incredibly dense. Did they just send an entire box of sand? That would be hilarious.

Carefully, the blond opens the lid and reaches his hand in.

Magic.

He opens his palm to reveal a handful of sand.

Just kidding, it’s not sand, it’s shredded paper, you know, the kind they put in Easter baskets. After taking out another two fistfuls, he decides that the suspense isn’t as fun as expected and frisbees the lid away. In the box sits nine bottles of wine, “That’s a lot of wine.” Indeed, Minghao,
that is a lot of wine. More importantly, stop wiggling so much. His coccyx is digging into Mingyu’s thigh whenever he tries to readjust his weight. Every time he tries to hold the silver-haired man even tighter, he can tell that there’s a slight discomfort being this snuggly in front of everyone.

He’ll take his cues.

Releasing Minghao from his grasp after pressing a kiss into his back, the dancer slides onto the floor and bumps Soonyoung out of the way with his shoulder in order to peer into the box himself. His lap is kind of cold without him there.

“Well, since everyone’s here already, should we drink?”

Wonwoo crosses his arms, “Is that a good idea?”

But Chan’s already returned with a stack of plastic cups. Where he got them from, no one knows, but it’s safe to say that this man comes prepared, “It’s just a little wine.” Upon being questioned about his sudden change in stance regarding ‘partying before a competition’, Chan gets a little defensive and claims that the faster they shoot back the little bit of alcohol, the faster they’ll fall asleep. He hands everyone a cup as Soonyoung digs around for a bottle opener. They usually provide one in the little care package that comes with every room.

By the end of the hour, everyone has reached the bottom of their first cup—which is more or less three-fourths of an actual cup measure—and most have moved on to their second or third. What. It’s good wine. It’s only slightly sweet, slightly sour, slightly bitter, and smooth as heck. Overall, the flavor is vague, but the more they drink, the better it seems to taste. It has a lovely aroma as well.

Minghao looks like he wants to stop after his first glass even though someone pours him a second one, “Give me your cup.” And he pours half of it into Mingyu’s hand.

He would refuse as well, but now it looks like their glasses aren’t empty which means that no one will pour them more. What a smarty.

Sipping on the wine—or dipping his upper lip into the red liquor every minute so that it’ll stretch—is nicer than he expected. While the pillow fight got some of them nice and friendly, nothing loosens people up like a mature glass of cabernet sauvignon. He learns a lot about a handful of people this night and probably won’t remember those facts come morning, but he does remember that Jun’s second guest is named Jieqiong. She’s a choreographer from LA—which is how she came to know Jun and Minghao—specializing in large formations and team arrangements. He also learns that Roi is the father of two toddlers down in San Diego. He had stopped his dancing career after a leg injury—he can barely make it through the mall in one go—but served as Jun’s mentor for a period of time. Lately, he’s enjoyed his office job doing PR for a small indie media company and has plans to go to Cabo with his family in the summer- this man never stops talking about his kids.

Jihoon briefly introduced his guests formally when they started pouring the wine. Amy is what you’d call a jack of all trades in the arts having occupied culinary, studio, and curating positions. She just dropped a new album on Bandcamp and enjoys her day job where she manages a music school in Irvine. Beomju—also from LA—is a rather stout man who is a bit stoic just like the petit audio technician. He has a significantly cooler job serving as a full-time recording studio engineer but also moonlights as club DJ. Amy is surely the curveball guest. She’s totally approachable and boisterous after her second glass and it makes Mingyu wonder if Jihoon is a fine mix between the two.

The man himself is unfurling, cheeks lightly flushed as he plays some sort of finger game with
Jun and the others. They hit fingertips and yell and it’s all in good fun. It’s a side of Jihoon that Mingyu expects only to see after a couple drinks—although, he certainly didn’t expect it to be this early into the night. When Jun knocks him out of the game with a finishing move, he shoves him playfully and continues talking.

He jumps up in excitement when Jun kicks Beomju out right after him, clapping and laughing when the older man asks him to calm down. Jihoon isn’t drunk in the slightest, but he’s comfortable. His position in Jun’s life still doesn’t sit well with Mingyu. What’s the awkward dancer supposed to think when he’s acting so—he can’t believe he’s thinking this—cute? He’s smacking tiny fists into his shoulder and pushing him around. This is the most physical contact he’s seen between the two and he’s seen them dance a steamy dance together. He’s even giggling.

The weird thing is Jun doesn’t seem bothered in the slightest. He’s being too normal about all this affection and flirtation Jihoon is dumping onto him like it’s nothing out of the ordinary. Then again, after you know someone for a whole ten years, it’s to be expected that you grow accustomed to how they behave when slightly intoxicated. Jihoon’s a tiny dude, maybe the alcohol affects him faster than the others. Maybe he’s using the half-empty cup in his hand as an excuse to get close to Jun with no strings attached.

And that doesn’t sit well with Mingyu either. You can’t just avoid it. You can’t just go in like that and abandon all responsibility at the rim of your glass. It’s like if Minghao were to turn around and just say ‘Sike, I’ve never liked you. I was just drinking some fun juice that Soonyoung gave me. Try again when I’m sober’ and that’s something that he can’t just ignore.

Jun is his friend.

But Jun isn’t asking for help. He doesn’t want to butt in. It’s none of his business- but it is- but it isn’t- but it is- but it isn’t. He doesn’t want to drive him mad just like Wonwoo and Soonyoung were about to do to him and Minghao. Interference like that in a relationship ends poorly more often than not. They’re lucky it didn’t go south. They’re lucky Minghao is good at keeping to his own resolve. He’s so patient. He’s so kind. He’s so damn stiff when he’s conversing with strangers that it’s almost comical considering he has a job where he has to provide a lot of parental lip service.

Minghao meshes well with the people he already knows. That’s that.

It’s painfully obvious that he gets shy when he’s put in situations where he has to talk to Jihoon’s friends in a less-than-professional manner and isn’t too hot on listening to Roi complain about daycare and how his husband nags too much. He’s never rude to them, but this is a side of Minghao that Mingyu doesn’t really understand. What’s there to be shy about? Friends of friends are your friends by default. He’s, personally, met most of his former besties through mutual friends, so seeing Minghao struggle to speak up about anything that isn’t small talk is interesting. Chan gets most of his attention likely because everyone else is already mingling and he’s getting drowsy. It’s to the point that he’s nearly curled up in Jun’s sheets and Minghao’s gleaning the room for a helping hand.

Mingyu keeps his distance, though. If the small crowd of people made him uncomfortable to show any sort of PDA—whereas Mingyu’s totally comfortable with it in this type of setting—he’ll give him some space. He wants to help, but he doesn’t want to suffocate him.

It’s Soonyoung who helps Minghao cart Chan off to his room and tuck him into bed.

Poor kid.

He finally didn’t have a stick up his ass. Yes, Mingyu’s still a little salty about his behavior in
the hospital and about how he berated Minghao. What happened to treating your seniors well? Kids these days.

But he’ll digress.

People have their moments.

And it’s not like Minghao’s mad at him. Minghao understands Chan far better than Mingyu does and—as Minghao had told him in passing—they used to be incredibly similar until Mingyu ‘came along and dropped a fork into the garbage disposal’; Minghao being the garbage disposal, the fork being his affection and warmth. It was a little difficult to pick apart at the time. Was it a compliment? An insult? Passive-aggressive communication? A joke? Probably all of those things.

But it doesn’t matter because Minghao comes back into the room and flops onto the mattress next to him, wine cup held precariously in the air, sloshing around high enough to drip down the side but not splash onto the white sheets. He quickly sits up and laps at the dribble before it can stain his shirt. It’s okay to be a little thirsty right now, right? The kid that called him a thirsty weirdo isn’t in the room anymore, “Something on my face again?”

Mingyu chuckles and shakes his head, “Nope. How ‘bout me?”

Minghao’s eyes narrow as he studies his face with mock concentration, “Not yet.” Good answer. “How are you holding up? Tired?” he shakes his head. He’s not tired in the slightest even though they drank wine with the intention to get sleepy-headed. He bumps their elbows together, “We can go to our room,” our room, “if you want to call it qui-”

Buzz.

He’s interrupted by the vibration of his phone. It’s Vernon, “What’s up?”

It’s silent as he reads the text and starts typing out a response, “Uh,” a few taps, “Vernon says they’re almost done with dessert,” well, they better be, it’s nearing midnight, “and he’s wondering if Jun’s still doing the pool thing. Jun,” slightly louder, “are you still doing the pool thing?”

The black-haired man sits up from his conversation after wrestling Roi to the side, “Pool thing? What time is it?”

“11:29.”

“Yep. There’s still half-an-hour before I have to go live.” He tosses his clear Solo cup into the garbage, “Is Vernon back? He said he’d help me film, but I have a tripod-”

Buzz, “He’s downstairs, coming up.”

“What are you doing at the pool?” he asks Jun before swinging back the last few tablespoons and discarding his cup as well.

“I think most people call it a polar bear swim, right?” he looks to Minghao for confirmation.

But Minghao shrugs, “I think it’s only a polar bear swim if it’s on January 1st,” and turns toward Mingyu, “Jun does charity livestreams on his channel near the holidays, but because we’re here this year-”

“I’m still doing it!” he looks energized, “It’d be nice if I had more people, though. Usually, if more people join, the donations go up.”
Minghao shuts down the offer before it even goes up, “Good luck with that, it’s freezing outside—”

“What the fuck is up, losers.” Soonyoung swings himself into Minghao’s lap, stretching his legs over Mingyu’s, “Let’s swim.”

“How about no.”

“The pools are heated and Junnie’s audience wants to pay to see him get half-naked and wet.”

Jun laughs nervously, trying to save his image in front of Mingyu, “It’s for charity.”

“Yeah, guys, for charity.” Soonyoung singsongs, wrapping an arm around his unamused friend, “Do it for the cats.”

“For the cats!” Jun cheers, appreciating the diversion more than anything else.

Soonyoung raises an empty cup, “For the cats!” and tosses it into the trash.

Looking between his two best friends, Minghao pouts. How is he supposed to say no when they’re both giving him those sparkly eyes? Jun’s even on his knees, elbows propped on Soonyoung, fingers linked under his chin, “Please.”

“C’mon, swim with us. Don’t you want to see Mingyu’s hot bod?”

“That’s not it, I—” Flustered, as predicted, by the smallest things.

He shakes him before pulling him close and whispering—ineffectively, because Mingyu can hear everything—into his ear, “Look, Hao. You got a cute boyfriend, don’t you want to see him half-naked, dripping pool water like a sexy lifeguard?” Thanks for the flattery, but Minghao can see him completely naked if he just asked.

But it’s enough provocation to make him blush. It’s amazing to hear how composed and flat Minghao’s voice and face are with how much red is creeping into his ears, “I don’t mind doing the charity stream, but I don’t—”

“Good thing I brought two. I knew you wouldn’t bring your swimsuit.” The blond kicks his legs off of Mingyu and pirouettes into a graceful stance, celebrating victory early, “Shortsighted, Hao.” He pokes Minghao on the nose before taking a few strides across the room to tell the rest of their party.

Not wanting to face those wide, Puss-in-Boots eyes of Jun’s, Mingyu immediately agrees to be part of the event and earns a big, rough hug.

Surprisingly—or maybe not-so-surprisingly since everyone is proving to be a little wild when they’re off the clock—every single person agrees to go to the pool. What’s more—again, maybe less now—surprising is that all of them packed swimsuits. Who does that? Well, Mingyu does that, too. But, hey, if there’s a pool at the venue, you ought to bring a swimsuit just in case. You never know when your friend will have a sudden charity stream to host and you’re asked to go for a midnight swim.

Down the hall, Jun yells something about only having fifteen minutes to get dressed and get downstairs before they have to be on camera and starts panicking about charging his phone so it has
enough battery for the short cast. Luckily, Roi has, like, five power banks with him—nothing like a
parent to be overly prepared for the most unlikely situations.

“Here you go!” Mingyu doesn’t get a good look at it, but whatever Soonyoung hands off to
Minghao can barely be considered a swimsuit, “Meet you lovebirds downstairs.” He winks before
scurrying off in his loud, clapping flipflops.

His dancer stares at the small bunch of fabric in his hand before rolling his eyes and shutting
the door, “I,” wrinkling his brow like he’s having a headache, “I really want to punch him. Can I
punch him? Please?”

Chuckling, “After tomorrow, sure.” Mingyu pulls Minghao into him, tossing the sad excuse
for a swimsuit into the sink and kissing his forehead, “You don’t have to go.” Because now that
they’re in their room, going back outside and socializing sounds less and less appealing. Can they
cancel? Snuggling into those fresh sheets and watching some pay-per-view or Barefoot Contessa
until they drift off sounds like heaven.

“I’ll go. We promised already.” Looks like Minghao’s the one getting sleepy from the bit of
wine, “I’ll just put my feet in, maybe drown Soon if I get the chance.” Mingyu feels a kiss on his
shoulder before the shorter man digs in his luggage for some clothes and heads off to the bathroom to
change.

They’ll keep it short.

They’ll go for a little dip and run back up to the room, shower, and get tucked in. No big deal.
The idea of being on camera isn’t that nerve-wracking for him. He’s been filmed plenty of times,
whether it was promotional videos for his college or Snapchats of him acting like a fool during
summer break. Mingyu’s been topless in front of cameras before and he’d be lying if he said seeing
himself on someone else’s screen didn’t boost his ego slightly.

So, he quickly gets undressed. His shoes have stayed off since he started jumping on Jun’s
mattress and now every part of this stuffy ‘formal dinner’ attire can fall to the floor with them. Okay,
no, they’re going into a bag for laundry—folded neatly and stacked.

He plucks out his swim trunks and shimmies them over his hips. They’re slightly tighter than
they were in the summer—and he’s wholly blaming Minghao for that—but they still look nice. In his
opinion, the green and blue hues match his skin tone rather prettily. The drawstring is tied in a tidy
bow. When he was in school, they used to joke that undoing it was like opening a gift. Cringey
words like that are almost enough to make him shiver. Well, maybe it’s just cold. Mingyu grabs a
jacket, too, slipping it over his shoulders.

Minghao’s opened the bathroom door but hasn’t emerged. He’s taking his time again,
probably uncomfortable with the itty-bitty speedo that Soonyoung’s tried to stick him with.

Staring at himself in the mirror with a sweater half-zipped up his stomach, Mingyu chews on
his lips. Despite having Minghao join him in the pool like he (and his aching feet) had wanted earlier,
this is all suddenly sounding like a bad idea.

Chapter End Notes

you’ve elected to drink, the wine is smooth and heavy, unlike the feelings in your heart.
Chapter 133

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s below freezing outside and he just agreed to swim.

Mingyu.

If there was ever a time- no, no, this was a decision he made that he’ll stick with. He’s going to get his ass in that freezing water and his dick is going to shrivel into nothingness and it’s going to be fun and it’s going to be a memory he’ll be able to fondly reflect on ten years down the line. It’ll be fine.

“You should put bandages on your ankles.” Minghao’s peppery voice catches him off guard. It’d been silent over by the sink for the last couple minutes and he’d assumed that he wanted to stew over tonight’s debatably bad decisions. The only rustling he hears now is the dancer slipping on a baggy, navy windbreaker with a golden zipper. It stays open, however, because he’s already wearing a printed white t-shirt underneath.

It’s slightly unfortunate that he has to be the only one in the room with his chest exposed and there’s a moment where he debates zipping his jacket all the way up, “Nah, it’ll be fine.”

But Minghao’s going to see it all eventually anyway.

He needn’t be so shy.

“Famous last words.” Perhaps his premonition earlier about this being a mistake wasn’t all in his head because Minghao won’t look at him. It’s not like he wants to be gawked at- well, it’d be nice if he appreciated the view a little bit- is he looking too much into it? Is this the alcohol thinking? Because he isn’t usually this scatterbrained. Maybe he is? Maybe he isn’t? Is he? He hopes not.

But it can’t be.

Alcohol never makes him think more.

“No leg brace? No wrist brace? What is this nonsense?” Mingyu jokes as he fixes his hair in the mirror for the nth time. He should realize by now that he looks like he always does. There’s no sense trying to look better. There’s nothing to fix.

Minghao fiddles with his earrings after taking a seat on the bed, “Knowing them, either Soon or Vern’s gonna push me into the pool and I want to wear the braces to bed, so it’s better to not risk them getting wet.” There seems to be something else on his mind, but Mingyu doesn’t get a chance to pry.

The door clicks unlocked after a short rapping, “You two ready? Let’s go.”

Vernon is standing in their doorway with obnoxiously pink and sunset-orange swimtrunks on and a neon snorkeling set strapped to his forehead. Under his right arm is Seungkwan in a thick hoodie with a thermal blanket wrapped around his shoulders, looking far less than amused. It’s way past his bedtime and he’s cold and salty. Under Vernon’s left arm is someone that Mingyu doesn’t recognize—likely his guest—who is partially occupied with cheering Seungkwan up while greeting Minghao with a bright smile.
“You ready?” Minghao tosses the question over his shoulder, looking at the desk instead of at him directly.

“Yep.”

“Aren’t you.” Seungkwan points at the guest and then at the room a couple times, “going to-”

“Oh, right!” Vernon backs both his boys up to let them step out of their room. Seungkwan stumbles a bit, tripping on his slippers, shaking his head with mock disapproval, “Guys, this is Hyunggu-”

“Kino’s fine.” That’s a cool-sounding nickname.

Vernon quickly corrects himself, “Sorry, Kino! My bad. This is Mingyu.” He’s nodded towards, “And this is Minghao.”

“Related?” What, because of the two ‘Ming-’ parts?

“Dating.” Seungkwan corrects.

“Ah.” Kino’s handshakes are firm and friendly. He makes a point of repeating their names and looking at their faces with intense eyes—obviously committing the combinations to memory, “You look familiar,” he speaks idly as they march down the hallway and into the elevator. The others are, presumably, down at the pool already, “have we met, Minghao?” The way he enunciates his name is a little awkward and crystal clear.

“Maybe.” His mood seems to have a changed a little bit; voice lighter and higher, “Where are you from?” It could just be the desire to make a good first impression.

“Vancouver- well, I’m actually from Surrey, but no one knows where Surrey is, so, yeah.” It’s a little too chipper for Mingyu’s taste at this hour but is generally unoffensive. If they met at a different time, then perhaps it’d be easier to make friends, “I used to dance for Underground Vancouver.”

“Oh, then, probably.” Deciding to wear their room slippers down to the pool is proving to be slightly clumsy considering their feet barely fit. Who needs slippers this big? A Sasquatch? The loud flapping noises they’re making is almost as annoying as how unruly they are at staying on, “Jun and I went there for a conference a few years back.”

Shuffling into the elevator, Minghao comfortably comes to Mingyu’s side. He carries on their small talk and Mingyu knows that he’s probably offered several opportunities for him to enter the conversation, but he isn’t in the mood. He sighs as they wait for Seungkwan to dash back to their room because he forgot his phone and Vernon uses his back to hold the sliding doors open. Why is he being like this? He doesn’t need to be like this. What happened to the Mingyu that could sweet talk his way through anything? Why does forcing himself to act like that feel so artificial right now? This doesn’t feel like him either, but something about Kino throws him off. In some ways, he sees a reflection of himself a few months back; a little too nice, a little too forward and professional. But, again, maybe he’s overthinking.

A knuckle brushes the side of his pointer.

Minghao quietly nudges him, silently asking to hold hands as he chats. Mingyu hooks their pointers and middle fingers together, knuckles staggered. He ghosts his thumb over a hangnail before deciding that holding hands like this is silly and links all five digits, palms flushed like normal. The poor guy’s fingers feel like they’ve been sitting in the fridge for an hour but his palms are almost
A small smile comes back on his face.

Both of their faces.

Seungkwan apologizes as he jogs back to them, nearly losing a shoe in the gap between the platform and the elevator’s door. He hears a few laughs and Vernon starts a chain of ‘what ifs’ backed by mischief. He proposes that dropping your wallet would be bad. Minghao suggests dropping something more meaningful would be worse. For the record, dropping your phone into the crack before the doors close and the elevator malfunctions would be the absolute worst thing.

But his sentiments reside with the man beside him.

He’d be pretty heartbroken if his bracelet fell into that crevice, so he reaches his thumb up to slip between the chain and his skin. He gives it a little tug to let him know that he gets the sentiment and didn’t mean anything by disagreeing. It’s not his fault he was a moment late to catch his drift, but Minghao’s infinite patience holds true and he bobbles his head in acknowledgment. Kino has most of his attention—talking about this and that and about how he met Vernon on some rainy spring night years ago when he was just out of high school, they were both soaking—and everyone’s attention, really. He looks at you so attentively, it’s almost impossible to not find him the slightest bit endearing after you look past how forward he is. It’s probably just his personality.

When the elevator dings, they step out onto tiled floors and make their way down another hallway and another hallway and another hallway, until Seungkwan opens the door leading to the outdoor recreational area and they’re swept with the overwhelming smell of chlorine and Jun’s voice carrying over the soft gurgle of a fountain.

It’s extremely dark out, but the moon and all her stars look absolutely stunning in the cloudless sky. The warm fairy lights and tiki torches give the jacuzzi and bar a nice glow whereas the closed-down lap pool and the free-swim (kiddie) pool are radiating their own teal light. It’s ambient and there’s already soft music playing as Jihoon has dialed in some jazz on a Bluetooth speaker.

The best part is that it’s essentially deserted for the night.

Other than two or three older couples occupying the bar and a small squad of college-aged whippersnappers steeping in the jacuzzi, it’s a wasteland. No one in their right mind is swimming at the end of November. Of course, he’s friends with some extraordinary people.

Wonwoo and Soonyoung are already in the pool—no surprise there. The blond is trying—and failing—to swim faster by using kickboards as makeshift fins. Jooheon is throwing pool noodles at him like javelins. A few of their guests are wading around in the shallow end in an attempt to acclimate their bodies. They know it’s going to be cold and it’s better to not get stunned by the water when they have to swim towards the deep end and back. Maybe drinking nine bottles of wine was a good idea before coming out.

Locking his phone and taking it with him, Jihoon makes his way next to Seungkwan and Minghao who are just about to stick their feet in. He’s clever, Mingyu will give him that. Sitting on the leftmost side of the two, he can use their bodies to block the breeze that will inevitably turn into a strong gust later. However, his lack of jacket probably means that he’s going to take a dip as well. The audio technician seems a little less clingy now but just as chatty, even introducing himself to Kino who had taken a nosedive into the water a second prior.

“Two minutes!” Vernon calls as he brings Jun’s phone over to Minghao and asks for help with
some camera settings. Filming at night has always been a bit difficult.

Jun makes a curt and general speech, thanking viewers for tuning in and reiterates himself in Mandarin and that other language that Mingyu doesn’t know. He drags Vernon on a lap around the pool to introduce everyone briefly before announcing the charity. He waves a postcard-sized pamphlet into the phone’s camera and points down excitedly.

Mingyu can assume—based on all the Youtube vlogs he’s watched in past years—that he’s telling them that the details are ‘in the description box below’ and that they should ‘like and subscribe’.

Sensing that it’s almost time, he strips off his jacket and tosses it onto one of the cushy lounge chairs lining the pool. Wonwoo and Seungkwan jokingly whistle at him and Vernon gives him a catcall from behind the camera, "Woo, get it, Mingyu." Okay, that’s not helping. Minghao’s still avoiding eye contact, but in an attempt to boost his own confidence before entering the water in front of at least 500 people, he imagines the aversion is because he looks hot enough for him to be flustered.

Please, be flustered.

Please, don’t be mad at Mingyu for some super secret reason.

Please, just be your adorable and flustered self.

Owowowowowowow.

He should have listened to Minghao.

Mingyu’s quickly learning that the man is usually right.

His ankles sear painfully the second he plummets into the water and starts floundering his way to the other end of the pool. They were rubbed raw. What part of his brain thought he would be okay going straight into the pool without bandages? The polar bear swim ends up looking more like a desperate, drowning bear crawl on his part. He feels better that he’s not the only one screaming, but he’s definitely the only one with such sloppy form. So much for looking cool, now he’s just looking cold.

Jun, on the other hand, is already out of the pool and shaking off water as he takes the phone from Vernon to end his brief stream and thanks the viewers for their donations. The goosebumps already came to surface when he pushed himself out of the pool and despite trying to keep a straight face, Jun’s cracking up because his voice and hands keep trembling. It’d be a shame to get sick right after the competition.

The longer he wades around in the water, the less morbidly freezing the temperature is. It’s to the point where it’s almost bearable, “Cannonball!”

The brown-haired boy runs over to the three sitting on the edge of the pool and jumps over Seungkwan to make a big splash. It’s a rude awakening for them and it’s plain to see that his boyfriend is a little annoyed before he shakes his head and chuckles, “Dude, nice one!” Soonyoung hollers from somewhere in the background of his thoughts. Minghao ruffles Seungkwan’s hair and probably says something sympathetic because he, too, is dating a happy fool that’s dog paddling in icy waters.
Mingyu’s attention is more or less on the two little sharks making their way towards Jihoon from the deep end.

“Go.” Amy whines, “C’mon, Ji-ji,” she rattles his leg, “he’s shivering.” And tosses a handful of water onto his thighs, “Now’s your chance!” getting his shorts wetter than he ever wanted them, “Go.” She draws out.

Beomju shakes his head, already showing his chagrin, “He’s an immovable object.” He crosses his arms over his chest and shrugs apathetically, “Absolutely hopeless.”

Amy folds her hands together under water near the edge of the pool and squeezes her palms together to shoot a stream of water into Jihoon’s face. It’s effective? After getting hit squarely between the eyes, he recoils and turns away, blowing the chlorinated water off his face with a raspberry, sputtering like a boat that can’t start.

“You two are annoying as hell, why did I invite you?” he grumbles as he gets up and kicks the water off his legs and directly into Amy’s wide smile. She’s not mad, she’s laughing with Beomju and if Jihoon wasn’t so focused on getting away from them and throwing half-hearted curses behind him, he probably would have heard her slur ‘love is an unstoppable force’ before diving under the water and swimming back to where the others are talking in the shallow end.

Jihoon cocks his head and stretches his neck like he’s frustrated or upset, and the bit of hubbub makes Seungkwan and Minghao look over curiously. For a moment, Mingyu thought he was going to return to his room and turn in for the night. But the man begrudgingly slinks his way over to the bar to ask for a towel and jogs it over to Jun who is signing off under the cabana they’d occupied with all their towels and shoes. He doesn’t even wait for him to turn the camera off, throwing the toasty, heated towel into Jun’s face and chiding, “Stay warm.” before bolting off back towards the pool with the vlogger in hot pursuit.

It seems uncharacteristic and Mingyu thinks it’s weird that Jihoon would let Jun tackle him into the pool—the fact that Jun has the audacity to tackle such a prickly person into a frosty pool already baffles him—, but then again, there seems to be a lot of their relationship that’s still in the dark for him. He hopes they sort things out. Maybe they have sorted things out. He could stand to care less about Jihoon, but Jun looks happy.

But it’s a different sort of happy.

Jun doesn’t look at Jihoon the way Wonwoo looks at Soonyoung—and he can see the couple swimming around out of the corner of his eye—it’s so different.

But the way Jihoon sneaks glances, the way his eyes get so inexplicably sincere and fond the moment Jun turns away—maybe Jihoon looks at Jun the way Minghao looks at Mingyu and that has to mean something. Mingyu doesn’t get why he’s so determined to keep up this cold façade when they’re together. It frustrates him to no avail. It’s so much easier when people are straightforward about things like this—he thinks as it took him ten years to think about Minghao without feeling like the world is crumbling in on itself.

Alternatively, thinking about him, now, is like building. Building what? He doesn’t know. Building something. Something awesome and profound, something safe and secure. It’s Minghao, a person that works tirelessly and skillfully at creating and fixing things that people can’t see on the surface. Minghao’s real, though, he’s human and he’s tired and the rings coming in under his eyes say that he’s exhausted after the last few days, the last few weeks, the last few months, the last few years.
That’s okay.

He can rest.

Mingyu will carry him home—wherever that may be.

Holding his breath, Mingyu ducks under the surface and pushes off the ground with his feet. It’s been a long time since he’s opened his eyes in a pool and it stings a bit but no more than stale contact lenses in week-old solution. He needs to see where he’s going. Sneaking up to Minghao mid-conversation and splashing him with a slap of the water makes him jump.

“No thanks, water bad, bye.” Seungkwan scoots away faster than anyone he’s ever seen and makes his way to the other end of the pool where nearly everyone else has congregated in an attempt to stay huddled and warm. He sits on the steps leading in, letting his toes stir the shallow waters as Vernon slides onto the first step down and rests an arm on his thighs.

They’re so precious sometimes. Ah, young l-

A wave crashes over his head, filling his left ear with water and forcing his eye shut, but at least he can meet eyes with him again. There’s a glint there that he doesn’t understand fully, but if the resumption of eye contact is because of something Seungkwan said, then he’ll thank him in advance.

“Rude.”

He swings one arm into the pool and raises an impressively tall wave. There isn’t a square inch of Minghao that goes without a drop of water. His mouth hangs open in slight disbelief. Push and pull, push and pull, Mingyu knows he doesn’t mind that much. He has plenty of clothes upstairs and a warm shower at the ready. It’s okay to mess around a little-

With all his might, Minghao kicks his legs in the water and barrages Mingyu with a typhoon of chlorine. He has to dive backwards and swim away in order to avoid the attack. The dancer shakes his head, sneering at him with a childish smirk on his face. Oh, he thinks he’s clear.

Two can play at that game, Minghao.

Using his best attempt at a breaststroke, Mingyu conjures what he believes to a medium sized wave, but he underestimates his own strength because when he opens his eyes, Minghao’s absolutely drenched.

Doing a reverse somersault, he puts some distance between them in order to recover. His windbreaker is clinging to his back and arms. His hair is sticking to his face and water is dripping off the tip of his nose. They’ve sufficiently drawn the attention of all their friends who give a hearty laugh, “Revenge! Revenge!” Soonyoung and Vernon chant, followed by Amy and Roi.

There isn’t much that Minghao can do. He’s on land, how sad.

Too bad, Mingyu wins.

He fills his cheeks with water and spurs it out like a limp fountain, egging the silver-haired man to give it his best shot no matter how feeble. Sure, they continue splashing each other until their friends get bored and return to their idle conversation, but by the end of it, they’re both slightly winded.

“You know,” Minghao calms down, admitting defeat and crouching by the edge of the pool, a smile tugging at the side of his mouth. He wipes droplets from Mingyu’s brow before they can drip
into his eyes. The dancer tucks wet strands of hair behind his ear, combs soaked clumps off his forehead. His touch is so gentle and careful. “with your teal shorts and water refraction, you kinda look like a mermaid.”

That’s a cute notion.

He’ll play along.

‘Me?’ he gestures in mock surprise before giving an exaggerated shrug, ‘A mermaid?’

Minghao tilts his head to the side, not quite picking up on the impromptu roleplay, “A merman?”

Mingyu debates more with his face than his brain, ‘Mermaid? Merman? Either is fine.’ He mouths.

“Lost your voice again, I see.” Mingyu gives him a big frown and nods, pouting, “Well, that’s too bad. Guess I’ll have to learn sign language.”

He shakes his head as Minghao moves his rickety leg to take a seat. He’s already wet, sitting in a puddle won’t matter. Mingyu’s more concerned that he’s going to catch a cold with the windchill breezing by them. They should call it a night, and they will as soon as he solves the puzzle. He points at himself and points at Minghao, then purses his lips and makes a silent ‘mwah’ before opening his hands as a gesture to magic and pretending to speak again.

The dancer lazily shakes his head with an eyebrow raised.

C’mon, Minghao.

What 90’s kid hasn’t watched Little Mermaid? Kiss the damn mermaid before your lips turn blue. They’re already a pretty shade of purple.

Mingyu impatiently splashes his knees, but Minghao looks down at him and chews on his lips; unyielding.

So, he flicks water at him. He’s going to bother him until he gets his Magical Disney Princess Kiss™ because Minghao’s a beautiful, fairy prince and he’s a clumsy mermaid prince and he- okay, maybe he’s too tired to think straight, but when it comes to Minghao, thinking straight isn’t a priority.

The dancer rolls his eyes as if they weighed five pounds each and lets out a deep breath before grinning the tiniest grin. He sulks and beckons Mingyu to bob a little closer with the curl of his finger. Ears ablaze a vibrant peach, he leans forward for a kiss.

But, alas, Minghao can’t reach. He can’t bend that far without stretching first and even if he could, he’d lose his balance and fall into the pool. Mingyu pats his shoulders, telling him to brace himself with them. He wants this kiss so bad. Sure, he could have gotten out of the pool or pulled himself up to the edge, but where’s the fun in that? Nothing like a freezing cold midnight swim to give rise to a trust exercise.

Carefully, Minghao scoots his butt all the way to the very edge and leans over, holding onto his shoulders and trusting Mingyu to not slam-dunk him into the pool. And for just that, he’s grateful. To be able to trust someone and for that trust to be reciprocated, that’s quite nice in its own way. The hem of his basketball shorts might be dipped in, but he’s not going to let him fall.

However, he notices he’s putting more weight on his right wrist.
At first, he thought he was just a little jittery from the cold. Maybe it’s a combination of the weather and having practiced the routine on an unfamiliar stage but putting too much weight on that wrist is clearly painful—not on Minghao’s face—Mingyu just knows.

No.

Nope.

Not worth it.

He pushes Minghao back to sit up straight. One little, idealized kiss isn’t worth extending the injury. Fairytale kisses can wait.

Signaled to wait, he slouches, slightly impatient. Mingyu heaves himself up with one, big push, his hands on either side of Minghao’s legs, and shakily smiles into a soft kiss. The tender hands cupping his face are cold, the wind is whisking away his body heat, but everything—as expected—feels warm.

When he starts to lose strength—and indeed, a very brief kiss—and lowers himself back into the water, Minghao’s mouth follows ever so slightly. You’re going to fall in, “Hey, careful.” He tries to put a hand on his waist to stop him, but in one fell swoop, the dancer goes flying into the water.

“Whoops.”

Their heads knock together with a hard bonk and they’re underwater, air bubbling out of their mouths. He doesn’t know if it’s because of the cold or because of the shock, but he can feel Minghao’s limbs seizing around him reflexively. What was a floundering of lean limbs quickly turns into his legs wrapping around his waist and his arm is around his neck, the other hand is trying to iron out the pain from the collision. Mingyu brings them back to surface, thankful that he’s tall enough to reach the bottom on his tippy-toes.

Minghao’s breath is irregular and he’s trembling from the icy water—from shock, not a medical emergency—and it doesn’t look like he has his bearings yet. He can’t see his face, but he feels dazed. So, Mingyu loops an arm around his waist and holds him closer as they regain their vision and wipe their faces free of water.

The large splash and likely loud noise of their foreheads smashing together seem to have gained everyone’s attention.

Chapter End Notes

quick thanks to protein for supporting this fic~ here's a demonhao (tbh i don't know if they did it for the fic or for sthg else but please go love them)

and if anyone wants to play bias bingo with me, i'll make u a doodle if you get a bingo uvu also i want to know who your biases areeee ♥♥♥ let's get to know each other a bit hm~

if anyone hasn't caught who the guests are:
amy = ailee
beomju = bumzu
roi = is roi from The Legend/Qin Fen from Awaken F who is friends with Jun irl
jieqiong/kyulkyung from pristin is jun's friend and hyunggu/kino from ptg is vernon's
friend irl ^^

i've been drafting a LOT for the 555-1486 (junhoon) and 0800 (verkwan) this last
week! is there anything you hope to see/learn in those stories?
“Sorry, I didn’t mean to push so hard.” Did you? *Did you*, Soonyoung? Because it looks like you’re incredibly proud of what you just did. He sheepishly leans over the edge of the pool, a towel wrapped tightly around his shoulders. “You good?” His eyes are curved in impish crescents over a grin that’s more telling than his apologetic words.

However, those tells barely scratch the surface of his mind because the arms wrapped around his neck are squeezing him so tightly and the pain of his forehead is pulsating with the beat of the music in the background. Instead of yelling at Soonyoung, he takes a moment to better steady them in the pool. He holds solid and stable in order to get Minghao’s body to calm down and adapt to the temperature. His breaths are shaky, and his teeth are chattering, the heavy weight from his water-soaked clothes make his limbs feel tight and lazy.

But when he finally turns to face the assailant, his eyes are ablaze with a seething agitation. There’s always been something about the eyes of an angry Scorpio that can’t be placed into words, but Mingyu’s glad he’s not on the receiving end. “Soonyoung.” Of course, such a pretty voice can’t be terrifying in the slightest. Sorry, Minghao, it just can’t be done. Serious, sure, but threatening and scary? Not a chance.

The grip around his neck loosens as he splashes a frustrated wave at the blond, slurring some curse along with it.

He giggles. Instead of running away as expected, he comes closer to the edge of the pool and squats, toes curling to balance himself on the rim. He rests his chin on his hand, squishing a cheek, “Howdy.”

Like a snake, Minghao launches and strikes in one sharp and pointed movement. Mingyu gets a face full of water, but he opens his eyes in time to see his dancer’s hand latch onto both lapels of Soonyoung’s towel and drag him into the pool with a strong tug. The shorter man kicks off with his legs, aiding Minghao’s strength, and does a formless flip into the water.

He should probably intervene.

Mingyu should probably intervene because the two are starting to wrestle towards the deep end while trying to drown each other—okay, so they’re adults and likely won’t be murdering each other in cold blood, but Minghao’s still carrying two injuries and Soonyoung has a habit of going too far when it comes to palling around. Seeing the stronger blond plunge his best friend under the water and watching all their limbs flail haphazardly drives him to pull them apart.

Where’s Wonwoo when he needs him? Dry, like a sane human being should be at this hour? Likely.

“Guys, stop, someone’s going to get h-” Mingyu’s warnings fall on deaf ears as he wades over with his arms up, blocking his vision from the splashes of water. However, that’s not what stops his sentence.

They’re both laughing—still yelling, but also laughing—and generally not angry. Minghao
might still be a little peeved that he got wet, but Mingyu thinks he’s more upset that Soonyoung rammed their heads together, “Take your jacket off or you really will drown.” The older man yanks on the hood of his windbreaker.

“I’m getting out, it’s fine.” He struggles free and makes his way to the edge of the pool where an attempt to hoist himself out is made, but his wrist gives out and he almost hits his chin on the concrete.

Mingyu, as expected, is over in a flash, already out of the water and offering a hand to take Minghao’s right, “Careful.” He braces himself and leans back, using his weight as a counterbalance to offset his weight.

“I’m careful.”

Sure, he says that, but he’s the one who’s sitting around in sopping clothes and shivering every time the wind picks up, “Let’s go back to the room and dry off.” And get washed, get to bed, and get to sharing body heat because he’s pretty sure his nipples are going to fall off if it gets any colder.

“Let’s get shots.” No, Soonyoung, let’s not get shots, “Get everybody over to the cabana thingy. I’ll order a round for everyone!” This sounds like a bad idea, “It’ll warm you up!” but at least his intentions are good. Sorta?

Hearing how chipper and happy he is, it’s hard for Minghao not to agree to just one drink. He does advise Soonyoung to stop drinking so much on his way over to the bar, but his words also go unheard over the roar of the leaves.

Defeated, he calls everyone over from the shallow end. They nod and start making their way over slowly, not wanting to leave the water they’ve acclimated to. He yells into the dark to call Jun and Jihoon over from wherever they ran off to and receives responses of what sounds like little more than a whisper. Whatever they said doesn’t matter, it’s probably better if they continued to spend a little private time together.

Under his breath, Minghao lists off every alcoholic thing that he’s consumed within the last few hours and berates him about his pacing before turning to Mingyu for assistance and heaving a sigh, “One drink, then bed, please.”

“Hey, you don’t have to tell me twice.” He rubs the towel into his hair before shaking his head wildly in an attempt to restore some of its volume. Water flies everywhere and Minghao shields himself with the flap of his coat, barely hiding his wide smile, “Sorry.”

He snaps his towel at Mingyu’s thigh, “Aren’t I wet enough?”

“You should take off,” a chuckle escapes him before he can finish his sentence. It earns him a curious eyebrow raise. Telling Minghao to take off all his clothes in public makes his cheeks red, so he rephrases, “your jacket at least. You’ll be warmer if you’re dry.” How complacent, he slowly strips off the clingy jacket and balls it up to toss onto the table. It knocks over someone’s water bottle in the process, but he doesn’t seem to care, “If I were you, I’d take the shirt off, too.” The cotton tank top probably retains more water than the windbreaker’s material.

Minghao gives him a pointed look, “I’ll keep it on, it’s almost dry.” He says as he wrings out at least a quarter cup of water into a bush.

Mingyu won’t push his luck.

It’s always a possibility that Minghao might not like physical parts of himself as much as
Mingyu doesn’t like historic parts of himself. Maybe he’s self-conscious about this or that—after all, you are your own worst critic and your flaws are magnified in the mirror—, but Mingyu can easily look past the minutia, “Can I at least get you a new towel?”

What he can’t look past is Minghao shivering and potentially getting sick.

He nods and Mingyu shuffles away to grab the biggest, freshest, hottest towel from the rack to swaddle him in. It’s the last one and he feels a sense of pride in snatching it for his man. Sure, it’s laughable to you now, but have you ever seen Minghao Xu drowning in a fluffy white towel? No. You haven’t. Because this is a sight for Mingyu’s eyes alone, “Come here.” He pats the seat cushioned seat next to him on the wicker bench.

“How?” Licking his lips before biting them, he attempts to hide the fact that he was, indeed, staring at milky thighs and delicate fingers, at a sheer tank top and dripping collarbones.

“This towel is nice.” He puts the cloth up to his nose and covers his mouth, dabbing away water as an excuse, “And yours is wet already.” Are you being shy? “Do you wanna share?”

Holding the left flap open for Mingyu to take a seat, he tries to look the slightest bit distracted by the murmurs in the pool.

How can he turn him down?

His towel is wet. He is cold. Soonyoung and Wonwoo won’t be back for another few minutes, the kids are all over by the pool. The heat transfer between bodies is more efficient than sitting alone.

And he won’t be one to leave Minghao alone, “Sure.”

The big towel is long enough to shelter both their shoulders only if he loops an arm behind Minghao’s back and wraps it around his waist. You may see it as an excuse to pull him closer, and Mingyu won’t be denying those claims because—even when he’s slathered in smelly chlorine and his hair is the texture of overcooked angel hair pasta—this feels like a step towards a more comfortable position in their relationship. Skin to skin, out in the open with all their friends able to see them; does this mean that Minghao’s okay with publicly revealing that they’re an item? It doesn’t take much to see it, but it’s not like Mingyu’s gotten any Facebook notifications declaring that he’s in a relationship with him. It’s not like he’s been tagged on Instagram or that he’s receiving prying questions from people who should be minding their own business.

Indeed, the pace of this relationship is something that he’s never encountered before but learning about Minghao and working with him has been incredibly rewarding in ways that he can’t describe- his ear ticks, but he doesn’t catch what Minghao whispers, “What?” he only feels the soft lips ghost over him.

“I said,” he sighs, “I’m sorry if I’ve been a stick in the mud tonight.”

“What are you talking about?”

Yeah, Minghao hasn’t really been his usual self for the last couple days. Mingyu hasn’t either. There are things on their minds; stuff that’s a little too embarrassing or forward to talk about and stuff that they’d rather wait to see the outcome of. Communication is needed, but it feels difficult to talk with the premise of an end lingering a few hours away. Minghao doesn’t need to list off all the things for Mingyu to understand what he’s hinting towards. His eyes say enough. He really is very sorry.

But for Mingyu, Minghao’s efforts to make him feel included have been tireless and astronomical. His words are often comforting and careful—not premeditated or meticulous, but
considerate and kind. He doesn’t need to think about including Mingyu, that’s just his default intention, “You’re fine.” He pulls Minghao’s half of the towel closer to ensure he stays unfrozen, “We’re fine.”

At the last sentiment, he looks up.

He searches Mingyu’s face for something. For what, he has no clue, but for some sort of answer nonetheless. The deep browns of his eyes are made into warm embers by the light of the tiki torches. They’re filled with fairy light stars and the lovely moon. He’d very much so like to tell Minghao how beautiful he looks tonight, but his words are stolen along with an uninvited—and very welcome—kiss.

When did kissing become a means of communication for them?

Maybe it’s his love-clouded heart talking—it’s certainly beating loud enough to be heard—, but when their lips meet, when he holds Minghao in his hands- in his arms- in his head- in his stomach- in his existence, all their pressing troubles fade into background noise. All those pressures and tribulations become little blemishes on an otherwise smooth and gentle sea.

He feels a kiss pressed into his temple and onto his cheek before waking to serious words, “Is it okay if we don’t kiss in front of everyone?”

He always has half a mind to ask why, but Mingyu figures that the answers will come to surface in time, “Totally.”

“Sorry-”

“Don’t apologize, it’s fine-”

“Let me finish.” Mingyu nods, “It’s just that I feel people have been interfering a lot. When I kiss you, I want it to be because I want to kiss you, not because our friends are cheering us on and egging us to make out or something.” He holds Mingyu’s hand, sandwiching it between his cold fingers, “This relationship is between you and me. Seungcheol isn’t involved, Soon isn’t involved, Wonwoo isn’t involved.” The intensity in his eyes is no joke, “They might have brought rise to ‘us’, but they’re not welcome to determine what we do and how we progress.” Wow, is it heating up in here? He feels flushed all around. It’s not to say Minghao’s being possessive—in fact, he’s pretty hands off—but to hear him want to isolate their personal relationship with such fervor is getting him a little hot and bothered. Who would’ve thought that, of all things, would be a turn on? “They can watch us grow, but I don’t want them to,” he wrinkles his nose and sniffs, probably still cold, “I don’t want them to decide how we grow. No pruning, no clipping, no moving us into different conditions.”

Someone—Mingyu doesn’t care to remember who—calls them over from the pool and says that Soonyoung wants them to go to the jacuzzi since it’s getting too cold and he doesn’t want to risk carrying a tray of drinks that far. He’d much rather continue listening to Minghao and talk about their situation and stance on this matter because he wholly agrees, but alas, they’re with their party of cohorts and coworkers. They can’t just ignore them until they fulfill their promise of one drink.

So, they start walking over with heavy feet.

“I want us to decide that.” Minghao’s voice is so quiet and faint that Mingyu stops moving. He lets the towel fall off his shoulder but catches the tail of it with his hand and pulls him back with a soft tug.
“We have been the only ones deciding that.” They resume the same pace again, “And we will be the only ones who continue on deciding this.” It might be too soon to say that this is Minghao’s biggest insecurity in their budding relationship, but he doesn’t think it’s a long shot. It’s not caused by one person in particular but by a compiled entity of both interpersonal and societal pressures. Mingyu would be lying if he said he didn’t feel it too. After all, without Wonwoo giving him a bit of a push, he likely wouldn’t have said anything to Minghao. He would have never gone to the studio and stopped their fight. So, he’ll thank him for that, but it’s also very important that it’s his unfiltered thoughts and intentions that go into fostering this romance. It’s crucial that Minghao is in this relationship with him and only him, “I’m yours for as long as you’ll have me. Please, don’t doubt that.”

He wants to seal it with a kiss. It feels like something you should seal with a kiss. Almost every inch of his body wants to seal it with a kiss especially with the way Minghao looks so somber.

But kisses can be left for bedtime.

Mingyu pats Minghao’s head, trying to tame his unruly hair as they arrive at the large jacuzzi where most of their friends have already claimed a spot in. The smile on his face is a silent thank you for remembering his words.

Jun and Jihoon both scoot over to make room.

Regretfully, the spot is between them, but there doesn’t seem to be any other choice unless they want to sit on the stairs. Wonwoo and Soonyoung will likely take those spots because of convenience, so the two sit down quietly. Having sensed the previous tension between Jihoon and Mingyu, Minghao picks the seat next to the audio technician.

Everyone’s a little loud and boisterous as the night draws to a close. The wine had its sweet time to wind its way through their veins, and while most of them didn’t drink to excess, it’s plain to see that there’s enough alcohol to make everyone comfortable and cheery. The others probably drank at dinner as well.

“Okay, first round!” Soonyoung’s feet slosh into the water as he carries the tray into the center of the jacuzzi. ‘Carries’, because whatever he’s doing isn’t—by definition—carrying. Balancing, more or less. Teetering. Something along those lines.

He hands Wonwoo the bottle of Herradura añejo, a dish of salt, and a bowl of limes to hold off to the side as he holds the tray high above everyone’s line of sight, “What are you doing?” Jun asks as he’s the first one prompted to choose a glass.

“Just pick.”

Jun raises his hand above his head and takes hold of a golden shot glass like a claw machine. And like a claw machine, he drops it into the tub by mistake, earning a round of laughs before flicking the water out of it. Everyone gets their turn to pick a mysterious color from the silver tray. He moves clockwise and Mingyu doesn’t pay it much attention until Wonwoo sighs after picking up a deep red glass.

Skipping his own spot and holding the try too high for Jihoon—who in turn jabs him in the stomach to get him to bend over—, a pink glass is chosen. Minghao reaches up following him and grabs blue.

Mingyu gets red.
Looking around the circle of people and at the assortment of things sitting behind Wonwoo, his brain is starting to add things up. Other than them, no one else has a dark red glass. There are two of each color despite there being an odd number of people. Roi has a cup of soda (how dadly of him), which makes everyone pair up nicely. Unfortunately, that also means—if his years of tedious math classes serve him right—the only color left for Soonyoung is-

“Ah, as always.” He loops an arm around Minghao’s neck with a knowing grin before pouring a round of shots for everyone—even a little into Roi’s cup and apologizing after he’s yelled at—and passing the bowl of limes. Delicately—as if he’s capable of any sort of delicacy at this hour—, he balances the dish of salt on the floating tray and takes his seat again, “So, fuckos, nothing says late-night, family-friendly bonding like,” he winces, kisses his teeth, and rewinds, “nevermind, one shot before I give y’all the rules.” About half of them swing back their colorfull glasses and refill them.

Minghao only takes a little taste before sticking his tongue out and sputtering quietly. He shakes his head at Mingyu with slight panic in his eyes before reaching behind him and dumping more than half his glass onto the cement and refilling the rest of the shot with jacuzzi water. If it’s bad enough that he’d rather drink the chlorinated water that they—and many strangers—have been stewing in, it must be pretty bad. Mingyu dips a finger into his and has a little taste. It’s not so bad and it’s pretty sweet and smooth. It doesn’t taste like absolute regret, only, like, 85% regret.

It’s probably the alcohol content that Minghao’s more concerned about and Mingyu’s not in the mood for a hangover tomorrow morning, so he follows suit and drips half his shot over his shoulder, covering the glass with his hand so no one can see his cheating move. Soonyoung must be a stickler for rim-full rules. He hopes that Wonwoo won’t mind.

One drink, then bed, please.

_Aside, his brain is screaming, “Slake your thirst with a bit of salt. It’s not so bad.”_

One drink, _then bed, love._

“_AsIwassaying._” Soonyoung splashes his hand in the water after coughing, “nothing says late-night bonding like a round of body shots, so find your partner and get ready.” Fuck, “We’ll go this way,” he stirs his finger in a counterclockwise direction, “starting with Woo and who?” he squints to look around, “Oh, Gyu.” Like he didn’t plan it to happen like this? “Starting with Wahnoo and Mango. Best shot gets brekkie on me.”

Well, there’s no backing out now.

Mingyu makes his way to the center of the jacuzzi with Wonwoo in tow.

He may or may not have fantasized about this in brief _months_ ago and if it had to be anyone that wasn’t Minghao- no, he’s pretty sure he still doesn’t want to do this with Wonwoo, “So, how are we doing this?”

“Make it _hooooooottt._” Soonyoung cheers.

Man, the amount of trust he has in Wonwoo- wait, is this a kink or something? Is this a _thing_ for them to play the jealousy game? Is this going to be the fricking dance conference dinner again? Well, at least Jun and Jihoon aren’t involved this time, “Salt, shot, lime?”

“So.” Whatever, let’s get it over with, “Wait, what are you doing?”

The lime wedged between his teeth is removed so he can speak, “It’s a body shot.”

He should have expected this much. He was hoping they’d be on the same page about this—
about not touching in inappropriate ways—, but the gears are clicking in his head. Wonwoo probably knows that Soonyoung’s up to something and wants to give him a run for his money. At least he doesn’t have to take the shot from his body.

He’ll count his blessings tonight.

He feels like there’s an odd familiarity of some event leading up to this moment—likely from now-nightmarish university days—and he knows there was once a time that being in the spotlight doing body shots with a good looking someone or other would give him the high of attention and adrenalin. Tonight, today, tomorrow, this week, this month, this foreseeable future; he feels incredibly out of his element. It gives him the heebie jeebies to get suggestively intimate with anyone that isn’t Minghao. It makes his skin crawl uncomfortably.

Mingyu lines the rim of his glass with salt before swinging it back.

Wow.

This is absolutely terrible.

In a rush to grab The Lime of Relief, he bumps lips with Wonwoo and doesn’t care in the slightest because that was an atrocity to alcohol. Why does Soonyoung like things that are so bad?

Did he just give a blowjob to a rotting oak tree slathered in cough syrup? Wow. Amazing.

Wow.

Wow.

He’s so glad he poured half of that into the jacuzzi.

Oh my god.

“Stay still.” Wonwoo chuckles, handing a new lime to our long-suffering Mingyu. Shuddering—but taking the lime between his teeth anyways—, he listens long enough for the senior PT to sprinkle the coarse granules onto his forearm and lick him. Ewewewewew. He feels a hand grab the back of his neck as he recoils slightly. He puts his own hands out to stop Wonwoo from pulling him any closer. Despite everyone’s high spirits and constant whooping, he’s ready to call it quits. But, alas, he feels his coworker’s teeth accidentally graze his upper lip before he takes the lime and finishes their round.

Feeling spent, he lacks any sort of grace coming back to Minghao’s side and rolling his head back, “That was bad.” He gurgles after hitting his skull against the rim of the jacuzzi. He doesn’t even remember when Wonwoo took his shot, “Soon, you have absolutely terrible taste in tequila.”

“It’s tequila?”

This fucking imbecile.

“Yes.” Jihoon sighs to Minghao’s right, “It literally says it on the bottle.”

“Ohyeahnicecool, I just asked for something smooth and sweet.”

He should have expected this much.

What he doesn’t expect is for this round of body shots to quickly escalate into a game of chicken. After he and Wonwoo sit back down and take a moment to recollect—although the latter
seems much more smug about it—Jun pops too much salt into his mouth, shoots back his shot, and immediately spits it out in a fit of laughter. His partner, Amy, yells and splashes him before taking her shot and dipping him as if they were tangoing. She plops the lime into his mouth only to fish it back out a second later and drops Jun into the water like a sack of hot potatoes.

They’re both in high spirits.

Neither looks uncomfortable because neither of them is in a committed relationship, and they don’t have to put up with the interference of two very dumb, very annoying people. Soonyoung, he’s looking at you- stop petting Minghao, stop pinching his cheeks and stop snuggling up to him. In contrast, Minghao doesn’t look perturbed in the slightest. He’s adapted to Soonyoung’s flirty antics over the years. ‘That’s just Soon being Soon,’ he’d say every now and then when Mingyu would question the affectionate dancer’s intentions.

They’ve done risqué things on stage before and in the practice room, too, but does he have to do it right in front of Mingyu? Just because one person is comfortable enough in their own relationship to flirt with other people casually doesn’t mean that everyone else is. To Mingyu, there’s something principally iffy about it, especially when Wonwoo gets all wound up. But what does he know about balanced, idealized, perfect relationships? He’s never been in one.

Until now, hopefully.

Unfortunately, neither Soonyoung nor Minghao are the type to back down from a challenge.

By the time everyone’s had their turn, the shots have gotten a little too touchy-feely for Mingyu’s comfort. Whoever—no, he’s a little too flustered to remember names—just finished taking their shot licked salt off a shoulder and took the glass from the recipient’s waistband. Everyone seems so open and okay about it because they’re close. He understands that. They’re close and most of them have known each other for years, they know their own boundaries.

He’s the outsider, so it’s okay to play along.

If Minghao’s okay with it, it’s okay to play along.

“You first.” Even with the context, Soonyoung manages to sound as happy as a kid walking into a candy store. He pops the lime into his mouth and holds out his arms to be salted.

His dancer holds a pinch and thinks for a moment, uncharacteristically slow. He looks back at Mingyu for a fraction of a second before dropping the grains on the blond’s wrist, licking him, shooting back the tequila, and calmly taking the lime from his mouth without letting their lips meet. It’s all very methodical and quick, akin to the kind of cinematic shot that would be replayed five times over in a corny martial arts movie so you can appreciate its accuracy from three different angles.

However, it wasn’t enough for their friends and they whine at the lack of show.

Mingyu can almost feel the wave of dread radiate from their side of the jacuzzi as Minghao suckles his lime and tosses it aside, “I’m gonna do lime, shot, salt, ‘mkay?”

He nods, wanting to get it over and done with.

Minghao sinks his teeth into the bitter rind of the lime and waits with his arms crossed as Soonyoung sprinkles bits of salt like glitter onto his shoulder.
Whew.

Okay, it’s just the shoulder, whatever.

Holding Minghao in place by the nape of his neck is a little much but Wonwoo had to do the same thing to Mingyu in order to prevent an accidental lip-lock. He stands them chest to chest, taking the citrus without any regard for avoiding a kiss. Admittedly, seeing Soonyoung kiss Minghao is the slightest bit attractive, but the remaining fraction shifts Mingyu into an unfavorable, salty, bitter, upset state.

Minghao’s shoulders shirk up as he turns his head away and grits his teeth, causing the salt to spill into his clavicle. Soonyoung is still holding him in place for the two seconds it takes him to take his shot. When he comes back to seek out the salt—like a weirdo, who chases shots with salt?—and finds that it’s rolled away, he pulls he silver-haired man even closer, dipping him like Amy had done to Jun.

His lips are just about to meet his neck when Minghao loses his balance and slips, slamming himself into the water and away from Soonyoung. The comedic action sends a couple into hysterics while the rest splash at him.

It was an escape.

What a way to conclude the night.

When Minghao comes back to the surface and shakes out his hair, there’s a tight smile on his face. He chuckles and apologizes for the mess up, something is off. Mingyu can feel it.

Jihoon mentions something about everyone having drunk enough for the night—and for the week—and suggests that they turn in so they can get up for brunch tomorrow without wanting to die. Wonwoo agrees and drags Soonyoung out of the water by his wrist roughly even though his voice is gently wishing everyone a good night. There’s so much resting behind his eyes and his words.

Whatever, that’s their problem to work out and Mingyu will have time to seriously talk with him in the future. For now, as long as they leave him and Minghao out of their antics, he won’t want to fight anyone—even if he might cry in the process.

“Remember to use protection tonight, kids.” Or something like that without all the vowels. Go to bed, Soonyoung, you’re drunk, “Give lotsa smoothies. Get some dick but not too much, you still have to dance tomorrow.” Bold of him to assume that they’re going to have sex. Sleep sounds much more enticing.

Yeah, they need to rest.

They need to talk.

One by one, they vacate the jacuzzi and make their way back to their rooms.

But Minghao isn’t moving yet.

So, Mingyu isn’t moving either.

They wait for a while until everyone is gone.
And once everyone is gone, it’s Mingyu who gets out first, taking the towel with him and walking silently to the cabana to grab their things.

“Hey, you’re gonna get wrinkly.” He returns to stand by the stairs leading into the water, hanging their jackets on the handrail and dropping slippers by the edge. He holds the large towel out, ready to receive the pouty dancer in a big, fluffy embrace. Let it go for the night, there’s time to argue about it when everyone is sober.

Not expecting an arrow to the heart in the form of Minghao’s saddest, most sorrowful, sparkly puppy eyes, he subconsciously covers his chest to check for injury. The man sluggishly stands up to get out, goosebumps raising up on his skin the moment he leaves the water. He reaches for his not-so-dry windbreaker when Mingyu stops him, toweling him off with quick pats and rubs before tossing his tiki-toasted jacket over Minghao’s slender frame and zipping it up all the way to his neck.

His smile earlier was for show.

Minghao’s just as mad and upset as he was.

But Mingyu just wrinkles his lips and pulls the hood up over his head, “One drink,” pulling the drawstrings down, “then bed,” and taking his hand, “please.”

“I still want to vom. That was so gross.” Minghao wraps the towel around Mingyu’s shoulders and walks next to him, “Why does he have absolute garbage taste in liquor? I mean, I guess it’s expected of someone who only pretends to like drinking. When we were in college, he’d only order Moscow Mules because they tasted like limeade. I’d rather do shots of cough syrup, u-”

“Hey, Minghao?” He doesn’t want to cut him off, but he’s running his mouth because he feels like he needs to fill the silence. Mingyu doesn’t want him to do that right now. He wants to address it while it’s still fresh.

“Mm.”

Mingyu stops shuffling with his clumsy slippers for a moment, “Look at me.”

“Yeah?” he pulls the hood off once they’re inside and out of the wind.

“Is it,” he thinks about his word choice because he doesn’t want to offend anyone. At the same time, he’d really like to punch both Soonyoung and Wonwoo in the face. Minghao had just said he didn’t want anyone interfering in their relationship. Mingyu had agreed. They were on the same page. So, when one action contradicts the other so abruptly, he’s thrown for a loop. How is he supposed to feel? How can he feel any other way?

Minghao’s voice is tiny and soft, “Is it what?”

“Is it okay to be mad about what happened just now?”

Chapter End Notes

you’ve elected to drink because you’re losing someone, tequila is a bad choice, but you’ve already messed up a lot tonight. it’s better to forget that you did.
“Mad.”

Minghao takes a step away from him, expanding the preexisting space. It almost sounds like a question, but there isn’t a bit of surprise in his steady voice.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.” He breathes, blinks, and taps the elevator’s call button but not hard enough for it to light up, “You can be mad at me. I should have said someth-“

“No.” Mingyu slaps the button a second time, hard enough to make Minghao jump a little— which is an accident he already regrets—, “I’m not mad at you.” That’s a lie. He’s a little mad at Minghao. He already knows that he can read that in his tone. Fairly, Minghao might have been a little mad at him for kissing-not-kissing Wonwoo. That’s fine, too. Mingyu’s a little peeved that he also almost kissed his coworker.

\textit{Ding}. Immediate this time. They didn’t have to wait. After all, it’s past 2am, not many people are coming in from the pool at this hour.

Unfortunately, the ride up to the room is rather silent. It doesn’t take long to reach their floor and sluggishly waddle themselves into their room. They lock the door, flick on the lights, and just wait for the silence to lift despite not knowing what to say and how to say it. There’s something heavy in the air, but it’s no heavier than what they’ve been dealing with already. However, neither of them have the will to fight tonight and, for the record, Mingyu doesn’t want to fight.

He wants to talk and work things out regardless of how difficult that may be.

He wants to listen to what Minghao has to say and discuss what they should do in order to avoid situations like this in the future because he knows that’s what he wants as well.

It’s new, isn’t it?

Wanting to talk instead of abandoning topics or internalizing them until he forgets and wounds scab over is something he’s never really experienced before. Sure, he’s usually the less aggressive one in relationships—that’s just his nature—but when he’d felt this way before, he’d try to sweep it away, leave the person in the past, and move on.

Passive.

That was his theory on addressing snags in the road. It’s been a mantra he was raised to feel comfortable with. When it comes to people, let the bumps and blips in a relationship pass. Let tiny things die. Let his spouse be mad, talk about it after a few days if it’s still bugging them, but if it’s a topic that can go without revival, then let it die. Let it die. There’s no sense in fighting and arguing about something that can be erased with time and when you have forever with someone, you have a lot of time.

He can understand his parents’ sentiments. After all, they’ve been married all this time and while they do argue on occasion, it was never anything huge and no one really yelled. No one slept
on the couch and no one had to stay over at a friend’s house. Sometimes grand apologetic gestures were conducted, but they usually made up with a kiss here, a hug there. Maybe that’s why Mingyu’s so nonconfrontational—he just never learned how to confront someone. The extent of his confrontations at work were limited to asking Joshua for schedule changes and switching patients with Seokmin and Jeonghan. The extent of his confrontations in university were limited to test corrections and sweet-talking his way out of a parking ticket. The extent of his confrontations in school were limited to asking teachers about incorrect marks and asking coaches to put him on starting string.

But that was it.

That was it.

No, it wasn’t.

There was one other confrontation in high school and that one involves the man across the room who is rolling up his wet jacket and stuffing it into a plastic bag. It involved a cafeteria and the smell of grease-infused ceiling tiles and shoe-scuffed linoleum. It involved a couple hundred ears and a couple hundred eyes. It involved Mingyu acting irrationally and causing a scene—doing things he would never do, even now—just to get under someone’s skin and get a reaction out of him.

The more he thinks about it, the more it seems out of character. Had he really liked Minghao so much at that time? Was negative attention already a world better than no attention at all?

Does it even matter anymore? It’s something they can both leave in the past. It’s something he wants to bury. And maybe it’s the alcohol talking, but it’s more than likely the fact that some corner of his heart hurts whenever he’s troubled, but he still wants to talk. It’s going to be tough, but he still wants to talk. If it ends in a fight, then it’s a fight they’ll have. They’re going to argue and fight in the future—for what, he doesn’t know—, they might as well take the first step now.

His intentions are from different ten years ago, but Minghao is still someone worth fighting for.

He can almost feel his parents sitting on his shoulders, telling him to let things go—that there was no harm done and that they can talk about it after tomorrow’s results—, but when the shorter man yawns and rubs his sunken eyes he shoos them away. Much like Minghao’s best friends and stand-in guardian aren’t welcome to drive their relationship anywhere, his parents and their expectations aren’t welcome either.

This is theirs to do with as they please; to discover and mold, to foster and cherish. Minghao’s been waiting for Mingyu to take his turn at taking the initiative and it’s his responsibility to reciprocate that gesture. Maybe now isn’t when he’d appreciate him doing that, but he feels like he has to say something. Anything.

It’s time to grow up.

“You said it well earlier.” Mingyu looks over, stopping Minghao from picking at this earring with a gentle hand. The premise of a serious talk is already making him this anxious, but it has to be done. There’s no turning back without regret. He idly irons out his fingers and puts them in his lap before moving back to his luggage and taking out his toiletries and a fresh set of pajamas, “No one should be interfering and deciding things for us,” He moves to take his bracelet off to shower—like he does every night—, but stops when he touches the clasp because he can feel eyes on him. When he meets them, he feels like he’s done something wrong again- Oh- no, that’s not it. It really isn’t.

Mingyu’s not the type to do something so low and petty just because of something so small. Even if he’s upset now, he’d never do something so dramatic to hurt Minghao. He’s definitely not the type of
person to rip a wedding ring off during a fight and throw it into an unnamed abyss. He wasn’t going to remove the bracelet because he’s upset, it’s just habit for him to take it off before his showers. It was just bad timing. The worst timing because Minghao looks two motions away from being mortified. He wasn’t thinking, “so what do we do? They’re playing a game and we keep getting involved.” He slides the bracelet up his arm a bit so it sits snuggly and safe, “Even if we don’t want them as part of our relationship, we’ve somehow wound up as part of theirs.”

He’s never going to go back on his word. He’s Minghao’s safe space and protector and he will be for as long as he’ll have him. He’ll ensure his happiness. That’s his job as a significant other; as a partner.

“I know,” Minghao lowers his head, “I know,” and turns to finish picking up things for his own shower, “I,” he blinks slowly, exhausted, “can we talk about this after we’re clean and not covered in chlorine?” He stands up with a graceful and swift movement, “You can go first, I’d just—”

Mingyu sets his things down, “You go first,” and walks over to usher him into the bathroom, patting the top of his head, kneading a hand into his shoulder, “it looks like you’re about to pass out.”

Minghao allows himself to be guided to the shower before closing the door behind him quietly.

This is okay.

This is fine.

They said they would talk about it.

They aren’t ignoring it. They aren’t ignoring it.

He decides to burn some time organizing things that don’t need organizing. He turns on the TV and puts on something uninteresting to act as background noise as he looks out the window. They’re not that high, but since the hotel is on a slight hill in the middle of the city, it overlooks the neighborhood behind it that’s full of single and two-story houses. There’s a church in the distance that is beautifully lit and a tower further away that serves as a beacon of light. You can even see the bridge and all its cars even this late at night.

Maybe he should have listened to his parents. Maybe he shouldn’t have tried to talk about things. The reason for the sudden doubt is that Minghao’s not humming in the shower like he’d done before and that probably means something. Does it mean something? Does it have to mean something?

His forehead bumps against the glass as he teeters on the balls of his feet. They still ache from those mistakes of shoes.

It would have been simpler to call out Soonyoung and Wonwoo weeks ago. He should have done that weeks ago. Minghao should have too. But he knows they both have their reasons for enduring it. Part of him liked it. Part of him liked the push, the childish teasing, the immature gestures, and he has a feeling that Minghao also enjoyed the chasing game to a point, but while he doesn’t want to be cookie-cutter professional about this relationship, it’s something that he wants to take seriously.

His feelings are serious and right now he’s seriously upset that Soonyoung had pushed Minghao into a very uncomfortable corner and that Minghao hadn’t said anything to get out of it before that point. It’s not jealous. He’s not jealous of what Soonyoung has with Minghao. He
simply feels disregarded. Sure, it was a game, but isn’t it normal to understand boundaries.

Then again, it’s Soonyoung. It’s Soonyoung and Soonyoung is goofy and loud and ridiculous in every sense of the word. His heart is in the right place—he cried adopting a cat—and he and Wonwoo truly showed Mingyu a reflection of a happiness he could one day have. He’s adorable and (mostly) pleasant. Many parts of Mingyu almost feel guilty for being upset with him, but he has to remind himself that he’s not directly mad at Soonyoung just as he’s not directly mad at Minghao. He’s mad at the situation that a cumulation of their decisions and actions have whittled them into; himself for not being more attentive, Minghao for not stopping earlier, Wonwoo for not saying anything weeks or months or years into their relationship, and Soonyoung for being a clingy, drunk friend.

Absolutely all of it can be let go of. It can all go back into the river of the mind, washed away when he takes his shower. He knows Minghao’s a professional at getting over things and this is just a little small thing that he’ll be able to get over as well. However, it’s Mingyu that can’t let go so easily. He’s never felt this sort of—hm, well, it’s not exactly anger, or fury, or jealousy, or envy. He’s not about to go to Wonwoo’s room and knock on their door to tell them off, but it unsettles him enough to drag Minghao into a deep conversation.

This is important for their growth. There might be better times to talk about it, but he’s upset now, and he wants to not be upset by the time he loses consciousness in those sheets—

The bathroom door opens.

Lost in his thoughts, he’d missed when the shower had shut off, “Your turn.” His voice is still a little defeated and down in his oversized shirt—with too many holes in it, is that fashion or wear-and-tear—and baby blue, baggy fleece bottoms printed with a variety of cute frogs. The metal-rimmed glasses look very unfamiliar perched on his nose—not like he can’t see without them—but the round frames somehow soften his features. His hair is a whole mess and he’s weaponized with a comb and a bottle of spray detangler, but there’s something on his face that reads tired and frustrated. Clearly, the reason he didn’t want to get his hair wet was likely because he didn’t want to deal with all the knots.

Every movement he makes seems like it’s full of dread and Mingyu’s not sure if that’s because he’s not looking forward to their talk or because he hates tugging at his damaged hair for extended amounts of time. His eyes, however, are filled with something that he can’t quite describe or process entirely. Does he want a hug? Does he need one? Does he want to sleep? Does he have to look so vulnerable at a time like this? He seems so unsure of everything.

He hisses as he puts his things away, calling his attention immediately.

“You okay?”

“Yep.” His voice is strained. Something in him still hurts whenever he shows that he’s in pain. It’s better than him hiding that he’s in pain—and he’s very glad that they’ve established this trust—but the way Minghao’s brows pinch makes him concerned. He probably doesn’t realize that Mingyu can see him. “Just stepped wrong. It’s been kinda sore since earlier when I s—” he backtracks, “since earlier.”

It was when he slipped in the jacuzzi. Since earlier when Soonyoung made him trip in the jacuzzi.

“Let me take a look.”
“It’s fine, really.” But, again, they’re too tired to argue. Despite wanting to dominate the situation himself, Minghao has a seat on the bed, rolls up his pant leg, and removes the Velcro brace to show Mingyu what appears to be the non-existent damage.

It’s not bad. It’s not very swollen. If anything, it’s probably just sore from being used so much; rehearsals, walking to and from dinner, and wrestling in the pool. When he slipped it was possible that he tried to catch his weight with it instinctually and hit it on the bottom of the jacuzzi, maybe on the filter or drain. Nevertheless, Mingyu sets to work with a light massage.

It’s silent for the longest time. Maybe Minghao thinks he’s mad again and that he failed at sweeping the problem away. Well, he wouldn’t be entirely wrong to assume those things. He’s still upset about it—not as much as before, but he’s still not over what happened less than half-an-hour ago. If his heart had fists, they’d still be balled up. If he could breathe fire, he’d keep his mouth shut.

But Minghao makes him so soft.

Minghao mellows him out without dousing his flame.

He’s started to organize Mingyu’s bangs, combing strands into place and tucking bits and pieces here and there. He straightens out the curl in the hem of his swim trunks and evens out the neon drawstrings. Maybe he thinks being nice will lighten the load later. He doesn’t have anything to worry about. Mingyu’s not here to lecture him or yell at him.

Again, he’s not mad at Minghao. He’s mad at this situation involving Minghao. To him, they’re very different things, but he has to understand that Minghao might not read the situation like that. He’s the type to shoulder the blame. He has to be understanding. He has to try to see it from Minghao’s perspective. It’s unfair for him to be up in arms twelve hours away from a not-that-big-but-still-important competition and he knows that his significant other won’t mind talking about it when they’re both not sleep deprived and trapped in a hotel in the city.

He can postpone until the car ride home tomorrow. He, too, can be patient and kind.

“We don’t have t-”

“Let’s talk about it.” Always full of surprises, this one.

“Okay.” Mingyu wraps his knee back up with the brace and properly secures it. He always has the habit of making it too tight. It doesn’t allow for good circulation, “Let’s talk about it.”

“Where should we start?” his voice is almost robotic, like he’s spent a good amount of time thinking about a proper answer to Mingyu’s prying questions.

Mingyu scoots over so he’s facing him on the bed, “I don’t know.”

“What’s bugging you? We know what’s bugging us overall, but what specific thing is bugging you?”

Wow, Minghao really knows what he’s doing. How many times did he mull over this during his ten-minute shower? “I,” He really has to think about this question carefully, “Why didn’t you tell Soonyoung to back off?”

“That’s like asking why you didn’t tell Wonwoo to back off.” Prickly subject, okay, “I mean, he’s your friend and colleague, right?”

“I think my relationship with Wonwoo and your relationship with Soonyoung are a little
different.” Minghao’s listening intently and seriously. It’s weird and new. He’s not used to conversing like this and it makes him nervous.

“Okay.”

“Wonwoo and I are work-friends. You and Soon are best friends with a long history and,” Mingyu doesn’t even know if he’s supposed to bring something like this up. It’s not really the reason he’s upset, but, “and he was interested in you at one point or another. He gets really handsy with you and Wonwoo doesn’t like it, but he keeps doing it anyway and I don’t understand that, and I don’t understand why you let him do it.”


“It’s okay to keep it simple.”

“Soonyoung doesn’t like talking about his feelings, but after knowing him this long, you can pick up on his habits. He wears his heart on his sleeve and isn’t good at hiding things.” Minghao thinks about his words, “He’s a lot like Chan. They have similar backgrounds and the way they think about work and dance is very similar,” Mingyu would have never assumed that to be the case considering Soonyoung is a ball of sunshine and Chan is less-than-inviting, “it’s why Soonyoung usually takes Chan’s side when we argue. Neither of them like change that they aren’t actively a part of- that’s not to say they can’t adapt or accept change, they just get miffed by it.” He’s not sure he likes where this is going, “But you’ve already had a hard time with Chan and Cheol and Jun and their drama.” His lip twitches to the side in a sort of quirked smile, “You don’t get to deal with Soonyoung. Wonwoo doesn’t even have to deal with Soonyoung.”

“Is he bullying you?”

“Nonono, nothing like that.” Minghao pats his shoulder. Apparently, he’d tensed up, “Soon’s just a lot less mature than the others in this aspect. He doesn’t tell me what’s wrong, so I have to guess, and after Vernon’s whole hospital episode and Chan’s hissy fit, I figured it was probably something similar.”

He’s dumbfounded, “That makes no sense. Soonyoung wants us to be together. He and Wonwoo set this up!”

“Shh, I know.” He placates Mingyu by handing him one of the pillows to crush, “I know, that’s why I didn’t get it and I still don’t get it.” He stacks his own pillows up to lean against, gesturing with his hands, “I think he wants us to happy, but he also doesn’t want anything to change.”

Mingyu puts the pillow on Minghao’s lap and rests his head on it, letting his long legs dangle off the bed, “What’s there to change?”

He shrugs, moving his left hand to rest over his bare chest, “Before there was you and Wonwoo, there was me and Jun and because Jun had a language barrier a few years ago, Soon was stuck with me.” His palms are warm, “He’s childish and acts naïve, and before Wonwoo moved to town, Soon would regularly ask me to spend the night.”

“Wait, so did you two, um,”

Minghao scoffs and smacks Mingyu on the cheek lightly, “No. We didn’t kiss with intention
or have sex or anything like that. We’d just watch videos and hang out and eat too much cheap popcorn.” It’s not his fault for thinking that. He’s never been invited over to someone’s house for the night just to literally Netflix and chill, “What I’m getting at is that Soonyoung’s just not used to sharing me—maybe that’s the wrong term. He’s not— you know, yeah, I guess that’s the most direct way to put it.” He takes Minghao’s hand, pulling it away from his face and putting it back on his chest. Don’t be so tense, dear. No one is leaving this conversation hurt, Mingyu will do his part to ensure that, “He was kind of like this when I moved in with Seungcheol, but it wasn’t nearly as bad.”

“So, it’s because of me?”

He makes some noise and pushes the glasses up his nose bridge, telling Mingyu he doesn’t really know, “I’ve been trying to prove that being with you isn’t going to change my relationship with them and it’s not going to change my relationship with dance and my career.” Closing his eyes and lowering his head, he speaks quietly, “But it’s been hard. Even before Wonwoo, Soon’s always been clingy and touchy with everyone. He’s just a flirty person and he’s also incredibly oblivious. We’ve grown used to it and I never thought twice about what he does to me or anyone else.” Minghao sits back up with a sigh, “But when it comes to you,” and leaves it there. He can’t finish his thoughts.

Mingyu sits up as well. He scoots closer, pressing one hand to the mattress on the other side of Minghao’s waist so that they’re at equal eye level, “When it comes to me?”

“Yeah.” He looks away, out the window, over the city, who knows.

He can pick up that much. When it comes to him—ever since this whole mutual attraction thing started—, something about sitting pretty with your flirty friends ought to feel dishonest. To some degree, it’s different when you’re alone with them, but when it’s in front of your object of affection, motions can’t be ignored, “So, you didn’t say anything tonight because you didn’t want Soonyoung to feel like things are changing?” He’s okay with that in theory, but in the long-term—well, it will take some compromise.

“I didn’t want to say anything tonight. I didn’t want to throw Soonyoung off his game tonight. He was drunk, and his inhibitions were abandoned at dinner. Arguing with him would have been a waste of energy since he’ll probably forget it tomorrow.” His head bumps against the headboard with a soft thump. Clearly, Minghao’s one of those people who gets worn by talks like this. He sounds emotionally drained, “So, sorry for what happened. I should have stopped him early on, but I’ll do it after the competition.”

Somehow, that doesn’t sit well with him. It’s not exactly what he wants to hear, but that’s probably a good thing. He doesn’t want Minghao to tell him exactly what he wants to hear. He wants honesty. It takes him a solid moment of staring at his closed eyes and tired face before he’s able to figure out why he’s not happy with the explanation, “Don’t apologize.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?”

“When you apologize, you’re admitting that you did something wrong.”

Minghao lifts his head slightly off the headboard and slowly creaks open his exhausted eyes, “Did I not do something wrong?”

Mingyu shakes his head, “You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m sorry if I made it feel that way.” The dancer looks at him with hooded eyes, half-expectant but mostly sleep-deprived, “Did I make you feel that way?” It takes Minghao a few seconds to process the question before nodding.
Now that things are said and done, he gains a good amount of clarity to the situation. Neither of them are to blame. There’s something to be upset about, but—at this particular time—there’s nothing they can do about it. It’ll have to wait until tomorrow night, “You should go shower, it’s getting late.”

“Can we promise to figure out a solution to those two at a later, more-sober time, then?” Minghao nods actively, agreeing with the rest of his energy. He’s attentive and he’s been listening to all of Mingyu’s words with his entire face—if that’s even possible—and, all in all, he feels good after having this chat.

They’ve had serious talks before, most of which took place at the counter in Mingyu’s apartment on windy nights. The talks were usually about less pressing things like general politics, personal beliefs, and county happenings. However, he’s actually very happy that their first potentially problematic discussion was handled with such grace. Neither of them wants to other to feel hurt or offended by these troubles. Neither of them wants to feel like they’re barring the other from maintaining their intimate friendships. Because they’re still learning a lot about each other and their personal limits on topics like this, experimenting with such dire people was risky.

How nice is it, though, that he feels like the fist clenching his heart has gone.

Mingyu tries his best to telepathically send a signal that he’d like to seal that promise with a kiss, going so far as to bite his lower lip and letting it pop out from between his teeth before pursing them slightly. Maybe he’s not in the mood. Maybe he thinks making out with Mingyu when he’s already half naked will just give a head start for one thing to lead to another.

That’s fine.

He probably wouldn’t want to make out with himself either. He still stinks of chlorine and dry pool water.

Chapter End Notes

oof what a talk.

tbh i think i'm the kind of person who would try not to argue, but if it really bugs me and this person is really important to me, then i wouldn't have any other choice but to talk it out ;; as an adult, having convos like this should be easy in theory, but in practice i think it's really difficult to confront people.

did you ever figure out who you were telling to drink?
When he gets out of the shower, the room is silent.

The show he had put on earlier—some documentary about meerkats—has been turned off. The lights have dimmed, and their shoes are tucked away, but everything else is as he left it. It’s just eerily quiet. Thusly, Mingyu tries to brush his teeth as silently as possible. He makes the faucet piddle water into the sink and combs his hair deftly. He does his normal skincare routine with more grace than normal so he’s not just slapping product on his skin—in all honesty, it makes him feel like he’s taking better care of himself to slow down a bit.

Maybe Minghao went to sleep.

He was already looking pretty rundown and exhausted. Having such a long and arduous conversation right after such a tiresome day must be draining. He completely understands. After taking a steamy shower and clothing himself in soft cotton shorts and a comfy t-shirt, he’s just about ready to call it a night himself. If anything, he’d be surprised if Minghao didn’t get sick right after this competition, and if he does get sick, it’s kind of fun to imagine fretting over him, bringing him soup and medication, forcing him to stay home and tucked in bed. Of course, if Minghao doesn’t get sick, that’s just as good—to health and happiness—but, but, but, if he did get sick, Mingyu promises to cook for him and baby him and cut the crusts off his sandwiches and warm up his tea fifteen times because he keeps forgetting to drink it.

He wants to be the doting significant other that he’s wired to be and would enjoy being. He wants to try his hand at playing that role in someone’s life. It’s a bonus that it’ll be Minghao’s.

Oh, c’mon. Even thinking about taking care of him is making his heart drum. This is so lame. He’s done for-

“Yeah, sure,” his voice is barely a mumble, “thanks, Jay. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He’s on the phone? “No, it’s fine. I wasn’t sleeping yet.” There’s some sort of brightness in his voice, but it’s not excited or happy. It sounds artificial. How should he put it? He sounds like he’s using his customer service voice, “Bye.”

He hears the phone clatter on the nightstand right after his glasses and Minghao shuffle in the sheets, stretching out on the cool, goose-down blanket and rolling around. He pokes his head out to see just that. The silver-haired man twists his hips and pops his back, relieving his spine of knotted muscles and strain. He sits back on his knees and leans forward to stretch again—improperly—, smothering his face into a pillow and reaching his hands out to grab at the pillows and headboard.

Mingyu’s not exactly silent when he gets on the bed behind him and applies pressure to his lower back, pressing a palm down firmly to help correct his form.

His footsteps were intentionally heavy. He doesn’t want to startle him and if his aid was unwelcome, he’d want Minghao to express that nonverbally. This probably seems like a compromising position—not like that’s how they started off back at the clinic and on Mingyu’s living room floor—but he doesn’t care. His intentions aren’t there, they’re where Minghao is trying to relieve some pain. But it seems like his company is appreciated because after two more disinterested
yoga positions, he rolls over onto his back and loosely wraps his legs around Mingyu’s waist and he’s easily forgiven for making them talk about friend troubles. His baggy t-shirt rides halfway up his stomach and the cuffs of his plush pants are teasing at his lower back.

He makes an effort to go against habitual behavior and he knows that even if Minghao was okay with making love tonight, that it wouldn’t sit right. All that activity and jostling, it’s just not good for him the night before a competition—well, there are less strenuous sexual activities that they could get up to, but if it’s going to be their first time together, he’d much rather do it right—with all the motions of courting; the typical dinner and movie, flowers, what have you.

He wants it to be a little more special and memorable than half-assed, redeye quickies in an unfamiliar hotel.

He wants to talk about tomorrow, talk about their day, talk about Cacahuate and about Byeol, but kneeling on a bed between his man’s legs derails his train of thoughts ever so slightly, “Phone call? At this hour?” He hopes he’s not staring, but he knows he’s totally staring. Mingyu tries to save some face by pulling the hem of his shirt down, but the feeling and warmth of his soft skin are bewitching.

Tonight might end up being a test of temptation after all.

He nods, “Yeah, last minute business call. I told them to call me after dinner, but they were trying to reach me while we were at the pool, so, y’know.” Clearing the damp and well-combed grey bangs from his forehead with the back of his hand, he gives Mingyu that tight and expectant smile.

His hair, unfortunately, gets stuck in the bracelet.

“It’s after business hours.” Mingyu leans over him to help pluck the stray strands out from between the hinges of the clasp, careful to not pull too hard; breakage is a cursed thing. He may or may not have read up on hair damage after Minghao had bleached his cool brown hair into that nearly-missed, cheesy yellow and invested in a trove of natural, organic hair masks that have yet to arrive in the mail. He likes taking care of him and that includes his hair.

Minghao shakes his head, “It was important.”

He could leave it at that, he doesn’t need to pry, but, “What’s so important that you’d need to take a call at,” he looks at the clock as the latter finally shakes his hair free of the bracelet and beckons him forward to puts his hands on his shoulders, “like, 3am?”

Minghao cups his cheeks and turns his face back towards him, pulling him down until he has to use his elbow for support. He opens his mouth to speak and shuts it a second later. His lips part a few millimeters before touching over and over. Mingyu can barely feel his breath brush against his peach fuzz, but he can smell the mint from his toothpaste. As much as he likes holding him at any other time of day, there’s just something especially intimate about laying with someone with your clean pajamas on and your teeth brushed; no makeup, no hair products, no fancy clothes or name-brand accessories to hide behind. Sure, you can shower before a one-night stand, but wrestling in bed with someone after doing non-spontaneous things like combing your hair and taking off your slippers is just so damn domestic that Mingyu wouldn’t mind going to bed this late every night of his life if only to have Minghao swathed in the covers with him.

He doesn’t know if it’s some ploy Minghao has—as if he knows that he has this irrevocable power over Mingyu’s poor heart. It’s his eyes he’s drowning in—as always and in this moment—, there’s just something so mystifying about how clear and watery they are. As he tries to search his face for the cause of such unannounced snuggling, he comes to find the reason for the delay in
answer. The explanation he wants seems to need careful wording—yet again—and Minghao’s not about to spill all the beans. However, he’d like to think that he knows him well enough to understand the almost protective look behind his eyes.

That phone call was about Mingyu.

That phone call was about them.

“Is everything okay?” he caresses his cheek, squishing the corner of his mouth upwards in a forced, lopsided smile. It’s not the same. His dimples don’t crease the same and his eyes don’t curve the right way.

“It will be.” What’s with the conviction?

If this was any other universe, Mingyu might have thought that Minghao just sold his soul to the devil in exchange for a miraculous outcome where they could win, get their contract deal, set up clear boundaries with their friends, and still get to spend continuous time together. But in this universe, things don’t come so easily.

Even if they did, he wouldn’t want Minghao selling his soul for something that they can work through in the future. It won’t be a walk in the park knowing how stubborn and hardheaded they both can be, but it would be a labor of love and that makes it a lot more doable.

“Do you need to be so cryptic?”

Minghao nods, somewhat enjoying the feel of Mingyu’s cheeks bunching up in a wide smile. Moving his hand from his face to his temples, he pushes his drooping bangs back, giving him a very unappealing, slicked-back look.

He shakes his head free of Minghao’s hands and earns a light chuckle. When the hands come back to his face he turns to the side and kisses his palm, mumbling, “Can’t tell me?”

“No,” he sits up with a heave, “I can tell you.” forcing Mingyu to sit back on his haunches again. He leans forward and presses his forehead to his chest, “It’s a safety net.”

Well, he doesn’t have to say it so matter-of-factly, “Safety net?”

He relaxes his back and sits normally, pawing at the hem of Mingyu’s shirt, timidly picking at a seam that’s coming undone. It’s fine, you can pick at that. It’s better than scraping at your ears, “There are a few different company representatives coming to this thing. Um,” he tugs at a string to pull the small rip closed, “You already know, like, there’s contract deals for the winning team, but that’s not necessarily true. You don’t have to win to get a contract deal.” His nails find another loose string to play with, “Of course, the marketing reps would like to sign a winning team,” he wraps it around his finger and pulls it taut until his nail turns white and red, “but if your style suits their brand better, there’s always a chance that they’ll sign with you instead.” It snaps, relieving the pressure and Minghao flicks it away, “Like, Soon and I lost this small competition a while ago, but we were approached by a start-up company to help with their ad campaign.”

Ah, the logistics of business. Stuff that never interested Mingyu in the past, but he’s trying to add things up, “Where does the phone call fit into all this?”

“It was someone I met during a summer internship in college,” So, someone he doesn’t really know, “that unknown number from earlier,” So, someone who knows him rather well, “he’s the marketing rep for his company and decided to come so we could meet up, but we cancelled because he had other people to see for business, and I, well,” Minghao purses his lips and looks up under his
bangs, “I wanted to spend time with you, so it worked out fine.” He nods and resumes playing with stray strings, “But I told him to call me when his plane arrived to confirm that he’d be there tomorrow.”

“So, it’s a safety net in case you lose.”

“Yeah.” Minghao nods, resting his head on Mingyu’s shoulder again, nodding and frizzing up his hair, “Just so,” he kisses his teeth, “if we lose, the collateral damage won’t be,” searching for a word or searching for a pattern in the number of loose threads, “terrible, and Chan can get the exposure he needs to get his foot in the door and I won’t feel as bad about everything.”

Minghao doesn’t need to feel bad about anything, “Sounds like you have confidence this guy will pull through.”

“Well, I might have called in a favor, but he owes me one for making me fly out to New York the night after a showcase to photograph for his cousin’s wedding. I’d say it’s fair.”

“He sounds like a real nightmare.” Mingyu takes Minghao’s left hand and kneads his thumb into it, applying pressure to his metacarpals and spreading them out like the world’s tightest pizza dough.

He links their fingers together and closes his hands, finger pads digging into the back of Minghao’s knuckles until they pop. He yelps at the sudden sting. Sorry, that was a bit hard. Mingyu’s out of practice and he’s far from a specialist at popping joints, “He’s not. He’s actually a lot like you; a little goofy, a bit of a perfectionist, and stupidly capable of anything he sets his mind to.” Keeping his fingers hooked in place, he presses his thumb into the carpals; not too hard, not trying to massage, just to slide it down to his wrist and feel his pulse.

“But is he hot?”

“Why? Because you’re,” Mingyu’s eyes snap up to his, flustering him and earning him a feeble slap on the arm, “hot? Sure. I probably had a five-minute crush until he opened his mouth.” a giggle. Good. “He’s generally hot.”

And—in his best mocking-SpongeBob voice—to continue lightening the mood, “Like I’m generally attractive?”

His laugh slows to a stop. Now, he’s just smiling that million-dollar smile with his eyes pointed down at their hands as he moves his fingers out of his grasp only to drag his dull nails lightly against the inside of Mingyu’s palm. It’s sensual and a little ticklish, but he doesn’t pull away. He didn’t mean to say it like that and the more he thinks about it, the more he wants to take those exact words back. He doesn’t want to compare apples. He’s not jealous. Period. He’s not so insecure that Minghao calling other people ‘generally hot’ will get him up in cahoots. Oh, please, don’t think that, “You’re,” oh, please, don’t think that, “different,” another pause, “now.”

“Did I get les-”

“I don’t really care what you look like, Mingyu- I mean, by association, because you care about what you look like—and that’s fine—, I care that you’re happy looking the way you want to look. But for me, personally?” He tilts his head to the side, pouting slightly and licking his dry lips before mumbling through gritted teeth, “There isn’t a part of you that I’m not attracted to.”

Well.

I mean.
He should have expected that much.

But hearing it for the first time in his entire life is weird and nonsensical and he doesn’t get it at first because his only response is to curl up and roll over in hysterical laughter. He probably sounds like a madman. He knows that Minghao’s giving him a weird look, he can feel it on the back of his neck. It’s not exactly something you can reciprocate with direct language. He can’t just say ‘me too, bro’ because, gosh, Minghao has a way with words. Why does he have to say things like that when his brain doesn’t have the attentive capability to respond like a normal human being? Why does the only response he’s capable of involve him tumbling like a panda and honking like a seal?

He’s such an embarrassment.

Damn you, Minghao. Damn you and your pretty words.

“Can you breathe?”

“No.” he’s still gasping for air, wheezing after taking just one look at Minghao’s concerned face.

Mingyu’s not laughing because he finds the words funny. He’s laughing because they’re simply inconceivable. No one has ever liked him this much. He hasn’t even liked himself this much. Minghao can’t just march around and uppercut him with words like that, roundhouse him with that straightforward expression. It’s totally unfair.

He rolls off the bed with a thud, landing on his knees and clinging onto the side of the mattress with weak arms. He looks like he did when he was a child praying before bed, “I mean, rude, but okay.”

“No, it’s not that.” He tries to crawl back up, “I swear, I-” but Minghao pries his hands away from the blanket and throws him off the side of the bed like Scar threw Mufasa. Mingyu falls to his death on the (very gross) floor and scrambles into the (clean) safety of Minghao’s arms, tackling him into the mattress and rolling over him, “Thank you,” he manages to squeeze out between laughs, rubbing his face into his stomach and flattening him onto his back.

“For what?” he’s preoccupied with disinterested attempts to get the PT off of him.

“For all your hard work-” His voice strains at the last word because Minghao’s jabbing fingers into his side trying to tickle him. It won’t let him speak coherently, but he hopes the ‘thank you for liking me more than anyone else ever has’ comes through.

He finally manages to pin him down after five minutes of on and off grappling.

He’s careful enough to not bump his knee or crush his wrist under his weight but roughhousing with Minghao always leaves him a little high and tingly. It knocks the air out of his lungs and leaves him breathless and weak. His bones feel like chocolate and his muscles feel like marshmallows.

90% of him wants to leave Minghao feeling the same way.

“We should sleep.” He yawns, scrunching up his nose, tugging slightly under Mingyu’s grasp because he wants to cover his mouth. Ultimately, he doesn’t have enough energy and ends up turning to the side as to not exhale directly into his face. This gives Mingyu the perfect vantage point to blow a raspberry into his cheek.
Sweet, sweet revenge.

It’s not just the effervescent laughter that makes Mingyu feel so alive, it’s the fact that he’s going to bed with someone he really, really likes and he doesn’t have to whip out his dick to prove it. He doesn’t feel any sort of need to prove it. Agreeing to come this far with him, isn’t that proof enough? Proof of what? He’d rather not say, he’ll let you figure that out.

Letting one of Minghao’s hands go, he wraps his arm behind his waist and pulls them just a bit closer. He lifts his back off the mattress high enough that gravity helps it pop again, “Eughff.” Minghao groans before using his free hand to push back on Mingyu’s shoulder, telling him he wants to be put down, “Manhandling me all the time,” it’s a mock complaint, “I’ll find an excuse to kick your ass one day.”

“Sure, you will.”

“I will.”

“And when will that day come?” With the intent of experimentation in mind, he lightly grinds his hips forward, lowering himself to kiss the man underneath him. He looks perfectly good where he is. No ass kicking to be had.

“I mean,” Minghao uses his fingers to walk his hand down Mingyu’s chest, “today’s as good a day as any.” He curls his fingers suddenly, tickling him under the ribs and using his legs to try and switch their positions, albeit failing to move Mingyu. A valiant attempt, brave agent.

He laughs into Minghao’s neck when he’s tickled again, ghosting lips over his collarbone before letting their foreheads meet. God, he’s so happy right now. Ugh. His heart is so damn full of joy and confetti and airhorns and rainbows. Geez, “Nice try.”

“Sleep with one eye open, Agent Gyu.” Not GyuGyu? Fair. Saying GyuGyu and HaoHao aloud is far more cringey than reading it on paper, “Or you won’t see morning.”

“Ah,” Minghao sighs, steadying his breath and removing Minghao’s prying fingers from his side, planting it firmly back near the top of his head where he’d been readily holding the other hand hostage, “bold of you to assume I’d want to see morning.” That could have been a little less corny and a little more delicate, but even without the premise of the competition’s punctuation, morning sounds less and less tasteful when nights like this are lathered in Minghao’s presence and warmth. If nights could last, please let them last as long as he can spend time with the person he likes most.

Minghao shakes his head, smirking and rolling his eyes. Seems like his patience for Mingyu to let him go has run thin because he tries to change the subject, “How are your feet doing?”

“Fine.” He’d appreciate if they could continue rolling around in bed until they fell unconscious. Sleep is a sweet seductress, but Minghao’s laughter and their flirty giggles are much more desirable. Alas, he takes the hint and allows himself to be overpowered by the smallest push. Not all good things are meant to last, but he’d like to hold onto the fizzy feeling in his stomach for just a little while longer.

Minghao gets up and shuffles over to his toiletries bag just to turn around and peek over his shoulder before Mingyu gets a chance to sit up straight and fix his clothes- ah, fuck it. He likes his thighs and if they want to be out on full display, then let them be seen. He’s feeling himself all of a sudden. Maybe being with the dancer gives him a boost in self-confidence. Look at these thighs, Minghao, don’t they look soft and strong? Don’t you want to take a nap on these thighs? What are you even doing over there? Come to bed. Touch these thighs. One night only, exclusive show, “Roll
“Kinky.” He does as told, rolling over onto his stomach and letting his feet dangle off the bed.

“What’s kinky about rolling over?” Minghao laughs as the bed dips slightly under his weight and Mingyu hears the crinkle of paper.

“Anything can be a kink. People get creative.”

A subtle and cold sting finds its way to the back of his Achilles before a bandage is slapped over it. It must’ve been Neosporin or something like that, but feeling it over those spots of raw skin wasn’t great. “And what are your kinks?”

Mingyu turns to look at him, “What are yours?”

He crumbles up the bandage wrapper and tosses it into the bin before sprawling out on the bed next to him, on his back, not his belly, “What do you think my kinks are?”

He could answer seriously, but something tells him that this isn’t to be handled so directly. The more he thinks about it, the fewer kinks he can think of for himself, so he doubts he has any in mind, “Um,” he rests his heavy head in his arms, eyes tracing the lines of Minghao’s ear, under his jaw, over his Adam’s apple, “financial stability and long-term companionship?”

“Oh,” he presses his tongue to the inside of his lips, biting it a moment before he chuckles and closes his eyes, settling into the mattress, “you got me there.”

“You should get under the covers if you wanna sleep. It gets cold at night.”

“I’m not sleeping yet.” He rests with his eyes shut for just a moment longer before something comes to mind, “Did you want to sleep?”

“A little, but I’ll wait up.”

“If you’re sleepy, just sleep. I’ll move.”

Move? “Move?”

“Yeah, so we can get under the blanket.” Whew. He was about to think that Minghao would have rather taken some other place to sleep, like the ottoman or something. That’d not only be a sad sight for both of them but also would make Mingyu incredibly upset that- why is he thinking these things? He’s being silly. It’s late and his brain is going off on weird tangents that don’t make sense, “Unless you’d rather me go somewhere.”

“Nah,” he scoots over to rest his chin on Minghao’s chest, “you’re perfect right where you are.”

He curves his spine suddenly, shifting away from Mingyu, “What about now, corndog?”

“Less perfect,” so, he uses his arms to pull him back, “but perfect all the same.”

Minghao just shakes his head and smiles down at him. He’s the type to not believe in perfection. Mingyu doesn’t much believe in it either, but if there was a threshold that defined ‘the perfect’ from ‘the imperfect’, he’d like to think that it’d be possible to pass that barrier. Minghao has definitely been back and forth several times. He’s a veteran of perfection, “You’re just speaking nonsense now.”
“You’re just speaking nonsense now.” Mingyu teases, sneaking another kiss and another and another, progressively cruder, a little more heated each time because as long as Minghao’s reciprocating, he’ll meet him halfway.

And, again, for the record, if there was any way to be perfect and if they so wanted, the only thing they can do perfectly is—hm? It’s not? It’s not kissing?

Then what is it?

“Hey,” Minghao breathes, his lower lip still caught between Mingyu’s teeth. He stops and backs up an inch or two so he can listen. Before you say anything, he knows doing that doesn’t directly change his hearing, but the closer you get to Minghao, the more his presence simply drones out every other distraction, “seriously, it’s almost 4 and the roomie’s getting here before noon. I don’t want you dozing off on our drive home tomorrow.”

“Should I surrender, then?” It’s not hard to come back into his arms and mumble into his skin, to speak with half-closed eyelids weighed down with golden sand.

“To sleep?” he has a hand pulling back the covers already, flapping them open and over Mingyu’s head with a heave, “Yes.”

He briefly hops off the bed to kill the lights and shuffle under the duvet, “Do you really need two-thirds of the bed?”

“Oh,” Mingyu laughs, “yeah, obviously.” He says, getting into Minghao’s space as he settles in, “You get two-thirds, too.”

“Huh?”

Okay, okay, Mingyu Kim has taken enough math to know what makes a whole and two-thirds times two is more than one, but—look—in a physical sense, “The middle third is where we overlap, duh.” He earns a shove to the chest as Minghao buries himself in fluffed blankets and wheezes out a whine, a verbal manifestation of his bashfulness. He winds his arms around his middle to pull him closer until they’re back-to-chest and he can nuzzle the curve of his ear with his ass resting comfortably against his crotch; proper spooning, “Is this okay?”

He squirms at the breathy whisper and wiggles away, turning around and getting up. He stamps both his hands on either side of Mingyu’s head, hovering over him with the blanket barely clinging to his waist and sliding off at a snail’s pace, “Is this okay?”

“I mean, sure, but you’re going to sleep like that?”

“I can sleep however I want.”

“Fine.” Mingyu shuts his eyes with a smile and a huff, keeping to his half of the bed, “Have fun.”

“I will. This is a good vantage point.”

He’s halfway to dreamland already, “Vantage point, huh?” he feels chapped lips peck his cheek and hover over his temple, “How’s the view?”

A kiss on the tip of his nose, on the bridge, on his forehead and on every spot between his ears. Minghao nestles his mouth into his hair, kiss permeating through his scalp and skull until it reaches his brain. A kiss on his chin, along his jaw, down his neck on the way to his collarbone.
Sometimes it’s nice to take the backseat and be the one who gets felt up. Any fraction of his subconscious that was worried about how long he hasn’t gone to the gym or watched his diet is obliterated by a caress here, a touch there; gently petting away all his troubles. A kiss on his shoulder, on his chest, on his stomach and in reverse, then down his arm and to his hands.

He’d call it nonverbal praise. There’s not a part of him that Minghao isn’t attracted to and that includes all his imperfections and lumpy bits, all his stubble and all his infant wrinkles. A kiss on the tip of each finger.

The bed dips when Minghao scoots a little closer and straddles him. A kiss on his lips, a kiss on his lips, a kiss on his lips. Maybe he didn’t want to be the little spoon. Does he want Mingyu to be the little spoon? He’s never been a little spoon, but he’s open to trying new things, especially with him.

The question about the view was entirely redundant. Minghao’s terrible night vision means that he can barely see anything and he’s fairing surprisingly well. The only thing that has poked him in the eye is his crispy bangs. If Mingyu was wearing his Sunday best and covered in the nicest hair products and contoured his best features, it wouldn’t matter. Minghao can’t see him—which is probably the reason he’s still kissing him even though he’s trying to make it obvious that he’s actually getting so very sleepy by shutting his-

“Perfect.”

Does he have to make it so hard to fall asleep?

Maybe he heard wrong, “What’d you say?”

But he can feel eyes trying to scan his face in the dark, “Nothing.”

It’s said so quietly, “Nothing?”

“Yeah,” Minghao stops necking him. He already misses the overt affection, “you’re just dreaming.”

“Oh.” Mingyu hums, humoring the man on top of him, “Dreaming, huh?” He rubs his hands over his thighs, nails clawing over the plush fabric before he rests them at his hips and pulls him down to sit on his upper pelvis, “I don’t think I’ve had a dream quite like this before.” Minghao complies, sitting up and moving his hands to rest on Mingyu’s stomach instead, “In that case, dream Minghao,” His fingers stroke over the skin just above the elastic of his pajama bottoms, skimming the rim of his underwear’s stiffer waistband, “you can continue with the smoothies.”

He expects Minghao to give him a light smack, to tell him off with a chuckle, get shy, and give up. He expects him to call it a night for the both of them because everyone is beyond tired, “Don’t wanna.”

“Aww,” yes, good, give up, sweet kissing fiend. Go to sleep so we can dream. But part of him is still a creature of habit, “please.”

The dancer wiggles his hips slightly, pouting with his whole body, making a childish noise before relaxing into his position.

“We can’t sleep likes this. Move.” Mingyu bucks his hips, not to excite either of them, just to nudge Minghao off, “Get tucked in,” he hesitantly gets off with a roll but rests his head on Mingyu’s shoulder and keeps one knee between his thighs. He’s too tired to care and flaps the blanket over them, “and count to a hundred.”
“A hundred?” he pushes the covers off.

“A hundred.” he pulls the covers back over him.

“No.” he pushes again.

“A hundred, Minghao.” Mingyu pries his hand off the covers and flattens it out against his chest so that he’s like a koala hugging a tree. Stay put.

But Minghao jiggles away again, this time floundering away from Mingyu and his heater-like body. C’mon, Hao, it’s winter and you’re cold, “I’m not-”

A little annoyed but not more than he is enjoying the banter, he roughly grabs his waist, “A.” and pulls him as close as humanly possible, “Hundred.” he hisses into his neck, “Minghao.”

It’s silent for the longest time and he would have thought that the man had fallen asleep if he wasn’t so damn tense- maybe not tense, but that he’s holding his breath. He doesn’t know why Minghao’s so adamant about staying up. It’s like he’s waiting for some sort of punctuation for the night to end.

“Make me.”

Slowly, but quickly all the same, Mingyu’s piecing things together.

Because the results of tomorrow might mean they won’t see each other for a long time, perhaps Mingyu wasn’t the only one with sex on his mind. Soldiers do it before they leave for war, businesspeople do it before they leave on extended trips. Nothing says ‘I want you’ and ‘goodbye’ like a good fuck.

If he’s learned anything about Minghao in the last one- two- three months, it’s that if he thinks Mingyu wants something, he’ll discretely offer up easy chances to take. Because he knows that most people—Mingyu included in the populous—would prefer to have sex at a nice hotel on a weekend getaway before some dramatic, relationship-testing event will unfold, it’s possible that’s the reason why he doesn’t want them to sleep before one or both of them gets off.

“Is that what you think I want, or is that something you want?”

It’s a hard question to answer.

If Minghao wants to whip out his ‘by association’ logic again, that’ll make things a little more complicated, but he’s not expecting a verbal answer. Minghao just lowers his head deeper into the covers until only the crown of his hair pokes out, “What do you want me to say?”

“The truth would be nice.”

Minghao remains silent. It would have been okay if he was finding his way to the land of unicorns and clouds, but it’s obvious that he isn’t sleeping yet.

But, no- Mingyu’s going to put his foot down. Everything that Minghao likes in a relationship is mutual understanding and communication, and consent is a big thing. He’d been thinking about it the wrong way the whole night. Maybe it’s because he’s conditioned to believe that he’s a very sexual and beguiling person, maybe that’s just how he’d come to understand his nature in relationships- ‘relationships’, but now that he’s in a relationship that he honestly and truly cares about- yeah, this isn’t about not wanting to force himself on Minghao or pushing Minghao to a point where he feels like there’s no backing out. No. It’s very possible that Minghao wants to have sex
tonight.

However, this is about Mingyu not being comfortable with having sex under these circumstances and he should make it known, “Minghao,” he can feel fingers knot into his cotton shirt and press against his sternum, “I want to have sex with you.” he doesn’t move for the longest time until so much awkwardness fills the air that he has to poke his head out to breathe. He gives Mingyu a questionable look that he probably thinks is hidden by the dark, “But not tonight.”

“Not tonight?”

“Yeah, not tonight.” Mingyu’s eyes dart around. This is awkward, “And maybe not tomorrow or the next day- don’t get me wrong, I’m very attracted to you,” Yeah, he realizes that telling someone you don’t want to frickle-frackle might make their self-esteem falter, “But I’m just not comfortable doing it tonight beca-

“You don’t need to explain, Gyu.” Minghao’s expression is a little hard to read in the dark, “It’s probably a good idea for us not to do anything rigorous tonight anyway.” That’s what he was thinking way earlier, “But in the future, it’s okay for you to say no as well. You don’t need to explain or justify it. If you don’t feel up to it, then you just don’t.”

“Are you okay with this?”

He nods, “It doesn’t matter that I think. If one of us isn’t feeling it, then neither of us is feeling it, okay?” It’s little stiff still—the air, that is, “Besides, I’m way- years out of practice. I’d rather our first time be somewhere a little more familiar.” Man, he can read their relationship like a book at the weirdest times, “Maybe with some candles or some shit so I can actually see what I’m doing.”

He’s trying to make Mingyu feel better, he can tell, “I still want you to count to a hundred.”

“No- what? After a conversation like that? No way.” Minghao whines, “Why would I do that?”

“Then count backwards from a hundred.”

“Doesn’t that take more brain work? Won’t that keep us awake even longer?”

Mingyu kisses his hair and turns slightly to face him, “What do I have to do to make you count to a hundred?”

“Nothing. I’m not counting to a hundred.”

Mingyu sighs.

“Can’t we just do something simple, like kiss until we fall asleep?”

Mingyu sighs again.

“Fine. I’ll sleep.” He rolls over, defeated, only to have his arm pulled softly and be rolled back into Mingyu’s arms.

“Middle ground idea,” His brain is too tired to think of much else outside of ‘make Minghao feel wanted’ and ‘make Minghao go to sleep’, “You’re going to not move and try your best to fall asleep,” he folds Minghao’s hands together in the space between them, sandwiching them to his body with his chest, “and I’m going to kiss you,” he gropes the nightstand for his phone and unlocks it to open up a timer. He punches in 1:40 and puts it in Minghao’s hand, “until this timer hits zero.
Okay?”

His voice is unsure and a little unsteady, as if he’s nervous about trying something new, “Okay.” But he’s a curious one and his thumb hovers near the start button as Mingyu tiredly rises from the mattress to—once again—loom over him. His muscles feel lazy and his limbs are heavy.

It’s not like he’s totally awake right now. He’s close to, maybe, 80% conscious—if he’s generous. He feels a little bad that he’s a tad bit on autopilot right now, but it’s better than forcing Minghao to sleep without a proper, lovey-dovey sendoff. He knows, deep in the pit of his stomach and his heart, exactly where he wants to kiss.

It’s somewhere that Minghao finds particularly intimate and sensitive—everyone has their own, personal, place like that—and Mingyu’s going to kiss him there as hard as he can for one hundred seconds because he’s petty and a part of him still hasn’t completely let go of what happened in the jacuzzi. It’ll scratch that tiny possessive and prickly itch in the back of his head and give him a head start at forgiving Soonyoung in the morning.

He licks his lips in anticipation, one hand already under Minghao’s shirt, holding him in place lest he gets squirmy again. If he wants to stop, he’ll say so. Until then, placing trust in Mingyu is an exciting exercise of limits. He’s nice and toasty from being under the blanket and, for once, it’s Mingyu’s hands that might be a little chilly against his skin, but the contrast in temperature isn’t startling. In fact, it feels very pleasant. His eyes are shut, learning Minghao’s edges and curves with echolocation. No, he’s joking, but it’s something like that. All of his body can be felt under his weight.

Without seeing, he knows that he looks absolutely beautiful.

Without looking, he knows that he feels absolutely perfect.

“Go.”

Chapter End Notes

the original draft of this chapter ended with the note #blowjobssavelives2k23 but we'll save that for a later story lmao and yes it's been rewritten three times. one draft included them putting on lotion for each other but i thought that was too much hahaha

i really just wanted to write some warm fluffy stuff. minghao and mingyu continue to learn a lot about each other and despite fighting with this chapter for a long time, i'm very happy with how it turned out.
Chapter 137

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s somewhat a relief that he wakes to Minghao still in the covers, being the big spoon that he so wanted to be with one arm firmly around Mingyu’s waist and his fingers draped over his bellybutton.

He wants to turn around and face him.

He wants to take in all his morning time glory; his messy hair, his dried drool, his unkempt clothes. In tune with that, he worries that tossing around will stir him from his slumber and it seems too early to start the daily grind. They should be sleeping as much as possible with how late they stayed up. What time is it anyway? The sun beaming in from the open glass window says that it’s well past daybreak and the city isn’t nearly as glamorous without its sparkling lights. Mingyu reaches for the phone that ought to be on the nightstand, but it’s nowhere to be found.

Oh, right.

He combs a hand through his hair and rubs the boogers from his eyes in an attempt to look somewhat decent. They did get up to some hijinks last night, didn’t they? That damned phone was surely forgotten somewhere in the sheets. He doesn’t even remember the timer going off—not that it comes as a surprise, his timer didn’t go off last time either. It’s a welcome memory that he certainly kissed Minghao for longer than a hundred seconds and he can tell by the way his lower lip still feels slightly worn, that Minghao had never bothered to heed the time.

However, time is still of some importance. They can sleep in all they want compared to the last few weeks, but there’s a firm limit set by yours truly, Seungcheol Choi, who is due to be downstairs in- what does the alarm clock say? Mingyu reaches over to turn it towards him so he can read the bold red LED numbers; the roomie is supposed to be here in an hour and a half.

They have plenty of time.

There’s plenty, plenty, plenty of time to just soak up Minghao’s touch; his warmth, his goodness.

The way he breathes is so soft and cute. He doesn’t snore; he sleeps as quiet as a mouse. The smallest movement Mingyu makes causes his slender fingers to curl, asking for a shirt but finding skin. But, to hell with it, he’s going to absorb the man as much as he can visually as he his physically. Who knows how many more times he’ll get to see him sleeping before they’re off on some lavish tour or shooting commercials on another continent?

Hm.

He’s not sure what exactly happened last night—he just did whatever he wanted to—but he woke up with one single notion tapping at the back of his skull; Minghao is going to win today.

Yes, he’s as perfect as Mingyu remembers.

Those slightly parted lips, those squished cheeks, that sty of hair, and- he moves just a bit to brush a few strands out of his face. Sometimes it’s nice to take a break from those beautiful eyes because they often burn with the intensity of a million rare moons and as much as Mingyu likes
being the object in their gaze, he equally loves when he can capture Minghao in his.

Oh, sweet prince of the stars, if only you knew how much he loves being the object of your affection.

Oh, gentle ringleading magician of the night, if only you knew how much he loves being the center of your attention.

Plucking here and there, he straightens out Minghao’s shirt and kisses his forehead. Again, waking up to him every morning would be the best blessing he could ever ask for. He knows that regardless of the final results, he’s going to have Minghao in his arms again, in his bed again, in his kitchen again, in his life again. There’s the whole future ahead of them and the man sharing his breath has every intention of being there next to him. He said so.

He said so?

He said so.

Last night, he said so.

His eyes search his face in a slight panic. What did he say exactly?

Mingyu wants so desperately to recall the words he likely heard, but it’s almost a matter of having answers without any questions. To that effect, part of him doesn’t care. He has his answers, he has his solid, stable, secure locked in place—at least that’s the way he wakes up feeling—but what prompted Minghao to say what he said? What did he say- if he said the first word that comes to mind, Mingyu’s never going to forgive himself for forgetting.

“You didn’t say the L word,” he mumbles under his breath, “did you?” Maybe Minghao will be apt to sleep talk again and answer his prying questions subconsciously, but the man just wiggles around a bit, smacks his lips together, and curls into his chest. The breath he puffs into his shirt makes his feel just as warm outside as he does inside. A fraction of him gushes. Enjoying someone this much is almost painful.

So, what?

Maybe Minghao said the L word- maybe Minghao said the L word- that would surely be enough to put him at ease and give him this feeling of security. However, the more he plays over that hypothetical situation in his head, the less likely it seems. He’s not the type to drop the L-word this early in a relationship—if ever—, he’s the type to show you and make you feel the L word. As such, that’s one word likely not included in whatever Minghao said before sunrise. In fact, he can’t even picture him saying words like that at all. That combination of words strung together in that order isn’t in his vocabulary.

And the more he analyzes it, the more he tries to put words to this feeling, but it’s surely something he can’t describe. He can find parts and pieces—accomplishment, fulfillment, satisfaction, contentment—but there’s no word that can pinpoint exactly how he feels, at least not in the languages he knows.

But still—

C’mon, mystery cryptid. C’mon S.S.A. HaoHao. C’mon, time wizard. What secrets are you hiding in that lovely brain of yours? Tell Mingyu, he’s curious, “What did you say last night, babe?” He almost gags on the pet name, tongue flicking out of his mouth in a reflexive cringe and he’s sure he has more than five chins. Again, ‘babe’ doesn’t suit Minghao at all. Why did he bother trying?
“Did you say something?” the tiny movement of the lips against his breast tickles.

“Sorry,” he pulls him closer, “did I wake you?”

He hums—unsure if that’s a yes or no—and ducks under the duvet to rubs his eyes and clean up any dribble. Mingyu was sure to do those things the second he woke up, although, the more he thinks about it, those gross little things make it more intimate and the day neither of them cares anymore is a day he looks forward to, “What time is it?” Or something akin to that is mumbled out of a lazy mouth that hasn’t quite woken up.

Mingyu turns to check the clock again. You never know how much time passes when Minghao’s involved, “Almost 11.”

“Cool.” He pokes his head back out, but his eyes are still quietly shut. Maybe the window is making it too bright.

“You can sleep a bit longer.” He tucks his arm under Minghao’s head so they can be just a bit closer, “Want me to shut the curtain?”

“I think everyone’s supposed to go out to eat, though.”

“I thought we all agreed we were on our own in the morning.” He can’t help it. He’s playing with his hair already, tucking it behind his ear and running over its curve with the rim of his nail, “We don’t have to be at the venue until,”

“Until 3?” Minghao secedes, he can’t get back to sleep, so he sniffs and opens his eyes, “I think?” his brow furrows cutely as he tries to puzzle out the information, “I’ll check my phone. Ugh,” he groans as he smother his face into his shoulder, bunching up the thin fabric and nestling his nose into a fold, “last night was a damn mess if I’ve ever seen one.”

“Last night’s over. Today’s a new day.” He offers the peppy words of comfort up kindly. He doesn’t feel hungover in the slightest and it doesn’t seem like Minghao drank enough to be under its effects, but he yawns and whines as he sits up. His hair is sticking up all over the place and Mingyu chuckles, following him. This is definitely something he wants to get used to.

But that’s when the light catches his skin, and on the left side of Minghao’s throat, a chain of violets is in full bloom.

A bruising purple and red patch stains his neck and Mingyu feels his stomach sink.

“Surprisingly optimistic coming from you.” he shakes out his bangs and bends his spine, but Mingyu’s the one who stands first; alert and ready. For what? He doesn’t know. Maybe it was just a trick of the eye, shadow play, sleep inertia- maybe he’s still dreaming, “How are we feeling about Soonyoung and Wonwoo today?”

“Peachy.” He looks for something in the wall, something in the window that’s misplaced or fantastical; some hint to tell him he’s dreaming. He’s a dead man if he’s not.

Mingyu turns around again to look at Minghao who surely, undoubtedly, truly bears a painfully obvious hickey on his fair skin. Unless some ninja snuck into their room while they were asleep and karate chopped him in the neck—knocking him unconscious—, that mark is there because Mingyu got ahead of himself last night and lost to his vices. There’s no way Minghao can go on stage like that. Mingyu has ruined everything, “You good?”

After putting his glasses back on, Minghao moves to stand, throwing his legs off the bed and
takes one step only to grunt and slow down. Instantly, he drops his worries about the hickey and comes to his side to check on him, “What-”

“It’s fine.” He says, wincing onto his weight a second time, pushing Mingyu to the side with a hand at his chest, “It gets sore when I sleep too much.” He pats him to tell him he’s okay, “I guess waking up feeling impervious is left for dreams, huh?”

“Y-yeah.” His arms hover around Minghao like a cautious parent watching their child take its first steps, teetering, tottering, wobbling, and off-kilter. Instead of walking more, Minghao steadies himself against the wall and extends his hamstring, diving head first into a practiced choreography. It’s the morning routine he’d told him to do months ago, but it’s slightly rushed like he wants to get on with the day.

He raises an eyebrow when Mingyu’s eyes haven’t left him for the last three minutes, “What’s up with you-”

“Nothing.”

“You keep looking at me like you’ve seen a ghost.” Minghao stands at full height to stretch his arms over his head before looping them behind Mingyu’s neck and cocking his head to the side with a playful and cheery grin, “I’m not sure if I like it.”

He should probably say something before he has to find out on his own. It’s rude, right? It’s like sending off a friend who has something stuck between their teeth, “Um, actually,” he’s left marks on Minghao’s neck before—many little tiny ones in the color of infant rosebuds—that could masquerade as bug bites (although, he vaguely remembers Soonyoung seeing right through that). This is on its own level. He’s never marked anyone that boldly before—not even bruises from contact sports can compare—and the amount of regret coursing through his body is evidence that he’s crossed a line that should never be crossed this close to a public event—if ever. Minghao’s going to be so mad, “your neck, I, um,” He already has a head start with his hands where they are. Piledriving him into the (gross) carpet would be well deserved. Putting Mingyu in a headlock and suffocating him would be child’s play, “I’m really sorry but-”

“It can’t be that bad.” Minghao rolls his eyes, already aware that he’s left some sort of mark thanks to last night’s activities. However, he doesn’t know the severity. This isn’t something foundation can easily cover up. With a light chuckle, the silver-haired man disengages from him and makes his way to the sink so he can pop his contacts in and brush his teeth. It only takes one look for Minghao to curse under his breath, “Shit.”

“I’m sorry.” He really does feel bad about it and is already scouring the bed for his phone so he can Google ways to get rid of a hickey as fast as possible with their limited hotel resources, “I’m so sorry, I-”

“Mingyu,” he draws out the brush-garbled name, complaining but not as angry as he’d expected, “Miinnggyuuuuuuuuu.”

“I’m sorry!” he heaves as he rounds the corner with his phone, “It says here, that we can put hot water on it and slap it around to increase the circulation and maybe massage it, but it doesn’t hurt, right? I didn’t hurt you, did I? I’m so sorry. I got a-”

“Calm down.” Minghao stops him after spitting out his toothpaste. He rinses his mouth, “Calm down, Mingyu. I’m not mad. This isn’t the end of the world.”

“I know, but still, I-”
He tilts his head up a bit to check on it again, rubbing fingers over it gingerly. The skin is speckled with red as well. He—the thought seems more dreadful than it ought to be remembered for—must’ve used his teeth at one point or another. That’s some serious damage, “Shut up and let me think.” His words don’t have any bite to them—no pun intended—but his eyebrows knit with concern. It has to hurt a little, even just the tiniest bit. There’s no way something can look that gnarly without hurting the slightest. There’s no blood and the skin hasn’t broken, but he can’t look away. Hickeys and love-bites are supposed to be flirty and pretty little things, fueled by passion and curbed by some sort of fulfillment seeing your other half bare the mark of your fondness, but this is by far too much.

If Mingyu was in his position, he’d be upset.

He’d be so mad and disappointed at the lack of restraint. He doesn’t have to see an ocean of people and look pretty in front of a camera and be in the spotlight of a televised event that might go down in history as something that makes his heritage proud. Facing their eyes and judgmental others with such an intimate and uncouth—who is he kidding—*injury* is humiliating. He’s marked Minghao with something uncivil and unbecoming and it’s his fault that he has no choice but to go up on stage with it on full show.

Despite his calm exterior, Minghao’s certainly thinking about it and working out how he feels and probably thinking of ways to excuse it. His fingers dance over the spot, again and again, covering its nearly-three inch length with ambiguous scrutiny. Maybe he’s trying to rub it away.

Mingyu wants a chance to apologize for his mistake, to promise it will never happen again, and to beg for forgiveness. He wants to explain that he never meant for it to be that dark, that he wasn’t thinking and that he absolutely, 100%, completely, totally doesn’t have some possessive complex about marking him as his in front of thousands of people. He doesn’t. He doesn’t. He has Minghao in every domestic and intimate sense of the word. He doesn’t need some silly, childish hickey to prove it. He’s mature, he’s mature, he’s mature and level-headed and he’s so, so, so, so, so sorry.

Minghao sighs into the sink, leaning over it with his head down before shouldering past Mingyu to rummage in his luggage.

Aside from the impending doom of him having to go on stage like that, he’ll admit here and now that he’s less worried about Minghao being mad at him and more concerned with the imminent wrath of his teammates- but even they don’t scare him that much. The real fear factor in this situation is the quick-ticking countdown of the man who is scheduled to show up within an hour.

Seungcheol is going to kill him.

He’s going to rip him from limb to limb, sock him in the gut, kick him in the shins-

“Okay, so maybe, maybe I’ll just switch accessories with Jun and it’ll be okay. I’ll just ask if he has anything to trade since I’m not feelin’ my collection or whatever.” He fans out a small bag of jewelry on the desk, sorting through it and counting off pieces before taking a picture with his phone—likely to text it to the other dancer—before shoving everything back together and tossing it amongst his clothes.

Foundation has been ruled out as a coverup already. In the quick peek that Mingyu got of his performance outfit, most of the items are white and black. Sweating that much on stage is bound to make a mess of any sort of makeup that’ll be constantly rubbing against clothes, “I’m s-”

“Stop apologizing. It’s not going to change anything.” He’s hurriedly putting together a casual
outfit and shuffling past him to get into the bathroom to change, “I’m not mad, so stop apologizing.” But Mingyu’s apologizing because he believes he did something wrong. He waits outside the door like a kicked puppy and doesn’t have the mood to perk up when Minghao comes out only a moment later. The loose tank top he had planned to wear is far more revealing than he thought it would be.

“Can you,” Mingyu mumbles, stepping away from him, giving him room to dig for a new shirt that has a higher collar, “just, maybe,” he even finds it hard to talk to Minghao with all the conflicting feelings caught in his throat, “punch me in the eye and call it even?”

He scoffs as he pulls out a loose white t-shirt, “You want to match with me that badly?”

Unaware of how much skin is showing, Mingyu catches the corner of a tattoo or two on his back shoulder and a small number of long, sheer scars from who-knows-what trailing over his skin—stuff that Minghao had probably hoped to hide last night. Does that mean whatever Mingyu said last night helped them lower this guarded wall just a little? He desperately wants to remember, but there are already too many things to apologize for.

Minghao turns around, arms crossed over his chest.

While the patch of purple on his neck is clearly the boldest mark made, the tank reveals that the hickeys cascade over his shoulders, collarbones, and chest. When he lifts his shirt to reveal more under his ribs and stomach, Mingyu shies away, “I’m going to have to punch you more times than I have the energy for, so you’re just going to have to go without. Okay?” They’re fortunately—oh so very fortunately—much lighter than the violet bruise. There’s easily thirty of them that he can count at a glance, but those can be easily hidden by clothes.

He shimmies the shirt on over his distressed tank top so that the frayed, warm grey hem can be seen under his slit shirt. Minghao already looks too cool to be dating him, “I’ll take the rain check.” The shorter man reaches up to ruffle his hair on the way back to the sink to preen.

“Your hair is soft.” At any other time, the compliment might feel out of place, but Mingyu’s been hoping for that comment for a while. Notably, with the lilt in the way he sings it half-heartedly, it’s clear that he’s trying to cheer him up.

“Nice try.”

He laughs and shakes his head, “Well, I tried, at least.” He jabs a few studs into his ears, reserving a few holes for the dangly ones meant to be worn during performance time. Aside from the diamonds and silver balls, the only other accessory he’s wearing is the chain bracelet, “Hey, c’mon. Snap out of it.” He’s spun around, “Get dressed,” and is tutted along towards their luggage with little pats to his butt, “get washed up.” Standing in front of the mirror, Minghao wraps him in a hug from behind, squeezing some sort of lightness back into his mood and tiptoeing to rest his chin on his shoulder, “And maybe if you do all that before Cheol gets here, I’ll find a better way to get even.”

The warm kiss on his neck makes him tingle all over. It tickles him pink and makes his shoulders shirk up as Minghao giggles and sways them for a couple steps, using Mingyu’s weight against him.

Okay, you win.

Mingyu will stop apologizing.

When Mingyu gets out of the bathroom, he’s also not feeling the first shirt he puts on, so he
patters into the hotel topless and switches out his button-up for something more casual to match the navy cable knit he was planning to wear.

Minghao is typing away at his phone with his legs crossed, sitting on a made bed with his black cap already on, “Everyone went out to brunch with their guests, so I guess we’re on our own. Soon said to meet back here by 2 just to be safe.”

“Since when did he care about being safe?” he slips the baby pink t-shirt over his head and pops his head out the top with enough speed that his hair does a cute bounce before settling in place.

Minghao shrugs, “When he woke up this morning, apparently.” and rolls onto his back, “Nothing new. He usually buckles down the day of a performance.” before tumbling off the bed and onto his feet, “We still need to sort this out, though.” He gestures passively at his neck, speaking without a care. He’s trying his best to show that it’s not bothering him even though Mingyu knows it is. Even if it’s slight, he knows it is.

“Jun didn’t pull through?” He’s been one of their saviors so far.

“He said he only brought one necklace and that it’s, like, a ribbon.” It’s unnecessary for him to help Mingyu into his sweater, but here he is pulling it over his shoulders and picking at tiny balls of lint with his fingertips, “I don’t think it’s going to work out.” He flicks them into the carpet.

“We have to think of something before Seungcheol gets here.” Mingyu, then, has a brilliant idea—probably one he’s traded all his karma tokens in for—, a breakthrough, if you will, “I’ve got a scarf!”

“Okay.”

“Yeah,” he steps to the side to card through the various fabrics he’d packed, blindly feeling for the dark grey muffler because the way Minghao’s idly curling his fingers into the large gaps between the knits in his jacket is very distracting, “here.”

“Oh!” he laughs, and he doesn’t know why, but it’s a genuine and airy laugh, “I have this exact scarf.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.” He folds it in half and loops it over his head, twisting it once to pull one end through and again to pull the other, “Yep, wears the same, too.”

Mingyu had picked the scarf up years ago, sometime in the winter with the intent to give it away during Christmas. He never got to give it away—finding that he’d grown somewhat attached to the soft fabric after having it sit in his room for a month. It’s not really his style and he still wears it carelessly tossed over his shoulder, but it’s kept him warm and that’s all that matters. It’s amazing how different (re: cooler) Minghao looks donning the same scarf. He knows how to fashion it, “It looks good on you.”

“I know, Mingyu.” He chuckles, “Why would I keep a scarf I didn’t look decen-”

Knock, knock.

“Hm?” their attention clicks towards the door, “Must be room service.”

“We’re not set to checkout until tonight.” Minghao scoots past him to open the door, speaking as he unlocks it, “Hi, sorry, we’re not-” the mid-sentence break catches Mingyu’s attention, “Aren’t
you early?"

And, needlessly, his stomach is on the floor. He can feel it. It drops straight out of his ass and onto the floor with a hard splat, “Well, hello to you too, Minghao.”

Seungcheol’s here.

The dancer steps aside to let him in, “Morning.” Mingyu stutters into a shaky greeting before organizing his things a bit—or at least, he’d like to occupy himself with organizing things, but Minghao was very thorough in picking up after themselves while he was getting dressed.

“Morning, Mingyu.”

He takes two steps past Minghao before whipping around, his swede messenger bag almost hitting him. The man squints and gives him a onceover before opening the main flap and pulling out a familiar grey scarf, “Okay, cool, I thought I was dreaming for a sec.”

“You brought my scarf?”

“Yeah, I saw it when I was folding the laundry and I thought you forgot to pack it. Don’t you usually take this one with you?” He balls it up in his hands, wringing it a couple times before folding it over his arm and cocking his hip, “Don’t tell me you went out and bought another one. You could have called.”

Mingyu sways uneasily. It’s only a matter of time, “Oh, I didn’t want to bug you since you were busy, and I only realized I forgot it this morning. I didn’t buy a new one. This is Mingyu’s.” A thumb is waved towards him somewhere in the blurred space between life and death. Sorry, Seungcheol. I’ve done your son dirty. I’ve ruined everything he’s worked towards.

“Really?” he scoffs, “Do you guys have to match with everything?”

“The bracelets were your idea, remember?” Minghao shuffles between them to get to his shoes and has a seat on the bed to lace them up properly.

Seungcheol laughs a hearty and warm laugh, smiling up to his gums and his eyes crinkle in the most fatherly way, “Yeah, I remember.” Shame he’s in such a good mood today because it’s about to go downhill. It’s not that he doesn’t want Minghao to- well, he doesn’t want him to show his roommate the incriminating blots on his neck, but he also doesn’t know how they’ll manage to hide it until it fades. There’s no way to find an alternative coverage with Seungcheol added to their party for the rest of the day. In reality, he knows there’s only so much damage he can do. He’s not really going to die. He probably won’t even be yelled at. However, Seungcheol is a sharp man even when he doesn’t intend to be, “So, give Mingyu his scarf back and let’s go. I saw this place downtown that looks good. I want to beat the lunch rush.”

“It’s Thanksgiving weekend,” Minghao smiles, blinking blankly, “will it really be busy?”

So, so sharp, “You’re stalling. What’s up?” That was fast, faster than Mingyu had ever seen a parent catch their child red-handed, “Why are you stalling?”

“I’m not stalling.” Minghao tries to laugh, slowly raising his hands to the scarf, “It’s just cold,” he slurs as he pouts—oh my god, he’s trying to get out of something by acting cute—and sways, “and this scarf is already nice and toasty.”

Seungcheol isn’t buying it, but patiently plays along with an equal amount of cloying sweetness in his voice, “I thought you said this was your lucky scarf.” And he knows how to turn the
tables, “That’s why I woke up early and brought it for you.” Guilt tripping is a little low, “C’mon, Hao. You two don’t have to lie to me.” He throws an arm around Mingyu’s shoulder, “I was young once. A hickey’s a hickey, no big deal. Let’s see the damage and get on with our day. I’m sure I’ve seen worse.” The weight pressing into his side is supposed to feel friendly and welcoming, but Mingyu’s only thought is how easily he’d be able to throw him out the window and into the parking lot several floors below, “Give Mingyu his scarf back and let’s get some eggs bennie, okay?”

His parental coaxing with babying, reasoning words seems to work. With shy fingers, Minghao turns slightly to undo the grey scarf and hand it back to Mingyu. He heaves a deep breath before meeting eyes with Seungcheol to receive his own.

The pressure around his neck tightens and turns rigid. He’s not sure if that’s his own throat closing from the stress of the situation or if the professor is really thinking about flexing his arm around him like a boa constrictor until he runs out of air. He’s much too scared to look at his facial reaction, but the atmosphere surrounding them is telling.

“That’s,” he’s at a loss for words. It’s okay. Mingyu hasn’t ever seen something that bad either. It takes only a few seconds for Seungcheol to come to his own conclusions with how ready Minghao looks, shying into himself cautiously. He’s not running away from this and Mingyu isn’t either because he wants to stay true to their promises. Seungcheol isn’t welcome to pilot this relationship anywhere. He’s welcome to sit the fuck down and watch and that’s what Minghao is saying with his eyes alone. He’s only approaching with caution because he knows Mingyu’s going to be the one on the receiving end of any backlash in this situation.

The more scared Mingyu feels, the more Minghao bears his mark for all to see, tilting his head to the side, not just because he wants to show both of them that he’s not afraid, but also because it seems like he’s challenging his over-protective roommate. It’s probably best not to agitate him, but Minghao has no holds barred, “So,” he waves towards his neck, “these are the facts.” And he gestures towards them, “And we need solutions.”

Seungcheol sucks up a breath and nods with his lips tightly sewn together.

And suddenly the knot in his throat isn’t so imaginary.

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY GYUHAO DAY~~ what will be mango’s fate~~

I know I said I would post earlier last night, but my friends came from out of town and took me out for a belated birthday dinner uvu what was I going to do? say no? but i knew i HAD to post today~ ehehehe m any more years to the bestest friends in the world uvu
“That’s,” Seungcheol sucks up a gallon of air and holds it as he eases into a nod, teeth clenched lest he turn to the side and use them to rip out Mingyu’s artery. His jaw is locked. Please, just let him live for the next few hours. But the engineer isn’t privy to yelling at or around Minghao; he uses a steady and disarming adult voice, “That’s a big deal.”

“It’s not.” Minghao is calmly evening out the ends of his own scarf and folding it in half, refusing to wear it just yet.

“It is.”

“It’s not.”

“It is.” The weight over Mingyu’s shoulder disappears and is replaced with a shove to his chest, “What the **absolute fuck**, you **irresponsible, hormonal teenager**. What the **hell- he’s about to go on stage in front tens of thousands- hundreds of thousands- and you fucking thought it was a good idea to-”

“I know- I’m sorry, I di-” the back of his knees bump into the edge of the footboard and he flops down onto it.

“You didn’t **what?** You didn’t think that this was a bad idea? You didn’t think about how this could really hurt Minghao’s professional career?” He’s bowled over by Seungcheol’s fists balled into the lapels that Minghao had so carefully ironed into place with his hands.

There’s only so much a dog out of place can do in the face of danger other than cower under the dripping growl of the alpha, “**I promise, I didn’t mean to-**”

Minghao rolls his eyes and steps up, grabbing the back of his roommate’s coat and tugging him off with a robust jerk.

He highly doubts that he’s as strong as Seungcheol—based on his grip and build alone, he can tell that not going to the gym as often has done nothing to detriment his muscles—, but it’s not like he fights against him. After he stands up again, leaving his prey—Mingyu—to recompose himself on the bed, he takes a step back and Minghao holds him by the back of his black jacket the way you’d hold a snarling dog back by its collar, “Cool it. This isn’t entirely Mingyu’s fault. We are adults and I could have told him to stop and I didn’t.” He takes a step forward, placing himself between them, “This isn’t a mark on you, so mind your words, Cheol.” He doesn’t entirely understand the gravity of those words as they seem to be said in reference to something from the past, but it doesn’t really matter because Seungcheol’s aggressions drop immediately and he walks away.

He raises his arms over his head and stretches as he makes his way towards the window, “Fine.” The word is spat out like a distasteful loogie.

Mingyu feels a hand pat his thigh, Minghao motioning him to get up and stop acting so dramatic. If the situation was as light as it was last night, he would have pulled him down and tumbled over him in a giggle fit, but here we are. Mingyu Kim; dead man standing.

“Look.” The dancer starts, “I’ve already thought about this.” continuing to lace up his shoes,
“If we can find something to cover it between performances, we can easily say it’s just stage makeup for the last set. The sky isn’t falling and if I hear Mingyu apologize one more time, I’m going to ram my head into the wall. So, can both of you chill out? This is my problem,” oof, he’s agitated. That’s the third-week-of-physical-therapy voice that he doesn’t miss in the slightest, “and I’ve thought of solutions.” He’s a little scary when he talks like that. Mingyu wonders if that’s how he talks in the studio when they’re serious. If so, he can see why they fight so much, “So, let’s get some food, get less cranky, and get to effective problem solving, okay?”

“Fine.” Seems like staring out that huge window is a good way to blow off steam, “Fine. You win.”

Mingyu deflates in relief, glad that Minghao always wins.

Finally, he moves to put on a pair of socks and wear his own shoes, steering clear of the huffing man across the room, but Minghao stops him halfway. He patters over to his luggage and quickly pulls out two large bandages. Right, those darn ankles of his. They’ve scabbed over a bit since, but they’ll definitely be sore with his socks and the heel of his shoe rubbing against them. Thanks for remembering, sweet time wizard, your concern is greatly appreciated. Maybe it’s because his back is sore or because Seungcheol’s in the room, but he half-expected Minghao to crouch down and slap the plasters on for him instead of handing them over-

Shush.

Mingyu’s a big boy and he can put on his own bandages, but it’s nice to be babied sometimes. He surely enjoys it when his caretaker is someone so good to him, so fond of him. And himself, likewise, wants to baby this individual.

“Do you have any Neosporin?” is that the sound of Seungcheol caring, “It might get infected.”

“I think it’s okay. We let it airdry last night.” He grabs his phone, wallet, keys, whatever else, “We can grab some Neosporin if we pass a convenience store. There’s a 7-11 somewhere out there.” There he goes again, making sure that everyone’s thoughts are accounted for. What did he do in his past life to deserve someone so considerate in this one?

Once they settle into a four-seater table at a bustling brunch place halfway down 3rd Street, the day doesn’t seem as daunting as it did an hour ago.

Mingyu’s gonna live.

He thought that the first real meal sitting together with both of them would be more awkward than it is. Other than Seungcheol being an absolute child and stealing from Minghao’s plate every few minutes—just to rile him up—, there’s nothing amiss.

Their conversation is casual and intimate at the same time, talking about things like career outlooks and discussing the practicality of putting rice in salt shakers. After offering a taste of their own meals and settling into idle chitchat, they talk a little more about how Minghao came to live with Seungcheol in that too-big-for-one-person flat and he hears a funny story or two. He comes to learn that the person who helped Seungcheol fix Minghao’s car is the one babysitting the fur baby this weekend—although, the name escapes him—and that the only way they keep the fluff to a minimum is because Minghao vacuums every morning. He’d been a bit lax recently due to his injuries and overall tiredness, so Seungcheol’s picked up the slack, “and has done a terrible job. You know you’re supposed to use the attachments to achieve maximum suckage, right?”
“You’re the one achieving maximum suckage.” He jabs his fork at him, “Why can’t we just hire someone to clean the place?”

“That’s unnecessary expenditures, and you know how I feel about spending on stuff like that. We’re perfectly capable to do it ourselves.”

Amongst other domestic struggles, there’s the cleaning disagreements and the trouble around inviting guests over at weird hours of the night. It’s almost nice to see that Minghao and Seungcheol’s relationship isn’t all doting dads and best buddy flatmates. In fact, they disagree on almost everything. However, their compromises are strong and steady as well. Seungcheol washes dishes every time they cook, and he shakes out all the rugs every weekend. Minghao cooks and does groceries with Seungcheol’s Costco card, and deep cleans the entire apartment once a month. Seungcheol gets to pick up after Cacahuate so long as Minghao’s the one who washes and dries him weekly.

And, yes, Minghao’s the one that has to kill the spiders. It’s kind of sweet that the professor readily admits that he’s a huge chicken in the face of anything with more than four legs, “Simply unwelcoming. What do you need so many legs for? Villainous deeds, that’s what.”

They talk a little about his job and a little more about his books and at some point—with a large bite of English muffin in his mouth—the engineer grows increasingly shy. He grumbles something about writing a variety of genres, from fantasy horror to slice-of-life supernatural mystery, but his most recent endeavor is a story about love and he’s been having the worst time trying to piece it together. He’s rather short when it comes to answering questions and tends to diverge most of the blame—it’s not really blame—onto other situations and people. For example, Jihoon’s music and critical input have been completely null recently and their creative jam sessions have piddled out to little more than frustrated coffee sipping and excess snack consumption.

He mutters something about not being able to write about it cohesively; that his thoughts jump around a lot and that when he asks Minghao for help, he’s also at a loss, “That’s not my fault. I’m just editing your grammar and syntax stuff.”

“But your feedback on the content is always a big shrug and that’s not helpful.”

“Maybe you both have different experiences and opinions on the topic.” Mingyu suggests, inhaling yet another blueberry pancake, “Isn’t it something that you have to write based on personal experience?”

“That’s what I said.” He grumbles into another sip of water- oh, hey, you’ve barely eaten anything. Stop talking, more eating. Focus on the fresh buttermilk. It’s so good. We don’t have a fridge to store your leftovers, “But no, this fool thinks-”

“It’s better for stuff like that to come from the imagination! That’s what will make a seemingly mundane story come to life and be fantastic.” Well, Mingyu can’t disagree with that. He’s pretty sure Attack on Titan and Bleach weren’t written based on personal experiences. He’s not really one for reading without a copious amount of pictures. After all, a picture is worth a thousand words. But they’re still excellent stories. Sure, he cancelled his Shounen Jump subscription when he left for college, but he’d still readily pick up any of those old stories just for kicks.

Minghao makes a face, showing Mingyu that he’s tried to talk his own sense into Seungcheol a hundred times and counting, “I think you just need to embrace what you know about it instead of trying to find something revolutionary between the lines.” He jabs at his potatoes a few times, eating a small bite before turning back to his water. Maybe he’s nervous about today after all, “If you want to communicate about a topic like love, regardless of setting, it’s not going to feel special if you’re
trying to cater to everyone in the audience. The narrative of love has to be special to you, unique to you. That’s why Jihoon and I can’t be of much help. Our experiences are unique to us, not to you.”

“Mingyu,” fuck, “what do you think I should do?” he crosses his arms after taking half of Minghao’s biscuit and slathering it in honey butter. By now, it’s clear that he’s not just picking off his plate because he’s hungry. He knows that Minghao’s probably not going to eat. Maybe it’s habitual. But he needs to eat.

He can only shrug.

The last thing he had to write was some report for his graduating thesis and he doesn’t even remember what it was on. Seungcheol expects some semblance of empathy, however, and even though he’s speaking with zero experience, he tries to come up with something decent, “Well,” damn, these pancakes are good, “in my opinion, the first time you fall in love,” and he doesn’t expect his mouth to run dry, “like really, really fall in love,” it’s not the fault of the pancakes, “that’s, like, the strongest and most indescribable feeling. So,” please eat, Minghao, you’ll need strength for all the cool things you’re going to do later today, “without being overtly fantastic, perhaps that’s something that’ll be easier to write about.” Can you at least drink juice or hot chocolate? “And you can keep it vague, so a lot of people can resonate with it.”

Seungcheol nods a few times, thinking about his words, digesting them faster than the slice of honeydew he just ripped through, “I see.”

Minghao’s eyes blink between their faces, his knees rubbing warmly and comfortably against Mingyu’s under the table as he dribbles his heel—an anxious tick that his own mother would always snap at him for doing. He seems a little weathered and exhausted despite having slept enough. Hopefully, he’s not getting sick. Hopefully, he’s not hungover. Hopefully, he’s at his best and will perform just like the shimmering star he is, and they’ll win, and everything will be as he woke up feeling.

Feeling, feeling, feeling, that’s almost all he’s been doing the last few days.

What more is there?

Need there be more to it than that?

If he feels hungry, he’ll eat. If he feels thirsty, he’ll drink. If he feels tired, he’ll sleep.

If he feels lovelorn, he knows there’s someone who will meet him halfway with the softest touch and the most meticulous-

God. If he sees Minghao pick up his fork and set it down again without putting it in his mouth first—with food on it—he’s going to start spoon feeding him himself.

Because Minghao’s incredibly sensitive to the atmosphere created by the people around him, he stops shaking his leg and finally takes a bite of food to shut their brains up. Because Minghao knows a little bit of a lot of things, it’s easy to shift topics and even easier to fall into the belief that he and Seungcheol might actually get along better than he’d initially thought, that is, as long as he doesn’t step on anyone’s toes purposefully and as long as Minghao doesn’t completely abandon him just yet. “The apartment gets more quiet than I’d like.”

The man to his right perks up a bit, nibbling at a slice of orange as his eyes curiously look over his roommate.

“I mean, despite living together, I haven’t seen much of Hao around the last few weeks.” He
drags a bite of bread through the hollandaise, sopping it up, “And I know that’s mostly due to me
scaring you shitless,” well, he’s not wrong, “but in the future, Mingyu, feel free to hang out at our
place instead.” He sniffles, like those aren’t the concise words he wants to use, “We don’t have a
spare key, so Minghao can’t give you one,” oh, that’s what this is about, “but feel free to swing by
whenever. I won’t leave you out in the cold.”

“Thanks?”

However, no one is looking at Mingyu.

Seungcheol’s eyes are pointed down at his finished cup of coffee, waiting for the waitress to
refill it. He raps his fingers idly on the pounded copper table, nails clinking against the metal lightly.
Minghao, on the other hand, wears an expression so open, wondering, and almost conflicted. He’s
not exactly happy about this open invitation. If anything, his emotions are mixed.

Does this count as Seungcheol interfering in their relationship? Is that why they aren’t on the
same page about this? Maybe Minghao would like to have his own space, invite Mingyu over on his
own accord and not have him show up out of the blue.

But it’s settled, he’s not going to be showing up without talking to Minghao first, at least not
until he hears the welcome invitation from his own mouth. The air is stiff and a little awkward
because they’ve all stopped talking. The noontime bustle of the little restaurant is picking up and their
bill caddy has been delivered. Instead of fighting over it, no one moves to pay, that is until Mingyu
reaches for his wallet. At which time, Minghao snatches it with his snake-like reflexes and runs off to
the checkout.

Seungcheol sighs, calling his attention, “Same as usual.” He combs his hair back with his
fingers and wipes his mouth with the pastel green napkin in his lap, “I thought maybe eating out with
you would clear up that problem, too, but I guess I got my hopes up.”

Does that mean that being with Mingyu has fixed other problems? “Will he eat something
lighter? Like a cereal bar or something?”

He shakes his head, “Nah, I’ve tried everything.” He drops the napkin into his plate and leans
back in his seat, “Candy, Nutrigrains, soup, Starbucks, he doesn’t have an appetite before big
performances. He said it’s been like this since he was a kid—like he wouldn’t eat on test days and
stuff. Apparently, he dropped five pounds during his capstone finals and I’d believe him if he had
any weight to lose.” Mingyu gets to beat him to the tip and that feels better than dropping 20%
should for shoddy service, “But, I guess he was brave enough to try ordering something today with
the intention to eat.” Well, he’d barely eaten a quarter of an already small brunch, but at this point,
he’s willing to count that as a small victory, “So, it’s your fault if he throws up.”

“Hey, that isn’t fair.” Mingyu chuckles because it’s a joke and the firm hand that claps down
onto his shoulder and walks him towards the exit isn’t angry or full of hate. It’s full of fondness and a
little squeeze of thanks.

And at some point, Mingyu takes pride in being the most minute positive change.

Walking around downtown feels oddly familiar. It’s breezy and cold, but he feels comfortable
enough to loop his arm over Minghao’s shoulder, fingers resting in the plush fabric of this scarf as he
and Seungcheol chat about why the living room needs to—and needn’t—be organized. Guests are
out of the question thanks to the older man’s rationale, “If anyone’s coming over, they already like us
enough not to care about how our living room looks.”

It seems like Minghao is over whatever troublesome thoughts he had back at the restaurant because he’s more than complacent under his arm, resting his own hand at Mingyu’s waist, pinky tucked into the belt loop of his jeans, “Do you know how much shit I had to pick up before Mingyu came over?”

“Mingyu won’t care if I leave my game cases on the ottoman.” Seungcheol spins on his heel to walk backwards in front of them, talking as they walk. Standing downwind, they get a sniff at his cologne. It smells oddly familiar, too.

Actually, Mingyu would very much so care if they weren’t neatly stacked on the ottoman. He had to resist organizing the remote box when he went over, “Mingyu’s at least twice the neat freak that I am. You should see his apartment.”

“He probably will one day.” His thumb nicks Minghao’s jaw, cheekily poking at him. Has the future ever looked brighter than it is in this moment? “I’ll make sure to leave my coffee table in shambles to make it feel homey.”

Seungcheol throws a few fake jabs at this stomach before laughing, “I’m not that messy.”

The hand at his side pulls him close to whisper in his ear, “He’s totally that messy.” The breath tickles.

His heart feels light and happy. Gosh, he never thought he’d be happy in the vicinity of Seungcheol, especially when Minghao’s involved. But, again, he’s proven wrong because his significant other is an incredibly good judge of character. All the people he’s voluntarily involved with have been upstanding and beautiful in their own unique ways. Despite being rough around the edges, this prickly roommate has wound up being a surprisingly childish individual who Mingyu has quickly learned how to navigate. He’s not an enigmatic cryptid like the mysterious being touching his butt every time he makes it difficult to walk.

Suddenly, Minghao lunges forward to grab Seungcheol’s coat.

“Careful.” He chides, swinging the shorter man into them before turning to the person he’d knocked over, “Sorry about that.”

The young man he’d bumped into doesn’t respond right away. His hair is held back by a red and yellow sweatband, but it’s still getting in his face as he frantically picks up a stack of papers. His black sports bag keeps slipping forward and off his shoulder clumsily. Of course, they help out—is that even a question—Mingyu goes so far as to chase one sheet halfway down the block and Seungcheol stomps on one before it can fly into the street. The wind picks up and makes it difficult even though there are less than twenty papers in his once-neat stack.

Normally, he wouldn’t poke into another person’s business like this; he’s not that nosy. However, the way this strange man eyes Minghao makes him a little alert. There’s some form of familiarity in his gaze that the silver-haired man hasn’t noticed, “Thank you,” and his accent is heavy, “Míngháо.” The paper in his hand is the last page of an NDA form—or so it says at the top of the page—and at the bottom is a line for his signature that still isn’t filled.

“Sorry,” he hands over the short stack, “have we met before?”

He shakes his head and offers out a hand, “Dǒng Sīchéng,” Minghao takes it, but the man’s grip seems feather light, “we are going to dance today.”
Didn’t Soonyoung say something about not meeting rival dance teams before a competition because it’s a jinx of sorts? Should they be closing their eyes and leaving as quickly as possible, “Oh, you’re from the Taproom! I saw your videos. Sorry, I didn’t recognize you at first. It’s nice to meet you.” The way Minghao speaks is sometimes a puzzle on its own. Although he sounds friendly and although Mingyu expects him to be welcoming towards his competitors, something in his lil is rigid and uncomfortable. Even as they carry into casual conversation in a language Mingyu doesn’t understand in the slightest, even as Minghao and his too-nice-too-good-hearted nature offer to help translate some of the forms for him, even as Sicheng whips out a pen—thanking after each messy scribble—, he still sounds unsure and wary of the situation. The courtesy chuckles after every draw-out mistake that Sicheng makes and apologizes for aren’t normal. They aren’t Minghao.

If Seungcheol was right about the nerves, then maybe seeing someone from the opposing team is sending Minghao’s anxiety through the roof. But he’s too nice to stop halfway. He’s too polite to tell this guy to ask someone else to help him out. Minghao probably knows the struggle of the mad mess that is English and learning it as a child probably humbled him with everyone else learning it as a second language—it’s why he doesn’t use Chinese with Jun or that one kid from the studio, it’s why he tried his best to get rid of his already light accent since high school. Speaking with Jun previously, he knows that in the years that have passed, Minghao has lost a chunk of his fluency. He can almost hear him mulling over accurate translations. Maybe it isn’t that he’s lost his mother tongue, maybe he’s caught up over something else.

Is he intimidated? Is he worried? Is he nervous?

Do you need a corner?

Do you need some dimes for your fare to get away?

Mingyu puts a hand at the small of Minghao’s back, calling his attention, “Hey, hon,” but he says it in such a way that it could be easily misheard as ‘Hao’. He’s still not ready for the pet names, “I don’t mean to interrupt, but we’re going to be late if we don’t hurry.”

He is, however, glad that Seungcheol knows how to play along, “Yeah, I have a Skype call to take as soon as we get back to the hotel.”

“Oh,” Minghao hesitates, linking his fingers with Mingyu’s behind his back; loose and light like their hands might fall apart, “sorry.” He turns back towards the quiet dancer, “I’ll see you on stage, yeah?”

“Yeah.” His voice is little more than a whisper and if a car had driven by just then, he probably would have gone unheard, “See you then.” And he turns to leave, but takes only one step before turning around, “Can you tell Jühue I said hello?”

“Sure.” Minghao is already following him and Seungcheol in step, speaking over his shoulder as he waves goodbye.

“Thanks!”

He doesn’t know how long they walk, but it can’t be that far considering they’re still downtown, possibly a few blocks away from the hotel.

His heels don’t hurt thanks to the extra bandages they grabbed from 7-11 and the Neosporin that is actively killing any bacteria that he was worried about, but at this moment, the only thing on
his mind is Minghao’s seemingly uncomfortable disposition. His mood has been hot and cold all morning and now that it’s clearly the afternoon, it seems to be leaning more towards anxious impatience.

There’s still the very pressing hickey issue that they have to take care of and that’s probably just adding to the stress of today’s events. There’s still the hurdle of the entire dance competition, but before that is the possible nagging and prying questions of the friends who will see said hickey if they don’t figure out something fast. Despite all this, Mingyu’s also sure that if he and Seungcheol weren’t here right now, then Minghao would be having a much more difficult time trying to cope with it- then again, without him here, the whole hickey situation wouldn’t have happened.

Seungcheol is the one to thank.

He’s still trying everything within his dadly powers and that includes spending an extra fifteen minutes concocting some mysterious drink in the confines of 7-11’s self-serve section. When he finally emerges and hands Minghao a small to-go coffee cup, he doesn’t think much of it. It’s more surprising that his parental powers work and Minghao starts sheepishly sipping on the mysterious drink as they settle in for a moment as the oldest gets preoccupied. He does it without thinking; it’s in his hand, so he takes a drink.

“Of course, the baby drink works.” Seungcheol rolls his eyes as he scrolls through his phone and sees that he has a missed call or something akin to that.

“It’s not a baby drink.”

“It’s a baby drink.” He laughs, “But drink up. It’s better to have a little something in your stomach aside from the single slice of orange and three chunks of potato, okay.”

“What is it?” Mingyu asks as Minghao hands him the cup for a sip. It’s probably easier to learn through taste than through explanation even though the roommate goes on to explain that it’s just normally really hot soy milk mixed with cardamom and honey, “And all from 7-11, too? I’m impressed.”

“Well, I had to use the soy milk to rinse out one of those kiddie boxes of Cinnamon Toast Crunch a couple times, but generally, yeah.”

“Wait, so you’re just drinking hot cereal milk.”

Minghao takes his cup back with a pout, “I don’t see a problem with that.” The mock offense on his face makes Mingyu smile. Noted, Minghao needs baby drinks to tide him over on stressful days.

Sure, it’s easy for him to say that he wished he knew this information beforehand. He’s no stranger to concocting comfort filled drinks, but to know Minghao’s taste is something that takes time and experience; stuff that Seungcheol has an upper-hand in. Jealousy and envy aren’t on his mind right now, he just thinks it’s cool to have someone that knows you well enough to provide little things to fill cracks in an otherwise solid game plan.

All he can do to help the situation is sit next to him on the empty bike racks and rub his back and, for once, Mingyu feels at peace being just enough. He’d much rather see his spindly dancer down an ample meal and get off his feet, but within the present limits and constraints, the most he can do is support him quietly, steadily and readily.

He leans into his side, shoving him playfully with his shoulder, “Y’know, Seungcheol’s call
has him preoccupied.”

The man has been taking a call by the lamppost for almost five minutes already, “Hmm?” Minghao looks up from his drink, kicking his feet to balance himself again.

“So, I wanted to ask if everything is-”

“Please don’t ask if everything is okay.” He lowers his cup—nearly empty—and nudges Mingyu with his elbow, “We both know it’s going to be okay in the end, so the journey there doesn’t really matter right now.” And he links their fingers together again.

“Alright,” is hardly mumbled out as he raises a hand to tuck a few chunks of hair back under the strap at the back of Minghao’s cap. The wind still has a way to poof it up despite his efforts, “I won’t ask.”

A silence occupies the nonexistent space between them for the longest time.

“Can I kiss you on the cheek with sticky lips?”

“What?” he missed what he said, too focused on making his partner look less like a grey porcupine.

“My lips are a little sticky, but I want to,” he purses his lips and makes a tiny kissy sound before poking Mingyu’s cheek.

Pressing a kiss into his ear, he laughs, “You need to ask?”

“I’m sticky.”

“Well, Minghao,” Mingyu crosses his arms. It’s kind of cute that he can’t reach the ground while his own feet are firmly planted. Honestly, he doesn’t notice their height difference that much, but when he does, “you should know by now that I’m always going to be fine receiving smoothies from you,” it makes him a little tingly, “sticky or not.”

Ears red with blush, Minghao launches his empty cup at the garbage can by the door, scoring effortlessly, “Shut up. Kiss cancelled.”

“Aw, don’t be like that.” Remember his resolve to kiss Minghao in front of his roommate? Although all the hostility and fire from its initial intention has now died down, the notion still stands. It might be fulfilled within the next few moments, “Didn’t you know it’s national smoothie day?”

He sputters a few embarrassing smooches into the air, “Nice try.” Minghao stands and leans against the opposing rack, “National smoothie day is on July 21st. We shuttle all the kids to Jamba Juice after practice, so, ha.”

“Okay, fine.” He checks over his shoulder for Seungcheol one more time—not because he cares that he sees, but to make sure he’s not uncomfortable—, he’s not looking. So, he pulls Minghao into him by the loops of his jeans and nearly knocks his hat off with his forehead, “Then when’s national kiss your significant other day?”

“-day.” Minghao mutters before crossing his arms and turning away.

“Hm?” What was that, dear?

With a huff, he mumbles again, “Every day.”
“Oh, is it?” he just grumbles, “Well, would you look at that. Today is—oh my gosh—could it be? Today is,” his heavy sarcasm and half-assed enthusiasm are cracking Minghao’s stoic resolve, making a cackle breach through his gritted teeth as he shakes him and tickles his sides, “a day?”

That effervescent laughter fills the space under the 7-11 awning with the most beautiful sound, fills the cracks in the pavement and the gaps between ceiling tiles. It flushes out Mingyu’s heart and strums the spiderwebs on the windowsill.

This is the loveliest moment.

This and many others just like it and many other moments that will come to be.

Humble.

Subtle.

Simple.

Why does making him laugh and smile feel so damn good? So fucking right? Who asked you to be so amazing, Minghao Xu? Who gave you the right to be the center of feelings like this?

Aren’t these the thoughts of a human that is truly, undeniably, completely in love?

Chapter End Notes

In the next episode, we go into a bondage shop :D

NOW THAT I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION, have you guys checked out @svtclubhouse? it's a little side project i’m running :)

also, SPECIAL THANKS TO @winhaoist for supporting 1098 on Ko-Fi! Here's a shot of today's scene with winwin~ ahh the world works out nicely after all~
“Isn’t this a bondage shop?”

“Hear me out.” Seungcheol stops them in the middle of the sidewalk after gesturing towards a dark and grungy store. This is like Hot Topic and Spencer’s older, more promiscuous cousin who has no semblance for public decency. Can they really just display stuff like that on the street? There are children walking around, “It’s not a bondage shop, it’s a leather store.” Minghao tilts his head, eyes narrowed with an underlying uncertainty, “You can get a really thick choker to cover up that bad decision and the fastest and easiest place to find one is probably here.”

He appreciates the roommate’s wit, but he hasn’t even had a chance to kiss Minghao in front of him and now he’s asking them to walk into a sex shop together. He’s seen more outlandish things in the past, but he can’t say he’s seen them with Minghao. However, there’s no argument to be had. The dancer is getting more desperate for solutions as the minutes tick by and Mingyu’s going to be accommodating to the nth degree since the need for this venture is still mostly his fault.

So, they make their way into Barely There, an adult store- don’t give him that look. He’s seen most of these items serve their purpose in various PornHub explorations. He’s not that naïve. He knows exactly what most of these things are. It’s just a little awkward to be in here with his significant other and his roommate. Speaking of, Seungcheol looks completely unbothered. He looks just as casual walking in here and picking up a studded collar as he did walking into Valentino Wednesday and requesting fine fabrics for a suit jacket that’s still at the dry cleaners. Somehow, it doesn’t come as a surprise.

Seungcheol seems like the type to like stuff like this in the bedroom.

From the couple times he’s asked Minghao, he knows that Seungcheol has been working on a short series of romance novels full of passionate and prolific love, so he wonders if he’s privy to frequenting stores like this to fuel his ‘creative endeavors’. Unlike a fantasy novelist who has to use a copious amount of imagination to craft a new world, someone who writes about relatable topics like emotions and love must, in fact, draw from personal experience, right? A few sparks in his brain almost make the connection to Jeonghan wearing one of these harnesses or being bound by a length of rope, but he squashes that thought underneath his heel as they swerve past a shelf of vibrators.

There’s absolutely no time or space for thoughts like that right now-

“Think fast.” And he’s smacked in the chest by something fleshy and neon green. It flops around as he flounders to catch it. It’s a mess of limbs and he misses, but the sound of an extra large, limp, silicone dildo smacking against the linoleum floor is probably the most hilarious thing he’s heard today. He stifles his laughter in the quiet shop as Minghao beats a hand against his shoulder—also trying not to laugh—and his ears turn a lovely shade of pink.

Seungcheol knows exactly what he’s doing and he’s having fun pressing their buttons.

The older man pulls Minghao to continue walking and they duck under a few whips hanging from the ceiling. However, the dancer’s reflexes just aren’t as sharp as they usually are because he’s still recovering from Mingyu’s clumsy stunt. The giggles are stuck in his throat with his mouth
stretched wide and his eyes crinkled into crimped crescents. The curled fingers at his lips are the only thing stopping him from causing a ruckus in the sultry store. Minghao walks directly into a cat of nine tails and jumps back, swatting at the air in front of him as Seungcheol chuckles and ushers him along until they reach an entire wall of restraints.

Fucking Christ, Seungcheol.

Is this a test? Is this a test?

They could have gotten to this section by other means, like the opposite wall of the store that’s lined with stupid bachelor party gifts and offensive t-shirts.

Something about coming here with him feels inappropriate and a little—dare he say—perverted. It’s not because it’s an adult store, it’s because it just feels weird to come here with Minghao and Seungcheol. It feels like someone has something to gain out of this equation and he doesn’t like it. It rubs him the wrong way. Couldn’t he have just sent he and Minghao in alone- or just Minghao? He’s an adult. He’s perfectly capable of buying something like this on his own. You understand, don’t you? Maybe he’s thinking too much.

But whatever. They’re here now and the sound of that fucking dildo hitting the ground is still pricking up the corners of his mouth.

Breaking the thick silence, “Oh,” a little scoff, “Soonyoung has this one.” Again, not surprised.

“He seems like the kinky type.”

“I don’t know where it goes during the offseason,” Seungcheol picks it off the wall, holds the d-ring-tipped leather straps and sparkly chains up to observe, and puts it back, “but he wears it during performances.” He shuffles them a few feet over to the selection of chokers.

Several of these fit the needed criteria of thick and pretty, but Minghao turns away each one. Mingyu knows he doesn’t like to wear a bunch of restraining items during performances. In his own words, the only thing he’ll wear that’s moderately tight are his pants and shoes, “Hiya,” the floor assistant beams, “can I help you guys with anything? Any questions?”

“Yes, actually.” Seungcheol turns towards them and waves his hand towards the wall before he smoothly loops an arm behind Minghao’s neck, “We’re looking for something to cover this.” And he tugs down the scarf, making the dancer struggle for a second and scramble to cover the hickey again. He kisses his teeth as he escapes his grasp and shoves Mingyu between them as a barrier. The hands curled into the sleeve of his jacket make him feel grounded, a firm reminder that he ought to be less amused with his significant other clinging to him and more in tune with protecting him from Seungcheol’s provocative gestures.

“Of course.” They take a few steps over to look over the collection, heels of heavy boots tapping loudly against the polished floor, “So, do you want something versatile? Like, are you guys using leashes or tying him up to anything?”

This isn’t for us, but what does Mingyu expect when three people walk into a store within this context. The idea of a threesome- well, while he may entertain the thought in the future, for now, their relationship isn’t ready to even consider things like that. He’s still fiercely fixated on being the center of his attention. For now, he’s still entirely grossed out about the idea of Seungcheol’s naked body being anywhere near them or his virgin bed. His poor, poor bed.
“What are your specs, Hao?” Seungcheol takes a step forward to lean over and peer around Mingyu’s chest to peek at Minghao and his red ears.

Despite his flushed state, his expression and voice are anything but amused, “I’m a choreographer and we have a televised competition today, so,” Mingyu takes note that Minghao didn’t bother to go with ‘dancer’ or something more ambiguous, “just something simple,” he lets go of the navy knit to clap his hands together once, giving punctuation to his agitation. He gives Seungcheol a tight and pointed smile, “that looks professional and won’t hit me in the face while I’m doing flips on stage.”

“Preferably not too tight,” the roommate tacks on, “white or black,” and looks at Minghao with a cheeky grin, waiting for a confirmative nod, “with silver hardware because that looks nice, right?”

“Whatsoever. Just whatever you guys have that’s simple and not too pricey.”

However, even though they point out that it’s for Minghao, the shopkeeper and Seungcheol do most of the negotiating over finding the right one as he and Mingyu keep to their section of shelving. They even leave to browse selections kept in the case at the front of the store and it seems like Minghao’s fine with letting his roommate hold the reigns to this purchase as long as no one is harassing him anymore.

After they’re out of sight, things seem to fall silent.

Every now and then they’ll pick out one or two to look at and immediately put back because who in their right mind is paying this much, “-for something you can get at the pet store?” Minghao shakes his head.

“We can go back and get my car and go to a pet store if you want.” He rubs a hand into the small of his back.

Minghao sighs, shaking his head and pouting his lips slightly as he files through a few accessories. It’s not a cute pout, it’s a drained one. There’s something on his mind, “I’m just really not in the mood to shop.” He waddles over to a new aisle full of clearance costumes. There are only a few left considering Halloween ended a month ago and Mingyu’s surprised that they haven’t cleared that inventory, but he supposes some people don’t just wear costumes one day a year.

“And I wasn’t in the mood to catch a septic dildo but Seungcheol seems hellbent on-”

“To be fair, you didn’t catch it.”

“That’s beside the point.”

He’d be lying if he said they were seriously looking for solutions. They’re just picking up ridiculous-looking things and putting them back. The public fascination with the phallic is silly—specifically a full-body banana costume with a special penis pocket is what gives him that thought—and he’d like to think he’s outgrown his immature college-self who would wiggle eyebrows and jeer at the smallest innuendo, but in all honesty, the current situation is pretty ridiculous.

He supposes it’s simply due to there being a lot of things happening at once, as if the universe was determined to jam pack their potential goodbye with every emotional stimulant in order to provide a somewhat impactful final hurrah. But that’s not exactly why Mingyu feels a bit worn and tired of all the things that have been happening. He wishes they had more time—a currency that he never thought about before. He wants more time to hold Minghao, he wants more time take him to
the movies, to art galleries, to try new restaurants, to drink shallow glasses of wine on the couch with Cacahuate on the floor and Minghao in his lap. He wants more time to solidify what’s already there, more time to develop comfort with the word-

Something soft slides behind his ears and perches on his head. A headband? He turns to look at Minghao who simply quirks his lips and tilts his head, “Nevermind, those don’t suit you.”

Mingyu reaches up to feel for whatever is there just to remove a pair of red lace bunny ears with a cheap white ribbon, “Yeah,” he draws out, “not my first choice,” and smiles as he hangs them back on the display. There’s time to kill, he supposes, just enough time that he doesn’t mind playing dress-up with discount costumes at the tail-end of November, “find something better.”

“There’s not much of a selection.” The silver-haired man slinks here and there before coming back to his side. Mingyu moves first, pulling a random headband from the dark of the ill-lit store and hooking it behind those very cute ears after ripping off his hat. He half expects it to be a bobbly dick joke on springs.

But he can’t laugh.

He just holds the black hat to his chest, winding the long strap around his finger and digging his thumb into the seam.

Indeed. Surprised.

Minghao turns to him with an unamused look on his face, soft, black cat ears sitting precariously on top of his head. One look at Mingyu’s expression makes his brow pinch as he looks up and feels for what’s on his head, “Devil horns, really?” a smile, “I might be in a bad mood, but I didn’t think it was that bad—”

“It’s not, it’s—” Mingyu wonders if Minghao ever found out how flabbergasted he was when Wonwoo showed him that picture a month ago. He wonders if Soonyoung ever showed Minghao his silly and rushed costume and told him how the cosmos had fated them to be one and the same, “cat ears.”

“Oh, like our costumes?” He laughs, fixing his hair and properly wearing the headband with the tag still hanging off the tip of the right side.

So, he did see his costume, “Soonyoung showed you?”

Mingyu tucks the hat into his pocket. If he’s going to wear those ears for a while, he’s not going to give him an excuse to put his hat back on. What hat? There’s no hat. Not awkwardly sticking out of Mingyu’s lumpy pocket, that’s for sure.

No. Hat. To. See. Here.

Honestly, it was a really busy day and I don’t remember if Soon showed me first, but I definitely saw your costume once or twice.” He pauses and grins, “Sorry,” and uses his fingers to quote the air, “costume.” Mingyu hip checks him gently and prods fingers into his side. He doesn’t want to be made fun of, but when it’s Minghao, it’s almost okay, “I hope that next year you’ll prepare something.” Batting his hands away with a giggle behind every word, “You’re obligated now.” As your then-boyfriend, of course, “The studio goes hard on Halloween.”

“Says the person who thought coming to work in a dark blue shirt and salmon tie would make
things more spooky.” So, he really did see him in all his Sharpied, spray-painted glory, “You’re cute.”

Oof, heavy sarcasm, was it?

“Cute?”

“Cute.”

The remark is said with a playful bite, but Mingyu can’t stop his cheeks from flushing just a bit. Without a snarky comeback to hide his embarrassment, Mingyu resorts to plucking out a thick, black lacey collar and strangling him with it. Now, before you chide him because Minghao has a very thin and lovely neck and a real collar would have no reason to be too tight on him, it’s because Mingyu picked out a rather lengthy bracelet and proceeded with it.

“Trying to murder me before the big show, okay. I see you, Mingyu. That’s one way to avoid the problem.”

“Sorry.” He lets go and hangs the accessory on the wall again, moving away with a whistle, “Didn’t read.”

“Clearly.”

They return to the intimidating wall of leather to resume looking for a decent pick that won’t break the bank. It lulls into a nice silence of comparing and head-shaking until Mingyu realizes that he’s the only one still looking.

Minghao has his arms crossed over his chest, headband still on, and lips pouted. What’s on your mind, dear, “The more I stand in this store the less I want to buy something.” He says it quietly as to not draw the attention of any snooping sales associates, “Because, like, so what if I go on stage with this?” Waving at his neck, “It’s not going to change anything. It won’t change how I perform. It won’t change whether we win or not.”

Mingyu stretches his back and stands at full height to try and understand his significant other, rubbing his shoulder and circling the patch of purple with his thumb. It’s faded some, barely, “It’s not very professional.” Not enough to go unnoticed.

“I know, it’s just that I feel like we’re making mountains out of molehills.” He leans into Mingyu’s touch ever so slightly, “I’m not really embarrassed about this. I don’t care about what people have to say about this. They can come to their own conclusions, so who cares. I don’t have to hide it.” He nudges his hand away with the side of his chin.

“No.” Mingyu takes his hand back, “You don’t.” sincerely hoping that all of this ‘we need to cover it’ adventure hasn’t come off as ‘I don’t want to go public with us’ or that he’s the one embarrassed about it. He’s not. He’s not. Minghao means so much to him, he just doesn’t want to do wrong by him, hurt his career, hurt his reputation or his pride, “It’s up to you.”

“I know it’s up to me.” Minghao squats again. His words are so soft that they actually do sound a bit hurt. He hopes that’s not the case. Maybe Minghao’s having those thoughts about him. If the odds and ends lead back to the clinic, where the clientele tend to be a lot more close-minded than the people in the performance sphere, then maybe he’s worried that this will hurt Mingyu’s career.

But it won’t.
There he goes again, thinking that he can make tsunamis out of tiny waves, hurricanes out of summer breezes. No one is going to care and his career and future are stable and safe like he’d planned them to be.

As with most things, Minghao bears a majority of the weight.

“Sorry.”

“Hm?” Mingyu looks down at him.

“I let my mood get ahead of me again. He isn’t so much looking for a nice necklace as he’s organizing them by color, “You shouldn’t have to put up with it.”

He gives him an assuring smile, “What? Staying true to your Scorpio nature?” He jokes, “Nothing wrong with you being you.” and shuffles a step over to bump him with his knee.

“Ha. Ha.”

“You’re under pressure and I added to the stress. It’s okay.” Minghao stays silent, still organizing the accessories, “But for the record, I don’t mind if you don’t get something to cover it up. I’m not embarrassed to call you mine.”

“Ew, Mingyu, that’s gross.” The sarcasm woven in those words doesn’t sit right, he doesn’t get the message.

He’s not trying to be saccharine sweet, “Minghao.” He’s trying to communicate something that he doesn’t even have the words for, “I mean, I’m fine with whatever you choose to do. Whatever you think is the best decision for you. I’m here to support you and- yeah, if you want to give zero fucks about the hickey, then let’s both give zero fucks about the hickey.”

Processing… Processing… Processing…

Minghao bobs his head and hums something short like an ‘okay’. He doesn’t say much else.

But Mingyu wants him to respond. He wants to know what he’s thinking. So, he puts a hand on Minghao’s head and pets him like the goddamn cat that he looks like, “Be grumpy if you must,” he gets the dancer to look up at him, “but let’s not fight and let’s not stress over it.”

How can a cat have such pretty puppy eyes?

“Okay, I’ll try my best.” It’s simple but sincere. Minghao lets the words float in the air until they make complete sense to him, “Let’s just get something because even if I don’t change my mind, it’ll still stress me out to only have one option.” That sounds like a good answer. He stands to meet Mingyu’s gaze, “Although, there are some benefits to publicizing that I’m taken.”

“Do people bug you at events like this?” Minghao nods, “Do I need to step up my bodyguard game?”

“Nah, it’s nothing I can’t handle myself.” Of course, Minghao can handle himself, it’s not that Mingyu thinks he’s some damsel in distress that needs saving, but he knows how people can get. He knows that sometimes people get handsy and pushy and gross and because Minghao’s at work—technically speaking—he has to stay professional and well-spoken. He has to provide lip service like he did the night of the dinner. He has to be nice, “But,” wide eyes roll up to him briefly and quickly look away, “playing bodyguard with you was kinda fun.” He takes the cat ears off, “So, I don’t mind.”
Instead of putting them back, he puts the ears on top of Mingyu’s head and cups his cheeks, squishing them slightly until his lips purse, “They’re mine now?”

“This is a good look on you.” Mingyu doesn’t usually like getting babied. He certainly never liked anyone touching his face so much since he fought hard in high school to keep his skin clear, but when Minghao does it, “You should keep it.” Squeezing his cheeks closer a few times so that his lips part and he makes involuntary kissy noises, when Minghao makes him act all ‘gross’, it’s okay, “Like a big fish.”

Okay, that’s it.

“Fish this, punk.” He shakes off his hands and grabs Minghao by his waist in one motion, pulling him close to blow a rude raspberry into one of his equally soft cheeks and trail fishy kisses up to the tip of his ear until he’s puffing hot air into his hair. They’re both trying to keep quiet, but with all the protesting and breathy laughter, it’s difficult.

Minghao smacks his arm a few times, “Okay, okay. Not a fish.” Mingyu loosens his grip but keeps his arms looped around his waist, “A catfish.” And he tightens those arms right back up and shakes the slender man until he gets a whine out of him, “Okay, fine, fine. You can be whatever you wanna be. Let go.”

“Better-” The headband is removed from his head and it takes him a moment to realize that it isn’t Minghao since his fingers are poking between the holes of his sweater.

That can only leave one, “You kids done playing dress-up?” He lets go of Minghao as Seungcheol hangs the headband on a random spoke in the wall of miscellaneous leather; not back where it came from, “It’s almost 2.”

Slender fingers move to loop into the stitches of his arm instead of his chest, “How ‘almost’?”

“Like, 10 minutes ‘almost’. Let’s go.”

“Shit,” now Minghao disengages. He turns back towards the display, “we still didn’t pick one.”

“I gotchu.” He flaps the pocket of his coat open and starts fanning them towards the door. While Mingyu is simply confused and follows where he’s led, Minghao hesitates.

He stands his ground, putting a hand on Seungcheol’s shoulder before snapping at him, “You didn’t buy it for me, right?”

“Pffft.” He scoffs and rolls his eyes, continuing to sweep them towards the door using the clearer, shorter, less-inappropriate path through the store, “No, I stole it.” His impish grin says he didn’t steal it. But the professor gets them out the door and back on the street, surprisingly happy and bouncy like a child coming out of a candy store. Minghao’s absolute doneness is telling, “Don’t look so bitter.”

They take brisk steps. It’ll be a little difficult to get back to the hotel by 2. They’ll probably be a few minutes late, “I am bitter.” Minghao stomps forward a bit so he can turn around and berate his flatmate, “You said you wouldn’t buy me anything anymore. We made a deal.”

“According to the deal, I’m allowed to buy you things,” he pulls out his phone and taps a few times before scrolling down a sizeable document that Mingyu doesn’t have the guts to read over his shoulder, “during times of celebration including—but not limited to—public holidays, job promotions, competition victories, and book launches.”
Damn, they have a document for this? Is that in the rental contract? “And none of those things are today.”

“You’re going to win today.” He says it so matter-of-factly like most proud parents do, “So, consider it an early gift.” Seungcheol juggles between his pockets like he can’t remember which one has the necklace before pulling out a black bag and handing it to the silver-haired man.

Minghao crosses his arms, “How much?”

“I’m not telling you.” he gives him an incredulous look, “It’s a gift. And it’s 2, you don’t have time to refuse. Just take it.”

Seungcheol shakes the matte black gift bag a few times before Minghao frowns and accepts it, “Thanks.” Way to spoil his mood again, Cheol, “You better add this to my rent this month.”

He puts his hands up in defeat before resting the right one on Mingyu’s shoulder as the hotel comes into view, “No promises.”

“Add it to my rent or I’ll get my self-appointed bodyguard to square you up.”

“Alright, alright.” He nods, waving Minghao off and giving his shoulder a firm squeeze, “Mingyu, I hope you’re ready to throw down.”

A few weeks ago, he would have probably shat his pants, but after all the poking and prodding Seungcheol has given them today he thinks wrestling with him might be good for clearing the air. If they can learn something from Soonyoung and Minghao, maybe punching a friend in the face will strengthen their bond in the future. But look at that, Minghao—the same Minghao who called him the president of The House of Weenie Hut Jr.—has grown to believe he can actually face this parental roommate and not cry while doing so.

“You can’t fight Mingyu.” Scratch that last part. Minghao says it just loud enough to be heard over the traffic as they cross the street to the block with the hotel, “He can square you up, but you’ll be fighting me.”

*Are you protecting me, too?*

“Adorable.” Seungcheol shakes his head and tuts them along, into the lobby and into the elevator where the two flatmates seem to be locked in a battle of nerves because Minghao’s staring him down. The older is simply grinning ear-to-ear with victory in the curve of his eyes, beaming across the elevator to provoke the dancer again.

The distance Seungcheol has come from Mingyu’s initial impression of him as a one-dimensional, possessive person is certainly something. He’s obviously a *four*-dimensional, possessive person with a whole lot of doting and love-filled intentions. He really is the big brother that Minghao never had. He likes teasing him, spoiling him, pushing his buttons and all that nonsense. It’ll still be a struggle for him and Mingyu to get close, but because they’re standing in an elevator like this—and after all that’s happened today—it’s clear that getting closer to Seungcheol is in the definite future—Ding.

“Y’all fuckers are *late*!” Soonyoung angrily barks at them the millisecond the doors slide open before sighing and immediately dropping his mean act, “Oh good, it’s actually them this time.”

“How many people have you yelled at?” Minghao tucks the black bag into his coat pocket, leading the three of them out of the elevator and pushing the blond to move, indirectly taking the
blame for their lateness with the tone of his voice and his actions. They’re just five minutes late, go easy on him.

“Just, like, two kids and an old lady- it’s not that bad. I swear. I only said ‘fuck’ one of those times, too.”

“To the k-”

“To the old lady, okay.” Soonyoung takes quick strides down the hall and smacks his hand against several doors to call the appropriate residents out. Mingyu and Seungcheol think it’s safer to hang out by the elevators instead.

The members poke their heads out cautiously before coming into the hall to hear what the unofficial captain has to say. Chan’s already changed into his performance outfit whereas Jun has come out with his shirt off and Vernon’s holding a towel around his waist, hair dripping. Looks like they’re all getting ready. Jihoon’s the last to emerge from his room, hair messily uncombed with a set of expensive-looking headphones around his neck and a dense laptop still open with a program Mingyu could never hope to understand. His pajamas are still on and he has to wonder if he even left the hotel today.

They give Soonyoung an expectant look, waiting for him to make a big announcement or something, but after breaking his serious composure, he coughs, smiles, and jogs back to his room, “Wonu, I need the- yes- thanks.” He comes back out with a small notebook. That firecracker can’t even remember what he was supposed to tell them.

“We all heard the same announcements yesterday-” Jihoon grumbles before being shushed by Jun and Minghao who know they have to let Soonyoung speak or else he’ll get grumpy later in the day. It’s not like Jihoon doesn’t know that as well, he’s just known Soonyoung long enough to not care.

“Some shit was changed, okay? Get off my dick.”

“Okay.” Jihoon sighs, closing the laptop in his arms in order to pay attention to the almost-skittish man. Mingyu’s never seen Soonyoung so wound up. He wonders if something happened last night or during brunch or if this is just how he gets before competitions. Minghao did say he takes dance very seriously, maybe this is what he meant.

“So, hair and makeup will be done at the venue,” he puts his thumb up to count off, “and we’ve gotta be there by 3.” It’s followed by his pointer, “last program rundown and audio check is at 4:30.” The middle, “VIP guests are seated at 5. Audience at 5:15.” The ring finger, “Performance starts at 5:30.” The pinky, “Good?” a general mumble of ‘yeah’ resounds through the five listeners, “So, get down to the lobby by 2:50. They’re sending a shuttle over to pick us up, but guests can hang back and chill. They can use the back parking at the venue.”

They nod.

Mingyu doesn’t know how they comprehended what he said. He was speaking faster than his footwork. Does slowing down exist to these studio guys? How does he expect anyone to understand what he said?

“We know, Soon.”

“Don’t be so tense. It’s okay. We got this.”

“Yeah, lezgetit.”
“Okay, then.” Soonyoung seems a little troubled as he shuts his tiny notebook and kneads the binding between his fingers. But he shakes it off and closes his eyes, taking in a deep breath. Chan, Jihoon, and Minghao cover their ears.

He yells so hard he has to double over.

“Let’s go, team!”

Chapter End Notes

tfw u leave a fic for a month and scare your readers into thinking it was abandoned. nah fam. life just got ahead of me for a bit.

i am actually still not happy with this chapter. it was really hard to work through. so like 'get the collar to cover up the hickey at a sex shop because EZ' was the original outline and i thought it would be cool to write how they get kinda grumpy about cheol but ultimately end up talking about their sexual preferences--the idea is that discussing something like that outside of intimate touchy feely times would be the jux--but the more i wrote of that version, the worse it got ;u; i was just really awkward. and originally, mingyu and minghao picked collars out for each other and bought them in secret to be worn for (°ᴥ°;) times. but making the chapter more about sex and intimacy in the bedroom seemed to throw off the entire story's feel.

in the end, i settled for this jux instead--talking about unsexy things in the sex shop. where gyuhao talk more about what the hickey means and stuff. after all, in the very back of mingyu's subconscious, he wanted to mark minghao and obviously with his judgement unclouded, he would have never done that.

ALSO one last thing. I've decided that the very end of this story will be the post mortem, so 144 chapters hopefully. and the read-along will be posted on wattpad. i thought it was the easiest since I can post the chapter clean and then write the author notes as comments on the side :) and of course, i would hope that you can comment there too!
Minghao already has his luggage unzipped by the time Mingyu kicks off his shoes. He doesn’t even get a chance to ask any questions before the door to the bathroom is closed for him to change, leaving him and Seungcheol with words caught in their throats.

Well, it’s better to fill the air with awkward chuckles than with silence—

Maybe he spoke too soon because the man’s phone rings with a shrill jingle and he excuses himself to take yet another call. If he’s going to be so busy, why did he bother coming? It’d be less troublesome to be in an office instead of taking calls on the fly, but he supposes if he was in the same predicament, he wouldn’t mind picking up 30-minute business conversations in hotel hallways if it meant seeing Minghao fly across a stage and defying the laws of physics.

Despite time and space feeling liminal and a bit shaky after they returned to the hotel, Mingyu tries to root himself in reality. He’s probably just excited. This is a new experience after all. Theater has never been that appealing to him and he’s conked out during more than one play. However, he’s determined to emboss, engrave, and brandish every frame of today’s performance into his memory.

“Hey, is there a dress code or anything?” He came prepared.

Muffled behind the bathroom door, the dancer stretches out an, “Uh,” before responding properly, “not really. It’s not a formal thing. The audience is going to be casual, so whatever you have on right now is already nice enough.” There’s the sharp clack of metal before Minghao hisses.

“Everything alright?”

“Yeah,” a bit of shuffling before the same noise happens again, “I keep clipping my fingers on this belt since I can’t see what I’m doing.”

“Clip it in front and rotate it.”

“Can’t.” Can’t? What kind of belt can’t be rotated?

Mingyu raps his fingernails on the door, “Need a hand?”

When it opens, he’s looking at an angel in white, “Please.” Ah, he even sounds like an angel with his arms twisted behind his back in an attempt to fasten a gold-plated piece. The ivory belt is connected to second and third strips of leather that loop over his shoulder and arm. Gold chains drop from the left of the belt, hooked into the pearl buttons of his shirt. This is more complicated than he thought, “Earth to Mingyu,” he wiggles his fingers, shuffling backwards until he’s only a foot away, “belt, please.”

“Right.” He fumbles for a second, dropping the left half in the handoff, but clips the two together without much trouble. He can see how it’d be difficult to do this on your own, the hole is so narrow and the sharp clasp has left the skin on the side of Minghao’s pointers frayed and raw, “All good.” It’s sheer luck that he could fasten it with his big, meaty man-paws.

“Thanks.” The air feels rigid even after Minghao strides past him, leaving two ribbons of sparkling organza fluttering behind him, streaming from the back of his jean pockets. All the white
from head to toe makes him feel out of place in their comparatively drab-colored hotel room. Even against Mingyu’s pink and navy, he looks like he doesn’t belong. A person this beautiful can’t be of this world.

Is this what gods look like?

Is this who will welcome him at the gilded, pearly gates of heaven?

Is this how grooms feel seeing their brides bob down the aisle in primetime romcoms?

A gentle knuckle nicks the bottom of his jaw, reminding him to close his mouth. Oh, but that smile, that giggle, that’s something of the Earth. No heavenly body could ever wrench his heart like that.

“You’re going to see me on stage in three hours, do you really need to stare?” Mingyu nods eagerly and that’s enough for Minghao to shake his head and walk back to his luggage. He fishes out the black collar and hands it to him. Mingyu doesn’t wait to be asked, he knows what to do the moment the silver-haired man turns around.

For some reason, squeezing the two little snap fasteners on the back of this necklace is a world more difficult than the belt. It’s because his fingers are sweaty, which means he’s rubbing those grubby, stubby things on Minghao’s skin. He can only pray that he’s not disgusted. But the man doesn’t seem to mind as he preens himself in the mirror and fluffs the collar of his shirt to partially hide the choker. Mingyu wishes he could be less of a potato; idling in the middle of a room isn’t his forte. He wants to help, but there’s nothing he can help with. If anything, he’s just getting in the way.

Minghao ropes him back to reality.

He loops the grey scarf around his neck and pulls him close, but in this closed circuit, Mingyu can feel some tension radiating from the dancer. Perhaps he’s nervous, perhaps he’s excited, “Do I look okay?”

He cracks a smile, giving Minghao a gentle push back so he can scan him from head to toe as if he hadn’t been for the last ten minutes, “Very.” But tethers them together with their hands linked. He kisses the patches of pink on Minghao’s slender digits, wishing them well and hoping they don’t hurt-

The door handle jiggles once before there’s a knock and they let Seungcheol in.

“Another call?” he didn’t even notice that his roommate had left the room.

Maybe Mingyu isn’t the only one captivated.

“Another call.”

“You’d think that taking care of a dog that sleeps most of the day would be simple.”

The professor shrugs as he comes over to adjust the back of Minghao’s shirt, “What can I do? They’re determined to bond with Huatito.”

“But why do they keep calling?”

“He ate some soap.”

Minghao rolls his eyes and shakes his head, before tossing his bangs and stringing a few
dangly earrings through the holes in his ears. Who asked you to be so pretty?

Yeah, he knows he’s staring again, but he’s going to take it all in before the inevitable happens. Seungcheol isn’t calling him out for it and as long as it isn’t making Minghao extremely uncomfortable, he’s going to keep making puppy-love, mushy-gushy, dolly eyes at him.

“Can we take a picture?”

Minghao looks up from zipping his duffle bag to take with him to the venue, “You can’t wait till after?”

“Nope.”

Embarrassing dad, ahoy.

Beaded sweat and exhaustion probably won’t look too great in a family photo. It’s better to take it now while everyone’s still fresh and perky from brunch and a brisk walk. They’re shuffled around the room to find the most optimal lighting for a perfect selfie and Mingyu’s thrown back to how similar this is to every school dance he’d ever been to.

His parents are those kinds of parents; the kind that want to take a million photos of every single boutonniere pinning and corsage tying for four years straight. He’d felt awkward then, just like he’s feeling awkward now, but there’s something inherently different about actually liking the person you’re (not) going to prom with. Oh, ho, ho. Indeed—Mingyu shakes something out of his shoulders like a bird ruffling its feathers—excited; he’s excited. For the first time in a long time, he’s feeling excited about what tomorrow holds, what next week holds, what next year holds.

Today, tonight, for the foreseeable future, he’s going to be strung to this humble, gentle, and inquisitive person with a personality derived from unique and bold colors.

After being handed the phone and becoming a human selfie stick—such is the fate of the tallest person in the room—, Mingyu places a shamefully damp palm on Minghao’s shoulder, sandwiching him between himself and Seungcheol. He hopes the thin fabric of his shirt isn’t absorbent. They continue shifting around for a minute as the oldest fixes his hair in the screen and plucks a small ball of lint off his eyelashes before finally settling in with his arm on his roommate’s other shoulder.

The visual contrast of all-white Minghao squished comfortably between them in their navy and burgundy coats is radiant and warm. They’d favored the blown-out window as a background over their luggage, so the rim lighting that hits the dancer’s fried hair from behind seriously makes him look like some sort of celestial being despite holding a polite smile. The fingers he curls into Mingyu’s side tickles and he doubles over before scrambling to steady Seungcheol’s phone in his hand.

But all is good, all giggles and grins, and the older man berates them with laughter in his voice before they finally settle down enough to take a decent photo.

Or five.

But that number is negligible.

And despite this situation being initiated by Seungcheol—by an outsider—there’s a part of Mingyu that doesn’t mind seeing it happen again. And again. And again. He hopes for more awkward family photos. He hopes for more late-night interruptions from sleeping on the couch with sweatpants on and his hair fluffy from a shower and more Minghao. More Minghao safe and
snuggled up in his arms. More Minghao choking on spicy sauce and piping hearts onto a baking sheet. More.

“Satisfied?” Minghao slips away from them to shimmy on a thick and loose black coat that drapes down to his knees like the heavy curtains of old Victorian homes. The inner lining looks like stained glass windows. He’s really going for this whole angel aesthetic, isn’t he, no wonder he needed a whole suitcase. That coat probably took up half of it. At least he’s warm.

Seungcheol flips through the photos before giving him a toothy smile and a thumbs up. He pockets the phone and offers a hand to help Minghao gather anything he might need, but everything is ready to go. Duffle bag slung over his shoulder, the silver-haired man wraps them both in a brief hug and starts backing up towards the door with a wave. It’s not exactly unspoken that Mingyu’s going to be the one that drives Seungcheol to the venue—after all, he’s the one with the car—but it looks like the professor might have other plans.

After Minghao closes the door with little more than a lingering, doe-eyed glance, Seungcheol is ready to push his buttons, “So, we gotta go.” He feels those childish, peppering jabs in the air between his cardigan and his body.

“Go?”

“Yeah. Haven’t you noticed we’re missing a key item of performance-going?”

“Um,” Mingyu holds his arms out, making sure he’s all there. He doesn’t recall ever having brought anything to the school performances he went to, “n-”

“Flowers.” He’s already urging Mingyu to put his shoes on, “I didn’t think a bouquet would survive the plane ride, so we’ve gotta book it and get some.”

“Minghao said he’s a cold-blooded plant murderer. I don’t think he’d want us to-”

There’s no sense in arguing since his shoes are already on, “Bouquets are meant for the trash in a week anyway.” His bangs are tossed this way and that before he opens the door and holds it for Mingyu, “I always get him flowers when he performs. You’re supposed to. You don’t get out much, huh.”

And that’s how Mingyu winds up precariously parallel parked between an Escalade and a Jeep with little to no wiggle room.

He almost hits a bicyclist when he exits the car to follow Seungcheol down to a small flower shop just outside of downtown. It’s not as quaint and quiet as Lowry’s given that it’s sitting alongside a busy strip and the foot traffic is pretty heavy. They were planning to go elsewhere, but that’s what you get for plant shopping right after Thanksgiving. Beggars can’t be choosers and Seungcheol better choose quickly because they’re very close to running late. They’d spent the last hour and a half driving around to different shops that wound up closed—big surprise there—and Seungcheol was too stubborn to just call before showing up—ironic for someone who’s been taking calls left and right all day.

In the cluttered shop, the chipped green floorboards creak just a little with every step they take towards the displays. Small pots hang from the ceiling and the overgrowth of squiggly ivy dangling from the timber framing brushes Mingyu’s hair into his eyes every so often. It feels a little claustrophobic with such tall displays stacked heavy with ceramic vases and pots looming over them.
One wrong move could be costly, and not wanting to test his luck, Mingyu crosses his arms and sheepishly holds himself as they peruse the store.

The unlucky two floor employees are preoccupied helping other customers, but it seems like Seungcheol isn’t exactly browsing. He said on the way over, that a small bouquet of red roses was customary. Six roses per bundle for six people; thirty-six red roses in total.

“A little romantic, don’t you think?” Mingyu gingerly helps him hold the ones he’s picking out of a large tub of individual sprigs, careful not to get pricked.

There’s some sort of inquisition written on Seungcheol’s brow that he doesn’t understand. It was a joke? A means to start a conversation? “Huh?”

“Don’t get me wrong. Aren’t red roses usually for lovey-dovey things?” Mingyu shakes the water off his right hand before it can get his sleeves wet, “Like wouldn’t something like that be more appropriate?” He uses his head to nod towards a display of tulips. He always thought there was something formal about the way tulips looked—all uniform and compact—, but, apparently, he’s wrong.

Pouting his lips—he wonders if Minghao gets it from him or if he gets it from Minghao—and giving him a puff of amusement, Seungcheol adds another rose to his hands, “Well, yeah, but they also mean ‘congratulations’ or ‘a job well done’. They’re a simple go-to, but feel free to get something else.”

“Minghao doesn’t even like flowers.” He shakes off his left hand this time.

“He likes flowers when they’re from you.” Holding ten or so in his own arms, he leans towards the cashier’s counter where a stout, bearded man is taking a phone call and tying mesh cloth ribbons together to make large, poofy bows.

Smiling at them, he puts a finger up to ask for some patience before ending his call and clearing some counterspace to let them set down all the roses, “I can appreciate a man with a good eye for fresh flowers.” He scratches at his scruffy chops before punching a few numbers into the checkout’s iPad, “Thirty,” he counts again, “six?”

“Yep.” The professor nods, “Can I also get them,” he searches for a word before realizing he doesn’t really know what to call it, “packaged,” his voice goes high and he laughs, “together in groups of six? Something simple is fine.”

“Sure.” The middle-aged man hefts out a thick binder from under the work surface and slides it over to them, flipping it open to a tab heading the small bouquet section. Mingyu notices an absence of baby’s breath and has half a mind to ask about its absence but decides he doesn’t really care. Drawing with the clicker of a pen from behind his ear, he points to several quick options, “This one might be a little too simple since it’s just premium cellophane and ribbon, but it’ll get you two out of here before tomorrow.” He laughs a hearty laugh.

“Can I see the ribbon options?”

“Definitely.” He flips to another section in the magical binder of flower arrangements, “Any colors you’ve got a hankerin’ for?”

“Mm,” Seungcheol drags out, unsure of what might look good with the red roses.

“Well, the studio colors are red, black, and silver,” Mingyu nudges the corner of the binder so he can have a better look, “so, why don’t you just get this black mesh one with silver trim?”
He can feel the brownie points in his voice, “Sounds good.”

And Seungcheol pays the man for his services before Mingyu can meander off to look at a tiny cactus on the opposite wall of the store, “Should be a few minutes, but I’ll ring those guys up and see if I can grab an extra hand.”

“Thanks!”

Mingyu lunges across the store because this is a new place and he’s likely never coming back here ever again. He wants to get a good look at everything, especially at the exotic flowers that he can’t find in town. Nature is both amazing and beautifully mysterious in how it can grow the most interesting things unprompted.

He wanders into a small fridge-like area—which isn’t a good description considering it’s warmer and more humid than the rest of the chilly store—and is punched in the face by a vast range of vibrant colors contrasted against black brick walls. These are ‘Minghao flowers’. They’re so damn cool and awesome and unique and bold and- wow. Hanging Lobster Claw, huh, that’s crazy. Maybe a bouquet of these will suffice. These tropical flowers will survive at least twenty minutes outside this room. They’ll survive long enough for Mingyu to take a picture of them in his lap as proof that they once looked fresh and lively.

A hand tugs at his sleeve and he turns to face Seungcheol who is also immediately captivated by the stunning plants lining the room, “So, you’re going to get him Hawaiian flowers for the performance?”

“No,” Mingyu turns to leave the tropical room and reenter the crisp air of the main store. The black-haired man follows close behind, “I don’t know what to get.”

“Maybe something a little meaningful?”

And that’s how Mingyu gets roped into learning about the language of flowers—an abridged version—from Seungcheol and a very enthusiastic employee. He still doesn’t get it in full and also doesn’t think that Minghao will know what they’re supposed to say, but regardless, he appreciates that Seungcheol’s taking the time to explain these and those, this and that.

In the end, however, he still opts for roses. In part because they’re pretty, in part because he wants the two to shut up.

They’re supposed to be the norm, so that’s what he’s going to do. Otherwise, it’d be too obvious he was trying to say something- well, no, maybe Minghao would appreciate some hard to find flora. Who knows? But as Seungcheol said, he’ll like them because they’re from Mingyu. There doesn’t have to be any reason outside of that. So, screw the language of flowers and all that mumbo jumbo.

Just like Minghao has redefined things for Mingyu, he’s going to redefine these flowers.

After all, they’re from him and not the lovers who wrote the floral code or the roommate who is reciting it or the florist who is trying to sell it.

These are from Mingyu.

These are from Mingyu.

He didn’t like the absence of baby’s breath from Seungcheol’s arrangements, so he picks up a few sprigs. A few years ago, he went to a wedding where the flower arrangements were densely
packed, and the baby’s breath were scattered around the perimeter as if they were dissolving into the air. It looked lovely then. Hopefully, it’ll look just as lovely now.

The main body of the flowers is made up of ten roses that he picks just because they look unique and balance out the color nicely. He flicks off the water dripping from their stems and clips off the thorns with a pair of pruning shears the shopkeep hands them in order to expedite the checkout process. Ten yellow roses that fade into a soft and juicy red at the tips of their petals. Ten gradient roses; nine for the years they spent apart, and one for punctuality. He clips their thorns off as he gathers them.

One dark, mysterious, probably-on-it’s-last-legs-but-still-pretty-looking burgundy rose for the late nights spent huddled over their cell phones in the blackness of their bedrooms.

One bright, nearly-orange, freshly bloomed rose for all the days spent in recovery; for all the exhaust-filled mornings that waned into beautiful afternoons.

One sultry, deep, and vibrant red rose—the truest, most honest red he’s ever seen—to stand front and center in the middle of the bouquet for the present, for this moment, for the last moment and the one to come. He snips those thorns off as well. Nothing about the present should hurt. Nothing about this bouquet will hurt.

It’s a baker’s dozen for the missed DonutBoo dates, for the extra piece of the puzzle, for the bonus at the end of a long day. It’s a baker’s dozen for the twelve amazing people he’s come to know and appreciate in the past few months and for the him he’s discovered with the help of someone very special.

And for the future? For the future—well, at least he hopes it can help the bouquet last longer than a week—he picks up a small bunch of red rosebuds and peppers them throughout the arrangement. It helps balance out the center of reds assembled into a lumpy heart that would have otherwise looked too out of place. Indeed, the future should also be filled with passionate red, with moments of warmth, thorn-free memories, and-

“Do you want a bag or a box to take these out to your car?” the man calls to them, “I wrapped the ends in wet paper towel so they’ll keep for a few hours.” And maybe that’s a sign that Mingyu’s bouquet is already getting a little large. It’s already a wealth bigger than the bunches Seungcheol’s bought for the team and they’re running low on time.

Settled.

Thirteen roses.

Thirteen rosebuds.

Simple and clean and something he knows Minghao will understand the second he sees them.

They bumble to the venue just in time for early seating.

Mingyu’s bouquet—with its rather itchy holographic mesh ribbon—is tucked under his left arm while his right helps Seungcheol carry a fraction of his. It’s still somewhat quiet in the large auditorium. Only a handful of guests have arrived and even fewer he recognizes as their guests. He supposes the others are guests of the opposing team and press. Wonwoo is nowhere to be found. Maybe he’s backstage trying to calm the team down, but Seungkwan isn’t here either. He waves to Roi and Jieqiong who have colluded with Beomju and Amy to sneak in enough snacks for the entire
row and says hello to Jooheon as they pass.

Ambling to their seats, a little to the right of the front row’s center, Mingyu’s surprised that they’ve reserved the first two rows for performer guests and press must sit behind them. The general audience is seated even further back and upstairs. Is there a hierarchy to the dance industry?

Some crew members start running test shots on the dolly tracks lined up at the very bottom of the stage and others are fine-tuning lights up in the rafters. He can hear how the tires clack against the metal rail. How exciting. How exciting. This really is a legitimate, televised event. This is serious business.

Seungcheol motions him to carefully set the roses under their fold-down seats. He definitely doesn’t want them to get trampled by the potentially frantic crew as they sprint to get the best frame. However, after they settle the roses into their seat for the show, he doesn’t expect the older man to start chatting with him again, “It’s heavy, isn’t it.”

“Heavy?”

“The idea of Minghao not being around so much when they win.”

Ah, another ‘when’. Seems like Seungcheol also has confidence that Performance Studio’s victory is set in stone, “I guess.”

“You don’t need to lie. It’s gonna be hard for me, too.” He smiles that gummy smile, “Hell, it was already a little hard when he went off to spend so much time with you. Thinking that I might not see him for weeks or months at a time,” So, maybe Mingyu wasn’t the only one worried about a long-distance relationship. Minghao and Seungcheol will definitely have one albeit not a romantic one, “that’s new.”

But Seungcheol might not have had the luxury of reassuring kisses, of secretive 3am phone calls to unknown numbers, and the promise of return. In an ideal future, they’ll move in together, and that means no more roommate Seungcheol which—now that Mingyu has a chance to see eye-to-eye with him—feels incredibly unfair, “Hey,” he bends down slightly to bump into him with his shoulder, “you’ve got me. We’ll survive.”

He’s expecting a snarky remark, a comeback, a laugh, anything but the firm hand that’s placed on his shoulder and a tightly curled smile that empathizes with him.

It’s silent between them for almost a minute and he can feel the heat from Seungcheol’s hand seep through his cardigan and his shirt. He wants to be polite and not be the first to disengage from this weird side hug that’s not really a hug and not really a normal gesture? What is he thinking about?

“When he talks about you, Mingyu,” he’s always been curious. He knows what Minghao says about him to his teammates. He knows that he mentions him to Soonyoung and Junhui the most. But what does he say to an overprotective roommate that doubles as a substitute parent? Does he tell him everything? “he sounds like a teenager falling in love for the first time.”

He doesn’t mean to laugh, “Really, now?”

“His eyes are like,” and he opens his hands like a starburst, “full of hope and glitter.”

He can’t hold his laughter and lets the smallest giggle out at Seungcheol’s exaggerated motions.

Eyebrows are raised over a patient stare and humble grin, “And when you two look at each
other,” his eyes roll up, recalling a memory, a time and place that Mingyu can’t see, “it’s kind of endearing and funny,” he’s starting to like Seungcheol’s chuckle, “because everyone that I’ve talked to has said the same thing—that you two are,” and the way his eyes crinkle and wrinkle, “like two five-year-olds that have found their soulmate on the playground. Like you’re too young to understand the impact you’ll have on each other. It sounds kind of stupid, right? And I had my reservations about it, too, but it’s really undeniable; the somewhat cosmic bond you two have.”

His cheeks are hot and his laughter plateaus into a soft wheeze.

“It’s something that even the longest standing couple has to envy.”

His heart is drumming.

“Something that those who are lonely hope to find.”

Words like that from a person like this—from a person who holds such a weighted role in their relationship—it’s untimely and wonderful. Untimely because who in god’s name slaps down cards like this moments before an important event where Mingyu can’t even get backstage to tell Minghao that they definitely have Seungcheol’s blessing and that they’re the talk of the town. Wonderful because-

Wonderful because-

Wonderful because, damn, we look like that?

We make people feel like that?

Is that supposed to be embarrassing? Is it supposed to make his heart tighten to know that Minghao looks at him the same way—that everything that’s felt right is right in their eyes and in the eyes of those watching over them?

“It’s heavy.” Mingyu agrees and nods, putting a familial hand on Seungcheol’s shoulder in a more lighthearted way, patting him with his own airy chuckle, trying to laugh away the viscous half-formed words in his throat, “But it’s a weight I’m willing to carry.”

Seungcheol says something in response.

It’s something humored and jovial, something bright and truer to his personality than things he’s said before, but Mingyu has a hard time hearing him over the sudden sting of a song being blasted through overhead speakers and the roar of people entering the venue and calling out for their seats.

He gestures towards the door and points at his watch before speaking up a bit louder after realizing that he can’t be heard, “I’m going to run to the restroom before curtain!”

“Okay!”

And like that, he vanishes into the growing crowd, leaving Mingyu to his own devices.

The text he sent to Minghao 20 minutes ago has gone unanswered. The call he punches in goes to voicemail. Well, they are about to perform. It makes sense that he’s not with his phone. No matter. No matter. There’s plenty of time to talk after all is said and done. He’s ready to embrace the end of this chapter in their lives because he can immediately sit down and start drafting the next one with the most profound person he’s met.
People are starting to file into the rows of red behind him. He doesn’t know why the venue thought it was a good idea to let in general admission before letting in press because it seems a lot tougher to get them seated with all their pens and clipboards and tablets and cameras, but he can’t afford them much attention because a large projector screen starts rolling down from the top of the black curtains covering the stage. It flickers on.

An epic score picks up as some narration starts about how this competition has gone on for years, coupled with footage from past events; past winners, losers, trophies, tears. There are clips of the New York dancers and their respective studios—something about a “never before seen dance collective with a unique flavor” and how their individual dancers have led teams that are undefeated. All the shots are eye candy with splashes of transitional colors to mask out parts of the screen. It looks more like a music video than a promotional feature for the Taproom.

Performance Studio’s clip isn’t anything short of spectacular. Their hair colors say that the first clip was shot just after semi-finals as Jihoon is still sporting a vibrant blue as he’s spun in the air. They are clearly a studio known for balancing dance expertise and interpersonal growth through artistic expression; “revolutionizing the dance community by means of visual and auditory communication,” as the deep voice booms above the rumble of the crowd. It would be nice if the camera cuts slowed down just a bit to capture more of their soft sides, but to rival the on-stage aggression of the opposing team, most of the cuts are quick and punchy.

A short reel of ‘player stats’ starts rolling with little factoids about each participant, his specialty, his work experience, some fun facts, and a quote. The pictorials accompanying them are professional and it’s nice to know that he’s not only dating a professional performer but also a part-time model. He doesn’t know when the photos were taken because Minghao’s hair is dark brown with a bright blond highlight running through the middle layer—yes, like he’s actually wearing a halo—and his cheeks aren’t as filled out.

The stats are cute.

They’re so cute; too cute to follow up such edgy and sharp choreography reels.

Who needs to know that the leader of the Contemporary Taproom knits scarves for cats and dogs in his spare time? No one but he supposes that bit of commentary is what makes these otherwise superpowered people a little more human.

He wants to know what Minghao’s fun fact is because he’s such a medley of experiences; a grab bag of surprises-

\textbf{Ming-}

Surprises that Mingyu would have otherwise never expected from his simple exterior and straightforward way of speaking. Man, Minghao’s so cool and his friends are so cool.

\textbf{Mi-}

There’s a concerted roll of laughter when Soonyoung’s page fades onto the screen and Mingyu finds his own lips turning upwards as his fun fact is ‘Hoshi once slept for 38 hours and woke up with the ability to play chess’. He makes a mental note to challenge him to a match at the next possible opportunity.

\textbf{Yu-}
A familiar face graces the screen. The man they bumped into on the street looks even prettier with the mood lighting and out of focus background. His stage name is somewhat haughty and provoking, leaving no room for failure.

Gyu-

And Jun follows after that. It looks like they’re lining them up by studio seniority, in which case, Minghao should be next. But Jun’s profile is short and simple. His fun fact is that he can play the piano behind his back which is somewhat unexpected from him. Mingyu was ready for a fact about fitting his entire body into a fridge. California summers are unbearable.

Mingy-

He stands through another gorgeous man on the screen. Surprisingly, it’s a former b-boy that goes by TNT. He hails from Thailand and can speak too many languages and his fun fact is that he hates fruit and hasn’t eaten any since he was twelve— who- who hates fruit? That shit is nature’s candy. How can you hate fruit? That’s abnormal for sure-

Mingyu.

And Minghao rolls on screen.

Ah, yes, that’s his boy. That’s his man looking all regal and cheeky with his pressed suit and loose buttons. Put that half-lidded stare away, but also, everyone, look at my beautiful boy. Check it out, he’s got special street dance abilities—and that makes him ultra-mega-cool—and he has a focus in tricking and lite feet—whatever the fuck that is! He’s so awesome. He’s like holographic, first edition Charizard awesome. And his fun fact is-

“Mingyu!”

His heart.

“Mingyu, is that you?”

Drops into his shoes.

His stomach twists and he’s light-headed, overwhelmed with too many emotions and too much sensory stimulus because the voice that’s calling for him is effortlessly hurdling over rows of red chairs as he turns around.

“I knew it!”

He can’t breathe.

It’s too familiar, instantly too close. Too much.

"Spacey as ever."

His arms should be out. He should be smiling and jumping and screaming and filled with joy, but his instinctual reaction to being tackled with strong arms around shoulders is to recoil and shy away. The arms that he once missed, the arms that he’d once hoped would hold him with such fervor in the dim lights outside a college dorm now seem to grow thorns.

“What a small world.”
It’s suffocating in the worst way.

Chapter End Notes

oh no, who could that be? ;)

**here are your definitions for the chapter:**
baby’s breath – everlasting and undying love of any sort (friends, family, romance, etc), reconnecting with lost loves, self-discipline and the ability to stay focused on love.
yellow with red tips – friendship, falling in love, the transition from friends to being something more.
burgundy rose – unconscious beauty
orange rose – desire and enthusiasm
red rose – i love you
a single rose of any color backs its intent with the utmost devotion
thornless roses symbolize love at first sight
six roses - a need to be loved or cherished
thirteen roses - a secret admirer

ugh. svt beat me to the punch and stole the entire punchline of 1098, but that's okay. i'll persevere! STREAM HOME~ ♥ SUPPORT MINGHAO’S MENTORING ON IDOL PRODUCER!~

how's everyone been holding up? sorry it's been so hard for me to update this story ;;;;;; there's so many things i'm doing right now between going back to school and managing the clubhouse by myself :u;
Chapter 141

He’s in pain.

It’s a pain he can’t pinpoint, but it invades his lungs and slithers through his veins and vessels. It’s a pain that occupies his arteries and his esophagus.

In the blink of an eye, he’s self-conscious about every physical aspect of himself from his neglected muscle build to the speck of lint on his shirt. He worries about every little thing; misplaced hairs, untrimmed nails, his slightly dulled jawline. He’s not shorter—no—but he feels so small. He feels like he’s drowning in the arms of a giant, like his legs are giving out and he’s about to hit the floor. His heart races with adrenalin, it’s pounding in his chest and it’s not love—no—nor fear, but something else and he doesn’t want this to be happening. He doesn’t want this to be his reality.

“What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here?”

And while the man in front of him laughs at the silly coincidence—a sound that feels nostalgic like the sizzle of the communal waffle-maker and the greasy griddle of DannyBoy’s Diner—Mingyu doesn’t even know what expression is on his face. He should be happy. He should be smiling. He should be laughing, too. A part of him should be flustered and excited about meeting someone like this after so long. But just like how this love was a chaotic warzone, there’s a sharp ringing in his ears that muffles everything else. As if he suddenly has a head-cold, all of his limbs detach from his body and he melts into a conflict of nerves and discomfort.

I don’t want to see you.

“What are you here with?”

“What are you here with?”

And another bout of giggles that retain the tease of cheap, cornflower blue bedding and Sunday mornings curled around beaten pillows under the bright windows of the sixth floor, that rings like the buzz of late-night laundromat dryers and the jingle of coffee shop’s doorbells at half past one when they’d meet for a lunch of something premade. A hand that roughly shakes him and rests on his shoulder, not willing to let go because the person who owns this arm is someone that Mingyu would consider a good friend on any other day. But today, but today, but today-

I can’t even say your name.

“I’m here with someone backstage.”

“I’m here with someone backstage.”

And it’s like his excitement shoots through the vaulted roof and spins spirited ribbons through the support beams, billowing energy and color through the weighty velvet curtains. He’s the magic of Disney movies, nostalgic and reminiscent of simpler times.

Mingyu’s should feel the excitement, too, but-
But.

That’s just how he is.

He’s warm. He’s wholesome. He’s comforting and silly.

He’s got a smile that can make a heart sing, a nose that bunches up when he grins too hard. He’s got eyes comparable to sunrise, has hands as strong as the bonds he builds with those close to him. He loves animals, especially big dogs. He has a contagious curiosity about the world around him and a goofy, dorky, childish way of provoking people.

Mr. Perfect.

Someone that Mingyu didn’t exactly look up to, but always hoped to be. The ideal child, the perfect child with his perfect grades, perfect career, perfect body, perfect hair, perfect skin, perfect personality—and it all comes to him naturally. He was always the idea of something that Mingyu wanted to attain.

But he never let Mingyu mutate into him.

He always encouraged Mingyu to be himself, to laugh loudly when he wanted to and to not pay mind if a hair was out of place. He liked Mingyu as he was; as close to perfect as he could be. As close to perfect as he should be. There’s a reflection there—a reflection of happiness, that he once was happy without Minghao—without the smallest thought, notion, or speck of Minghao—and every second that passes under his touch is acutely similar to the tension built in a mirror that’s about to shatter. You can see it reverberate in the glass.

Guilt.

He feels guilt.

So much guilt in this very moment because his heart and his brain are fighting each other. In a fraction of a moment, this person took everything, everything that Minghao loves about him and made him hate it. It made him hate that he was no closer to the image of this person, that he didn’t progress in that direction, that he didn’t make a million friends and get a successful and fun career where he could travel the world and see a million things with an annual six figures. He chickened out in favor of stability like he always does.

It’s a kneejerk reaction.

He’ll come to realize that in the forthcoming minutes, but right now muscle memory is arguing with current feelings and Mingyu’s at a loss. This was someone he left in the past like he left Minghao in the past. This is someone who has turned up unexpectedly like Minghao who showed up unexpectedly.

He was someone that Mingyu loved.

He is someone that Mingyu loves.

“No way.”

“No way.”

But just not in the same way.
“Ah, should have seen your badge!” Never again to return, “I’m here for work, though. It was so sudden, I didn’t think to call you since you live kinda far.” To what once could have been, “But I guess the universe has a weird way of working.”

He has grown.

“It,” Mingyu wonders if this is fate’s way of testing him—better put, showing him that he has options, asking him if he wants to back out, asking him if he wants to keep his front door open to more visitors—and he doesn’t appreciate the sentiment, “really does, huh.”

He has bloomed.

“Crazy sometimes,” crazy how much Mingyu had once needed him, crazy how he was also a fate-filled meeting at a time when he was desperate for solid land, crazy how things could have gone had Mingyu taken a chance and just asked. Bzzt, not his. He doesn’t realize it because he’s lost to his thoughts, but the businessman starts shuffling them out of the row as he checks his phone. Busy as usual, “But, yeah, my contact asked me to go backstage. Wanna come with?”

And sometimes he withers.

“I,” his brain is moving about as fast as molasses drips, “don’t think I can get backstage.”

Why?

Why is he making an excuse?

He wants to see Minghao and wish him well before the performance, give him a hug and a kiss and a pat on the butt and tell him good luck. Had it been anyone else, he would have jumped at the opportunity, “Nah, I can get you backstage. The friend I’m here with is a judge.” It just has to be complicated like that, doesn’t it.

Mingyu accepts the offer with a stiff, professional disposition and even hesitates a moment to send Seungcheol a text before he follows in his memory’s footsteps. He was always a step or two behind, a few feet away. So, walking like this again feels both nostalgic and sad.

Does he deserve it any other way?

The cramped and tight area backstage is rife with meager lights and a wealth of people swarming around them like busy ants clad in black with headset antennae and clipboard bread crumbs, bumping into them as they try to be one with the plaster walls.

It’s incredibly stuffy in the hallway. They duck under a few cameras and jump over an entanglement of cables. His guide seems experienced as if this is nothing new to him. Then again, floundering like a fish out of water is nothing new for Mingyu either. Maybe if he could not look like a goddamn fool for one fucking minute, then maybe he could appear to be a proper adult instead of a man stuck in his childhood.

But Minghao likes that about him.

He fights those moments with lighthearted laughter, with a half-hearted joke and a gentle, sympathetic shove.

“So, who are you here with, again?” he shuffles them into a small crevice by a drinking
fountain that’s staining the hem of Mingyu’s jacket with water. This corner in the middle of the hall is no better than sliding along the wall. It’s no quieter, no more peaceful. At least it’s out of the way.

Mingyu cocks his head to the side and pokes a tongue into his cheek.

It’s not that he doesn’t-No, he definitely doesn’t want them to meet for some reason—but having Minghao be part of this competition and having his memory know the judge might make things hairy. If anything, Mingyu knows that if there’s something they’ll hate more than losing, it’s winning unfairly, “He’s a competitor.”

The sparkling joy doesn’t leave his face for a second. If anything, it seems to grow with the idea that they have friends in the same industry—that, “Fate really wanted us to meet today.” He laughs and pats Mingyu on the shoulder, “Don’t worry,” he’s read like a book, “my friend will be very fair in his judgement, I promise.”

Mingyu somehow doubts that.

If he meets Minghao, he’ll definitely like Minghao, and it’d be impossible to not put in a good word about him and Performance Studio. And his judge friend would definitely be persuaded because who can resist that goofy, adorable, bunny-toothed smile?

“Taproom or,” he pulls out his phone to check a simplified map of the backstage area, to find the respective green rooms. “Performance Studio?” Hearing the studio’s name tumble casually out of his mouth feels like Mingyu’s creeping dangerously close to the fire. It crackles and roars in the pit of his stomach. He never thought he’d be associating the two like this or this quickly.

“Performance Studio.” Like he’s admitting defeat, Mingyu stumbles and stutters over the words and has to repeat them twice to beat the buzz of the people rushing past them. He doesn’t dare lean in closer.

There’s some mischief in the man’s chuckle as he nods and leads them down a less busy hallway. The linoleum even echoes.

However, as they encroach on the Studio’s room, heavy bass reverberates through the walls. It’s reminiscent of the muffled music in the large recreation center where he didn’t get to make a wish in a dried-up fountain and where he almost punched numerous dancers—friends included—in the face for crowding his significant other. It’s where he fell in love with the bracelet around his wrist; where he happily accepted being physically bound to a mysterious time wizard who he can toddle around in pajamas with.

“Here we are!” he raps a special sequence on the door—the same way he used to rap on Mingyu’s bedroom door almost every night—before stepping back, “I’ve gotta dip real quick, but I’ll come back to pick you up when I’m done.”

In this liminal space, Mingyu can only offer a thumbs up weighed down by the metal accessory around his wrist.

If he blinks enough times, it could have all been an illusion. He could have sleepwalked here and ducked past the security guards and swerved down the right hallways coincidentally. For what it’s worth, he’d rather it be that way. He doesn’t want to associate the past with the present anymore, especially with a gift as precious as Minghao waiting just behind this door.

Vernon catches him making new revelations about his shoes, “Yo, Mingyu, how’d you get backstage?” It’s hard to recognize him at a glance. Day-to-day—all the times Mingyu’s met him—he
looks like your average boy-next-door. Next to the word ‘casual dress’ there’s a picture of Vernon sitting at the studio with an aged, screen-printed t-shirt and messy, unstyled hair. Today, his lips are tinted a lively red and the crease over his eyes are carved with a heavy, rustic brown. Mingyu knows stage makeup is supposed to be bold—or so he’s been told—but the rather bold look doesn’t seem to match with all the white that’s happening.

“Good question.” He mumbles as he’s ushered in. The way he got here certainly must be a hallucination, but just seeing a familiar face and hearing a voice he associates with good—albeit stressful—things like DonutBoo and fresh Friday hoddeok are already enough to help his feet find solid ground, root him in a flighty reality where the gap between the red velvet seats and the door of the green room is bridged by ambiguity.

“Minghao’s around here somewhere, feel free to hang until whenever.”

Minghao.

Rooted, planted, grounded, sowed in a reality where he’s real and his imperfections are loved and cherished.

There’s nothing to worry about.

There is a peculiar contrast between this small room and the studio. It’s partitioned by a length of black curtain hung on thin metal rods a foot above eyelevel. It divides the space between a lounge and—what he guesses is—a makeshift changing area; however, there is a mess of bags and water bottles and clothes strewn about the room and Mingyu’s fingers itch to stress-clean. Gosh, guys, can’t you just be organized for, like, an hour? Although he supposes in the craze of everything happening, there isn’t much that can be done. The only spot of cleanliness is where Minghao’s bag—with its Cacahuate and flag-filled keychain—sits neatly zipped up.

He doesn’t even know why there are bits and bobbles of clothes and accessories about if everyone changed back at the hotel. Maybe there was a wardrobe malfunction? Maybe someone had to swap out their outfit last minute? Or maybe Jun just decided to blow up his suitcase in the middle of the room. He’d ask, but it doesn’t seem appropriate to nitpick at little things like that while everyone has their mind set on preparations.

Rubbing his hands into his pockets, Mingyu meanders a lap around the lounge portion of the room, half looking for Minghao, half trying to record whatever’s happening in his memory for future events.

As expected, Vernon and Jihoon are focused on reviewing the steps. There must be pressure on them to uphold their roles on the team from not being dancers by trade. They spend time correcting each other—doing Soonyoung’s job—and restarting the same track in their shared AirPods again after figuring out which part needs work. To Mingyu, it already looks flawless but knowing that almost every member of this team is a stickler for synchronized perfection makes him guess that each stop is the result of a miscounted mistake. Their white clothes are missing their flowing elements, having been cast off with the rest of the clothing mess on the couches lining the back of the room. It must be warm when you’re dancing that hard offstage. He worries about how tiring the full set will be later.

Chan is sitting off to the side in a quiet(er) corner of the room. He’s speaking to a reporter that has her hair tied back in a bun and her phone out to record the audio of their interview. The way she’s dressed says that she’s an official from some sort of press outlet. The professional attire—that Mingyu automatically associates with newscasters—makes everything seem a little more serious and awesome. She reads him questions off a clipboard, and he responds after thinking for a few
Mingyu can’t help but feel like the youngest member looks absolutely in his element when he answers each prompt with an articulate response like he’s *made* to be a celebrity, a game-changer, the future of some industry somewhere. He looks confident and forthright despite picking at the rips in his white jeans every few seconds. The wide smile that stretches his lips and crinkles his eyes is quick to change into a troubled line when she asks her last question, so Mingyu puts aside all the bad feelings he’s ever harbored towards him and wishes him the best. *You can do it, lil’ man. You can do it!*

Jun is up to the same thing—answering questions—but not sitting quietly like the shorter, crow-haired man. He’s practically bouncing off the walls, nervously laughing into every answer and taking long pauses since he has to mentally translate both the interviewer’s question and his response. Out of all of them, Jun seems to be most anxious, jitters winding up his limbs and electrifying him. He can feel the static in the air, flying off the beautiful man like hairs off a skittish cat that blows its coat.

Calm down, take a deep breath. The apple of your eye is going to be on stage with you this time, Jun, there’s nothing to worry about.

When Mingyu’s noticed, Jun cracks a smile and bobbles his head towards him in a silent hello. It would be less off-putting is he wasn’t standing on the armrest of a couch while thinking of his next answer. His interviewer, however, seems to be getting a kick out of it, beaming at him every time he takes a step towards the edge. The strange behavior is charming and unique, but Mingyu’s sure this notepad-wielding buzz-writer wouldn’t be swooning and giggling so jovially if they noticed Jihoon’s occasional glances monitoring them in the reflection of the vanity’s mirror. Jun doesn’t seem to notice, or pays it no mind, as he continues to hyperactively answer rather mundane and straightforward questions; an oblivious heartthrob at its finest.

But he isn’t the worst off.

The real walking disaster comes barreling through the door not a minute later.

Soonyoung doesn’t have a shirt on and barely has his pants on. His billowy, white blouse is unceremoniously balled up in his hands and he’s dripping either water or sweat—Mingyu doesn’t want to know—, panting to catch his breath like he’s run a mile.

He’s quick to snap at a staff member that gets in the way—not in the way the entitled elderly do when they reorganize the Trader Joes or in the way he sees raging celebrities do, but in a way that says he’s equally pissed off and frazzled—and settles into a seat just to get up again a second later. He circles the room once, checking on everyone with a keen glare, like a tiger prowling the perimeter of its cage, before flopping into Mingyu’s personal space and leaning against his shoulder, “Hey.” Curt.

“You good, Soon?”

He rests his hands on his hips, looking a little pricklier than a moment ago, “Why are you here?”

Is he in trouble? “Someone offered to let me backstage. I just wanted to wish you guys g—” a finger is squished into his lips to shush him. The force is so strong it almost sets Mingyu off balance.

“Don’t, that’s bad luck.” Soonyoung shakes his head and cranes his neck to check behind Mingyu.
“Sorry, no Wonwoo. I didn’t see him in the-”

“He knows he’s not allowed backstage.” Then who are you looking for?

“Do you want me to leave?”

The blond takes a step back to give Mingyu a once over and parts his lips to complain before shutting them and tweaking them to the side, puffing out his cheeks and blowing a raspberry, “No, you can stay for a bit. Just get out of here before curtain.”

In his opinion, Soonyoung needs Wonwoo here.

He needs Wonwoo’s level-headed stability and calming presence before a grand performance like this, but—hell—what does he know? He knows Soonyoung, but only a little deeper than what’s on the surface. The rest of his opinions are formulated on guesses and connecting dots, reading in between the lines, “Do you know where Minghao is?”

Soonyoung turns away and points a thumb behind him to gesture towards the black curtain. He doesn’t look happy, but instead of dawdling over it and offering comfort, Mingyu excuses himself with a nod and walks away. Soonyoung’s an adult, he’s the unspoken leader of this team; a Big Boy. He can figure out his troubles on his own and he can be enough of a grownup to admit he’d like his boyfriend backstage to support him before a big show-

“Hold still.” He recognizes the doting voice almost immediately.

Seungkwan is carefully dabbing at Minghao’s face with a small angled brush and if he didn’t already know his boyfriend was wiggling around on the other side of the room, he might have felt the slightest bit jealous at how close their faces are, “Sorry.”

The poor dancer is incessantly tapping the heel of his foot against the salon chair and only stops for the few seconds surrounding Seungkwan’s scolding. Another makeup artist, dressed head to toe in black, is already packing up her stuff and getting ready to go, so he assumes that Seungkwan isn’t secretly a professional at this, “All you have to do is shut up, close your eyes, and not move,” the pâtissier grumbles as he uses his ring finger to dab at his eyelid, “and you were perfectly good at that when we had to study for SATs.”

“Hey,” Minghao’s lilt sounds peppery and tired, but amused nonetheless, “we all grow.”

He’s poked in the forehead and forced to lean back and relax again, “Oh shush, just take a nap or something.” Another swipe of a brush here, another touch of glitter, another flick of eyeliner, “You’re the only one who didn’t get to sleep enough.”

“I know, I know.”

“You know, if you two would have just gone to bed—stop shaking your leg—you wouldn’t have gotten that hickey.” Mingyu flushes, feeling just the slightest bit of remorse lingering at the back of his brain. The slow-to-fade violets peek out from the brim of the black choker despite not being all that noticeable. Of course, Seungkwan can see them clearly when he’s that close.

Minghao’s lips curl at the sentiment. Knowing Soonyoung and the others are too mentally clouded to pay attention to anything he’s saying, he lets just a little, tiny secret out, “Maybe I like it.” And he’s playfully punched in the shoulder. It knocks a chuckle out of him, “Just a little.”

“Oh, ‘just a little’,” Seungkwan mocks him and rolls his eyes before cleaning off the fallout with a beauty blender, “my ass.” He checks over his shoulder to glance at the door behind him,
To be fair, Mingyu Kim’s brain was also turned into mush.

Minghao just keeps his eyes shut, elated and accepting of Seungkwan’s claims. He wiggles his shoulders as the baker mists him with some fixative spray and fans it dry with his hands before stepping back to admire his work and start putting his things away.

Mingyu’s not caught yet, so he’ll take a moment to enjoy the view.

Unfairly, Minghao is at least twice as hot donning a burgundy smoky eye with sharp magenta gracing his waterline. Underneath the bit of bright, warm purple swoops a thin white and silver line carving the underside of his eyes. It’s not too bold, nothing avant-garde but delicate and fine. It makes for an impactful look. The silver contacts—the icing on top—make him look ethereal. The faded cherry lip stain just seals the deal.

There’s no way Minghao’s stage presence can be silenced when he looks like that.

Jesus.

The person in that chair is not human.

“Ah, sorry about that call.” A voice Mingyu doesn’t recognize opens the door at the back of the room and shuffles through, “It’s so easy for people to get lost at events like this. Can I just have him come here?”

The man that walks out has some pep in his step like he’s bouncing to a beat that no one can hear, “Do you even need to ask, J.?” There’s an unmistakable politeness and brightness in Minghao’s voice. Something rings familiar in the name. He’s heard it or seen it before.

“Well, with Hoshi a bit frantic and Junhui trampling furniture,” the stranger drags on and laughs as well. His smile is as bright as the sun.

“Eh,” Minghao spins in the chair to face him, “Jay’s been to his fair share of shitshows. I’m sure we’re not the w-”

“Oh,” Seungkwan catches his attention, “Mingyu!”

“Mingyu?” When his name slips past Minghao’s lips it’s so soft and mild, so full of blooming hope that he can’t help but toot his own horn. Hello, yes Minghao, we have your roommate’s blessing and I would like to kiss you at least three times before you go on stage and dazzle hundreds of thousands of people on TV.

He kicks off the floor and turns to face him slowly in the chair.

Having those gorgeous, alien eyes look at him makes his brain short-circuit briefly, “Hi, I’m Mingyu.”

His dancer covers his mouth to giggle like he’s suddenly conscious of how he looks, suddenly shy about all the glamour on his face. No, dear, you’re as beautiful as ever.

Mingyu can’t stop staring.

“Is something wrong?” his stare is patient and comforting, hugging Mingyu from ten feet
away.

“Oh, no, not at all,” Mingyu tries to stand properly and check his face, to make sure he’s making a good impression on yet another one of Minghao’s stupidly good looking friends, to show that he’s some semblance of a professional at his day job, “You just didn’t respond to my texts,” he thinks he hears Seungkwan scoff a ‘clingy’ before leaving for the lounge, “and someone offered to let me backstage,” let’s just glaze over that, “and I wanted to wish you good luck today— whoops, “but Soonyoung said I shouldn’t say that, so I’m sorry if I’ve jinxed it and— yeah— is it bad luck for me to be seeing you right now? Should I close my eyes or something?”

Minghao’s unnamed friend gives him a raised eyebrow before grinning, “First rodeo?”

“Yeah.” The fondness in Minghao’s voice is unmistakable and makes him feel less bad for sneaking backstage where certain boyfriends are and aren’t allowed, “Let me introduce you.” He’s not a boyfriend yet, do significant others get special privileges, then? “J., Mingyu.” He gests, “Mingyu, J.”

“Hi!” Wow, a solar flare. He’s just a sunshine-filled man dressed in tune with the hippest street fashion, “Hoseok Jung, B-boy Hope, Instructor Hoho, J., or whatever you’re comfortable with.” He offers a hand to shake.

“Mingyu,” he shakes the hand with a firm grip, “Mingyu Kim.” shaking once to show he’s confident and punctual, but the man continues wiggling his arm with continuous shakes, happy to make a new acquaintance. Again, Mingyu’s still gaining his footing in the social climate of dance conventions. It should be easy-going and casual, but when things are at a scale so publicized and hyped, it’s hard to be spontaneous and friendly.

“He’s one of the judges today.”

“Completely impartial if anyone asks.” Of course, Minghao’s already friends with a judge. Hoseok raises a hand to shield his mouth from the silver-haired dancer but does nothing to hide his whisper, “I have friends on the Taproom team, too.” He tacks on for posterity.

“J. was one of my first dance mentors. I’d skip school to attend his classes in the city.”

“How old were you then? Sixteen? Seventeen?”

“Something like that.” Minghao shrugs, “So fun I can’t remember, I guess.”

He feigns annoyance, “Yeah, you say that, but you were way more into breaking than popping and isolations.” The sarcasm is heavy.

“Hey, I learned a lot from your workshops.” It’s nice to see him so at ease compared to the chaos happening on the other side of the partition.

Hoseok cackles, “Don’t try to butter me up!” Mingyu can’t help but laugh along despite feeling a bit like a third wheel.

“I’m not, I’m n-”

“Yeah, they’re in there.” Vernon’s oscillating voice cuts through the bemusement of the room and grabs Mingyu’s attention. Could it be Wonwoo finally showing up to save the day and sweep Soonyoung off his feet so he can calm down? That would be great. That would be lovely. That would be wonderful.
“Man of the hour!”
That would be too easy.

“Hey, Jay.”

It’s another Jeon.

Mingyu doesn’t even have to turn to recognize his voice.

“There you are, Hoseok- I had a feeling you’d be with Minghao, but you said you weren’t going to speak with any of the competitors until after the performance.” There’s a weight on his shoulder. He’s making it awfully obvious that they know each other. Minghao must have a lot of questions.

“Well, I can’t help it if past students catch me in the hallway-”

“You can damn well tell me where you scurry off to first. And you-” he points at Minghao, cellphone still in his hand, “I don’t believe your fun fact in the slightest.”

Everything is happening very quickly.

Everything from the exchange of words to the hectic pace of today’s unplanned events to how fast Mingyu’s heart is simultaneously beating and crumbling, everything is happening very, very quickly.

Two universes are colliding in this very room and he can’t stop it and he can’t protect the universe he wants to keep.

Minghao blinks, seeming to brush aside the fact that Mingyu’s uncomfortably mapping out the meaning of his existence in the gaps between linoleum floor tiles, “What part is unbelievable?”

Hoseok combs his bangs behind his ear and puts a hand on his hip, “The part about being able to bench his dog and his significant other at the same time or the part about shotgunning two cans of LaCroix?”

“The LaCroix.” He barks like a yappy, little puppy, “You hate LaCroix.”

“Ah, you got me.” Minghao deadpans, “I do hate LaCroix.”

An intoxicating smile breaks open over his shoulder, “No, really,” he looks down at the floor before looking back up at Minghao and coughs out a strained laugh, “congrats on the significant other.” It’s so genuine it’s painful.

He’s so happy for Minghao.

He’s so happy that Minghao’s found happiness. Everyone’s always so happy that Minghao has found happiness, “So, who’s the lucky person?”

The silence that hangs in the air is like that of the pauses between bell-tower chimes. There’s anticipation for the next one, but you won’t know what time it is until they’re done sounding off. Mingyu can count the gong-like notes in the back of his head, in the quiet of his ears, and even the
noise the others are making on the other side of the curtain has fallen to darkness.

To be thrown under the bus means to be pinpointed for a fault you did not commit to on your own, to be the focus of blame for an event or doing that is not the fault or crime of one.

One thing he likes and dislikes about Minghao is his magical ability to puzzle things out faster than they can be answered for.

It’s not that he jumps to conclusions, but he sometimes responds to unspoken options because he thinks it’s what the other person wants. In this case, he’s heard the question and he sees that Mingyu looks like he’s seen a ghost. It doesn’t take much to figure out that there’s been a hairy past and that there are a lot of things left unsaid. Even Jun could probably piece together that there’s been a dead romance and too much intimacy to go forgotten.

To Mingyu, the fact that there were once feelings in the space between him and this piece of the past feels like the sin of a scarlet letter plastered over his heart for Minghao to judge.

“Well,” he drawls slowly, still taking hints and cues from the closeness that Mingyu wants to escape so badly. It’s meditated, every count, every word, every breath between that ‘well’ and the answer he’s going to give. He reads Mingyu’s discomfort, his desperate confusion and need for a corner away from this conflict of fate and feelings. He reads the concern etching crevices into his brow, reads the way his eyes shift away every time he wants them to meet. His body language alone is enough to say everything. So, Minghao does his best to be a good friend and be the level and fair person he always is, the kind of person he wants to be before he is a significant other. He opts to keep it a secret in order to protect what he believes—in the moment—to be Mingyu’s happiness and protect their future; to leave open ends and open doors, to leave open the front windows and let the smell of nights by the lake waft in. Mingyu doesn’t appreciate the sentiment, “he’s…”

Minghao.

I want those doors slammed shut.

Stepping out of the grasp just a few inches to the left, Mingyu rolls his lips inward before smacking them once and smiling down at the other half of his heart.

“Right here.”

He breathes for the first time in what feels like minutes, and the air returning to his lungs is crisp and fresh and it smells like cologne without the bad aftertaste; with no heartstrings and no guilt. It smells like a candle that’s lidded on a shelf in an apartment somewhere, never to be lit.

The best breath of air is the one taken after speaking the truth.

“Uh,” Minghao shifts in his chair, “yeah.” A smile fighting its way onto his face, a resigned, quiet smile that makes Mingyu’s heart capsize and flip and spin.

He doesn’t even care what look is on Jungkook’s face. Knowing him, the hyper excitement building in his chest is probably ready to burst. No way, he’d probably say, Mingyu and Minghao?

Yes, way, Mingyu would respond, bet you didn’t see that one coming, Mr. Perfect. This very imperfect then-best friend of yours has managed to find love in a fate-filled place that has limited admission, and it’s unfortunate, but you don’t have a ticket.

“You’re not joking, right? Not pulling my leg for old time’s sake?” He shuffles back and forth in surprise, shaking the ants from his pants. It's probably a mix of disbelief and surprise; after all,
from what Jungkook knows of Mingyu, Minghao’s not his type.

“No, yeah.” Minghao stands up from his chair, puts his hands in his pockets and purses his mouth, kissing his teeth before chewing his lip and speaking an early truth.

“Yeah?”

The second he blinks, the chaos of the room falls into darkness, but it’s somewhat different this time. The vacuum of space isn’t just black just like closing your eyes isn’t just back. Color-stained clouds fade in and out of existence. It’s filled with something sweet and something floral, nebulized into the air with a soft mist, and the longer he stands in the radio silence, in this vast and open space with Minghao in front of him—eyes and skin shimmering with starlight—, the darkness doesn’t seem all that bleak.

Minghao stands with Polaris over his heart.

When he moves his hand to scratch at his face or fix his hair—he doesn’t remember which—the light bouncing off his bracelet carves silver lines into the space around them, drawing curves and sickles in the space between them. Minghao’s not the only one who can radiate and shine this warm and welcoming light. Under his fingernails and in his nailbeds, stardust starts to sparkle and glimmer. Along the groves of his palms, golden light peaks through, illuminating them both.

“Mingyu’s my boyfriend.”

Ugh.

He likes the sound of that-

He loves the sound of that.

Tell me those words in the morning when you wake up next to me, when I brew you green tea and kiss the crown of your hair. Tell me those words when I feel ugly before a shower, when I feel ugly after a long day of work, when I look in the mirror and see bags under my eyes and weird spots in weird places. Tell me those words when we roll around on the rug playing videogames after midnight and I’m about to win, in the wee hours of the morning when you have to open shop, over the phone when I can’t see you for lunch.

It’s more than ‘boyfriend’.

It’s more than ‘significant other’.

It’s security and comfort, safety in the corner of a loud room with too many uninvited guests.

It’s the familiarity of hands you’ve wanted to hold for the last decade, of arms you could only dream of being held by. It’s time that feels fleeting and limitless at the same time, an infinite number of events and memories that play like vivid videos on the weathered white walls of a clinic.

Minghao makes the lonely ocean of a constellation whale into an art piece to be hung in a gallery full of vibrant color. He tacks them up on the walls like memories guiding Mingyu to a place he wants to be.

Jungkook still matters. His portrait sits immortalized within a beautiful and ornate frame down a corridor of the gallery that’s less-traveled. Minghao tells Mingyu that it’s okay to keep his memory pristine and dust-free, to preserve him for all the beauty that he’s brought into his life in the years they grew together. It’s important to take care of the people and things that have made you the bigger
and better person you are today.

“10 till final call!”

Chapter End Notes

so like everyone got it right it was jungkook damn but i guess it's obvious to a point, right? aw, i really wanted to keep everyone guessing for a while longer.

if anyone doesn't understand who 'Jay' is, it's Jungkook's English name in the fate au. we'll pretend it wasn't listed as Justin for the last few months. I thought it would be interesting if J.(Hope) and Jay got mixed up, but i decided to ax that part of the story since it made it too complicated.

originally, it wasn't planned for jhope to be in this story at all and for Minghao to have made acquaintances with jungkook during university (there's a small bit of plot planned out for this in the future), but it felt right to make jhope one of the competition judges and part of minghao's past as well :)

i also dropped a small sneak peak at 0800 (verkwon) and #120 (soonwoo) drafts on twitter so please give me some feedback! and talk about what else you'd like to see!
Chapter 142

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

He doesn’t get to kiss Minghao goodbye or good luck because Soonyoung is immediately on their asses—judge nonexempt—to get out the door.

Minghao doesn’t move to stop any of them but has the decency to give a regret-filled smile as he waves, still seated in his chair, one leg crossed over the other. He hesitates a second before nodding at Mingyu for his attention and silently kisses the air.

Jokingly, Mingyu catches it before he’s shoved past the curtains.

Maybe it’s best to part ways like this; on a good foot without focusing too much of their thoughts on what the future holds. Let’s focus on the present. There’s plenty of time to stress about cross-country contracts and international interviews tomorrow. Rest easy, Minghao. Rest easy, friends. You’ll win. You’ve worked hard for this and you will only feel proud of your success if you try your best.

Mingyu believes in you.

On his way out, scrambling away from the blond’s fiercely pushy hands, he notices that Seungkwan is quietly sitting with Vernon over on the couch in the corner, seemingly forgotten by the fiery dancer. He waves them goodbye, signaling that he’ll be coming out in a few minutes with his free hand. The other is completely occupied by Vernon’s; fingers loosely interlocked as he sips on a sweating Caprisun pouch.

He also waves a quick goodbye before Soonyoung yells a loud, “enjoy the show!” and proceeds to slam the door in their faces. Well, maybe dancing isn’t so different from other sports. He assumes that the team probably has their mantras and routines to stick to before a big game; putting their hands together, going through a list of stretches, chanting something silly and occult, the usual.

The judge—whatever his name was, J-something—excuses himself to bolt to the other end of the hallway where judges must gather for final touch-ups. And then there were two.

It’s ambiguous and muddy, but the walk back to their seats felt oddly cold and dramatic.

He was walking with long steps, Jungkook leading the way. Like two secret agents walking down a long hallway; serious, stoic, and somewhat urgent. He doesn’t know where all the people went.

They’re obviously still scurrying around and dashing this way and that, but he and Jungkook walk a sterile and structured path. It’s not negative or positive. It’s neutral and that’s where he wants it to be. He’s sure that the other is probably just as surprised that these two people are somehow an item; given their past and given their difference in personalities. It’s unclear, however, if he feels good or bad about that premise.

And Mingyu doesn’t care.

Unlike Seungcheol or Soonyoung or Jun or Wonwoo, Jungkook lives across the country. He’ll fly away in a few days. He’ll go back to being a distant memory, and he will play no part in this tight network of local relationships that Mingyu has clumsily cultivated in the last few months.
But a little, cosmic voice berates him in the back of his head.

We’re building a better future, he thinks.

And we should do so without discarding the good memories of the past, Minghao adds.

And Mingyu does care.

Because Jungkook was such a big part of his past; a big, warm, strong, good part of his past.

“Hey,” he calls and calls a little louder until the slightly shorter man turns around, expression curious and open. He missed those clueless bunny teeth, “uh,” Jungkook is also incredibly patient with him. Maybe Mingyu’s type is people that can put up with his stupidity, “are you okay with me seeing Minghao?”

“Huh?”

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. It’s such a stupid question. C’mon. What’s the guy supposed to say, ‘no’? Of course, he’ll be okay with it. God, Mingyu, get yourself together, “That- that came out wrong, I meant, like,” he hates that he’s stumbling over his words. What happened to the ‘professional agents walking down a cool hallway’ motif he was strutting in a second ago? “Just-” It’s okay. You’re okay. Steady me, love. “How do you feel about it?”

Before they reach the door that opens to a sea of red seats, Jungkook finally processes what Mingyu is trying to ask and takes his hand off the crash bar. He blinks a couple times, answering carelessly and naturally as he always does, “I feel good about it.”

“What do you feel about what?” A more direct answer if you will, Mr. Jeon McPerfect.

A smile and a pat on the shoulder, “You’re a good match, Mingyu.” He takes a hold of the tag around his neck, clearly reading who he is a guest of, “I never drew the lines or thought of you two ever meeting, but it’s worked out quite nicely, right? To be honest, in the years that I’ve known you —and, you know you can be wild at parties, good at running big crowds, all that stuff—you always came off as someone who had it all together, worked to get everything you ever wanted.” Jungkook drops the tag and puts his hands on his hips to state something matter-of-factly, “But on occasion, it poked through. Like, on nights where you got sleepy after drinking too much, or on nights where you’d disappear and show up at my place when the sun started rising; it was apparent to me.” the smile on his face seems so sad.

What did I do wrong?

Nothing.

He swallows and bares a rigid grin.

“At heart, you were a man with nothing.”

“Ouch.”

“I don’t mean it in a bad way.” Jungkook slaps him as he laughs, correcting the sentiment immediately, “Okay, maybe a little. But, really, Mingyu, when we were together, you were good at making me happy. You tried so hard to make me happy, to make my friends happy, to make sure everything was as stable as you could make it. Sometimes I didn’t know if the personality you were
putting forward was the real Mingyu or the Mingyu you wanted to be seen as.” He scratches behind his ear as the conversation gets a little too real for the both of them, “Maybe I liked the attention or maybe I didn’t feel like it was my place to say anything. I really wanted you to be your honest self all the time. I wanted my Mingyu to be the Mingyu who was in front of my friends. I wanted them to become our friends. But maybe we were young and dumb,” he shrugs, “It just didn’t work out.”

“I’m sorry I put you through that.” It’s no one’s fault. It’s no one’s fault, but Mingyu can’t stop himself from apologizing. Jungkook really did put up with a lot.

“Don’t be. I couldn’t communicate that to you back then and it’s a little childish of me to bring it up now, but maybe it’s good for me to resolve those thoughts.” He puts his hand back on the crash bar but doesn’t open the door, he just raps his fingertips against it, “But with Minghao, you won’t stand a chance. He’ll see right through you and he won’t be afraid to tell you off. You need someone like him, the kind of person who sees past all the lights, makeup, and manufactured habits.” He cracks it open just a hair to let it a breeze of cool air through the stuffy hallway.

He’s still wearing the same cologne.

“Someone who teaches you to love yourself regardless of whether you love them or not.” When did they ever talk so seriously, “But, hell, what do I know, you know? Just my gut feeling.”

“Thanks, though.” Mingyu mumbles, unsure if he’s heard, “I don’t know what I’m thanking you for. But I feel like you’re telling me something I needed to hear, especially from someone like you.”

The crash bar clacks against itself as the crowd comes into view, “You know, you’ve changed since we last met.”

“How so?”

Jungkook’s lips curve as he turns to exit through the door, “You’re finally holding something to your chest that you can’t bear to let go of.”

And maybe he didn’t realize it in the moments that passed, but he sure does notice it now, that he’s clenching his fist tightly around a kiss passed through the air.

On one hand, he feels silly and naïve; who holds on to flying kisses like this? On the other hand, he’s grasping for something he finds security in. He feels safe in his corner, he feels safe in his company. The time wizard has given him a protective enchantment and he has to take good care of it until they meet again.

“There you are.” Seungcheol looks up at him as he shimmies his way through their friends, stepping over Wonwoo’s thin legs and flopping down into his seat, careful not to smash the roses sleeping underneath.

His coworker hands him a small remote as the lights on stage die down and the crowd hushes itself, “For the vote.”

“Where have you been?” Mingyu hisses at him as he adjusts his sweater and kicks out his legs slightly. He feels like a cold bird settling into a warm nest woven with the presence of people he knows and cherishes. Their voices and murmurs are welcoming and familiar even when he accidentally stepped on Beomju’s foot.
“I could ask you the same thing.” Wonwoo hisses back, elbowing his arm before leaning over and explaining which buttons to push. If he’s honest, he only catches a few words because the new party of rival-team guests had moved into the seats on the other half of the front two rows. Most of them look young, probably made up of coworkers and friends just like their half. A lot of them are sporting Taproom jackets, “Votes close when the lights go off.”

Simple enough. It’s not like he really has to think about which team to vote for. He leans back in his chair and settles in, looking up at the stage with its classic red curtains and black backdrop. The projection screen is rolling up and the music is still going as hard as it was before.

Seungkwan slithers past them as the music simmers down into low rumbles. He stops before reaching his seat, legs staggered between Mingyu and Seungcheol. He crouches as the announcer pops his mic, “Welcome to the 21st annual dance conference hosted by the AIDA.” His chest is tapped when he doesn’t pay attention immediately, “I hope everyone has had a good day so far. I know it’s been cold out there, but our two studios are about to turn the crowd roars as Seungkwan drops a piece of paper into his lap and continues to his seat on the other side of Seungcheol.

A note?

“Before we bring them out to the stage, I would like to introduce our panel of judges sitting in front of section 5.”

‘Vote fairly, agent. -S.S.A. HaoHao’

He pockets the note after running the edge of it under a fingernail, reading it twice more. Mission acquired, he’ll vote fairly.

“Let’s hear it for The Taproom!” the cheers roll like thunder as six men make their way on stage, deep, dark green waist-length capes fashionably covering their off-black uniforms underneath. “Taeyong Lee,” Mingyu recognizes the snowy-haired man immediately, “Yuta Nakamoto,” it seems like this dancer is a little nervous as he laughs up a storm. “B-boy TNT,” the third in the lineup jogs up behind the other two with a bright smile, “B-boy Win-Win,” a familiar face doesn’t seem like he has the energy to humor the rest, “Lucas Wong,” that’s a big boy. Can a man as big and floppy as Mingyu himself even dance well? “And Jisung Park.”

The six stand center stage and take a graceful bow, flapping the gold trims of their capes to the side just enough so the militant uniforms underneath can be flashed to the crowd. They’re obviously a team with good funding to back their skillsets. The leader of the studio holds the microphone up to his lips after calming down his troops. He says something friendly and humble, then something a little boisterous and loud to get the crowd going, but Mingyu’s eyes are on the little glimmers of sparkly white organza in the shadows of house left.

Shifting in the dark behind the black curtains, he sees Chan poke his head out just a bit before he’s called back by Jun to rally with the rest of them. They put their hands together quietly as the cheers on stage die down again and the host takes up his position after the Taproom shuffles towards stage right, “Let’s hear it for Performance Studio!”

Soonyoung lets out an explosive cheer to pump up his team just as the host finishes his sentence and that stirs the audience, whips them into stiff peaks of pure excitement. In Mingyu’s opinion, the cheers are even louder than the first group. You have your California natives; your home team.

It’s expected that they’ll win. The standard is high; executive decks in skyscrapers are overlooking a team of six scrappy nobodies under a telescopic lens.
It must be a lot of pressure.

In the heat of competition—under the stadium lights or the spotlights of the theater—, there is no mercy. It’s an unsurmountable force that crushes you, and you will either crumble under that pressure or be molded into the form best fit. It turns the burning coals of a person’s passion-driven flame into revered diamonds.

Performance Studio is no exception to the transformation.

“Hoshi,” Soonyoung trots up to the edge of the stage, almost overshooting it before waving to the crowd, totally missing their section. Wow, rude, Soonyoung. We’re here for you and you just go and ignore us like this. Wonwoo doesn’t seem to mind, only shaking his head at his boyfriend’s ample enthusiasm.

He turns to Mingyu to whisper (talk rather loudly) into his ear, “He always gets like this during big performances. Just act like we’re not here!” And rustles back into his seat comfortably with a stupidly fond grin on his face.

“Junhui Wen,” Jun walks slower, streamers of white cloth flowing gracefully behind him instead of jaggedly like the blond prior. He doesn’t look nervous on the surface and even bows a short hello to the friends he has on the NYCCT team as he passes behind them to reach center stage next to Soonyoung. It’s an orchestrated façade; acting like he’s not anxious, as if he wasn’t catwalking on a couch 20 minutes ago.

Soonyoung peers over at him and pats him on the back, giving him a firm nudge and nod to check if he’s okay. Jun gives him an exaggerated a-ok hand signal, chuckles through a near-sneer and teeters back and forth from the balls of his feet to his heels and back again. The potential energy stored in the two brings a strange tension to the theater; like two magnets pulsating with negated polarities forced together.

“Woozi,” when Jihoon enters the stage lights, he seems to be the most composed, walking with brisk steps and firm footing. He’s the one holding the microphone for introductions instead of Soonyoung which is a surprise for Mingyu since he always assumed that the firecracker was going to be the designated leader for public events. He presumes it’s a good thing since Soonyoung is far too amped up to make a coherent speech.

Unlike his vibrating teammates, Jihoon gives both Soonyoung and Jun a once over before putting his hands behind his back formally and confidently looking out into the audience with his head held level and high. But his composure cracks a hair when the blond opens his mouth to say something and Jun stops wiggling around. They can’t hear it, obviously, but Jihoon could and he locks eyes with the leader, nods, and puts a hand behind Jun’s back to steady him; anchor him.

Jun squirms just a bit longer before his energy peters out. He clasps his hands behind his back, still antsy on his feet, but takes a deep breath and lets it go. If Mingyu didn’t know better, he’d think that they were holding hands behind Jun’s back.

“B-boy Infinite,” When Minghao walks on stage, Mingyu’s heart does a little flip and flies up into his throat so he can cheer louder. He half-expects Seungcheol to whip out an airhorn from his suit jacket like his uncle did when he graduated college, but thankfully, the roommate only uses his voice—perfectly loud as it is.

Minghao’s gait is perfectly balanced, easy, and casual. No pain, no discomfort, fluid and simple; almost too much so. Like Jihoon before him, he feels level-headed and nonchalant. He’s not turbulent or brooding; his face says that this is just another day-to-day thing, his 9-to-5 thing, he
doesn’t need to fret over it. He’s like a wise toad watching moths flutter around a flame. Unlike Jihoon, however, he doesn’t make a single effort to calm down the other two.

All of his energy is focused on centering himself and upholding that steady demeanor.

Mingyu can’t quite see through it, can’t quite pick apart which parts of him are stable and which parts are drumming as hard as his heart. Is he nervous in front of huge crowds just like everyone else? Are his palms sweaty? Legs shaky? Stomach churning? Or is he really that accustomed to performing that he no longer gets jumpy?

“Vernon Chew,” the man announces. Out of the corner of his eye, Mingyu sees Seungkwan facepalm and shake his head with a snicker as Soonyoung leans over and corrects the host, “Sorry, sorry, Vernon Chwe.” As if they hadn’t gone over the names during rehearsal.

Vernon jogs out into the lineup with a stretched smile and his hands waving awkwardly in front of him. He’s always a bit spacey and absent-minded, so it’s no surprise that he appears to be the most chilled out member on the team. Seungkwan whoops for him, voice projecting over the crowd until he gets the dancer’s attention. And, like clockwork, his rather open and vacant expression perks up and he sees their party in the audience. He gets excited and shakes Minghao’s arm to point his findings out to him, but instead of humoring him and passing the information along, he only passes them a quick glance and nods once in acknowledgement.

“And Dino Lee.” Chan’s strut is a little showier than the other five.

He comes out drenched in confidence, in bravado, in conviction that they will, indeed, take home the title. He might be nervous, but his other feelings are overpowering whatever scent of fear he carries. He walks up to the team as if he was going to accept the award. With a bright smile, he waves to the audience and it is then that Mingyu understands why Chan’s on the team despite being a student at the studio; his presence on the stage is like a vortex that draws you in. The charisma sown into his sturdy and unwavering build seems to realign every spotlight and focus their aim on him like the cubic zirconia jewels on a QVC turntable.

Looking between themselves for a moment, Soonyoung cues a neat group bow and Jihoon starts their basic introduction on narrative choreography, on what they’ve been striving for as a studio, and doesn’t really mention the competition or opposing studio at all aside from thanking the American Instructional Dance Association for hosting the event. He’s surely a man of few words and when prompted for more, he only answers with a ‘yes’ or ‘no’. It makes the audience laugh, especially Yixing who is sitting a few seats over and behind them. He doesn’t seem to mind that it’s not his employees that are running the show tonight.

With the host’s closing statement, Jihoon picks up his microphone again, “As we are performing in our home-state today, we would like to offer the Taproom the choice of going first.” Apparently, this is a common competition courtesy. A camera trucks in to capture the commentary.

The white-haired leader has his eyes opened wide in surprise—so maybe it isn’t that common—and turns to his team before deciding that they’ll go first. Handshakes are had and the lights go dark as applause and cheers start up again. Mingyu will save his voice for when his friends arrive.

When the lights come back on, they’re tinted in deep blues and magentas, but as the music crescendos into emergency sirens and alarms, the lights flash red and their routine starts.

Each person on the Taproom team has a stark contrast in flavor from the next, not just in terms
of movement but in terms of visual appeal. They move with such aggression that it’s hard to keep track of exactly what is happening on all parts of the stage until the reunite in the center. As is always true, competitive teams from the city are always at a different level.

He doesn’t expect to be so wowed within the first thirty seconds.

For Performance Studio—from a little, city-township in the middle of Northern California—to even hold their own tonight will be a feat on its own.

There’s no room to breathe. The choreography is nonstop movement and swift swipes. Wonwoo mentions that their team only has one flier which might put their friends at an advantage, and Mingyu doesn’t really understand what that means until the shortest and lightest of their group is launched into the air. He spins at least four times before reaching the ground again, steadied by the back of the tallest, “Fliers go up, they perform in the air.”

“Do we have fliers?” as far as he knows, b-boy tricks and flying are two different things. No one in Performance Studio is light and nimble enough to be completely thrown like that. No one has the specialty of flying.

Wonwoo shakes his head, eyes focused on the show. He and Seungcheol have a wealth more experience watching and analyzing these things than he does. Mingyu doesn’t know any of the technical aspects, he doesn’t understand what the judges are looking for and he doesn’t know how they’ll determine the winner. Both groups are good, but the cheers the Taproom gets for seemingly simple moves makes him rethink what the criteria must be. Maybe those moves are just really hard to execute technically, but the flashy moves also get an equal amount of hype.

The song choice is key. Heavy bass makes Mingyu’s chest tremble. It’s callous and crazy, sexy and bold; everything that a party song needs for you to raise your glass and sing along. He gets lost in the musical haze, blurring the reality of the competition and the illusion of a concert. It’s fun and enjoyable and it makes him want to get up and vibe with the beats.

In a flurry, it ends before he feels like it begins.

A short but impactful performance that heats the audience up to a rolling boil, aptly seasoned and ready to stew.

Mingyu gets a little nervous for the team he’s cheering for.

He supposes—like most of the audience—he wants to be proven wrong, for Performance Studio to come onto the stage after this intermission and show everyone that they are the obvious choice. It would make voter-based competitions so much easier if there was a clear favorite, but that would be too easy.

Performance Studio takes the spotlight, shaking out their limbs before crouching down and waiting for the music to cue up.

The first instrument that reaches their ears is the sting of a violin, of bass grinding into low strings and building up every time a new member stands up until a full symphony blasts them into a practiced routine led by Jun and Minghao flipping over the two shortest members and sliding onto the ground. Foot-to-foot, they kick off of each other and glide to opposing ends of the stage, making room for Soonyoung and Vernon to steal the spotlight.

Mingyu overhears some chitchat, this and that about how Performance Studio always has the best and most complicated formations while the Taproom is always known to express a diverse and
colorful palette, “It’ll be a battle between a tried and true team against a team that’s always rotating the best people in and out.”

“Strong teamwork versus a team of strong individuals.”

Their narrative work holds true.

They’re sticking with the story of ambiguous relationships and how they can evolve, how no one knows the whole story. The designated pair for the first round is Vernon and Chan. Even though the music and choreography are upbeat and relatively bright compared to the set before them, Vernon’s character regularly does something silly or ‘incorrect’ and is berated by Chan’s character in passing while everyone continues as normal. It’s light-hearted and comedic with running body-gags and slapstick comedy. It makes people laugh and chuckle even if it’s just out of politeness.

In some light, Mingyu sees quick reflections of the Chan he met last night. He sees a carefree boy who had to grow up too fast and he hopes that the once-young prodigy will learn to open up more. If he could look this bright and cheery even on occasion, he would surely be more welcoming than he currently is. Every expression he and Vernon show on stage is charming and contrasted by the precision of the dance moves that follow.

At the height of the music’s tempo, right before the drop, a hot pink ribbon rolls out of Vernon’s sleeve when he throws his hands up. It’s reminiscent of an injury that Chan quickly takes notice of and tries to patch up. The message translates clearly when the team regroups at center stage and hype up the crowd as if they were holding a concert. The ribbon is ripped off and tossed away as it is quickly forgotten, brushed aside, just a small thing that was patched up.

Applause rains when they hit the final pose at the end of Jihoon’s mix.

It’s just as loud as Taproom’s applause, if not a bit louder. Minghao is flexed in a freeze with his legs jutted out in the air, mirrored by Jun on the opposite side. Right before the lights shut off, he disengages from the pose, unsteady when he lands and shakes out the wrist that was supporting all his weight. He pats his teammates on the back while ushering them off stage; using Chan’s shoulder as leverage to get his bearings.

The two performances had different impacts; they’ll appeal to different tastes.

And it’s not that his friends’ performance was boring—not the slightest—but it didn’t have the same bombastic flavor that scratches the high-school-frat-boy-party-hype-beast itch that Mingyu had buried somewhere in the past.

“Aight, aight, aight, hell yeah.” He stumbles back onto the stage, “Perf Studio, that was dope.” And turns back to the crowd, “Y’all know what time it is. It’s time to vote! Remotes at the ready!” he begins a countdown.

Mingyu fiddles with the four buttons on the device.

His reflex is, obviously, to vote for their friends. After all, they’re here to cheer them on. Seungkwan is doing a very good job of it, rallying everyone around him to press the second button for Performance Studio with the half-hearted promise of free donuts (of course, it’s a baseless promise to acquit him from bribery). For the worry and stress that this competition has had on his relationship with Vernon, he probably just wants the victory to be set in stone just so he doesn’t have to agonize about it anymore.

But when he gets nosy and gleans Wonwoo’s fingers, he’s surprised the man has punched in a
vote for the Taproom. Looking to his left, Seungcheol’s remote registers his vote for Performance Studio, “It’s best to be honest and vote fairly.” He echoes Minghao’s note as he pushes up his glasses.

The countdown is finished and Mingyu just punches in an option he doesn’t remember. It’s just the first round. There’s plenty of time for a comeback.

“Round 2! Team with higher votes will go first!”

When the lights go dark again, they can’t tell who gets on stage for the second set. There’s a little twinkle here and there, but Mingyu can’t see what color their clothes are. The moment the heavy beat drops at the beginning of the song, he knows it’s not Jihoon’s style.

Like the roar of a dragon, the music blasts into their faces.

It almost feels like a wind rushes them when the biggest members of the Taproom team launch forward, fingers grabbing the edge of the stage as they’re restrained by thick, elastic bands tethered to their outfits. The industrial sounds build upon the formation of a dangerous machine, gears crunching bones that cover a light melodic beat that is eventually drowned out by conical horns and power drills.

Their movements match the tune; edgy and unforgiving as they snap necks and elbow the air. They lean back and break their spines before snapping upright into fancy footwork, tossing off their capes during the short intermission solo by the leader. Gold-tipped canes are pulled out and used to offset their centers of gravity. The Jackson-esque angles and tricky illusions make for something worth taking note of.

It’s a flood of movement and they toss their flier up twice, sent by the tallest and caught by the second tallest (forgive Mingyu, he’s still terrible with names). However, come the later part of the routine, it seems that all the aerial dancing has worn on him and he can see their plans change on the fly. The tallest man asks him something in the back with wide eyes, ears leaning in for an answer, but the petit cat-eyed flier shakes his head. It seems like he doesn’t have the energy to make the third jump.

Mingyu doesn’t blame him, after all, it’s not like jumping and twisting in the air is the only thing he’s doing. He’s still keeping up with the rest of the choreography and takes centerstage when they have to do more flexible and graceful work. Energy needs to be conserved for the last round, but the communication feels a little sluggish between the members and they set up for the third jump before realizing that it’s not doable.

Thinking fast, the flier pulls his catcher and they dive into an impromptu routine that doesn’t quite suit the song playing but the juxtaposition of languid waves and dives—twisting and turning on the ground before roping the others into it—was a very interesting experience. Stained pink and peach, the change in lights rapidly alters the mood of the performance from something violent and abusive to something sultry and melancholic before the disk scratches and the beat changes with staggered moves that click with the jabs.

The flamboyant ending has them dramatically opening the military jackets—breaking apart all the delicate and thin chains that hold them together—, freeing beasts from their restraints, and setting them seething and free. Before they can hit the edge of the stage again, they stab their canes into the rim, creating a cage to bar them back. Their hands jut through, grasping for the camera and the audience of the front row as they snarl; the performance comes full circle and wraps up nicely.
“Damn, that was wild.” Seems to be the consensus of the crowd behind him, “Their stage presence is amazing, but I never know who I’m supposed to focus on.” Follows after that. “Individually, they stand out so much that together it feels a little muddy.”

Mingyu imagines that practicing a routine like that must have been awkward. He can’t picture the man they met in the street earlier to be the type that would get on all fours and growl like a lion in the confines of a dance studio. Then again, he doesn’t think giving your teammates a steamy lap dance is something that can be done easily in a studio either.

Coming to the stage again, his friends take a little bit longer to settle in. He can barely hear what they say, but Soonyoung points to a part of the stage after getting Jihoon’s attention and the musician nods in touch-and-go affirmation. There isn’t any time to change things. Whatever is going to happen will happen as it’s been practiced.

Jihoon has the habit of starting his compositions with soft and gentle instrumentals.

This time it’s harp harmonized by something rather Asiatic in nature. There are so many string instruments throughout Asian history that Mingyu can’t be bothered to remember the sound and name of each one, but he’s heard it many times in period dramas. The lighting drowns the white-clad dancers in pools of blue and green marble.

With their hands covered in ivory gloves, fingertips capped with bright lights, their movements oscillate gently. The scene itself, the composition of where they are—how Junhui reaches as high and as far right as he can and how Jihoon glides along the floor as far left as he can—gives the feeling of a floating belt of stars in the middle of the ocean. They sway like anemone, glow like fireflies, and entrap each other with their organza cloths like jellyfish.

As the movements pick up, the color of the lights get colder, closer to grey and purple. A storm is brewing.

Four members occupy the main floor while Jun and Jihoon take to the back, trying to resolve their characters’ problem like the first set. Just as the orchestrion screams and the cymbals clash, the sea of limbs part and Jihoon gets a running start and leaps into a jump-kick, grabbing Jun’s hand in the fraction of a second his foot nestles into the bend of his waist before he ricochets off of him and flies into a backflip. As they part contact, a red ribbon uncoils from their sleeves. It spans the length of the stage as Jihoon lands with a semi-purposeful crash and scrambles to get up.

If it wasn’t intentional, it looks like part of the act. If it was intentional, it got the message across.

“That’s new.” Wonwoo tells him, leaning forward in his seat with investment, “I guess we have a flier now. They must’ve decided on that last-minute as well.”

Mingyu can’t fathom the amount of trust Jihoon had to place in Jun to catch his hand midair and balance him on his hip, but he also doesn’t look light in the slightest. Having his bodyweight launched full throttle at the other dancer must’ve been taxing on both of them during rehearsals no matter how last-minute it was. Maybe it was a trump card move played out of desperation since they saw the other team withdraw from their third stunt.

Jun carries on with his solo moves, gracefully spinning this way and that, but the red ribbon continuously coils around him. Every time it does—bringing him closer to Jihoon—his character shies away and changes direction until it happens again and again. The problem isn’t getting resolved
and Jihoon’s character is growing frustrated with the aversion as the choreography continues. He reaches out to Jun with so much need and want, but the taller man curls into himself and drops into a split to avoid a hug. He lunges and arches his back, as flexible as a cat, and cranes his neck. When he turns to look at his partner, his expression artfully pained.

An exaggerated sigh signals the end of their relationship. And while he leaves hurt, Jihoon leaves furious.

He rips the end of the ribbon from his wrist and roughly stamps it into Soonyoung’s chest after a quick brawl. The martial arts training they’ve received gets to shine through and Mingyu almost winces every time Minghao’s limbs clash with someone else’s. Even if they’re play fighting, the momentum and impact of the hits are hard enough to be felt. It has to be. That’s how you make it look good.

Only at the last moment, does Jun’s character realize he’s done something wrong, but the lit fingertips of his friends come to capture him and hold him back from chasing after Jihoon who walks past them. The struggle is performance art, the emotions that roll over their faces have been practiced for countless hours in the mirror, the way their hands and heads snap at specific angles have been rehearsed too many times.

Finally, Jun breaks free and runs to the front of center stage, crashing to his knees and reaching out just as Chan and Minghao pull on his clothes. The fasteners snap off the flowing shirt and pants to reveal a fitted black button-up tucked into even tighter black pants. Casting the white coverups away, Chan and Minghao lift the red ribbon and run it backwards, clotheslining Jun as if he was being choked. He scrambles before getting bowled over and laying flat. The front stage fades to black and the spotlight is trained on the audio technician who has already pulled his white outers off at the back of the stage.

Like Satan himself, he looks dazzling dipped in onyx. He fixes the sleeve’s cuff and looks over his shoulder. The story is open to interpretation, but Jihoon’s expression says his character feels victorious and satisfied with these results.

If you hurt me, I’ll hurt you; a game of vengeful gripes.

The crowd absolutely loves it. It’s obvious that Performance Studio wins the second round. It’s well deserved considering the tallest needs Soonyoung’s help getting up and is clearly sore where he was kicked. Jihoon also rubs his knees as he gets to his feet and waits for the front stage members to catch up to him. They’re all checking up on each other, needing to know that they’re all unscathed and not sustaining any serious injuries before the final round.

Mingyu has half a mind to track down Jungkook and ask to go backstage again to check on them himself.

“They’ll be okay.” He’s thankful he’s got Wonwoo to calm his nerves, “New changes means pulling muscles they don’t stretch often.” He pats Mingyu’s hand that’s wrapped tightly around the armrest, “They know their limits, competitions are where they find new ones.”

As expected, to his left, Seungcheol’s typing away on his phone and listening to a message on WhatsApp, declining a call on Google Duo, and silencing the thing for the fifth time. His eyes scan the stage impatiently waiting for the host to come back and his feet kick precariously at the flowers on the ground underneath them. He seems amused and anxious at the same time.

“What did you think?” Mingyu asks since it looks like he’s itching to talk to someone.
“Tie.”

“Tie.” He agrees.

The older man slips the phone into his breast pocket and rests his elbows on his knees, bobbing his head a couple times like he needs to get the feel of his answer, “Tie. Because Minghao said Jihoon would never fly for them. So, that last move was a surprise for everyone, and they pulled it off natural.”

The host interrupts their conversation for votes and he can feel the victory of this set linger in the air. It’s not until after he casts his vote that he worries that performing right away for the third set will exhaust all their engines. The third set is supposed to be the hardest one, and while he’s dedicated at least 30 seconds of each stage to gawking at how beautiful his tentative boyfriend is, he worries that the next time he sees him, he’ll be the one wincing in pain from the push.

Part of him feels helpless in the audience and he’s sure Seungkwan, Seungcheol, and Wonwoo must feel the same way. But they also know that the teammates have each other.

The countdown for the votes end but the host is delayed as he receives an announcement from a stagehand. He bobbles his head as he downloads the information and taps his mic, “Alright, the polls are now closed! Did your team win? We’ll see, we’ll see.” The talks slowly now, much slower than he was talking before. And—as suspected—it’s because he’s trying to buy time.

Chapter End Notes

it's been a while :) how have you been?

End Notes

Thank you, again, for reading up until this point!

Keep me company on Twitter~
A post-mortem will be posted of this story with all my side notes and intentions once it's finished, so check back here at that time!

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If you would like to learn more about the Fate AU and the characters (without mango's perspective), click the series link down below!

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