Suck It and See

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/12728970.

| Rating:     | Explicit          |
| Archive Warning: | Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings |
| Category:   | M/M               |
| Fandom:     | EXO (Band)        |
| Relationship: | Do Kyungsoo | D.O/Park Chanyeol |
| Character:  | Do Kyungsoo, Park Chanyeol, Kim Jongin | Kai, Kim Joonmyun | Suho, Original Characters |
| Additional Tags: | Alternate Universe, Crimes & Criminals, Swearing, Humor, Crack, Flashbacks, Fluff and Hurt/Comfort, Violence, Angst, Romance, First Love, Past Relationship(s), Action/Adventure, Gang Violence, Implied/Referenced Homophobia, Mild Sexual Content |
| Stats:      | Published: 2017-11-14 Completed: 2018-04-04 Chapters: 16/16 Words: 168132 |

Suck It and See

by alostautumn2k16

Summary

Kyungsoo is 'The Lockerman' a notorious criminal tasked with hiding many of the illicit treasures of the criminal underworld. Framed for a crime he didn't commit, he is offered help by Chanyeol, an ex-armed robber (and ex-lover).

[criminals chansoo x au]

Notes

a/n: hiiii everyone! so i’m back with a wip that was deffo not to have a 7k long first chapter but there we go, expectations defied lolol. So this was written with the background that i was feeling a bit sick/meh today, watched two scorsese films in a row, and i thought that the crime au x chansoo verse needed a new neighbour c: !!! it's also enemies to lovers, sorta. deffo bad boys chansoo though. pls don't read if you can't handle that sdfbhsf ;-) bc i'd understand.

warnings for this: !!!!!!!! profanity !!!!!!!!!!!!!!! it is going to be 80% swear words. Some mention of sexual content / some poor jokes / violence ++ a lot. this is mainly comedic/crime/violence though as again, i wanted to write it to amuse c: in terms of length, i’m going to go with a tentative three + may be four. shouldn’t be longer but who knows about word count bc theyre all pottymouths here and that adds up!

-okay please enjoy this first chapter! It’s heavy on the flashback scenes - but it should be a bit
more partial between the timelines as we go on! also for any arctic monkey fans, this entire fic is written on the back of their entire discography ahaha c: have a lovely week exo-ls! Thanks for reading as always. I hope this cheers you up a bit as it cheered me up! Be well!

UPDATE POST-STORY COMPLETION.
- so, this story clearly extends past the 3/4 target mark as initially planned ahaha so i thought i'd add some warnings for new readers!
- the angst and the gun violence and the plot becomes much heavier/darker as you read along ++ the language so please keep that in mind!
- there are also others but i did my best to tag them/ warn about them in the extra long chapter notes so i hope it helps :)

enjoy!
There were two bars of LED lights above him flashing a bright white. The second-- the one furthest to him and closest to the cop with the twitchy eye and marital problems, was flickering and broken.

“You should fix your light.”

The second cop-- younger, more to prove, mommy issues -- snapped at him.

“If you aren’t going to talk about your work, or where the diamond is, then you better shut your fucking mouth.”

Kyungsoo continued to watch the lights dance and narrowed his eyes at the broken bulb, half-expecting for it to lull as his eyes became used to the imbalance of shadows in the room. His side was so much darker. It was hard to read or see anything. This was a shame considering the handicap he was already suffering from after they broke his glasses -- a product of when they had carelessly snapped his neck against the post office till and haven’t yet offered him a replacement. A little mean of them, really.

He wondered if his glasses were okay. They were probably lodged in the corner of his counter somewhere, gathering dust, worthless.

“So, is your lawyer a crook too?” Mommy issues teased him, fingers crumpling the edge of his file. A blatant giveaway for how just how much Kyungsoo’s silence was getting under his skin.

“Aren’t all lawyers crooks?” Kyungsoo responded with a smile, tilting his head at Marital Problems, observing the way his eye twitched just a little more at the contact.

“Shut the hell up.” Mommy issues mouthed, just as the bulb above them burst, causing the two men to jump, cursing. Across them, Kyungsoo remained undisturbed, content to be further bathed in black, his smiling face now completely obscured by the shadows of the opposing side of the room.
FIVE YEARS AGO

-//-

Why were the queues in post offices always so long?

Restless, Chanyeol blinked lazily at the clock which hung at the wall right at the head of the queue, watching over the people like a ticking god. He chewed his gum sloppily, teeth gritting in rhythm with the ticking - tick, tick, tick, tick - until he was finally at the front.

Thank fucking god.

Looking across, he peered at the final window down the row of identical looking customer windows. Above, right at the other end of the wall was a huge red sign with letters written in scuffed white paint: Customer Service Department Queue. They told him that this was where the Lockerman was. Post office. Corner of Cohn Street. Final Window. Customer Service Department Queue. It was his first time meeting the guy so maybe that explained why there was a strange sort of knot suddenly twisting in his stomach. Course. Another reason might also be the fact that Chanyeol already knew that the guy wasn’t going to be pleased by the news that he was bringing.

Nobody liked getting shitty news. Especially when it was four fifty on a Thursday and your shift ended at five.

God. Why did he end up with this fucking chore again? Oh yeah. He was the baby of the team. Therefore, as the designated team baby, he got the honour to do the family chores.

‘C’mon, Yeol.’ His superior had nudged him with a whine, waving the white envelope in his face as he sat on the grass outside their hide-out, unlit cigarette resting between his lips, ‘I need this in ASAP. And I’ve got a baptism at four o’clock.’

‘Get someone else to do it. How about Junmyeon? He likes flashing his motor around. I’m sure he won’t say no.’

‘You disrespectful asshole. Don’t speak shit about your elder.’ An unnecessary kick to the stomach was enough for Chanyeol to realise that his boss wasn’t slapping around.

He folded over, groaning dramatically in pain as he glanced across to where his cigarette had disappeared between the dirty uncut grass blades.

‘Deliver this before the post office closes. Hear me? Post office. Corner of Cohn Street. Final Window. Customer Service department queue. Repeat after me…’

‘I got it, I got it.’ Chanyeol exhaled, rising up from the ground and glaring up at the larger man who then slapped his cheek with the envelope.

‘Now remember, be polite. This guy. The Lockerman? He doesn’t fuck around. I really need him to take this from us. Problem is, he doesn’t like live stock so—’

‘Livestock?’ drawled Chanyeol, smirking as he watched his superior light a cigarette between his teeth. He heard him tell his wife he quit last week. Promises rarely lasted in their line of work. ‘What are we? Stealing cows now? Raiding farms?’
A fist was raised and Chanyeol withheld a chuckle, lifting his arms in surrender. ‘Okay, okay!’


Collateral. Before, in the old days, that probably meant a Rolex-- or a 45’ inch TV. But in their city, it always meant people. Gah, people.

‘Got it,’ Chanyeol answered, showing some obedience as he pocketed the envelope and glanced up at the man again, ‘Anything else?’

After tousling Chanyeol’s hair in the most ridiculously patronising display possible, like he was some puppy lazing in the yard, his supervisor lowered his stance and placed the cigarette between the young man’s grinning lips,

‘Remember what I said, Yeol. Be polite. Give the form. Say something nice like… I don’t know. How’s your Mom? Did you enjoy the sun out at lunch? Then keep that damn dumb mouth of yours shut.’

‘What if he says no?’

‘Huh?’

‘I said…’ Chanyeol looked up at the man, clamping his cigarette between his lips as he spoke, stretching out his legs across him, ‘What if he says no? You said yourself he doesn’t like… live stock.’

‘Then don’t bother coming home.’ His superior began to walk away then, stomping across the grass, shouting out the words as a form of goodbye, ‘If you can’t do this, then don’t fucking come home because I’ll kick you out!’

Lovely.

After what seemed like a ludicrous amount of time, Chanyeol’s turn finally came. The little red light which signalled that counter seven was free disappeared and was replaced by a green one. He walked across almost automatically, like a pedestrian crossing a road, and reached the till where behind, he would see the elusive Lockerman for the first time.

Picture this now:

All Chanyeol knew about the Lockerman was that this guy was a mastermind. All he ever heard about this guy was how great he was at what he did; and what he did, was hide stuff. He started low-- offering his locker business to anyone and everyone who wanted something stocked away for a short time. Most likely drugs. That’s where he got his name from: The Locker Man. He set up a bunch of lockers all across the city and people could use them to keep things aside from sweaty gym bags. But then he got good; and his friends got good too. Suddenly, it wasn’t just lockers anymore
and he was operating mid-scale, to big-scale, to motherfucking *Godzilla* scale level of business. After all, everyone who ever did something bad wanted a place to hide whatever it was that was going to get them clipped. Imagine stealing a bunch of new computers, and you were careless and got caught on CCTV. Cops on your door. They search your house, your friends’ house, your friends’ friend’s house, your ex-wife’s house, your grandma’s house, your garage, your secret den where you watch pornography all day -- and they find no computers. Where’s the case? Where’s the culpability? What are they going to do? Prosecute you for enjoying the fine roads with your fine vehicle during a fine evening across where technology warehouses happened to be?

There were better analogies out there but Chanyeol was an armed robber so all the imagery he knew was unfortunately related to stealing.

Alright, back to the picture. Mastermind. *Godzilla*-business plan. Could easily hide money, drugs, bodies (dead or alive), your everyday stolen Caravaggio-- basically if you got something to hide, and had the cash to hide it, then the Lockerman had a hiding place for it. And now he ran his business in a post-office where criminals could come along to counter number seven and beg for his services. Absolute legend.

So, naturally, Chanyeol’s image of the guy wasn’t going to be a tiny, four-eyed man in an oversized camel-colored suit in a post office.

“Good afternoon sir, how can I help you.”

His voice was deep and unfriendly. Just like any other public service worker, so no surprises there but Chanyeol couldn’t help but look a little dumbfounded. He had expected to see a six-foot thug with huge hands that could easily tip a box of several stolen advanced robotic prototypes in some hole in a rice field. Not this. Not some guy he could pick up in his arms and throw over the city bridge without breaking his back.

“Excuse me, sir?” The Lockerman tapped the glass window, causing Chanyeol to stiffen.

“Uh,” *Polite*. He had to be polite right. Clearing his throat, he stated a practiced and very, very lame, “Hello. How’s your Mom?”

The moment he said it, Chanyeol realised that his boss had 100% set him up to sound like a dumbass. His free fist balled up angrily as he breathed through his nose and slipped the form through the tiny gap between the glass and the metal till, mind thinking of a million ways he could get his boss back for it.

Maybe it was due to this quiet unspoken look of pure restrained rage that the Lockerman would subsequently reject his request.

“I’m sorry,” The Lockerman said, tossing one passive look over his shoulder, “It looks like we are not in possession of your package.”

Chanyeol should have expected it. But he didn’t, because he was too busy internally raging.

“Excuse me?”

The form was slipped back. The Lockerman’s cool words followed,

“I said, sir. I’m afraid we don’t have your package in this branch. Might I suggest contacting your original correspondent?”
In other words. *Fuck off.* Chanyeol didn’t need to be told twice, but he was still raging, and was still shocked to the bone that the guy he was trying to charm behind the till was basically two foot shorter than him and wore hair-gel. And just to further add to the mess of his day, his gum just lost its flavour. It was stale now. Disgusting.

“Are you sure I can’t make you change your mind?” Chanyeol attempted, with a sentence he would typically use for either seduction or intimidation. This time, he said it politely, like an old lady who was failing to entice her middle-aged grandsons to stay longer and try the sixth round of cookies she had baking in the oven, so it was neither.

“You can’t.”

Now that - the tone the Lockerman used - was not polite. If anything, it was damn rude and dismissive. And Chanyeol got pissed off-- *more* pissed off.

And he showed it.

Taking the form, his dark eyes remained on the man behind the counter as he spat his gum right in the center of the paper and walked away, making a show of hitting the flippy metal top of the bin *really* hard until it made a noise.

It was only after that, as he jogged out of the post office, that Chanyeol realised that he should’ve been way politer, and that there was no way he was going home until that tiny man took his request.

---

**PRESENT DAY**

---

The phone was ringing.
Chanyeol ran down the stairs, phone pressed to his ear, one arm into the sleeve of his jacket as his hands busied themselves with pulling his unwashed jeans all the way up. Once he reached the bottom step, he found himself sighing in relief as he heard the sound of television and his niece in the middle of the living room playing with her phone.

“Hyewon, we need to go, you’re late for dance-- oh, hi? Hi is this Little Steps? Yeah, hi. This is Hyewon’s uncle, yeah, sorry traffic got really bad down the south road? Yeah, I know. So… we are ten minutes away, tops--” He gestured for the little girl to lower the volume of the television, as he continued to blatantly lie, “Yeah, she definitely won’t be missing this lesson… again…”

After a charming farewell to the receptionist, Chanyeol’s sense of panic fully kicked in. One would think that the dance studio ‘Little Steps’ was a military facility considering how hard they whipped the parents and guardians of the children they taught about attendance. It was ridiculous. All of this fuss for a six minute recital at the end of the year which Hyewon hated and Chanyeol was too bored to really understand.

“Hyewon why, I’m going to get yelled at again,” he whined at the twelve year old as she sprung to her feet, bringing with her a cutting scoff that suggested that all wrongdoing was on him, “Why didn’t you wake me up? Don’t you care that you’re making your uncle look like an asshole all the time?”

“You are one.” Hyewon said simply, brushing past him and retrieving her dance bag which he’d pleaded for her to prepare the night before to prevent this sort of altercation happening. “Why do we even go? You know we both hate it.”

“Yeah well. It’s in your father’s last will and testament. He had a dance fund reserved for you and everything. So blame him.”

“Blame my dead father? Gee Uncle Chanyeol, you’re so not an asshole.”

Hyewon rolled her eyes, stomped to the front door and pulled it open before slamming it shut behind her.

Now alone, her uncle proceeded to curse at her and her bratty attitude as much as possible, guilt-free. Hyewon was such a brat. Although she had only been in his care for a year, he couldn’t believe how much she took after him. It was an unbearable living situation that he now he must live with. Sometimes he thought it was his brother’s way of punishing him for all those years he skipped on Hyewon’s birthdays. Such an asshole move in any plane of thought (rest in peace). It wasn’t Chanyeol’s fault he didn’t give a flying pig about kids-- and now this--

His internal crisis was promptly disturbed by the sound of Hyewon pressing the car horn.

Taking a deep exhale, the twenty six year old man walked to his front door, gently pressed his face against it until he momentarily shut off his ability to breathe, and then opened it to the sound of the car horn being abused.

He walked down the lawn, across his suburban neighbourhood, half-hoping that someone would come out, carrying a weapon, telling them to shut the fuck up-- just so he could have the opportunity to tell someone to shut the fuck up.
But nobody does; nobody ever does; because in Chanyeol’s life, nobody ever does anything.

They reached ‘Little Steps’ in fifteen minutes. They were already doing better this week. Ten minutes earlier than last week. This hopefully meant that Chanyeol could miss out on being quietly dissed by her teacher during his next progress phone call with them.

“Bye Hyewon,” he called out to her, attempting to be civil because he was lowkey riding on the buzz of his superior driving skills-- “Break a leg!”

His wording wouldn’t go amiss.

“I bet you’d like that wouldn’t ya!” Hyewon screeched at him, ensuring that the whole road could hear as she marched off, dragging her dance bag behind her.

Chanyeol didn’t bother waiting to see if she got inside the studio as most responsible guardians would. Instead, he revelled in the freedom he would get. These dance classes were two hours long--two damn hours without the brat nagging at him every second. Bliss. There was so much he could do. Although he was so damn tired from his job that the likelihood was that he was just going to hop back into bed and hope that when he woke up he would wake up in an alternate dimension where his brother didn’t die and he didn’t have to be bogged down with a kid that hated his guts--

He took a deep inhale and switched on the radio.

‘The excitement of the state visit is building. Already, the prospect of its national implications is being considered, alongside the cultural importance of the state jewels being returned to---’

Chanyeol scrunched up his nose, shifting the channel with the dial and grinning as the car was suddenly attacked with the noise of heavy drum beats and a loud electrical guitar solo. Rocking along with his head, he almost completely missed the vibration of his work phone had he not suddenly hit a red light on his way home. He stopped, the music changed, and then he heard its light ringing.

“Hello. Park Security Services. How may I help?”

Green light. Chanyeol kept one hand on the wheel as he drove forwards, other hand over his phone.

“Hello? Chanyeol? This you? What the hell, man? Why did I have to waste my time googling you? Why didn’t you keep your old number?”

The unfamiliar voice spooked him. “Excuse my french, but who the fuck are you?” This was his work-line. The only communication channel in the world which he had promised not to tarnish with his affinity for swearwords and dirty talk. Now even that was gone. Today was officially the worst day of Chanyeol’s week. And that was a lot considering only yesterday, he got told by his Grandma -- his own Grandma -- that he was gaining weight. Thanks world.

“It’s me Jongin. You remember right?”
Jongin. It took a moment for the light bulb to light up but it did and it did so with vigour. Jongin; the star lawyer of dirtbag city, Kim Jongin. The lawyer that could save you from anything and everything - provided that your pockets were as deep as the tidal wave of shit he would have to save you from.

“Yeah, course.” Chanyeol lowered the music volume, gaze remaining on the road as he slowed down his speed, “I… I changed my number cos I quit, remember? I quit. What is it? Why are you calling me?”

“You quit? I didn’t know that man. Good on you. Anyway, just thought I should tell you. Kyungsoo’s in trouble.”

At the name, Chanyeol’s car screeched to a halt. He had to-- otherwise he would’ve 100% driven it into the tree a hundred metres from where he was stopped because his brain just got stunningly close to shutting down.

“Hey. Hey? You okay, bro? Still here?”

“Still here,” Chanyeol answered shakily, glancing around behind him as other drivers took him over, flipping the bird as they grunted at his car, “Still… he’s here? What kind of trouble? What…”

“Bro, I don’t even know. All I know is that I need to get to the police station ASAP and it’s pretty bad.”

“Well, why… why the hell are you telling me?”

Laughter rung across the line.

“Shit, weren’t you guys a thing? Don’t you remember? You were in love with him or something…. ”

-//-

FIVE YEARS AGO

-//-

“Take me down to the paradise city
Where the grass is green and the girls are pretty…”

Slamming imaginary drumsticks against his car dashboard, Chanyeol listened to a few more beats of the song before shutting his engine and parking his car against the edge of an alley. He dashed across to the establishment where he just saw the Lockerman enter. It was a bar, no question, but it wasn’t in a part of the city he went to that much so he couldn’t say he knew what type it was.

He could say though that it didn’t look like the type of bar that postal office workers went to for their weekday drinks.

He had been tailing the guy for hours and so far, he’d come up short with any ideas as to how to lure the guy into accepting his request -- and doing so politely. Using what he knew and what he was trained to do was out of the question here and Chanyeol suddenly felt like a little kid doing a maths
test without his calculator. Fortunately, the Lockerman didn’t decide to spend all night in his closed apartment complex and so Chanyeol didn’t have to break a sweat and figure out a way to break into that.

Luring someone to do something you want at a bar? A far more plausible occurrence.

Chanyeol entered after a brief exchange of eye-contact with the bouncer. Inside the bar was dark and modern, the music was loud and beatsy, and it was cramped with people. Definitely not the type of place even he would go to on Thursdays. His Thursday plans were far more on the relaxing side -- providing he didn’t have a job of course. Because then his Thursday nights consisted of being squished in a black van with five other sweaty men, listening to Junmyeon’s 90s mixtape, and playing with the safety lock on his gun.

The place was surprisingly busy considering the time of night. There was already a healthy amount of people in the dance floor, swaying and hip-swivelling, and Chanyeol was unable to avoid the occasional stray touch and grab as he braved his way through.

Exhaling as he escaped, the man was about to admit defeat to his pursuit when he spotted a figure sat alone on a stool by the bar. The height and the hair color was right so he thought-- why not.

His hunch paid off. Taking the seat beside the stranger, Chanyeol only had to take one glance to confirm that he had indeed found the Lockerman. Except, this wasn’t the postal-office worker version he had met in the afternoon. The ugly suit was gone, replaced by a simple crisp white shirt and navy trouser ensemble. Two black buttons undone. Black shoes that were shiny enough to eat off of. The only remnant of his old self were the glasses that were still there. Round and squeaky clean.

“Are you done?” The man asked, casting one look at Chanyeol’s form, before returning his eyes to the drink in his hand.

He spoke with that same voice. Public-friendly, uninterested-- a borderline inconvenienced tone that grinded against Chanyeol’s gears for some unspoken reason.

“Done with what?” he countered, gesturing towards the barman to get him the same drink as his companion - “I just got here.”

“I told you. I’m not going to change my mind.”

“Who said I was here for that?” Chanyeol responded, taking the drink and leaning across to toast it ceremoniously against the other’s, “I just wandered my way in here and you happen to b--”

“You were tailing me. I saw you in that piece of garbage you drive.” The man responded dully, no flicker of response shown despite the obvious offence that Chanyeol took at the word garbage.

To describe his beloved Turbo?

Blasphemy.

“You’re... fucking rude.” Chanyeol spat, feeling less and less keen to follow his promise of politeness as he frowned at the other, draining his drink in a single gulp.

Mistake. The drink smelled like gasoline mixed with something lemony from a cleaning product and he felt like throwing up. He managed to hold it down with a wheeze. For a second, he thought the Lockerman almost smiled but he didn’t. It was a trick of the light.
“You want to do something for me?” The Lockerman asked out of nowhere. It was funny how level his voice remained despite the fact that he was the one that needed something. To Chanyeol, his voice was like a radio presenter’s—trained to keep calm and bleak, as to not stir panic when delivering bad news.

“And what’s that?” Chanyeol asked, having already predicted a list of answers—most of which would revolve around the ‘f’ word and off.

“Can you watch that door?” He lifted an index finger, gesturing towards the door to the gentlemen’s toilet, “I need to be inside for five minutes.”

Chanyeol looked around at the place then narrowed his eyes. “Look, bro. I don’t care how that sounds in your head but it sounds really fucking weird to me.”

He didn’t answer, for the answer delivered himself with his two feet. Chanyeol followed the Lockerman’s gaze and spied a large nondescript figure enter the toilet from the dance floor, looking particularly edgy.

When he turned his head back, a healthy wad of notes had spontaneously appeared in the space between them. Now Chanyeol— he hated working when he didn’t need to. But he also loved money. There was nothing more mind-numbingly beautiful than the sight of surprise money being placed in his hand. It was like Christmas every damn time. And this was as close to money being placed in his grasp for free. What’s the harm?

“I’m only watching the door. Anything else and you’re doubling my pay.” Chanyeol said as he followed the man who responded with the same cold silence as they approached the toilet door.

Five minutes passed. During that time, Chanyeol had figured out a number of things. The first was that he was definitely in a gay bar—judged mainly from the lack of women and from the fact that he appeared to have attracted more attention in this bar than any other one he’d been to—and secondly, whatever sexual altercation was going on behind him, it was most likely not going well.

Behind the harsh beats of the club music, there was the sound of shouting—and then occasionally, there would be a clatter.

He had resisted reacting until five minutes passed. Just so he could make sure that the Lockerman couldn’t come back and scold him after. The moment the allocated time passed, Chanyeol didn’t hesitate because once he made a decision, he rarely backed out of it. He slipped inside the toilet door, cautious, not certain about what exactly he would walk into, only to realise that he hadn’t wandered into some lover’s quarrel—but a full on fight.
The guy was a good five inches taller and 25kg heavier than the Lockerman. It would be fair to say that this contrast paid off with the Lockerman looking particularly dazed as he was punched square in the jaw. There was blood on the white toilet walls. Probably his.

Needy for and ruled by adrenaline, Chanyeol’s response to the fight was lightning fast. For him, it was like a switch-- there were guys fighting? Sign me the hell up. “H--Hey!” he lunged towards the stranger, managing to grab tightly onto his shirt collar and smack him right against the nearest wall, using his weight to pivot onto the opposing foot. And then with zero -- almost subzero thought, Chanyeol struck the stranger with a direct jab to the jaw, fully intending to break something.

The stranger wasn’t going to stand for it. After a cry of pain, he kicked out with his legs and aimed for Chanyeol’s head as the taller man stumbled backwards, betrayed by his own balance. Fortunately Chanyeol recovered fast and pushed back, shoving the other strongly back to the wall as he prepared for another killer punch -- one that would’ve certainly sent a few childhood memories a brain layer or two back -- but he was stopped.

“E--Enough!”

The Lockerman was behind him, one hand caressing his nose with a bloody hand as he pulled him away and then patted the stranger gently on the chest. “Enough,” he muttered, allowing the taller man to relax, his body sliding down the wall -- lower -- lower -- until --

Chanyeol’s eyes bulged wide as the Lockerman delivered a crosspunch -- probably to the strength level of his own killer hit -- right between the man’s eyes. And another-- another-- and then a final one as if to make sure that the message was loud and clear, whatever it was. The stranger ended the night with his face drooping down until it was pressed against the dirty bottom of a urinal.

One final look was all that Chanyeol spared the stranger again. After that, his attention became completely gripped by the Lockerman. When the Lockerman asked for Chanyeol’s jacket - he gave it to him. When he asked for Chanyeol to help him find his broken glasses, he scampered around the floor looking for it. And finally, when the Lockerman asked for him to stay with the half-dead body until some man in a red sequinned jacket came for him, he did.

It was all a little too fast and furious. Chanyeol was beginning to wonder which new American HBO drama he’d wandered into.

Still a little dazed, Chanyeol finished his list of tasks and emerged into the cold of the night, ears still buzzing from the club music. He walked across the alley, rubbing his shoulders together for warmth, before pausing as he realised that there was someone leaning on the hood of his car.

“Here’s your jacket.”

The clothing was tossed. The Lockerman had a jacket now. Camel brown. Chanyeol was beginning to sense a pattern.
“Thanks.” His eyes assessed the state of the other. He was holding a towel to his nose. Against the street light, the bruises on his knuckles were glowing. If he’d been speaking to anyone that was normal, and not at all associated with the brutal reality of being a lawless criminal in their city, Chanyeol probably would’ve offered to take them to a hospital— or at least showed some level of human-appropriate concern.

But Chanyeol knew better. And frankly, he didn’t care. He had seen worse and he wasn’t a mom.

“Need a ride home?” was the offer instead.

“So you admit it, you were tailing me.”

Chanyeol shrugged his shoulders coldly, pulling his car door open and gesturing for the other to submit.

“No, thanks.” The Lockerman dismissed— sounding comparably more polite now than when they had first started talking, “I’ll be fine.”

There was a part of Chanyeol that was disappointed. He supposed he rarely offered nice things to people -- and this was a pleasant reminder as to why. Although, it had to be said that the Lockerman wasn’t exactly people. People comprised faceless neighbours, guys and girls you happened to be sat on a train with, and the cold-callers he tried to flirt with on Junmyeon’s phone. The Lockerman wasn’t… people. It was too bland and general of a word, especially after seeing what he’d seen tonight.

Unfortunately Chanyeol’s vocab was on the weaker side. He could describe it physically though. What was a person to you if they made your heart race like a jacked engine? If seeing them punch a guy’s lights out made your blood hot in a good way?

“Oh, before you go.” He peered into Chanyeol’s open window, “I’ll approve your request. Just get another form and take it to me tomorrow.”

Fuck. Chanyeol had forgotten about that stupid form. In fact, he felt like he’d forgotten about a lot of things. What was the time? Would they worry at home if he hadn’t contacted them for more than a few hours? Did he have dinner already? Was he even hungry?

His play with the Lockerman had sucked up his entire damn day and he hadn’t even noticed.

Running a hand through his hair in frustration, Chanyeol managed a quick, “Thanks. I will,” before offering the man in the alley a lazy salute and driving off into the night.

He was first in line at the post office the next morning. With sunglasses over his tired bloodshot eyes, Chanyeol approached counter seven, having filled out the form under his supervisor’s guidance. The fact that he’d succeeded had surprised everyone at his house. ‘We thought seeing your ugly mug would guarantee that he’d reject us for sure,’ Junmyeon had hollered in his ear-- half-cackling. Of course this made Chanyeol self-conscious.
Hence the sunglasses, and the washed clothes and the extra long shower.

“Good morning sir, how can I help you.”

Chanyeol looked up into the Lockerman’s face. Any sign that he had spent his previous evening beating the shit out of some guy was absent. Parting from a slight bruise on the bridge of his nose, he looked as perfectly ordinary as he did yesterday. He was wearing the glasses, the same camel brown suit that looked slightly bunched up in the shoulders. And once again, Chanyeol was staring, but now in genuine belief that underneath all this -- normalcy and nice office guy facade was the six foot thug he’d come to expect from a criminal of his calibre.

“Uh, I have a form.”

He slid the form towards him again. This time, there was no snarky response. Chanyeol took a conscious step back as the glass between them was lifted and a package was slid across.

“Thank you. Would you like a print-out receipt?”

“Uh, yeah?” Chanyeol managed, glancing at the box in his hand, feeling the undeniable need to shake it.

“Here you go. Enjoy your day.”

The receipt was printed and taken. Before Chanyeol could even attempt to say another word-- the button was pressed and the tiny red light above him shone green. He walked away, feeling admonished and a little empty-handed. Chewing on his gum, which he suddenly felt the need to spit out, he was about to bin the receipt when he noticed that there was scribbling on the paper.

_Drink? Thursday._

It was fucking _pathetic_ how widely Chanyeol smiled -- so pathetic that he was certain he would’ve drop kicked himself if it was possible because there was no place for that kind of response in his mess of a headspace. It would suggest that he had wanted to be asked out which wasn’t true. He was Park Chanyeol. He was just asked; he didn’t _need_ to want to be asked. Privately, he looked at the paper again, then glanced back, as if half-expecting the Lockerman to be behind him, drink-in-hand, demanding an immediate answer.

And there was only one answer.

Pathetic, yeah but it was the only one.

Another Thursday came around. It came fast because Chanyeol had been counting sleeps. Once
again, he found himself at the same bar, playing the same club music, chest being unnecessarily touched up by the same patrons, and then posted at the same stool beside the same man in the same crisp white shirt and navy trousers.

“So,” Chanyeol’s eyes flicked downwards at the drink in the young man’s hand, “You planning on knocking the lights out of someone else tonight, or?”

“No,” the other man answered, before taking something from his back pocket and offering Chanyeol a white envelope, “You said I’d have to double your pay if you did anything else. So there you go.”

The envelope was about as blank as Chanyeol felt. He took it and then took the drink in the man’s hand and gulped it down with no shame. Again, he was surprised by the fact that it tasted so dire, but was he surprised? This man was about as unpredictable as Chanyeol’s 10-year old lazy ass of a washing machine. Sometimes it rinsed, sometimes it didn’t. Sometimes clothes smelled nice, sometimes it refused and his cardigans still ended up smelling faintly of sweat and blood. But he liked it that way. Sentimentality was a sucker but he would cling on to any residues of it that he had left.


Chanyeol grew even more irritated now that it was pointed out. “Nothing.” He sighed, rubbing his temple with a hand as he left his stool, thanking the barkeep with a stray finger, “Thanks for this, anyway. See you.”

And then another question. This time, the Lockerman was smug and Chanyeol was left with no choice but to become overwhelmed with a supreme level of pissed-offness that he wasn’t aware he could reach whilst sober.

“You have the easiest eyes I’ve ever had to read.” Smugness was dripping from him-- pooling on the floor and people were splashing around it, pulling Chanyeol in, “If you want to hook up, just ask.”

“Fuck off.”

This was Chanyeol’s automatic response to anything threatening and this was pretty damn close to that. He was obviously embarrassed too -- which made him look a million times guiltier.

The other man was unbothered as he shrugged, his drink full before Chanyeol had even spied the bartender approach him. His gaze was weighty and Chanyeol hadn’t even noticed it. It was mighty intense and loud -- like it carried a message but how could it? Eyes couldn’t speak. But his eyes did. And clearly, Chanyeol’s did too, he just didn’t know how to shut them up. He had to keep it together. He had done his very best already to avoid the play. The Lockerman’s play.

But that didn’t mean that the game wasn’t tempting.

But still, he wasn’t that guy.

“Fuck off,” Chanyeol repeated, desperate to make a scene but reluctant to part with the money he’d earned, “Go fuck someone at the post office.”

And he walked, because he wanted to. And then he went home and watched a film with Junmyeon.
Well. Now that was the ending Chanyeol would’ve liked. In his head, he had imagined throwing that final word and then driving home and drilling a mental note into his annoying ass brain to never run into the biggest asshole in the history of post offices ever again. But of course, as with most things in his life, the tide worked the opposite way to the initial direction he’d wanted.

After his spell of anger, and after further spells of cuss words, he found himself back at the bar, throwing his disgust and his spiel at a closer proximity. He wanted the smugness to disappear. It was so ugly-- he hated it. No, he hated being at the mercy of the smugness, as if he had something on Chanyeol when he didn’t. He talked and talked, knowing very well that most of his words were being drowned by the music which only got louder as time went on.

“If you don’t want to hook up, then why are you still talking to me?” The other man asked, amused as he smiled, downing another glass.

“Because…”

It would be important to note that at this point that Chanyeol had started to take drinks again. The gasoline drinks-- which were with slow intensity, beginning to grow on him. Although becoming more and more drunk on the stuff, probably made that tolerance happen much quicker too.

“Because, I want you to know, asshole. I don’t care who... you are. You don’t mean shit to me. You’re not even my type. Nope. I like sexy people. Not.”

Chanyeol poked at the other man’s undone button.

“Post office workers.”

“Message received.”

Money was slapped on the counter. The Lockerman offered a rather dizzy Chanyeol a squeeze on the shoulder.

“Get home safe.”

“I will. Goodbye.”

And then he went home and watched a film with Junmyeon.

Now that. That would’ve been an okay secondary ending.
But that didn’t happen either. What happened was the inevitable, which was that they hooked up. Chanyeol, in his drunken and horny stupor, only really realised the full impact of his poor decision after hitting his head hard against the roof of his car, as the Lockerman rode him frantically until his climax. He groaned loudly in pain, having reached his own completion moments before the other. It was sweaty and horrible and he didn’t enjoy it at all. It was worse after, when the drop from the momentary high came and he truly realised that there was no coming back from this. He really went there. After spending at least an hour listing the detailed reasons of why he would never, ever let a four-eyed postal worker near his crotch - here, he fucking was.

“Please tell me your name at least.” Chanyeol whined, in pain-- in genuine pain, both from embarrassment but also from the fact that his car was way too small for any type of sexual activity and his folded limbs had all cramped up. This was a lesson he should’ve learned by now. Car sex; only good in movies. The reality was not worth the clean-up.

“It’s Kyungsoo.” He revealed as he finally, awkwardly climbed off him, cleaning Chanyeol off non-committally with -- well, of course, Chanyeol’s shirt.

“Is that your real name?”

“What is this?” Kyungsoo tilted his head coolly, “Do you want to meet my pimp as well?”

The smugness was back. He was fully clothed now and Chanyeol was still cold and naked in his own car. The young man groaned again, feeling like he was suddenly stone cold sober. The embarrassment he felt was suddenly a good of a fix for it as any home remedy.

“God, you’re an asshole.”

“Whatever.” Kyungsoo ran his hand through his hair, before reaching for his phone and then stepping out of the car, “See you sometime then.”

Chanyeol, still half-struggling to get his pants on, laughed loudly and bitterly.

“I’m never going to see you again, four-eyes. Get the hell out of my sight.”

Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Why did he even say those things when it was so obvious that they were going to be lies? When he knew damn well that Kyungsoo was going to mimic them with his tongue in his mouth only a week later?

The truth was as follows: Chanyeol met Kyungsoo every week on Thursdays at the same bar for two months. And they hooked up every damn time. And every time, the ridiculously theatrical foreplay where they would pretend not to be into it grew progressively shorter until by the final Thursday, their last official hook-up-date, they didn’t even make it into the bar.

And at some point, too, well. Chanyeol stopped saying that he wanted to punch Kyungsoo’s smuggy little face afterwards and settled instead for a thanks and good work!

Progress.
PRESENT DAY

“Shit, weren’t you guys a thing? Don’t you remember? You were in love with him or something. Don’t you try and deny this. I remember it, five years ago - you were crying on my doorstep like some little kid, asking for me to let you know when he comes back. Well guess what, the day has come! The day for your reunion has come!”

Kyungsoo was here.

Chanyeol was torn between throwing up or driving straight into the tree with every intent of blacking out and forgetting Jongin’s call ever happened.

Because he knew exactly what he was going to do and his past self, of five years ago, was going to hate him so much for it.

“Alright, alright,” he swallowed slightly, as he scrambled to restart his engine, “Where is he then? Where can I meet you?”

“Police station. Make sure you shower first yeah? And if you got a nice suit, wear it.”

“Okay, okay.”

“Oh, and Chanyeol?”

“Yeah.”

“Try and keep it together, okay? No crying. It’s just sad, bro. This is Kyungsoo we’re talking about.”

“Go fuck yourself, Jongin.” Chanyeol muttered, hearing the final throes of laughter as he ended the call and threw the phone away to the side.

Then he reached home and decided not to go. He had his shower, slept for an hour or so as planned and picked up Hyewon from dance recital on time and forgot about Jongin and Kyungsoo completely. He then settled into his couch, called up Junmyeon and they watched a film just like old times.

But we knew Chanyeol better than that.

And he did too.

And a little part of him wondered if he still knew Kyungsoo as well now too.
forever isn't for everyone; is forever for you?

Chapter Summary

-- i wanna grab both your shoulders and shake baby
snap out of it (snap out of it)
i get the feeling i left it too late, but baby--

-- snap out of it, arctic monkeys

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

-//-

PRESENT DAY

-//-

How does one greet one’s ex’s lawyer?

In the end Chanyeol had no need to contemplate the dilemma because Jongin appeared shortly after he arrived and parked helpfully across his car by the station. His suit was flashy and expensive -- just the sort that Chanyeol had expected lawyers to wear but his hair was curled and coiffed, which rounded off a look that was more fitting to a middle-class awards ceremony for the City’s Best Real Estate Agent than rescuing a client from potential incarceration.

He then pulled Chanyeol into a surprise embrace.

Considering that they hadn’t seen each other in five years and barely knew each other even then, Chanyeol was left to contemplate whether this was some power move he should be wary of.

“Sorry, bro. I had to hug you.” Jongin murmured after patting his back a couple of times, “You looked so sad just now. Like one of those stray dogs they always want you to sponsor on daytime TV. You know what I mean right?”

The taller man blinked. “Yeah?”

“Hm.” The lawyer stepped back and eyed him-- shoes first, then a leisurely ascent to the top of his head. Good thing Chanyeol showered as such, then he didn’t feel so lacking in comparison to his get-up. “You don’t look half bad you know. You probably don’t get dressed up much in your job as a…. a… what was it again?”

Jongin had now moved back to his car. New sports car. A yellow lambo. Still had the new car smell with the scissor doors that opened upwards. He thrust a box of folders in Chanyeol’s arms as he carried a briefcase and a sleek rolling suitcase the size of Hyewon’s backpack.

“I run my own security firm.” Chanyeol muttered, unable to keep his eyes away from the vehicle.

“Oh yeah?” Jongin closed the doors and flashed him a perfect 10/10 smile - “Smart guy. Play to your
strengths. Good for you. Wait-- since you’re so smart, why the hell did you end up with Kyungsoo?”

His expression scrunched up into one of genuine curiosity, “Not saying everyone’s a 10 in your line of work but you know. There’s way more… stable fish in the polluted sea we fish in, you catch my drift?”

“Well, that’s in the… past.” Chanyeol answered, still awkward about answering questions about Kyungsoo. Unhelpful really. “We’re obviously not together now.”

“Point taken.” Jongin flashed him a wink, “Don’t want a repeat of the past yeah. Remember the rules. If you’re under him, you ain’t getting over him. Don’t get sucked back in, Chanyeol. Don’t let him bone you back into that place.” He poked a finger at Chanyeol’s chest firmly, “Don’t give second chances where they’re not deserved, got it?”

Honestly. Chanyeol had no fucking idea what this guy was saying.

All he wanted now to see was Kyungsoo. And the more they talked about him, the stronger the need became. That was the problem with Chanyeol. He was a naturally edgy person; once something was in his system, he had to flush it out otherwise it would drive him crazy.

“All right, let’s get that madman out of there.” Jongin stretched his neck, did a few skittery jumps on his loafers, and adjusted his tie with long elegant fingers as they entered the station together.

It wouldn’t take long for Chanyeol to realize why Jongin was the undisputed king of the underworld; and why he needed a suit that looked like it cost a mortgage. The truth was that image was a currency for power in their line of work, and if he wanted power, then he had to walk through the police station like the shiny floor tiles themselves should feel honored that he had chosen to walk his fine shoes on them. And seeing how irate the policemen became only added to the enticing aura he carried and dragged along with him like a shadow. Weakness? Humility? Kim Jongin Esq. could not relate. He was rich, sexier than any lawyer anyone had ever seen, and everyone who saw him either had to be putty in his hands or be a chump. Match that with a brain that got him to the top of his year and he was borderline unstoppable.

“Hey Jen. How are you?”

“Jongin!” The woman behind the main desk grinned widely, “Gosh, I haven’t seen you here in a while.” Jongin didn’t take little fish cases. This was why he rarely visited the diminutive HQ of state police. He may have in his early days post-university, poor and living on coffee and crackers. But he was playing ball with the big boys now and they didn’t even know what a police station looked like let alone the address to prison.

“I should say the same about you, Jen. How much did you lose since I last saw you? Ten pounds?”

“You’re the devil, you are.”

All his conversations all the way up to the interrogation rooms went along the same way. Halfway-flirty but cleverly personal. He knew anyone and everyone and even if he didn’t, it felt like he did because of the way he looked at you like an old friend. It was funny how much about being a successful criminal depended on how well you could read people. Read a weakness; know the pressure points; and you’re on your way to figuring out how to extort someone out of something you want. Admittedly, Chanyeol didn’t work that way. In his past, he only focused on the pressure points.
that mattered: human organs and their subsequent accessories. Mind games weren’t his thing. This was probably why he found the strength to leave it. He didn’t enjoy living in hell. Not as much as people like Jongin did. Mind Games was the honey that got people like him hooked.

Their last port of call before the awaited reunion were the police officers tasked with Kyungsoo’s case. Having seen the expression on their faces, Chanyeol already predicted that they’d had a taste of how much of a pain in the ass Kyungsoo could be. He presumed that this was going to be a tough one and stayed behind Jongin, happy to let him do the talking.

He hated cops anyway. They had a vibe.

“Excuse me, I’m Do Kyungsoo’s legal representative. I am going to see my client.”

“Ah,” The cop with a twitchy eye greeted them with a look so sour, Chanyeol cringed, “so you’re the great lawyer we’ve all been dying to meet.”

“Kim Jongin.” No hand was extended. “Now, can I see my client? Otherwise, I will be sending my documentation for unlawful arrest straight to the judge.” He held up his smartphone where an email was ready on the screen, “And we can delay this shitshow more, because I will do it. I’m getting paid by the syllable.”

The sourness, alongside the rest of their expressions, drained away.

Check mate.

“He can’t come in.” The second cop barked, gesturing at Chanyeol who bit back a retort.

Jongin glanced back, smiled at Chanyeol, before offering the set of cops a short chuckle.

“He’s my clerk. Just got back from his four-year gap year from the Maldives.” Then he clicked his fingers as he strolled to the door, and pulled it open with a single hand, “His dad’s in the Supreme Court so I dare you to touch him.”

It was an art. How easily he could pull bullshit out of his mouth like a magician with the never ending hanky trick.

Concealing a smirk by lifting the boxes to cover his mouth, Chanyeol followed Jongin into the room.

Now, all that was well and good, but nothing would beat the drama of Chanyeol seeing Kyungsoo for the first time.

The only way to describe it was that it was on par with the intensity of a South-American telenovela scene whereby Protagonist B had been pretending to be dead for fifteen years and returned on the eve of Protagonist A’s wedding to disturb proceedings and send everyone into a chaotic and hysterical meltdown.

At least. Chanyeol felt like that. Why? Because he hadn’t prepared his brain enough. It was almost as if Chanyeol had expected some other Kyungsoo to be sat inside the dark room-- not the one he
knew, not the one that broke his heart and left him emotionally clobbered five years ago. But it was him. There was no doubt because he looked exactly the same. Compared to Chanyeol who was certain that he’d wrinkled up from the stress of taking care of Hyewon 24/7 and running a security firm that had a primary customer base of paranoid elderly people, Kyungsoo was a vision of consistency.

Except the glasses. He didn’t have his glasses on.

And this focus went both ways. Kyungsoo didn’t even notice Jongin walk in the room, having had his eyes drawn entirely to the slightly taller man who walked in behind him.

“Kyungsoo, my love. What an unfortunate…” He gestured for Chanyeol to close the door, as he tapped the cameras, and ensured everything was off, before continuing, “Shitstorm. What the hell is this? What were you thinking?”

“I told you,” Kyungsoo spoke calmly, eyes still trained on Chanyeol, “It wasn’t my operation.”

“They’re the state-fucking-jewels. You can’t just steal that shit. That’s got consequences especially now. And yeah, I know it’s not you. But someone out there clearly thinks it’s you, or at least wants it to be you-- hey, hey!” He snapped his fingers, having noticed the wordless interaction between them, “Stop eye-fucking and listen to me here. We’re in deep trouble. If you can’t prove that you don’t have that diamond then they’re going to make your life a living hell. Get me? Everything… poof.”

Jongin paused his rant then, eyes narrowing again.

“Now, okay. What the fuck is this,” He walked across the table and tapped Kyungsoo’s cheek which was flushed red, “Did they hit you? How hard? I’ll take a picture.”

“What are you doing here, Chanyeol?”

It was clear that Kyungsoo had stopped listening too. Mind twins.

Unfortunately, Chanyeol himself couldn’t speak. It was like someone took his voice box and ran away. Probably for the best. He was lowkey scared about what he could say considering all that he could say. There was so much he wanted to say. Oh, so much.

“Didn’t you hear? Cutie pie here is my new clerk.” Jongin cooed.

“Yeah? You went to law school?” Kyungsoo smiled thinly, “That surprises me.”

“Shutup!” Chanyeol barked before he’d even realised what he’d said as he finally looked away, glancing instead at Jongin who was taking flash photos of Kyungsoo’s bruise.

Not the most eloquent greeting when meeting one’s ex for the first time in five years but Chanyeol was certain that he could’ve been way more colorful if he’d wanted.

“Everybody chillax. Let’s get out of here before they find any more reason to keep you. Have you got some place to stay? You need to sleep and eat well today.” Jongin looked somewhat more genuine as he ‘tsk’d and began patting Kyungsoo’s shoulder lightly, “A hundred percent, they’ve bugged everything you’ve touched the past twenty four hours. Down to the subway toilet you pissed in on the way to work. Got anywhere you can go?”

Kyungsoo sighed deeply, rubbing his eyes as he murmured, something non-committal like ‘Maybe…’
“I got a place.” Chanyeol blurted out, catching their gazes as he continued, “I mean, it’s the place. Remember? That place.”

He had wanted to say ‘our place’ but that was too burdensome. It sounded like what married people said about the place they first got to third base in.

Kyungsoo’s face was deceptively blank. Jongin considered it before waving his hand in dismissal.

“Look, whatever. Don’t care. You okay with that Kyungsoo? I need to stay here and sort your bail hearing because they are going to charge you with anything at this point if it means they can keep you here. So go-- oh, oh wait.” Jongin patted his pockets and then produced a glasses case. “Before I forget.”

Light entered Kyungsoo’s eyes as he was finally returned his sight.

Chanyeol’s heart squeezed. It was like the final piece of the puzzle. Yep; definitely that Kyungsoo.

“I run surveillance sweeps all the time,” Chanyeol continued, exhaling deeply as he stepped towards the door, “The cops won’t find us.”

“Okay.” Kyungsoo finally answered.

“All the stuff you asked for is in the briefcase by the way.” Jongin called out, gesturing for the case and waiting for Kyungsoo to retrieve it as he waved them away again.

The door was opened and Jongin called out one final time.

“Hey Chanyeol?”

“Yeah.”

“Remember what I said bro. Remember the rules, yeah?”

What rules? Oh yeah.

Something about not boning Kyungsoo.

They remained committed to silence until they finally reached Chanyeol’s car. Admittedly, it was a little awkward to Chanyeol, showing now that he was still driving his beloved Turbo after all these years. At least it was a little better looking because he had money now to actually maintain it properly. It was even more awkward because if they were being quiet in an attempt to try and deviate from memory lane, it was probably now going to be extra hard considering how many memories they had forged in this car. Not all were particularly PG.

Kyungsoo said nothing to suggest he was nostalgic. He simply slipped into the passenger seat.

It was there that Chanyeol finally heard his phone ringing and he found himself faced with the prospect of ten missed calls.

Biggest and loudest ‘fuck me!’ of the day went to this moment.
“Oh, hey? Little steps?” The car was started as he frantically dialled the number, “What do you… oh, okay. Oh that’s great. Sorry about that. I had-- yeah okay.”


“Yixing? Hey? Hey? Oh my god, you’re such-- thanks so much for picking her up. Do you know how much I fucking love you? Lifesaver. Ah, time just got away from me. Yeah, I’ve been super stressed at work, yeah, yeah. Sure, that would be even better. She’ll really love that. Right, right. Okay. Hey, hey Hyewon?”

“Don’t talk to me.”

“I deserved that. I love you. I’ll see you tomorrow. Stay with Uncle Yixing tonight, yeah? Be good!”

She hung up.

Brat. But he did feel slightly guilty for leaving her.

It was only when Chanyeol lowered the phone, and he found himself consciously hitting his head against the steering wheel, that he remembered that Kyungsoo was still with him.

“Sorry about that.” He mumbled, reversing away from the parking lot, “Family stuff.”

“You got a family now?”

Chanyeol resisted snorting as he humored him. “Yup.” He nodded, almost challenging, “I’m in a stable four year relationship with a doctor. His name’s Yixing. We have a daughter. Three bedroomed house in the West. Got a dog. The spotty one like in the movie? Yeah, that’s my life now. Park Chanyeol. Family man.”

“Congratulations.” Kyungsoo offered before smiling and laughing loudly.

“Fuck off,” Chanyeol mumbled as he followed suit, laughing, “What gave me away?”

“The word stable.” Kyungsoo smiled, pursing his lips as he looked at him, “People with stable lives don’t need to say that they’re stable. Maybe the rest I could believe.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” Kyungsoo then laid a finger on the post-it note which was pressed against the car dashboard. It was Chanyeol’s daily must-do- to-do list, the list designed to be relevant for eternity which was why it was neatly taped to his dashboard:

Pick up Hyewon /Take meds/ Stop saying the F word.

“I’d have believed you, if you weren’t here with me now.” Kyungsoo added, leaning his arm against the car window, eyes following the cars they were passing.

“Well, this doesn’t mean anything.” Chanyeol responded, as he lowered the volume of the radio, “In fact, I’m driving you to the place where I subsequently plan to kill you.”

Kyungsoo smiled. “Now that I believe.”
That was it. The first reference to the mess of five years ago. It was like the initial pierce; first drop of blood. It hurt like that too.

“I’m not going to kill you asshole.” Chanyeol finally muttered, keen to bury it. They could talk about it another time.

Maybe never. He wasn’t sure yet.

“Why not?” Kyungsoo asked, arching an eyebrow, “I deserve it.”

“Yeah, you really do.” Chanyeol wasn’t sure if Kyungsoo was trying to make him angry-- but it was working. Just a little more and then that initial stab could twist deeper. Then they could talk business. “You deserve it, Kyungsoo.”

“Then why are you here?”

Kyungsoo had asked the question as he’d rummaged in the glovebox and found Chanyeol’s gum stash, kept exactly where it had always been. He was now chewing on a mint stick-- slow and thoughtful.

“Because.” Chanyeol watched the slow motions of his mouth and swallowed thickly - “Because.”

Fun fact: Chanyeol used to keep his gum stash right next to the condoms and lube in the glovebox. His neat trio of necessities. But that ride or die life was gone now. Since adopting Hyewon, he had practically been celibate. Nothing killed sex-appeal more than a kid who would happily scream about how much she hated you to any random stranger on the street.

This lack of intimate activity was probably the cause of why Chanyeol was so strangely seduced by this mundane scenario. Definitely not because it was Kyungsoo.

Could’ve been anyone.

“Red light.” Kyungsoo said simply as Chanyeol halted, swearing loudly as the drivers behind them responded with an array of various pitched car horns.

-//-

FIVE YEARS AGO

-//-

Hook-ups with Kyungsoo must be the best in the world. He was at least an 8 on the scale of attractiveness, rich, quiet-in-bed -- left early, meaning no weird small-talk, and best of all? They hooked up in nice hotels with soft sheets and carpets that felt warm like puppy fur. Chanyeol became pretty content to take what he got from this pretty fast and that was sex, a night away from his deadbeat crime family, and an empty hotel room in the morning where he could watch movies tucked in a nice duvet until he was kicked out by the maid at ten.

He was already on the final Lord of The Rings movie. What a classic.
All good things had an end though and theirs came when Chanyeol attended the bar one Thursday and failed to find Kyungsoo there. He didn’t worry. At least not until the next week when he wasn’t there again. Now, in retrospect, the fact that he actually cared that Kyungsoo wasn’t there should’ve sparked an alarm system in Chanyeol’s head but it didn’t. Instead, in between jobs on the Friday, Chanyeol attended to the post office and found himself faced with counter seven and an impostor.

“Uh. Is Kyungsoo around?” He asked awkwardly, not expecting to face a woman at counter seven.

To his surprise, he was directed to the staff bathroom where the woman quietly urged for Chanyeol to take Kyungsoo home as he had been unwell all morning. Clearly, she had thought he was his--significant other or something. Honest mistake. Chanyeol looked like he was someone’s boyfriend.

“Hey,” he knocked lightly on the door, “Kyungsoo? You okay? It’s me. I-- I just thought I’d check on you. They said you were…”

The door’s lock was lifted. It swung open and Chanyeol stepped inside. The sight across him was of a particularly grey and beaten looking Kyungsoo with his head against the toilet wall. The place reeked of sick and he was clutching his stomach, in obvious pain.

Chanyeol wasn’t sure what to make of it and after receiving no explanation eventually spoke up.

“All right. I’ve been here before.” He pocketed his hands and sighed loudly, “How far along are you? I’m presuming it’s mine.”

Kyungsoo laughed loudly, throat croaked, as Chanyeol smiled and subsequently offered him a hand. He pulled him up easily. The smaller man’s legs were considerably wobbly and so Chanyeol held him in his arms, providing stable support as he wrapped his left arm around him, only to stop as Kyungsoo winced softly in pain -

“Ah, not there.”

“Ah, okay, okay.” Chanyeol narrowed his eyes, before casting a look out the door, “Want me to take you home? You look like shit. Can’t stay here.”

“Can’t.” Kyungsoo’s face was pressed into his chest. “Can’t go there.”

“Okay.” Chanyeol blinked, “I’ll take you to…. well come on.”

Kyungsoo didn’t respond. The fact that he didn’t respond suggested some level of -- trust -- which again should’ve struck Chanyeol hard against the face and scolded him. Signs like this should’ve been adding up, yelling, smashing pots and pans in his head: *Don’t do this! He’s going to rip you apart!* and maybe it had but Chanyeol had clearly ignored it, too occupied with making sure he brought the man in his arms somewhere safe.

The safe place which Chanyeol took Kyungsoo to wasn’t exactly *home*. Home was with his team--with Junmyeon his roommate and their empty fridge that smelled of old pickle. This was comparably more personal because this was Chanyeol’s personal home. A home he made. It was in a garage, one
of thousands by the dock of the city. He had bought himself one to park his granddad’s old caravan and after getting a good deal on a particularly large space, he decided to make something out of it. A den of sorts. A hide-out.

It was a perfect place because it was nearly always empty - there were no neighbours - and the garage yard was so ridiculously confusing to navigate that nobody would ever be able to locate it unless they were ballsy and stalked him.

Inside the caravan, there was a diminutive living space. But most importantly, there was a bed. Chanyeol rarely stayed there because he liked living with a roommate. The place itself was too quiet but it was useful for things like this. And it was first properly used that day, when Kyungsoo had needed a place to stay.

After preparing it for him, Kyungsoo lay curled on the bed, eyes closed.

“Here you go.” Throwing the sheet over him, Chanyeol blanched as the sheet then covered his head, the man now resembling a newly pronounced dead corpse. “Oops.” He reached forwards, pulling it down from Kyungsoo’s head and blinked dumbly at the sight of his sleeping face.

Now he realised that he hadn’t actually seen Kyungsoo sleeping before. He always left before Chanyeol woke up-- and slept later than he did because he took ridiculously long showers after hooking up. From here, he looked almost-- like he wasn’t a top-tier criminal that everyone lowkey feared. He looked normal. Just another sleepy guy.

“If you touch me whilst I’m sleeping, I’ll kill you.”

Kyungsoo’s words came out as a sleepy mumble.

Chanyeol rolled his eyes instantly as he stood back up and cleared his throat. “Yeah. Whatever. Sleep well -- or don’t. Don’t care.”

Later on, Chanyeol would discover that Kyungsoo’s sickness was due to a rather violent reaction to a painkiller he had been prescribed after a surgical procedure. His guess was kidneys. Whether he’d donated a kidney, or they had somehow been taken out of him, he would never know. All he knew was that Kyungsoo was exhausted and therefore slept non-stop for fifteen hours. When he woke up, he was so groggy that he almost chokeslammed Chanyeol onto the floor, having not recognised him without his glasses.

“Here. For fuck’s sake.” Chanyeol whined, smoothing his throat, as he placed Kyungsoo’s glasses back over his nose. “Better?” he asked then, narrowing his eyes to match how intensely Kyungsoo was staring back at him.

“How long was I out?”

“Almost sixteen hours. It’s seven am.”
Chanyeol moved to take the initial sip of his coffee and then offered it to him, as good hosts would.

“Want some?”

“No,” Kyungsoo blinked, still half-awake as he then said, “Do you know Mr. Feng’s in ChinaTown?”

“Hmm. Dumpling place.”

Kyungsoo was straight faced as he then said a simple.

“That’s what I want.”

Any other person would’ve recognised that doing stuff like housing an injured guy-- shuttling himself across town to buy him dumplings from a specific dumpling place -- would’ve constituted as behaviour that was beyond the realms of a hook-up partner. But Chanyeol, whose only taste of real life relationships came from the fictional ones he’d seen on television, remained completely clueless.

He drove to Mr Feng’s, picked up Kyungsoo’s exact order, came back and watched him eat it, never once pondering to kick the guy out even if beneath it, he did feel annoyed that he was doing chores again.

“Thanks.” Kyungsoo looked across, round cheeks full of food, “I owe you.”

“Yeah, you do.” Chanyeol mumbled, recalling how he’d unceremoniously cancelled on his and Junmyeon’s game night just so he could be here -- “What happened then? You going to say?”

The silence suggested that this wasn’t going to be shared. See, at least Kyungsoo knew boundaries.

He wouldn’t stay longer than midday on the same day. When the next Thursday came around, Chanyeol risked coming to the bar and this time Kyungsoo was well-recovered and had a package for him. It was supposed to be a thank-you present. Chanyeol had expected something grand, considering he’d seen the flashiness of Kyungsoo’s wallet. What he received was a painting-- to decorate the garage because Kyungsoo had noticed how empty it was.

“It’s Botticelli.” Kyungsoo said as they sat on the end of the bed and observed the wall across them where they had hung it together, “Apparently, it’s related to his The Abyss of Hell. This piece. It’s focused on depicting the idea that heaven and hell are the same place depending on where you look.”


“I like it,” he said eventually, because what else was he going to say?

“Really?” Kyungsoo blinked, having sensed the other’s initial reaction which had been negative, “I can always get you something else… like a gift card?”

Chanyeol laughed loudly, looking down at where Kyungsoo was smiling, clearly delighted with his
attempt at ordinary-people humor. He wasn’t sure what came over him at that specific second but he found himself taking Kyungsoo’s face into his hands and kissing him deeply. It was the first real kiss they had ever really shared, definitely the first sober one, but Chanyeol forgot all about that.

He reckoned that the painting must have messed with him - because he found this shit cute. Giving each other stuff. Kinda adorable.

“You shouldn’t really waste this stuff on me,” Chanyeol mouthed against his lips, “Save it for the others.”

“There aren’t others.” Kyungsoo murmured, holding tightly to his shirt collar, as Chanyeol climbed over him, “Just you.”

Ugh.

In hindsight, Chanyeol should’ve been cleverer. He should’ve called Kyungsoo’s words a bluff because they were criminals and they lied shamelessly for a living. In fact, he should’ve lied too-- muttered something about some other guy he was shacking up with. Then he could’ve probably got Kyungsoo to cough up something better than a painting.

But in that distance, with his heartbeat so loud he could feel it in his throat, and his mind so dedicated to Kyungsoo that he was deaf to his own inner voices -- all he had to give was the truth.

And the truth was that for two months, it had only been Kyungsoo for Chanyeol and he never thought about more.

Gross and sad.

Don’t fall in love kids.

-/-/  
**PRESENT DAY**

-/-/  
Kyungsoo stood across the painting. His eyes scanned the frame, smiling lightly at the recognition of how clean and well-kept it was. Chanyeol had been careful with the dusting. He was always so clean.

“You kept the painting?”

“Well yeah.” Chanyeol was arranging the pillows, fluffing them together, “It would be hard to get rid of it. There isn’t exactly a place you can throw away priceless artwork.”

Kyungsoo nodded and then glanced faintly at the bed as he climbed onto it. He curled up, slowly at first then placed his head on the pillow just like old times. A sheet was thrown over him, a little on the thin side but warm enough. He closed his eyes.

“I’ll be out here.” Chanyeol called out, eyes now returning to the painting.

“Ohkay.”
Now alone, Chanyeol was finally free to scream.

What the flying fuck was going on? What? What? What? This morning, he had been eating the same type of wheat cereal, watching the same anchor on the same news channel, moaning over the same electricity bill he had each month -- and now here he was, lazing at his porn den, and Kyungsoo was in his bed? What?

Just to catch himself up because clearly he needed a reminder: Kyungsoo was his hook-up of two months, sorta-boyfriend for at least five months, and then it all ended in a terrible, mind blowing breakup that still gave him stress dreams to this day. This should not be how this story was going. What should’ve happened, if one could reverse the linearity of time, was that he went along with Jongin, all the way up to the interrogation room, then he should’ve dragged the shit out of Kyungsoo and then walked out, glad and content that he finally closed the chapter on the worst period of his life.

He didn’t deserve any of this - because nobody in the world came even marginally close to how much Kyungsoo hurt him.

And yet, there his heartbreaker remained, dozing away in Chanyeol’s caravan. Chanyeol was just about to give his own face a light slap when the phone on the table began to ring. It was the phone which Jongin had given Kyungsoo in the briefcase-- alongside a bunch of folders and a tablet.

Presuming it was Jongin, Chanyeol picked it up.

“Hello?”

There was a pause. “Chanyeol?”

“Yeah, hey Jongin yeah. Kyungsoo’s asleep so I thought I’d pick up.”

“Ah yeah, that’s cool. Just let him know I have him scheduled for his bail hearing tomorrow midday. Tell him to make sure he brings his big boy cheque books as these cops are not going to let him off easy. God, they hate him so much. Apparently he told this one cop that he had a twitchy eye and now it won’t stop twitching…”

Chanyeol began to glance over the folders, as he responded with,

“Sure. Uh, Jongin? Can I ask you something quick?”

“Sure, bro.”

“What the hell is actually going on? Why is Kyungsoo in jail? What did he take?”

There was a sharp inhale behind the line.

“Okay. Let me dilute it down for you…”
The case was as follows: a state visit, of critical national diplomatic importance, was going to occur in a week’s time. Alongside this visit, there were promises and political deals upheld - one of which was the safe return of the lost treasures, including royal jewels, which were stolen and taken by rebels during the war. The jewels were shipped in from the opposing territory two weeks ago at the city port. It was there that the Ocean Diamond was stolen— the most iconic centrepiece of the entire collection. Considering that there had been an exhibition, dinner, charity gala and photo op planned with country leaders around this monumental event, the weight of this crime, context in mind, was beyond anyone’s ability to describe.

Now the city police received a tip that this diamond was in the possession of The Lockerman and with this tip, came a name. Do Kyungsoo. 26. Works as a customer service assistant at the post office on the corner of Cohn Street. The tipper was undoubtedly ballsy for naming Kyungsoo for despite the many years of searching, nobody had ever been brave enough to name him. Why would they? He was one of the main pillars upholding the city's criminal network together. Try and kick him down; there’s a structural earthquake.

But the cops didn’t care about that. They were hungry to prosecute and even hungrier to retrieve the diamond and make sure the diplomatic events happen as planned - so they were happy to charge ahead and pressure The Lockerman. Pressure him with whatever to get him cough up the Ocean Diamond.

Unfortunately, Kyungsoo didn’t have it. He had a lot of other stuff. But he didn’t have that.

“So my guess is someone’s trying to kill him by stabbing his empire straight with a fucking machete. Frame him. Get him to go down. If he can’t get that diamond, he will go down for something and there are people out there who would rather that Kyungsoo died than have him spill anything about what they’ve got hidden out there. So, either way he’s—”

Chanyeol had listened to the entire thing face down on the table. “He’s done.” he murmured, fists balling.

“Yeah. It’s a craptornado. But I’m trying to hold it down my end. Can you make sure he does too?”

Chanyeol was sure that when Jongin said that, he hadn’t meant-- oh can you help Kyungsoo clear his name, find that diamond, and wreck beautiful violent justice on the shithead that did this to him?

But that was exactly what he heard.

Later on, after getting dinner, Chanyeol picked up the file and lightly flipped through. They were mainly newspaper clippings of the state visit, less legal looking files about shipment details and couriers, and then finally --
The Jung Dynasty

The crest of a snake with three heads was printed in black and white. Chanyeol leaned closer, peering at it, sensing a familiarity--

“What are you doing?” Kyungsoo sounded annoyed but he didn’t look it. He was rubbing his bruised cheek.

“Reading.” Chanyeol on the other hand, sounded guilty and looked guiltier.

“That’s not for you.” He then blinked at the yellow bag on the table, “Is that--?”

“Mr Feng’s finest seafood dumplings.”

Chanyeol watched as his dead eyes brightened, moving immediately to the food. Honestly. Kyungsoo was probably the only customer still keeping Mr Feng in business at this point.

“Kyungsoo?” Chanyeol waited until the hot dumpling was in his mouth before speaking, “I want to help you with the diamond case.”

Kyungsoo looked up, cheeks full of hot crab and prawn.

It would be fair to say that Kyungsoo didn’t take the offer well. Next thing Chanyeol knew, he was chasing Kyungsoo down the garage yard, in his socks. The smaller man had picked up his stuff surprisingly fast and was speed-walking away at an even faster pace.

At first, he’d called out Kyungsoo’s name-- tried to pull him back -- tried to reason.

But Chanyeol was tired, he was hungry and he wasn’t in the mood for a fight.

“If you’re ready to stop being a little bitch! I left my address in your phone!”

He screamed out hatefully, before stomping back into his garage and pulling the door down.

-/-

FIVE YEARS AGO

-/-

Hell and heaven were one; depending on where you looked.

Kyungsoo had always liked this painting the best out of all the ones he had been gifted over the years. He wasn’t too artistically minded to fully appreciate the techniques behind it-- but the imagery, the story and the meaning. Nothing else in his collection spoke to him in the way that this one had.
A month had passed since Heon Woo from the Jung Dynasty ambushed him on his way home from work and carved out his left kidney with a surgeon’s scalpel at the back of a dirty stairwell.

He remembered that day as clearly as he remembered most days. And he remembered the day after too; how he’d persevered to go to work after a check-up with his doctor, and how Chanyeol had taken him here for the first time to take care of him.

Hell and heaven were one; and on that day he glimpsed both.

Staring at the painting, the Lockerman placed his phone to his ear and dialled the first number.

“Approve the hit.”

From today however, he would only see one.

The phone line went dead. He heard the garage door open, the harsh scuff of Chanyeol’s boots against the concrete and the clattering as he pulled the caravan door open and poked his head inside. Their eyes met. Chanyeol held out the yellow bag -- dumplings.

He had returned after a bank job. Duration: two hours and fifteen minutes. He sounded tired.

Kyungsoo stepped out of the caravan, glanced at the meal Chanyeol was neatly laying out on the plastic round table he’d bought, and then he hugged him. He smelled like his work van.

“I missed you.”

“Yeah?” Chanyeol chuckled, swallowing down a dumpling as he embraced him back. “I missed you too.”

Now he smelled like dumplings.

Heaven.

-//-

Chapter End Notes

sdbfh i'm enjoying writing this too much so i'm back waaaay too soon. thank you for reading! be well always EXO-Ls! also as with my personal trend, i've extended the length #disappointedbutnotsurprised c:
The subway system was a network which Kyungsoo had memorised as a boy running errands for the cartel. He recalled how he would sit on the trains, at any time of day, wearing a school uniform for a school which he didn’t attend, with a bag stuffed to the brim with contraband where school books should be. At times, he would catch himself glancing at the other children in the same carriage, on their way back to and from school, sometimes beside their mothers and their shopping bags. Kyungsoo would watch them and think with some envy how their minds were probably occupied with the frivolities of math problems and exams.

Not whether their Papa would come back alive from his morning meeting.

He knew the system so well that there were times in which he would find himself missing his stops, if only to challenge himself, because he knew that he could so easily find his way back. Sure. There was certainly a comfort in knowing that he could never get lost. But he wasn’t one for comfort. He could choose to be comfortable when he was dead.

So he played mind games with himself. His very own mathematics and Literature exams for a qualification he would get 100% on. Smart boy.

After leaving Chanyeol’s accommodation, the Lockerman opted to arrange a series of last-minute meetings. He lifted from his seat as the platform come into view and then he stepped off for meeting place number one. Melting into the faceless sea of people, Kyungsoo walked down to the subway mall, ignoring and ignored by passing travellers occupied by the rush hour. He wore a white mask over his face to conceal his bruised cheek and it was in the subway mall that he would slip into the small quiet eatery right at the corner with the dim light and stickers on the door. They specialised in soups. He wasn’t a fan of soup but he liked the owner. You could be anyone and he would serve you.
Even a little kid with no pocket money in a fake school uniform.

He entered and it was after politely greeting the owner that he would be seated across his associate. Byun Baekhyun. 27. BA Creative Writing. Tasked with organisation of the North West and the Port. Part-time freelance current affairs journalist at The Herald.

Longest acquaintance. Another boy in uniform on his way home. They had met that way. Baekhyun had been with his mom and he’d shared lunch with Kyungsoo. Lunch first. Few years after that -- secrets.

Kyungsoo had appointed him specifically to bring along information about the Ocean Diamond heist. At least everything about the night at the port when the diamond was stolen.

“This is everything--” A folder was offered, which included a phone that held a blurry CCTV video, “oh and Mom said to give you this.” A small tupperware of food was taken out of a waistbag and offered, “She says it’s Mexican sweet-buns or something. She’s experimenting.”

He thumbed through the folder.

“You know,” Kyungsoo murmured, glancing at the other man thoughtfully, “I used to say that I was going to steal the Ocean Diamond. Bring it back here. Bring it back home.”

Back in his youthful, patriotic days. It became a saying of sorts, back in his old den. *Why didn’t you get it? It’s not like it’s the Ocean Diamond or something?*

“Doesn’t sound much like you.” Baekhyun retorted with a smile, as he clasped his fingers and shook them, “So, tell me what’s the headline?”

“Damage control.” Kyungsoo responded coolly, “Meaning business as usual.”

Baekhyun looked relieved. Kyungsoo watched him carefully. He watched the way his fingers webbed together -- assessed the curve of his smile and whether it matched the gleam in his eyes. That was the problem with mixing friendship and work. The boundary of trust shouldn’t be lowered. Not for anyone. But when you share lunch with them, drink with them - leniency was a lustful temptress.

“You know if I find out anyone in the North-West has anything to do with this, you will take responsibility.” Kyungsoo stated, not an edge of threat in his voice despite the coldness in his eyes.

The other man smiled his square smile. The one that reached the eyes, friendly and warm.

“Kyungsoo, if you find anyone guilty in my payroll. I’ll pull the trigger myself.”

See. That was the attitude that most of Kyungsoo’s employees kept to heart. After all it was hard to betray the one who knew where all your skeletons were buried-- because he buried them. And Kyungsoo had made it a habit of acquainting himself with everyone’s skeletons, especially those in his payroll, because he knew there would probably come a day when he would need to dig them up.

“Good.” Kyungsoo smiled, before taking a bite of the baked good, and retrieving his things, “Give your mother my love.”
He met with four others, each tasked with heading operations in various city regions. Kyungsoo then took the subway back, coming to the simple conclusion that from now on-- nobody in his operation could be trusted. Quite a solemn conclusion considering how closely his whole life was associated with his work.

It was much quieter now with the end of rush hour attained and his train was basically empty. There was a little boy across him, in a school uniform, probably on his way back from late tutoring. Alternatively, maybe he was on his way to the drug den where he would spend the rest of his night helping his team roll up money. Either way, Kyungsoo watched with curiosity as the little boy clutched his stomach, having spent a good portion of the journey ogling the man across him who was busy gobbling down a caesar salad.

When he reached his station, Kyungsoo took the tupperware of Mexican pastries out of his bag and left it on the seat beside the boy.

“Have some. It’s homemade.”

Then he left.

When he entered the garage again, he was faced with a thoughtful-looking Chanyeol on his old couch, one hand holding up his phone watching television whilst a large baseball bat resided in the other, reclined against his shoulder. He turned towards Kyungsoo and said nothing. Kyungsoo walked past him and into the caravan where he once again positioned himself across the painting.

After a few minutes, Chanyeol awkwardly stepped inside the caravan and walked across, having completed the telenovela he was watching. He was far too big for the caravan. Even now, Kyungsoo found that it was still funny watching him bend his neck as he traipsed inside. He looked gigantic upright-- tiny when he sat down and had to crumple his body inwards.

“Hey, about earlier.” Chanyeol spoke, sitting at the spot beside him, “Sorry if I came across a bit--wired. Didn’t mean to spook.”

“You called me a little bitch.”

“Yeah, I’m not sorry about that.”

Kyungsoo mulled over the conversations of his day and had concluded his next step of action on the train. He turned to Chanyeol looking comparably more civil than when he’d left only hours earlier. “You can help but it will be strictly business.” he murmured, “And you will be generously compensated for it.”

A victorious gleam appeared in Chanyeol’s eyes as he nodded. He had expected it to happen of course. His operations were compromised; technically, The Lockerman only had him.

“Do you still remember how to throw a punch? You’ve been out of the game a while.” Kyungsoo asked, fully intending to rile the other.

Chanyeol looked offended. Mission accomplished. “Seriously? You think I got this broad and this toned from carrying Hyewon’s backpack and hustling at the PTA? Fuck off.” Kyungsoo had noticed
how he seemed strangely in shape for someone who hated exercising and was clearly in a much better place than a diet of cigarettes and ham sandwiches -- “I box. Every weekend. Here. Don’t believe me.” He angled himself to the side and tapped his left cheek -- more precisely, his dimple, “Take a swing. Try it.”

Kyungsoo must have lived through the longest day in his life.

So naturally he wouldn’t turn down an opportunity like this. Glancing at the taller man with a smile, he waited a beat -- and then took his right fist and sprung across -- with relative strength. Hard enough to be felt; but not enough to mark. A large hand covered his fist -- attack blocked -- and Chanyeol would have probably proclaimed victory had it not been for Kyungsoo’s neglected left fist which surged upwards and locked Chanyeol’s jaw from downwards, forcing his teeth, gently, to grit together. Kyungsoo exhaled and allowed his hand to rest across Chanyeol’s chin, thumb gently swiping the flesh beneath his bottom lip as a way of -- apology.

Chanyeol visibly swallowed. Kyungsoo curiously observed the way his adam apple bobbed, before testing the nerve in his eyes.

It had always been one of Chanyeol’s most distinct qualities. Whilst most people’s actions and thoughts generally followed a template, a repetitive rhythm they depended on that helpfully dictated their next move-- Chanyeol had few tells. He was dangerously reactive; a spark of heat. Never dull.

Hard to read.

“Strictly business.” Kyungsoo affirmed with a smile, allowing his hand to fall as Chanyeol released his fist and smiled back.

“Strictly business.”

The next day involved organising some leads for their pursuit of the Ocean Diamond. Alongside that, there was Kyungsoo’s bail hearing, a pick up of Chanyeol’s prescription from the pharmacy, a phone call with a client convinced that a dog was shitting in her yard -- but first, the daily grind began with taking Hyewon to school.

He briefed Kyungsoo on the situation, keen for him to know some background before he met his gem of a niece. Chanyeol spoke, with considerable easiness, how his brother and his wife had died in a terrible motor accident a year ago. How he had been listed as the godfather and legal guardian and was now tending for the teenager like the good uncle he should have been at the very start.

“I’m sorry about your brother.” Kyungsoo said, as they parked across Yixing’s beautiful house in the richest suburb of the city.

“Shit happens,” was Chanyeol’s nonchalant response, still not comfortable with the subject despite having lived through his grief for an entire year. He went silent as he watched the door to Yixing’s house open and a handsome dark-haired man emerged, his grin visible from even their distance.
Hyewon stepped out after and gave him a hug -- a long one, because she knew it would annoy her other uncle.

It did a little. But what Hyewon didn’t understand was that Chanyeol already loved Yixing more than she ever could.

If with every shit storm that came one’s way, sunshine followed -- then Chanyeol was Hyewon’s shitstorm and her Uncle Yixing was the smiley, responsible sunshine that always shone and delivered her to dance practice on time. He had been the brother of Chanyeol’s sister in law: brainy, a registered paediatrician, and always greeted people with a smile and a pat on the back. As her listed guardians, they had worked out a strategy between them - like divorced parents but minus the traumatic court time. Chanyeol wasn’t sure where he would be without Yixing’s reliable hand, ready to pick Hyewon up when he forgot, and offer her the hugs and kisses which he had to force himself to give.

Hyewon stomped across the yard and entered the car.

“Morning Hyewon.” Chanyeol greeted, beaming at her frowning face through the dash mirror, “This is Kyungsoo by the way. He’s working with me for the day.”

Kyungsoo turned to the dark haired girl and greeted her with a forced smile. She offered the same, but with a tad more disgust.

“Sorry about yesterday, kid. Got held up.” Chanyeol began to drive away from the street, where all the houses were painted in ugly pastel - “I’ll make it up to you though. What do you want later? Ice cream?”

And after that, Chanyeol just kept talking, seemingly forgetting that his guest was even in the car as they went along their usual morning routine. Being a tightly organised person when it came to Hyewon’s education, he knew her homework schedules and attended all the parent meetings so knew the topics they would study. He knew how much she liked art more than math; how she skipped on PE so she could play piano. So he babbled all the way to school -- about math -- hoping that in some way, him rattling on about it would motivate her to as well,

“....so I get that shifting between improper fractions and decimals can be tough but you just gotta look at it logically, start with the numerator then-- ah.”

The car stuttered to a halt across the school where pupils were already arriving.

Hyewon pulled out her earphones, having worn it the entire ride way as she did every morning and slammed the door shut. Chanyeol pulled out his wallet and offered her a note out the window between scissored fingers, as he went across and rummaged in his glovebox.

She took the note and almost sprinted away, but Chanyeol yelled out a,

“Howewon!” She turned. He reached out of his car window and tossed her a packet of cookies. Knowing Yixing, she had been given oatmeal for her breakfast -- which she hated. She caught it, expression instantly softening as she then waved it at him and turned away.

When Chanyeol returned, Kyungsoo was staring directly at him.

“You love her, don’t you?” Kyungsoo retorted coolly.

“To the fucking moon and back.” Chanyeol responded with a nod as he turned up the volume dials, filling the car with rock music, as they drove away.
“Drive! Fuck!”

“Jesus, Mother Mary!”

“How about Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

Such was the choral harmony that met Chanyeol’s ears at the end of every job or raid. No matter how ordinary and predictable (bank jobs, jewellery heist, kidnapping) or downright weird the job was. Weird; like tonight, when their job had been to steal a trophy from a CFO’s house because his bowling partner thought it should’ve been his. Chanyeol really did get a buzz out of working his life like this—investing his bonus adrenaline, and trust me he had lots, into armed robbery where the constant sense that something small could snap, and everything could go terribly, terribly wrong left him half-hard. All the time.

He was so weird.

Always had been. Even as a little boy in his private school, all he ever craved was trouble. Whilst other kids’ eyes shimmered when they got gold stars, Chanyeol found his short stints at the principal’s office the epitome of fun. It wasn’t even attention seeking. He had a lot of attention growing up. He was just always troublesome, and whilst at first it was manageable - outbursts in class, little hustles in the playground that left someone broke and without lunch - it soon spiralled into behaviour that was more violent. Suddenly, the principal’s office wasn’t enough anymore. He grew like a beanstalk, got handsome, and then all he wanted was to hit people.

This job ticked all the boxes for Chanyeol. He could be as rough as he wanted because nobody gave a shit as long as they got what they came for. But it turned out that his real calling came in strategy. The boring part everyone skipped on because their eyes turned to the prize before the hard graft. All those years in the expensive boarding school, forced to play all the sports teams, clearly did him some good because his spatial awareness, agility and planning precision was pristine and it was at a level practically unheard of in their business. He became their little good luck charm. If Chanyeol thought they could pull it off, then there was every chance they would. And if they couldn’t, he would find a way.

Because everything, even if it was encased in multiple layers of graphene and watched 24/7 by three bald men holding semi-automatics, could be stolen if you thought hard enough.

“Chanyeol, you’re such a scary motherfucker.” Junmyeon chuckled from behind him as he reached up from his seat and gave Chanyeol’s head a shove, “Did you see what he did? Hid in the guy’s ensuite. Not a peep. Had the trophy in his backpack.”

They escaped unharmed. This line of road was the end of their escape route. Now they could join everyone else and whine about the traffic home.
“Nah, the trophy was with me, idiot.” Their groupmate beamed, before glancing back in confusion as they all glanced at Chanyeol in unison.

“Well, what the fuck were you doing there then?” Junmyeon barked, leaning forwards to seize Chanyeol’s backpack, violently pulling the young man’s jacket collar against the seat, Chanyeol protected the bag with a whine. If they found out, he would get in trouble. Surely, it wasn’t his fault that the entire thing had bored him--

“None of your business!”

-//-

PRESENT DAY

-//-

“Where did you get the baseball?”

They were at a diner only twenty minutes from the dock. Kyungsoo and Chanyeol used to eat here on the rare times they were both available at mornings. Five years had passed and the place hadn’t changed. They were the only place that did the fried eggs the way Kyungsoo liked: a specific runny yolk, achieved only when it was exposed to hot olive oil for precisely fifty seconds.

Chanyeol threw the ball in the air and caught it with one hand. “Huh?”

“The baseball. It’s signed.” Kyungsoo swallowed down his food, “Where did you get it?”

“Can’t remember.” Chanyeol shrugged as he leaned forwards in the booth where his coffee was getting cold, “It helps me think.”

And he needed to think because unlike Kyungsoo, Chanyeol was occupied with planning for the case. He was excited by it because he thought that Ocean Diamond case was similar to his old work, except it was backwards because the prize had already been taken. It was more investigative--whatever the less legal version was. During Kyungsoo’s bail hearing, whereby Jongin had managed to negotiate a lower eye-watering price for his client’s freedom, Chanyeol had a snuck a glance at all the paperwork that Kyungsoo had collected about that night at the city port when the diamond was taken. Apparently by him.

It was obvious that someone had wanted to make it look like Kyungsoo’s handiwork: the typical seamless nature of it. It had been conducted quietly, expertly - barely making a ruffle in the grapevines of the criminal underworld which was about as active as a gossip column’s Twitter feed. But none of Kyungsoo’s typical couriers claimed responsibility. His inventory in every bit of the city had been roammed and there was no diamond there. The prize was with someone else; and the Lockerman was going to take the consolation fall.

Now they were here, at lunch, and Chanyeol was hooked.

“They must have used blanks. You know, nobodies. Each bit of the operation. A blank to transfer the box. A blank to take the box to the truck. A blank to drive the truck. Blanks to man it. Because by the time you’ve linked it together, it’s your court date and the diamond’s in some Russian
Kyungsoo watched as Chanyeol rolled the baseball on the table, shuffling it against his open palm. “The tipper is a rat in your operation. Can’t deny that. They’d never have arrested you if they didn’t just have a name. Your rat knows things.”

Rats. Kyungsoo had seen many rats scampering in the subway. He thought the subway was a sad place for animals to reside. There was no peace there. He supposed parting from the passing trains, it was slightly safer there. Just.

“But find that diamond, and the rat’s got nothing. Because if he lied about you having that diamond, then what are the chances of you being a criminal impresario?” Chanyeol smiled widely, “No cheese for the rat.”

The ball was thrown up in the air again. Same height and force but Chanyeol caught it quicker.

“The problem with using blanks is that it’s easy to find one that talks.”

Chanyeol’s team rarely used them. Only in the big jobs when they needed extra hands. They were convenient -- and cheap -- but weak and traceable. He reckoned that whoever strung up Kyungsoo wanted it done quick and clean. It wasn’t always the way though.

“I’ll profile these for the blank,” a hand landed on the list of names which Kyungsoo had been provided about the employees present at the shipping dock that night, “and then we can go and see if they talk.”

Kyungsoo finally finished his food. He glanced at Chanyeol’s coffee which remained untouched.

“Sounds good.” It was easy to forget at times -- as he had then -- that Chanyeol was actually a strategist at heart. He liked to portray the image of a wild man but he would squeal at the sight of post-its and dutifully arranged his music playlists according to genre.

As Chanyeol returned the ball to the table, Kyungsoo took it with no hesitation.

“Hey.”

“Drink your coffee.” He instructed with a light smile, “You’re going to need your energy.”

It was cold. Chanyeol almost spit it out at the first gulp.

Kyungsoo bit his bottom lip and smiled before signalling for the waiter to get another.

Profiling took a few hours. During that time, Kyungsoo was able to take some work calls. There were some tiny voices, lightly citing if the rumors were true -- but from what he gathered, his instructions had been heard loud and clear. Business as usual. Criminals were as lazy as non-criminals. If they didn’t have to worry, they won’t. For Chanyeol it was the same. He found himself
at his client’s home, looking over the camera footage of the phantom yard shitter, and identified that it was indeed the dog from next door following a few zooms.

“They never trained that damn pup.” She huffed, as she offered Chanyeol his cup of tea.

“Want me to go over there and beat them up?”

“Oh, Chanyeol. You are the sweetest.” She chuckled, mumbling something about what funny jokes he made.

Kyungsoo had been amused to hear about Chanyeol’s day job. His security firm. In a way, he had been pleased that the man hadn’t opted for something mundane-- like a call centre or a 45hr stint at the financial advisory department of a local bank. That type of work would’ve been insulting to the skillset that Chanyeol possessed. It was showcased now, loud and proud, as Chanyeol blabbed on about how he managed to narrow down the blank to a single guilty figure: Samuel.

Samuel who worked the night shifts at the dock. 38. Lived alone. Poorly and recently diagnosed.

Kyungsoo had promised Chanyeol that he would lay low and stay in the car for the entirety of the day. It was important in case something went amiss. Leave the manhandling to Chanyeol, apparently.

He didn’t manhandle Samuel as such-- for he had been really rather willing to cooperate with the six-foot hooded man with the big baseball bat in the trunk. He coughed up the details for the unregistered truck which had been used by the next set of blanks to smuggle the Ocean Diamond away with little persuasion.

Now the garage owner which owned said truck? A little trickier.

Kyungsoo watched from the passenger seat as the man attempted to run away from Chanyeol’s questioning -- only to stumble as he was hit on the back of the head by Chanyeol’s beloved baseball. The accuracy had been mind-numbing. Kyungsoo wasn’t sure how hard Chanyeol had to try as to not holler out in awe at his own skills.

First rounds of questioning tended to be nice. The second rounds of questioning that followed a runaway attempt-- less so. Kyungsoo leaned back in his chair and squinted his eyes as he reached for the pair of figures in the distance, condensing their scene between his fingers. The sight of Chanyeol kicking the man repeatedly in the stomach until he was down, falling on his knees seemed small and almost animated from his vantage point. It was like a cartoon but he could hear the grunts of pain.

Chanyeol returned to the car, sweating, as he started the engine and turned to his passenger. His large eyes were sparkly. Never predatory even when he was bursting with testosterone.

Always been a pretty boy.

“So?” Kyungsoo asked, as the car reversed, “Did he talk?”

“Knew nothing. Gave up the address of the getaway driver though.” Chanyeol exhaled, before smiling - “I bet I can make him say something.”
There was no doubting that Chanyeol was on a high now. The first had been the preamble -- the little practice time that runners got before the main showdown. The garage owner? Heats. A little something to tickle the appetite and warm the muscles. This final stop before the day was most definitely the final race of the night and Chanyeol was hungry for gold. Kyungsoo watched him as he exhaled, pocketed his gun, and chewed his gum -- his silence, unnerving yet contrastingly loud.

Funny to think how only a few hours ago he was explaining the basics of adding fractions to a 12 year old.

“Ask nicely first.” Kyungsoo said as a form of farewell, thinking afterwards that maybe he should’ve said something more constructive before he went inside. Something to dampen the mania.

But he wasn’t going to deny that he liked seeing Chanyeol this way because he looked right in his element. He looked confident and happy. And considering that he had no further uses, Kyungsoo wasn’t going to be a killjoy.

Bored, he leaned across the dashboard, chin on the tough surface, watching the curtain of the house with a dull gaze. It entered his mind then that contrary to Chanyeol’s belief, Kyungsoo was actually far more partial to his gentler side than the temperament he showed whenever he was riled. In fact, it amused him how often and for how long the man lied to himself: presented himself as a young man to fear with the stormy eyes and hard fists to match.

To Kyungsoo, Chanyeol was mostly gentle; beautifully gentle, even, when he tried to be.

There weren’t many of those in their circle of hell.

-//- FIVE YEARS AGO -//-

A Thursday night between them had never gone this awry. It had started normal-- a drink, a dance, and then a walk. But all it would take was a cutting, derogatory comment from a man in a work suit as they passed by hand-in-hand, and suddenly it was a riot. All Kyungsoo did was blink. The passing comment had flown over his head but it had clouded over his lover like a toxic fume. He stilled as Chanyeol had released his hand and darted to the stranger, whipping him around with a single slam to the chest -

“What did you just say buddy? Want to say it again to my face?”

If Kyungsoo hadn’t been there to physically haul a raging Chanyeol away from the man, now cooped up in agony on the pavement floor, there was every chance that he would never have stopped.

Now, they were in the Turbo and Kyungsoo was driving them -- directionless -- just far, far, far, because Chanyeol was furious, stretching his limbs everywhere, bloodied fists rubbing against the
car leather as he withheld a scream.

“Chanyeol,” Kyungsoo spoke, softly, “You have to calm down.”

“No,” The word was wheezed as he scrubbed his face with his hands -- the harsh thudding of his heartbeat almost audible, fitting of the level of his anger - “No-- you have to pull over, I’m too fucking pissed off.”

“Chanyeol.”

“If you don’t pull over, I’ll fucking roll out.”

So Kyungsoo did. He parked it by the closest side road where the lane was empty and muddy. Chanyeol left immediately, stumbling out as he walked to the front of the car and propped himself up onto the hood. Kyungsoo retrieved the roll of bandages from his glovebox; next to the gum, lube and condoms and walked towards him. He watched silently as Chanyeol lit a cigarette with trembling hands. He never had shaky hands. Only when he was angry.

He drew the smoke in. Exhaled.

“You’re pissed off.” Kyungsoo said, voice level.

“Pissed off? Yeah, Kyungsoo I’m pissed. Shitheads like that? They shouldn’t be allowed to walk free. Cause you know what they do? They say shit like that, then write papers, and scripts, go on radio, TV, teach kids. And then that kind of bullshit goes on… and on…”

He shook his head, muttering, as he took another puff.

“I don’t think he’ll be able to say much after you trampled on his mouth.” Kyungsoo retorted.

It was a memorable moment because it was around then that Kyungsoo felt the need to step in. Anything before then, he thought was deserved.

“Well, good.” Chanyeol let the cigarette rest between his lips, as he offered Kyungsoo a weary smile, “He deserved it.”

Kyungsoo took his hands then and began to wrap them up with the bandage. The proper way. Not the way Chanyeol did it, like it was a christmas present for a relative he disliked.

“He did.” Kyungsoo paused and hoisted himself onto the hood, taking the spot beside the taller man as he continued, “But you have to learn how to control your temper.” Left hand done; now the considerably uglier right hand.

Chanyeol shrugged his shoulders, unbothered.

“You have to.” Kyungsoo pressed, meeting his gaze now -- hoping it was enough to convey the worries he was too, ironically, worried to share - “You have to because one day it will get you into real trouble.”

A smirk.

“Baby, I am trouble.” Chanyeol retorted, saying the words unfeelingly like he was quoting some song.

Kyungsoo responded with a snort, pinching the cigarette from his lover’s lips and slipping it between his own. He looked across at the view they had of the empty muddy lane ahead. He wondered what
people would say if they were driving from that end and this was the sight that welcomed them?

*Baby, I am trouble.*

He was pulled from his thoughts by Chanyeol settling his head against his shoulder. He sounded tired; probably close to tears. It was clear that although the shithead had been the trigger for his outburst-- there was probably something else. Maybe lots of things-- things he was haunted by but he wasn’t ready for Kyungsoo to know yet. And that was fine, because keeping secrets was part of life-- part of love even.

*Oh.*

“I love you, trouble.” Kyungsoo said then, deciding that he’d forgotten to say it. It felt like the right words to get their Thursday back on track.

He felt Chanyeol exhale softly, adrenaline ebbing away, winding down. It was a source of natural calm, he supposed, to know that someone loved you.

“I love you too.” Chanyeol said it back, with his eyes - his hands - and then finally his lips.

And their Thursday became much nicer just like that.

-//-

**PRESENT DAY**

-//-

Kyungsoo was woken up by the sound of Chanyeol returning to the car. He rubbed his eyes, muttered an apology then blinked at the sight of the hard card paper clamped between the man’s lips. No doubt torn from somewhere.

“I got him to write it down, take a look.”

He retrieved the card and turned it over, “---he had to write it with his left hand. Unfortunately. But it’s readable, yeah?”

It was fortunate that the inside of the car was dark for all color had drained from Kyungsoo’s face.

The scribble on the page read one menacing syllable: *Jung.*

Kyungsoo’s eyes looked up to meet his companion’s. There was no lying when it came to a moment like this-- when a person, no matter how strong or cold they were, felt genuine fear like it had turned their blood cold. Chanyeol sensed it of course, because this was Kyungsoo-- and he knew him and his set of emotional responses like it was boxing trivia.

“We’ll talk about it tomorrow,” was Chanyeol’s demand-- no *promise* as he started the engine and Kyungsoo nodded after a pause.

Sharing feelings-- or truth -- or fucking *anything* wasn’t his thing. Chanyeol got that. But one way or another, they only had each other and he wasn’t going to go into a gunfight with a blindfold on.
“Don’t worry about it, yeah?” Chanyeol reached out then and consciously patted Kyungsoo’s hand before abruptly sliding away and exhaling as he shook his head, “Sorry.. habits.”

They could deal with this -- and now that -- tomorrow because for now, Chanyeol needed to buy his niece a litre of chocolate ice cream from the store.

Then he was going to sit at home and watch the next episode of Conflicto de amor with Hyewon because he was tired and she would spoil it for him if he waited any longer.

“You still watch those then?” Kyungsoo had remarked as Chanyeol shared that this would be the centrepiece of the rest of his evening. Five years ago, Chanyeol had revealed his passion for Mexican telenovelas as his guilty pleasure. A love that bloomed after his first ever crush-- the beautiful hulk, Gerardo -- had been the protagonist of one.

“Course. Even got Hyewon into it now.”

They neared his address. It only occurred to the pair of them that Kyungsoo’s place for the evening had not been discussed.

“You can come in and stay the night if you like.” Chanyeol offered, with no trace of awkwardness, too practiced in saying the sentence perhaps -- to people who happened to occupy the passenger seat of his Turbo, “Or not,” he added, keen not to impose, “Just let me know so I can drop you off.”

The name on the card was heavy in Kyungsoo’s mind, coupled with the sense of Chanyeol’s accidental touch.

“Did I ever tell you I went to South America?”

“Get out. You’ve got tell me about it.”

Kyungsoo managed a smile, amused by the look of utter admiration in the driver’s eyes as he slowly nodded his head.

“If I could stay the night, that would be nice.”

They rolled up to Chanyeol’s driveway. Suburban. Not as nice as Yixing’s neigbourhood-- but quiet. If Kyungsoo had seen it, without context, he would’ve assumed that Chanyeol had settled down with someone and acquired the full works: mortgage, daughter and spotty dog.

“Yeah? Good-- I mean, yeah,” Chanyeol flashed a smile, eyes darting awkwardly to the side as the car halted, “I’ll get a room ready.”

And Kyungsoo, now witnessing this, then wondered why not. Why didn’t Chanyeol just choose an out and be done with it?

Because out of all the poor unfortunate souls who happened to be in their line of work, it was clear now that he was the one of the few who deserved it.

And for some strange, unspeakable reason, that realisation caused Kyungsoo’s heart to ache.

-//-
guys... you ever write/read something, with a main couple, and think holy heck this is painful? losdofsd i've written so much chansoo aus but these two are wrecking my insides. fff. that final flashback? i swear i was getting phantom pain.

enjoy guys! thank you for reading! back again with another too-soon, blabby segment, and an extra chapter added be self!! indulgence!! writing!! i get it now, fully. i get it. thank you for the nice thoughts i appreciate them so much c: be well!!!!
if you love me won't you say something?

Chapter Summary

-- it's the sunrise
And those brown eyes, yes
you're the one that I desire

i just wanna see how beautiful you are --
-- best part, daniel caesar ft. h.e.r.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

-/-/  

PRESENT DAY

-/-/  

Inferno? That meant hell, right? Chanyeol could remember bits about Divine Comedy-- flickers of whatever pathetic sliver he managed to salvage from the two-hour Literature lessons with the lispy Philosophy teacher. He recalled how he’d sit at the back of the class, wooden seat teetering on its back legs, as he watched the ceiling with lazy interest. It had been summertime; fitting for the subject really.

_Inferno_, he remembered thinking; that meant… hell.

Let’s just say that Chanyeol was going through a corresponding journey right now. Except he was primarily trapped in the second circle of hell. Lust. It turned out that having one’s relatively (read: very) attractive ex in the house was actually very, very bad for a man who’s been deprived of any satisfying flesh-to-flesh contact for a significant period.

It had started after he’d trudged down the corridor, having opted to sleep in the guest bedroom and offer Kyungssoo the more comfortable mattress in his own bed (an interesting decision in its own right, in retrospect). Chanyeol had walked through the corridor with some speed and unfailingly, _walked_ into a half-naked Kyungssoo emerging fresh and clean from the shower.

“Oh, morning.” Kyungssoo greeted, hand tossing damp hair, as he walked out wearing nothing but a towel that masked his bottom half, “I was going to ask. Where do you keep your new towels?”

It would be fair to say that a gallon of steaming arabica bean coffee would not be required to jolt Chanyeol’s sluggish head this morning. Not with this beautiful 3-second long piece of self-insert softporn to run and over-analyse over his breakfast.

“Closet. End of corridor.” He had answered with practiced ease, eyes naturally focusing on Hyewon’s door right at the end of the corridor which suddenly felt further away.

Fortunately, Kyungssoo was none the wiser.
“Mind if I borrow some clothes?”

“Borrow away.” Chanyeol asked, wide awake as he had knocked on Hyewon’s door softly and speedily, tracking Kyungsoo’s motions as he disappeared into the closet - “Hyewon, kid. It’s time for breakfast.”

The knocking slowed significantly until Kyungsoo re-emerged, now fully covered in towels. A little bit extravagant considering that he was a house guest but Chanyeol was too dazed to say something.

“Thanks.” He called out, before disappearing into the bedroom.

“No problem.”

As was their usual morning routine, Chanyeol and Hyewon watched television on the small box screen in the dining room. It was an effective way of waking each other up that didn’t require them to make conversation-- because there was a chance that it would just develop into an argument. Because he was too tall for the table, Chanyeol often spent the morning reclined against the countertop, eating his cereal, eyes trained on the news channel for something old-man-esque like news about the weather or the interest rate. Just some current tidbit to discuss with his clients later on during the day.

Of course, today, his head was swimming with thoughts of Kyungsoo.

“You’re acting weird.” Hyewon said pointedly as she spooned cereal into her mouth, eyes fixated on her uncle, assessing his nice dress shirt and startling lack of morning breath-- “You never shower in the morning.”

“Yeah, I do.” Chanyeol muttered, before shrugging his shoulders, “Sometimes.”

After finishing her food, Hyewon tilted her head at her uncle and exclaimed,

“Kyungsoo’s your ex, right?”

Chanyeol choked on a wheat square, bubble of thought bursting. “Excuse me?” he gaped, before his eyes narrowed, “How do you know that?”

Hyewon then rightfully shared how she would frequently (claimed: accidentally) eavesdrop on his and Junmyeon’s conversations in the kitchen which was set right below her room. “You two always talk so loud. I remember you mentioning a Kyungsoo once. You said if you saw him again, you’d twist his arm.” Hyewon was no chump. If she knew something was important, she would remember it in unmistakable detail. It concerned Chanyeol that his personal life now fitted into that category.

“Yeah, well. That doesn’t sound like me. I’m a nice guy.” Chanyeol dismissed before practicing damage control and saying, “He’s just my… friend.”

“Friend? Like Junmyeon?” The little girl then shrugged her shoulders, “You never dress nice or
shower early for Junmyeon.”

Chanyeol laughed, resisting the urge to hi-five his niece across the table for her Poirot-level of investigative cynicism.

It was a good point. A really good point. Sometimes Chanyeol wondered whether he should save up because it was pretty damn obvious to him that Park Hyewon was on her way to being the next female president. She had all the qualities needed to survive and succeed the beastly political landscape: a smart brain, a deep-rooted distrust towards men, and an innate inability to accept crap of any kind.

Unfortunately, her guardian wasn’t so talented.

“That’s cause…”

I don’t want Junmyeon to fuck me silly.

“Just cause.” Chanyeol exhaled deeply, lowering his cereal bowl and reaching for his coffee, convinced that he was flushed. “You’re nosey, you know that Hyewon?”

Hyewon responded with an accusatory smile before expressing a shrug, “Just don’t come crying home when he breaks up with you again.”

Chanyeol choked on the drink—splutters of coffee almost staining his shirt. “You’re thinking … way ahead, kid.”

“No. Junmyeon said you were needy and trusting. You will be hurt if you let him. And you will probably let him, because you’re needy and trusting.” Hyewon smiled sweetly, as she stuffed some books into her bag, “My teacher says that’s called a vicious circle.”

As those loving words were shared, a figure appeared at the doorway. Kyungsoo. He appeared more youthful looking somehow -- refreshed from his shower -- and smaller-looking in the oversized shirt he had poached from Chanyeol’s closet.

“Morning,” he greeted them both.

“Breakfast?” Chanyeol asked, casual, as if he hadn’t literally just thought about Kyungsoo fucking him silly.

“No, I’m good.” He raised a hand to dismiss - “I’m going to get out of both your way…”

The marginally horrified look on Chanyeol’s face -- must have piqued Hweyon’s interest as the twelve-year old sighed dramatically, zipping up her bag as she listened to him fumble through a reply.

“Oh? I can come with… if you want. We got lots to do today anyway. So why not just. Be together.”

Smooth.

The faintest smile appeared on Kyungsoo’s lips. If Chanyeol didn’t know better, he looked almost pleased.

“You sure? I thought…” Dark eyes glanced at Hyewon then, polite but cold. She wasn’t scared and stared right back. “School run.”
The betrayal to the morning routine which followed was something Chanyeol was certain he would have to pay for with sweets, ice cream or video games later on.

“Ah, nope. Not today. Hyewon can take the bus today, right kid?”

He flashed his niece a smile-- one that conveyed enough desperation that the girl was left with no choice but to acquiesce otherwise she would’ve found it too pathetic. She moodily snatched her bag from Chanyeol’s side of the table and stomped out. Chanyeol felt a little bad for her, because he knew how much she hated the bus. It baffled him to this day how a kid could have so much animosity towards other kids. She was clearly naive to the fact that when kids become adults, they become so much worse.

“That’s the spirit. See ya later kid.”

Kyungsoo watched her leave, bemused, as he turned back to his companion who was already halfway into tying up the laces for his final shoe. Although Chanyeol was certain that he wouldn’t be left behind, he knew how much a stickler the other was for time.

“Shall we go? I’ll get my car keys.” Chanyeol moved to the bowl in the middle of the dinner table. The one full of cookie packets, conveniently sat next to the swear jar. Hyewon labelled it as the reward bowl.

“Actually, I was going to take the subway.” Kyungsoo smiled, pressing his lips together, “Is that okay?”

“Sure!”

Was that okay? Of course not. The subway sucks.

But it was Chanyeol’s fault that he had conveniently forgotten Kyungsoo’s strange obsession with taking the subway for stuff. Whilst the rest of the city understood that using the subway 100% guaranteed acquiring an accessory of viruses and a run-in with the city’s host of perverts and weirdos-- his ex had always expressed a strong preference for it. He liked the convenience -- apparently. Of course, that was a lie and Chanyeol thought it could only really be two things: one, it was a criminal thing and two, it was some sex thing.

God, he needed to stop.

Balancing himself by leaning against the wall of the carriage, Chanyeol wearily allowed the motions of the train to rock him from side-to-side. Eventually, he grew restless, and found his gaze wandering. First-- to Kyungsoo, of course, and then with some ease, it reached further on to land on a nice-looking couple sat together. She was wearing a nice grey coat; he was in a corresponding grey work suit. It was easy to conclude that they were together because of how much the woman tolerated his blatant manspreading, but there was also an air about them which suggested that they weren’t a couple to last. It was strange like that. The expression of body language was so astoundingly transparent that you could probably tell what a person was like just from the way they sat in a subway car. The woman appeared content but there was a sense of coldness in the way she had
angled her shoulder away from her guy, as if to say only two more weeks, then I can stop pretending like I like this asshole.

So, if someone else was looking at him and Kyungsoo now, what would they say?

He smiled at the thought as he glanced up again, looking up at Kyungsoo’s thoughtful face whose gaze was pinned to the subway map across him.

“Two more stops.” Kyungsoo spoke softly, before glancing down and smiling easily at him. He was in a good mood today. Good; because he certainly put Chanyeol in a good mood.

Cringe.

Their description would probably go along the lines of: tall guy is pathetically trying to get the smaller guy to notice him; smaller guy isn’t biting. Then it could lead on to some fantastical presumptions: a fluffy work friendship turned romance, unrequited forbidden romance between the sons of rival bakeries, ex-school friends re-discovering each other after years apart.

But unfortunately it wasn’t like that at all, proving the point that in the real world: nobody can claim to know shit about anyone.

Anyway, back to Chanyeol’s seemingly unending appointment with the guardians of the second layer of hell. Just when he thought his feelings couldn’t get more toyed with in any worse way, he found himself at a boutique clothing store in the East. His old haunt and home. The fancy East with the European pastry shops and small artist studios -- frequented by people who liked shiny pavements and where the trend of mismatched colors and striped sweaters never died.

The clothing store was across the barbershop where Chanyeol had broken up with his first boyfriend. It was peculiar how he’d associated their last messy kiss with the sight of the rotating barber’s pole. It still looked the same. Chanyeol then wondered how Mr 1st violinist in the school orchestra was doing. Probably an accountant somewhere. In hindsight, this would be a great career path for him as he hadn’t been that great at violin-- or kissing.

Kyungsoo had clearly prepped the store beforehand as when he arrived, he was instantly led away by two ladies with the longest measuring tape trailing behind them and Chanyeol had been left to wait by the front door, confused. Fortunately, Kyungsoo would re-appear about twenty minutes later in a brand new three-piece navy suit complete with a nice tonal silk black pocket square.

Honestly, Chanyeol’s eyes had watered. Not just for the sheer theatrics of the entire scenario, or the bonus layer of attractiveness it had offered the man - but the price.

“How is it?” Kyungsoo had asked seriously, tugging on the hem of the blazer as the tailor had smoothed his shoulders.
It was almost as if he knew the game he was playing. Chanyeol knew that Kyungsoo often did know— and he enjoyed teasing him— but he was the one prone to forgetting and so he bit the hook every-time like a fish with a deathwish.

“Great.” Chanyeol had answered, after a momentary heart palpitation. He was then thrown a paper bag which contained his shirt by a woman. Like it was garbage.

“You going somewhere, then?” he asked Kyungsoo afterwards, as he finished conversing with the owner who had insisted he nipped the clothes for free. Being the gentleman, Kyungsoo refused.

“Yeah.” Kyungsoo smiled, stepping to the door and opening it for him, “Brunch with you.”

They exited together. With Kyungsoo dressed so formally, Chanyeol felt like their street cred in this part of town was immediately lifted. Suddenly, they weren’t just two casual professionals seeking a nice pastry; the presented image was now one casual professional and his rich millionaire friend seeking pastries.

“What am I? Fifty one and menopausal? I don’t do brunch.” Chanyeol teased back, despite the fact that he actually rather fancied sitting with Kyungsoo at a table again.

“Then what do you want to do?” Kyungsoo asked, peeking at his watch, “I have a midday poker game— but otherwise I’m free.”

What did Chanyeol want to do? Now that hook came with sirens so fortunately, Chanyeol did think twice about biting.

“Brunch sounds good.” The taller man answered, a familiar twist growing in his gut as he added, “I want the posh stuff, right? If you’re treating me.”

Kyungsoo smiled before looking up at him. “Of course.”

And then to Chanyeol’s equal horror and delight— Kyungsoo grabbed his arm and batted it, as if he’d said something supremely funny and not at all demanding. Now Chanyeol would have certainly done the same, had he not feared that he would be tempted not to pursue the arm-bat and… dive right into holding his hand very tightly.

And he doubted he would get free brunch after something like that.

Over brunch, which once again included the staple offering of coffee and eggs, the plans for the day were discussed. Chanyeol and Kyungsoo’s focus today was to organise a way to smoke out the rat within the Lockerman operations. Despite the reassurances from the higher ups of Kyungsoo’s group, it was far too easy to let suspicion slip in their position. And so, he was going to seek out what was circulating within the crime families on the grassroots level. The best way to do that was through the monthly poker game between the city’s finest and bloodiest. And oldest.
“I’m going to try and hear it from them directly. How my people are doing grass-roots level.” Kyungsoo explained, “It will probably give me an idea of who I should be wary of.”

Such was the entertaining thing with the older generation. Everyone told them things thinking that they were too old and lonely to tell anyone; but it was surprising how easily stories were exchanged during a game of poker as a way to divert attention. And the stories were often very, very good - after all the saucier the tale, the more likely it was to distract.

There was no forgetting last night’s revelation however, but Chanyeol decided that he would leave it with Kyungsoo for now. It was clear that it was a pressure point and he didn’t want to spook him as he had done before.

“So, how’s business then?” Chanyeol asked as he watched Kyungsoo scroll blankly through his burner.

“Same old.” Kyungsoo responded, glancing into his eyes.

They were having brunch outside. There was a cool breeze and the sun was out. The table was small and wooden and their knees were almost touching. Chanyeol’s heart hadn’t stopped thudding like a motor since they sat down. How could he eat his eggs florentine like this?

Fortunately, Kyungsoo was in an uncharacteristically chatty mood so Chanyeol was avoided the opportunity to accidentally blurt out an awkward and closed conversation starter like: wow, we look good today!

“You know what occurred to me yesterday. I’ve never once spoken to you about my work. Not properly.”

“Eh.” Chanyeol shrugged, lifting his eyes to Kyungsoo— admiring the fond way the sunlight fell onto his features, “I wasn’t really that interested.”

“No?”

“No.” Chanyeol offered him a smile, “We had a strict no-talking about work rule, remember?” He watched Kyungsoo’s expression shift into one of recognition -- “Plus, you, being the gatekeeper of the underworld’s secrets, wasn’t exactly why I stayed with you.”

Kyungsoo smiled back. “Really?” The waitressed passed by, barely noticed, due to the unnatural weight their stares carried for each other.

“Yeah.” Chanyeol sipped his water, realising that they were leaning dangerously close to that Topic. The Topic. Big T. The turbulence of five years ago and their relationship/breakup. The only topic that was proving as difficult to broach as this entire Jung issue. He leaned deeper in his chair, “It wasn’t just the... sex either.”

_Inferno._

“Oh?” Kyungsoo leaned closer keenly, “What’s left?”

Literally everything else. This was the answer. But Chanyeol could see it -- feel it -- the smugness creeping into his form and he would definitely not let Kyungsoo claim victory this easily.

“I stayed with you because you were an asshole.” He responded -- the dullness betrayed by his
dimple deepening to obscure a smile, “My type at the time.”

Kyungsoo nodded in understanding, before cutting his food and asking a casual --

“Not your type anymore then?”

Danger scale: atomic bomb level. Funny how easily Kyungsoo could send a conversation from small-talk to mindfuckery in a matter of seconds. To Chanyeol, this was the type of question that was equivalent to the million dollar question in *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* Was the reason why Chanyeol had been so unlucky with love because he was cursed to be attracted to only awful people? Alternatively, Junmyeon, his phone-a-friend, may have the right answer in that he always stood by that Chanyeol’s volatile personality made him inadequate for stable adult relationships.

Chanyeol watched Kyungsoo chew as he pondered his answer. The way his lips moved around, the very corner of them pointed into a smirk as if he knew he was being watched. Lowkey worshipped.

This would’ve actually been a good time to dispel this unresolved sexual tension between them (yes, he was admitting to it) matter once and for all -- even if he had to lie. Chanyeol should’ve just agreed and not stretched out an unnecessary pause and made it weird. But just when he thought he couldn’t handle this manageable question with any less grace, he answered with a bizarre --

“Eat your eggs, Kyungsoo.”

Which was brunch speak for: *I’d still do you, 100%.*

Fair to say that Chanyeol really needed someone to tackle him.

Platonically.

Suddenly, his appetite had disappeared and the twisty gut feeling was back. Again, Kyungsoo was able to claw some of the atmosphere back by returning the conversation with a simple,

“Do you remember, once, that we wrote each other letters?” he paused, searching Chanyeol’s eyes for recognition - “And you asked me to hide them. Because you wanted to see if one day you could steal them back.”

His memory wasn’t as sharp as Kyungsoo’s. But it definitely sounded like them. Chanyeol scoffed as he drained his drink.

“Sounds like us.”

“Do you remember what you wrote?”

“No.”

“Let’s find out then, yeah?” Kyungsoo tilted his head at him, “I still remember where I kept them. We can walk there.”

-//-

**FIVE YEARS AGO**

-//-
Amongst other things, Chanyeol had been fortunate to find a boyfriend that complemented his rigorous work ethic. Well, actually he was convinced that Kyungsoo worked infinitely harder because a crime empire was surely more challenging to run that a simple minute-by-minute plan of an east End bank heist.

They would often sit in the garage den, side-by-side on the old couch. It was a beautiful parallel: Chanyeol with his photocopied building blueprints which he would hold up to his eyeline after sketching onto copy paper and Kyungsoo ruffling through his pile of post-office forms as he would run through names in a city directory that must be a decade old. Between them, at least two empty mugs of coffee, a litre of energy drink and a takeaway bag from Mr Feng’s.

Neither liked working in silence so they compromised: Mon/Wed/Fri would belong to Chanyeol and his rock classics, whilst the rest would be Kyungsoo and his 50’s crooners. The music would be played through a set of speakers which Kyungsoo had bought him as a gift (one of the first items that would fall during the post-break up era in which Chanyeol sought out to destroy every item that Kyungsoo had ever given him.)

Sometimes they would stay like that for hours, content with the music and the occasional frustrated grunt when a pen leaked.

On the day they challenged each other to write letters, Chanyeol had been the one struggling to come up with something. With his paper folded in half as to make sure that the other didn’t peek, he had stared at the blank page, feeling equally as blank.

“Come on, write anything.” Kyungsoo whined, head resting on the arm of his couch as he hummed along to *You Really Got Me* by The Kinks, fingers drumming in rhythm against the couch surface.

“Don’t rush me,” Chanyeol countered before adding a softer, “I know what I want to write. But it sounds… stupid.”

His companion raised an eyebrow. “Keep it simple,” he encouraged, before offering him a reassuring smile, “And if it’s stupid, then so be it.”

“Okay.” Calmed, Chanyeol scribbled his note down and then extended it across to the man on the other side of the couch, “I swear to god, Kyungsoo. If you look at it before I steal it back… or our ten-year deadline, I *will* come after you.”

Kyungsoo took it with a smile and a nod, indicating that the threat was acknowledged.

A moment passed and suddenly the motivation to complete their work stuff was forgotten. Chanyeol fell into the other side of the couch and comfortably rested his head on Kyungsoo’s lap as the other admired him from above-- fingers tentatively mapping the curve of his cheekbones, “Kyungsoo, can I ask you something?” Chanyeol asked, as Kyungsoo’s fingers moved to drum lightly over his lips, walking over them and admiring how funny his expression looked,

“Hm?”

“Can I tell Junmyeon about you?”

Tilting his head, the dark haired man considered the question before nodding enthusiastically.

“Yeah, okay.”
And Chanyeol had smiled, oblivious to the fact that it was Kyungsoo who had found the gesture more heartwarming. After all, it was equivalent to a slight lifting of the curtain which had concealed their relationship to the world.

Just a little peek to let some sunshine in.

The letter would linger in Chanyeol’s mind later that same day when he returned home to Junmyeon. The older man was sat on the front step of their house, with grass-stained knees and sleeves rolled up.

“Hey loverboy,” he cooed, pouting his lips as Chanyeol occupied the spot beside him, “Back from sacking up with that babe of yours? Can’t believe you’ve still not brought her around to see me. You know I still don’t think she’s real, right?”

Glancing across at the green grass, newly cut by Junmyeon who finally gave up after many passive-aggressive notes on the fridge, Chanyeol turned to undoubtedly his closest friend and said,

“Junmyeon, I’m dating a guy.”

Coming out to someone, properly, was something Chanyeol had basically given up on. Such opportunities never really presented themselves to him considering his background: first the youngest son of devoted churchgoers topped with the all-around cliche absentee father, and second as the student of the most exclusive all boys’ boarding school in the city where everything in the world… aside from the freedom and confidence to be oneself had been drilled into him, age 5 to 19.

He had tried once. Outside the principals’ office, after getting beaten the shit out of by some trigger-happy senior in the hockey team. His mother had held his swollen face, crying, and he had tried to explain then -- how doing the exact set of sports that his brother did wasn’t going to magically resolve the fact that everyone now knew he was sneaking kisses to Mr 1st violinist and he would subsequently have to handle the shithead-charged homophobic shitstorm that would follow.

Fortunately, before it really got to him- Chanyeol snapped first. The name-calling stopped when Chanyeol learned the art of how to throw a really good punch; to embrace the fact that the divine had given him a special gift and that was the ability to beat people up with practically zero guilt. Talk shit. Get hit really fucking hard -- so in time people stopped doing the first part.

But he did still have to spend most of his school years alone and angry.

Junmyeon was different though. His Junmyeon who took him into his life after starting in the team together; the same Junmyeon who co-leased a house with him despite knowing he was just a disowned deadbeat. He was the first ever person that Chanyeol realised he could truly call a friend without feeling doubtful. So he trusted him with this; with him and Kyungsoo.

And of course, Junmyeon delivered because he was just a great reliable person.

“Really?” he offered Chanyeol a smile, “Good for you, man. Fuck, look at you. Are you crying? Man. What did you think I was going to say?”
Chanyeol realised there were tears in his eyes only after Junmyeon pointed it out. He didn’t realise how heavy his heart had been until the weight disappeared.

“You know all that doesn’t matter to me.” He pulled Chanyeol into his arms, before locking him into a headlock and laughing, “You know, I love you right? Like, whatever man. I just feel bad for assuming.. And for joking about the fact that he was fake.”

“Nah it’s okay-- and yeah, I know.” Chanyeol managed, wiping his eyes, “Just that I realised today that I actually-- fucking love this guy. So it’d be nice to tell someone about it.”

Junmyeon ruffled his hair tenderly as he released him. “You deserve it, man. Gah, you got me going now,” he wiped his eyes, laughing, “Now there’s no excuse, one day you got to bring him here, yeah?”

Chanyeol nodded, before leaning into Junmyeon-- imagining internally what a dinner with Kyungsoo would look like. Not awkward at all actually. They could bond easily over their inability to tolerate Chanyeol and his three am rants. Oh, and they were both pocket-sized.

“This is your first ever non imaginary relationship right?” Junmyeon asked, brushing some grass blades off his shirt.

“Kinda yeah.” Chanyeol answered, “First ever, love really. First… love.”

First love. That sounded nice.

“Well remember, the first cut is the deepest. So be careful, yeah? If he hurts you.” He shook his head, flexing his hands as a threatening gesture, “Let’s just say, everything valuable in his apartment is going up on Ebay for free.”

A reflective commentary: Unfortunately, the dinner between Chanyeol and his two favourite pocket-sized people would never happen. But Junmyeon was instrumental in encouraging his roommate to break the shit out of all the gifts Kyungsoo ever gave him in that golden post-break up era of five years ago.

-///-

PRESENT DAY

-///-

Little by little, Chanyeol realised during this day that he was gaining a glimpse into the segment of Kyungsoo’s life that he’d missed out on in their relationship five years ago. The Lockerman side. It was mystical almost, how different their lives were, now and even then. This contrast was probably best summarised by their current location whereby Kyungsoo had taken him to the third biggest bank in the city and they had walked in through the front door with ease. Chanyeol, being the ex-armed robber, was completely thrown being far more used to the dim and narrow alleys which led to back doors and side doors.
Who knew the insides of banks were so fancy?

After a brief conversation with a private banking consultant, they were taken to the large vaults situated within the bank basement. As they did so, Chanyeol found himself imagining what it would be like to commit a robbery today. A sweep of the area used to be part of their prep-- but it was left to Junmyeon whose shockingly handsome looks had been always enough to fool bankers into trusting him. Chanyeol pondered on the exits he would use. How long he would switch the cameras off for to get from point A to B. A force of habit but it helped calm his heart which had naturally started to pick up with adrenaline at the sight of so much potential--

Money.

They were taken to a silver room lined with tiny deposit boxes. There were so many boxes hunched closely together that it looked like the wall itself was silver. Each little box was strictly uniform. Nothing too mind-blowing for Chanyeol, again. Being the seasoned ex robber who used to be the chaotic wind that broke the little box towers apart.

Their letters had been in box number 12.

“This looks pretty fancy.” Chanyeol retorted, sneaking a glance into the box as Kyungsoo took the two letters out.

He was ignored. Clearly, the matter had engrossed Kyungsoo for he was then off-- looking for another box, assessing contents. Curious, Chanyeol assessed the box across him and saw that there were two photographs. They were coloured-- but a little blurry and crumpled around the edges. The sort of poor photograph quality found only in grandparents’ albums. One had a set of similar-looking and similar-aged little children in a living room - their little faces blurred out by the heat of the flash. The other was a picture of a tall middle-aged man with a hard expression and even harder looking military boots. The backdrops in both photographs had faded with time.

Underneath them was a small purple velvet -- sheet? Handkerchief? He wasn’t sure.

As he turned it, he thought he glimpsed a logo -- but Kyungsoo was quick to pull it from his grasp before he could conclude what it was.

A letter was thrust in his hand for good measure.

“Want to read it now? Let’s read each other’s.”

Watching the other man warily, Chanyeol paused.

“After, can I see the stuff in the box?”

Kyungsoo laughed. “No, those are my personal things.”

A fair rejection. With a shrug, Chanyeol unfolded Kyungsoo’s letter, scanned the words and read it out loud with a fond smile -

“Yours says. Hey. If you did steal this, I’ll wire you 10,000 myself. You look nice today. Sorry I don’t say it more.”

For Chanyeol, it was strange reading it out loud-- and imagining that such tender thoughts came from Kyungsoo. At times it was easy to forget how chaotic their love affair had been: how much they had given, and subsequently lost, in a very short period of time.
“Read mine then,” Chanyeol encouraged, shocked as the other man glanced at his letter - then pocketed the piece of paper away.

“No, I think it’d be better if you tried to remember it.” Kyungsoo insisted, seeming flustered.

“Woah, what the hell? That’s not fair.”

“I have to get to my game.” Kyungsoo excused, as he slotted the boxes back, “You can argue over this with me later.”

Surprisingly, Chanyeol didn’t insist. He could only imagine the type of message he would have written in-- something that would seem totally heartbreaking now.

And they couldn’t let something as mundane as past emotions affect Kyungsoo’s poker game.

They took the subway. Four stops, a line change and a further two stops later and they found themselves in the South. The region had many nicknames from locals depending on who was asked. The rest of the city could call it Savage South or Stiff South due to the combined epidemic of gun crime and addiction which ran hellfire through the city and subsequently led to a high mortality rate. Sad and unfortunate elements certainly. But for those actually in the South, they liked to think of themselves as the Sexy South because it was where the old timers still lived and ran their businesses. The original golden girls and boys of crime.

And Kyungsoo just happened to play poker with them once a month.

They walked to a bar which was located only a few streets from the subway station. The Lily Flower. Chanyeol had never frequented the South because his clients were primarily comprised of rich businesses in the North West and the East. Here, the contrast between the modern renovated areas of the city and the poorer areas was more defined.

Kyungsoo found himself glancing at his tall companion, observing the pale uneasiness in the way he narrowed his eyes as they crossed the street. There was the distant sound of police sirens -- more frequent here than anywhere else. It would make any criminal, seasoned or not, sweat a little. “So you really play poker with Liu Jun?” Chanyeol was whispering as they walked along the pavement, “Fuck, Kyungsoo. That blows my mind.”

Liu Jun. The retired leader of the notorious Golden Dragon Triad. Allegedly retired. Chanyeol recalled once knowing a guy who had ran into one of Liu Jun’s sons in a typical Westie bar and had returned home in a bag.

The others around the poker table were of similar backgrounds. But the one that had amused Chanyeol the most was none other than Mr Feng-- owner and proprietor of Mr Feng’s dumplings. The fact that Kyungsoo would now reveal that the nice smiley old man who would hand him dumplings on weekdays for delivery to Kyungsoo was actually the muscle man of an old Hong Kong branched syndicate was enough to freeze the taller man’s expression into one of permanent
shock.

“No fucking way.”

“He was the right hand.” Kyungsoo revealed, a hand catching onto Chanyeol’s arm subconsciously, as they walked along the pavement.

“And you’ve been playing poker with them since….”

“Since they taught me how to play.” Kyungsoo smiled up at him.

“You’re playing me.” Chanyeol responded back, pocketing his hands and noticing how Kyungsoo’s grasp remained, “How can that be true?”

Kyungsoo shrugged coolly.

They would reach the bar in exactly that state. Chanyeol was actually unbelievably proud of himself. He managed a whole 129 steps with Kyungsoo latched close and comfortable on his arm without being weird about it.

The poker game was closed door. After being patted down for guns and sharps, Chanyeol and Kyungsoo were led into a second underground bar which was manned by a single guy behind the bar top. There was a television and a set of old dusty liquor behind him in amber and emerald bottles arranged in beautiful uniformity. Upon seeing Kyungsoo, excitement exploded across his face as he slipped past the bar and embraced Kyungsoo tightly, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. He was probably about fifty, a little heavy around the middle with yellowing fingertips and thinning black hair.

“We almost thought you weren’t going to come, boy! You’re not normally last to arrive.”

“I got held up. How are you, King?”

King smiled, a large hand squeezing Kyungsoo’s shoulder. “You know me. Back’s been a fucking blast. But nothing I can handle,” His gaze then turned towards Chanyeol-- the smile fading immediately, replaced by something more watchful, “Who’s the pretty boy? Looks like he needs the pisser.” He chuckled coldly as he jerked a finger to the direction behind them, “Gentlemen’s is behind you, on the left.”
Chanyeol’s jaw locked tight. King smiled accordingly.

“He’s my friend.” Kyungsoo reassured him, glancing at Chanyeol - a sense of comfort lurking beneath the composed lock of his expression, “Used to work for Pips. Not wandered the South much so thought I’d show him around.”

“Pips? Robber, are you?” King smirked, “Yeah, Pips wouldn’t need to be in the South. We’re piss poor down here.”

It turned out that this fact -- the fact that Chanyeol was basically a South virgin -- would amuse the bar patrons more than anything else that Kyungsoo shared about him. Well, both amuse but also promote a certain level of distrust which wouldn’t dispel no matter how much Kyungsoo tried to reiterate that Chanyeol wasn’t some pretty-boy snitch. As not to risk losing his temper, in possibly the worst place, Chanyeol focused on staying quiet and focusing on Kyungsoo who was incorporated fully by the patrons like he was family. He was undoubtedly the youngest of the poker group and they treated him as such. Lots of shoulder squeezes and light cheek slaps.

The man whom Chanyeol had been most excited to meet, Liu Jun, had undoubtedly given the most mistrustful reception to his appearance. Chanyeol assessed him in return: he was in his 80s, skinny and rough-toned from chronic cigarette use, but he acted younger. Even if his bones creaked, there was no doubting that he could probably still crack a man’s skull with his fist.

“Heard it’s your first time in the big-boy bar. You should try the liquor.” Liu Jun had remarked, chuckling a breathy chuckle as he gave Chanyeol’s chest a light slap, “You’re a tall fucker… How did you meet Kyungsoo?”

“I rescued him from a tree.” Chanyeol joked dryly.

The room erupted in loud laughter. Kyungsoo adjusted his glasses shyly as he shook his head.

“Alright, kiss him goodbye then. Let’s get some money out of you, boy.” The rest of the men entered, with Kyungsoo following last, just after Mr Feng who didn’t hesitate to give Chanyeol the same here’s-your-dumpling restaurateur smile.

How long did poker games normally last?

Chanyeol could only hope that Kyungsoo was gaining some damn fine intel because he was getting restless. It didn’t help that it was just him and the barman -- King -- who after a few moments of silence, had decided to pretend he wasn’t there. He cleaned around him and his elbows up and down like a clean freak, reducing Chanyeol’s limbs to those pieces on a mantelpiece that could get dirty but nobody would check so you just wiped around. More than once, he considered spitting on the bar top -- if only to give the man something to actually clean up.

It was as he was quietly entertaining this idea that his phone vibrated. He took it from his back pocket and read the text with a smile,
from: hyewon ♥
can you help me with maths later?
i have a test tomoz

He replied, bursting with pride:

to: hyewon ♥
Yeaaaah ofc!
I’m excited

from: hyewon ♥
Lol k

Smiling to himself, Chanyeol found himself jolted out of his semi-parental cloud nine by a glass being slammed in front of him. A deep dark amber liquor was poured in, and he met King’s large searching eyes.

“Don’t normally take this long for someone at my bar to order something to drink.” He retorted skeptically.

“Oh,” Chanyeol pocketed his phone again, “Sorry. Not used to… drinking this early.” *Anymore.* Not for a while.

“Why?” Everything he said seemed suspicious to King. It reminded Chanyeol of when he first started working the circuit. Everyone picked up on everything different with him; his North-Eastie drawl, on-trend haircut, perfect face and complexion. This normally led to an offer of a little welcome bruising - so that people didn’t know he was a push-over *newb.* “You on a programme or something? Not judging. But I run a business, you know? Got to try and flog the stock.”

Chanyeol smiled before draining his glass. “Get me a few then,” he offered, keen to open up a conversation to save him from the boredom.

“That’s right, pip.” King nodded, pleased, before jerking a finger at a sign behind him - “You can smoke here too.”

“Oh, I don’t--”

“What are you? *Pregnant?”*
Eventually, something warmer developed between them and Chanyeol found himself presented with an opportunity to learn about how Kyungsoo had started with this old-timers. It was strange because he’d never once thought about asking about Kyungsoo’s past. It always seemed so futile to ask considering how secretive Kyungsoo was about everything -- and admittedly, it had never been a priority because he never wanted to talk about his own.

But King, for all the good that he was, was definitely a talker. And he wanted to talk about Kyungsoo because he was clearly very fond of him -- a key mutual interest they now shared.

“I’ve known Kyungsoo since he was... this high,” a chuckle escaped the barman’s lips as he patted the bartop, “Probably even smaller. I knew his first family. He was little then. When his Papa came here, after pay-days on the Friday, he’d be put on everyone’s lap. I remember... he used to sing. His Papa was a crooner too. Kyungsoo was a good boy. If you asked him to sing, he said which song? No talkback. Not like the other kids. Just work. Graft...”

The bar is filled with music and people. The walls are new-- and there are both kids and adults, running around, gliding through the cigarette smoke. There is a man in the corner, in the peeling military boots and fresh khakis. His eyes are drowsy. ‘My boy’s a singer. Sing a little, Kyungsoo. Show your Uncle.’

The little boy peeks behind his father and slowly shuffles forward. Big eyes. Little voice. His tiny is palm is taken. A coin is placed in the middle - ‘You’re a good boy, aren’t you?’ - and he beams at it, how the silver shines over the smoke and lights.

“So... when all that business came, when his Papa died, it was pretty bad.” King exhaled throatily, performing the sign of the cross as he continued. “Fucking awful. Nobody’s really sure what happened. Kyungsoo wasn’t home at the time. Going back from an errand. Probably on the subway. When he came home, everyone in the den is dead. Including Papa.”

Bloody walls. Bloody tiles. Papa was in the living room and the television was still on. He is still holding his train ticket in one hand when he walks through the front door and asks for Papa. ‘Papa?’ And then he sees the flicker of the television-- how quiet it all is even though he can hear every word out of the quiz show. ‘Papa?’ All the lights are off but he can see the television so he lets it guide him. He feels a little weird the closer he gets. His brain gets fuzzy; his eyes sting; then he steps into the living room but someone holds him back.

‘Hey kid.’

King paused, placing the glasses he was cleaning with a spotless cloth in a neat line across him.

“Then he gets a choice, you want to die with the rest of them, or do you want to keep working?”

They tell him not to cry. Papa’s in heaven now. He’s a good boy; good boys don’t cry. Good boys
keep working. ‘So, what do you say?’ the man in the purple clothes -- purple like eggplants -- smiles
at him, ‘you want to come with me kid?’

Good boys don’t cry; good boys keep working. He nods slowly and takes the man’s hand.

‘What’s your name?’

“-- Kyungsoo. He’s had a hard start. And now look at him. Still good as gold. Deserves every bit of
success, that boy. Because you know the other kids in the circuit that start out like him? The work
eventually gets to them. They’re young you see. Their brains are still growing when they start out so
when they get older, they end up getting wired funny. Not Kyungsoo though. You look into that
kid’s eyes and you see he can still put two and two together. That’s what makes him a good partner.
Can’t trust someone who can’t look at you straight.”

Chanyeol nodded, swirling the drink in his glass, allowing the grand weight of the story to wash over
him slowly. He hadn’t been prepared and felt lightheaded all of a sudden. Sad too. Pretty fucking sad
actually.

“Maybe that makes him more... funny than the others though.” He murmured softly.

“What’s that, boy?”

Chanyeol looked up and shrugged his shoulders. “You know. If normal people get fucked up by this
stuff. Maybe because he doesn’t, it makes him the funny one.”

King chuckled and nodded, “That’s another way to look at it too, yeah.”

After a few minutes of quiet, Chanyeol found himself asking a direct question thinking now was a
better time than any.

“What do you know about the Jung Dynasty?”

This earned another set of chuckles from the barman. “You really are an Eastie boy, aren’t you?” He
shook his head, now arranging the glasses as he placed them in the shelves across him, “Old news.
The Jungs are all dead.”

Chanyeol blinked in confusion, an unnatural shiver jolting him up his seat. “How?”

“How do you think?” King smirked, before adding, “To be honest with you, can’t even remember
myself. Every great empire falls. Everyone dies. Not that big of a deal really.”

Just on time, the door behind the bar opened, signalling the end of the game.

They took the subway home. Kyungsoo excitedly shared that he had acquired a possible lead after a
conversation with the businessowner, Mr Partis. He was even more excited about this than the extra
factory space he had won from Liu Jun. With his hand on Chanyeol’s arm, he found himself peering
up and noticing the strange quietness in the man’s expression. It was a heaviness he had carried on
his face since leaving the bar. Kyungsoo met his gaze, before tightening his grip around Chanyeol as
“What’s wrong?”

“King. He told me stuff.” Chanyeol murmured. He couldn’t really lie, not to his face. “About you. About your life.”

Kyungsoo blinked, before smiling thinly, just resisting the urge to laugh. “Now, what?” The train jittered to the side as he allowed his grip to fall away - “You pity me because I’ve gone through something? Please.”

There it was: the smugness, the asshole tone that Kyungsoo used as a defence mechanism-- a way to cut off others before they pushed him on anything meaningful. Chanyeol responded with an eye-roll, ever the empathetic shoulder to cry on. “No, I don’t fucking pity you.” His eyes betrayed him, but he focused on watching Kyungsoo instead-- how the weight of his words had seemingly moved onto him,

“I just. I wondered how you manage to keep it together so well?” Chanyeol exhaled softly, as he patted his chest, “How does it not all carry… in here?”

No doubt this had surprised Kyungsoo who had expected a barrage of questions about the dim dirty bowels of his background. But he should have known better, considering how little he knew about Chanyeol’s family - suggesting he wasn’t all that moonstruck over sob stories either. He considered the question, as the train arrived at the platform and the rush-hour group flooded in -- city workers with their face-sized mobile phones, aggressive backpacks and thick dark blazers.

Kyungsoo blinked numbly as he then felt Chanyeol take his hand - pulling him back safely to the space behind him as others squeezed between and across them.

The train moved ahead and the passengers trembled.

With no further space to have a conversation, Kyungsoo responded to his silent message by carefully locking their fingers together.

Chanyeol then squeezed his hand back.

And they held that silent conversation for the entire journey.

Chanyeol returned home -- Kyungsoo in tow. They had barely uttered a word since the subway ride. All their hands back in their right - separate - places.

The day would weigh heavily on Chanyeol’s mind however-- especially during the study session with Hyewon later in the night where the quiet moments were plenty as she pondered over her workbook. Kyungsoo opted to remain in the bedroom, skipping their offer of dinner together and the
latest episode of *Conflicto de amor.*

“Hey. Uncle Chanyeol. Focus up.” Hyewon snapped her fingers across her uncle’s eyeline. She was resting across her bed whilst he was on the floor, stress chewing through a pencil.

She noticed the crease in the corner of his eyes. “Uncle Chanyeollie? *Hello*…” The nickname use was successful as his attention fluttered back and he scooched forwards from his spot, peering over her work.

“Sorry, kid. How are you doing? Which question was I going through…”

“You okay?” She asked after a moment, lips pursed.

Chanyeol met her gaze and smiled. “Course.” And then, his expression shifted into one of amusement -- as he laughed -- “What’s this? Is the great Park Hyewon showing love for her uncle? Should I go call your Gran? Get my bonus for the year?”

The response to that was a loud scowl. A Hyewon signature. She was so moody nowadays. But nothing he couldn’t handle.

Maybe now was really the time to accept that Hyewon wasn’t a baby. He couldn’t put his hands over her eyes anymore, thinking that she wouldn’t be able to peek through the gaps. So he opted to tell her the the truth because that’s what he needed to start doing. Especially when it came to things which affected her.

“I thought about your dad today.” Chanyeol shared after a second’s pause, “Just remembered him. How I missed him. And how… we never talk about him. Your mom too. You’re okay, right kiddo?”

His niece’s gaze lowered to the square paper across her. After a moment, she nodded as she met his warm eyes. “Yeah,” she pinched her bed sheets, as she nodded again, “I’m okay.”

It felt so strange talking about his brother’s passing. And it occurred to Chanyeol now that it shouldn’t ever be. It was *awful* -- sure -- but it wasn’t something they shouldn’t be able to talk about. He thought now, with great clarity, how much harder he had to work to make her parents people Hyewon could talk about easily -- because they should be known as people who loved her; not haunted her. So she didn’t grow up *as* fucked up. It was the best gift that he could give his brother. A daughter that grew up-- happy.

And less fucked-up than them: a pair of emotionally closed temperamental neat freaks with abandonment issues.

“It’s… okay not to be either. It’s okay to have bad days too.” Chanyeol offered her a smile, “But I’m here, whatever happens.”

And just as a second surprise of the day, Chanyeol was stunted as he found Hyewon leaping forwards and hugging him tightly.

“Love you, kid.”

And then he cried a little - just a sniffle.

“Crybaby.” Hyewon teased, before letting him go and waving her book at him, “Now, can you mark my homework? Just don’t get snot on it.”
Twenty minutes later and he was finally excused with fractions and all its amazing glory finally mastered. He completed the session by peppering his amazing niece with compliments-- hoping it would give her confidence as she was much better at it than she thought.

“Go kiss Kyungsoo good night then.” Hyewon called out after, as he was on his way out.

“Huh?”

Hyewon looked up at him, upside-down on- her bed, phone raised in mid-air.

“I said good night. Uncle Chanyeol.”

Chanyeol blew her a kiss as he stepped out of the door -- and it was there that he found himself walking right into Kyungsoo again. Just as he had this morning.

Funny how the world worked in circles like that. His corridor wasn’t even a small or narrow one. The world just really wanted to amp up the awkwardness between them. Maybe the gods were watching and wanted a laugh.

“Oh-- hey,” Chanyeol babbled awkwardly - totally caught off guard as he had just been about to coop into the bathroom and plan what to say, “I was about to… say good night.”

Kyungsoo seemed equally as shaken.

“Oh.” He nodded, “Yeah. Okay.”

Silence. The worst kind.

“So, good night?” Chanyeol posed, the syllables hard on his tongue, as he tried to resolve why Kyungsoo was acting awkward back. There was no reason for it; he was sure that he hadn’t been lusting like a lovesick teen over him all day. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Chanyeol stepped away first. He moved to the other end of the corridor -- towards the guest bedroom and it was there, that Kyungsoo eventually spoke up.

“I’m sorry, Chanyeol.” His voice was unsettlingly quiet -- lips barely moving around the syllables, as he stepped closer, “For five years ago.”

Funny. Chanyeol had imagined this apology before and he would’ve never imagined it happening under his own roof, across his corridor - with Kyungsoo wearing his slippers.

He expressed a slow nod, as if processing the apology in his head - each syllable being shaken and tested for meaning and sincerity. He spoke, just as softly back -

“Just five years ago?”

Chanyeol smiled sadly as he added,
“Kyungsoo, you’ve screwed me for at least the next ten.”

And there, he took the folded note out of his hoodie pocket and held it up between his fingers. The one he had nipped from Kyungsoo’s jacket when he hadn’t been looking on the way back home from the subway. An easy enough task. The hard part was actually reading the note and realising that at one point in his life -- he had felt happy enough to write it.

His message, from his sweet and doe-eyed twenty-one year old self, was as follows:

**Hey. If we’re still together, and we haven’t yet - want to get married? I know it’s stupid but I know we’ll never get around to asking each other.**

And then an indentation, as if added as an afterthought - a backfall: **If we aren’t together, why not?**

“I think I forgive you though.” Chanyeol nodded, tucking the note away, “Maybe.”

“Why?” Kyungsoo’s large eyes gleamed with tears - the beauty of it, still accentuated somewhat by the humdrum glow of his old lightbulbs. “Why would you forgive me?”

And there it was -- another million-dollar question now lingered in the air between them, carrying promises and answers instead of money and internet fame. Chanyeol could feel his heartbeat in his throat, grounded by the weight of his previous lover’s gaze, as he found the answer -- as clear as spring sunrise. No phone-a-friends. No silliness. No sob stories.

“Because I want you, Kyungsoo.”

Just a surrender.

Certain that he was going to get haunted by his decisions of yester-night’s, and keen not to further his descent into upset, Chanyeol uttered his male protagonist - first drama lead - confession one-liner and then rapidly excused himself to safely retire into his room. Sad and in all honesty, a little more sexually frustrated, than when he had commenced the day, Chanyeol fell back onto his bed and rolled comfortably onto his back.

He then retrieved the note from his pocket and attempted to read it again in the dark.

Twenty-one year old, armed-robber extraordinaire Park Chanyeol really thought he was going to get married one day. God. Out of all the shitty and sad things he’d heard that day, Chanyeol had to admit that this personal fact was the one that took the cake for him.

He thought it’d be best to apologise to himself now. Even if technically, it was the mistakes of the past that had led him here. Alone and still hung up over an ex.

*Sorry bro-self. Sorry it all got messed up.*
And after making peace with himself, he decided to do himself another favour and sleep it off.

No point in staying up and running the possibility of crying more. He was so irritatingly soft today. Maybe King was right. Maybe he really was pregnant...

His brief respite would not last long.

At some point, within the first twenty minutes of him resting in the single bed of his guest bedroom, still within the non-REM sleep cycle, Chanyeol became aware of noises. He ignored it, of course, and would’ve continued to do so, had it not been for the sense of extra weight adding to the bed and the sound of the mattress springs sighing beneath him.

“Chanyeol.” The voice was airy and familiar.

Tired, Chanyeol lifted an eyelid and gazed at the dark shadow beside him. He narrowed his eyes then wearily shook his head. It was clear to him what had happened.

If one carried the day’s events and incorporated them into dreams -- then he had pulled the excessive sexual tension of his day into his, instead of all the sad parts.

"Go away sex-dream Kyungsoo," he huffed sleepily, batting the figure away as he then lifted his other arm and made a show of pinching it hard to wake himself up.

This wasn't the first rodeo for sex dreams involving his ex-- obviously. And he’d expected one tonight-- of all nights, but he definitely wasn’t in the mood anymore.

"Go away..."

Then more movement followed-- the mattress moved beneath the weight again as it transferred itself from the mattress and onto him. Now, with the weight exerting some pressure on his various body parts -- but particularly his cock -- he found himself waking up, slipping away from the initial belief that this was just an imagination sex-dream concocted by his brain to cheer him up. "You're still cute when you're groggy," came the low drawl from the shadow as he settled on his thighs, “Cute.”

Chanyeol frowned. Kyungsoo never called him cute-- unless he was tipsy. He narrowed his eyes suspiciously, lifted an arm, and naturally began to pinch himself again. Harder, until he was biting his lip because it hurt.

This action was observed with a laugh. Kyungsoo then reached forwards, lowered his arms and encouraged him to sit up by pulling them. “Come on, wake up.”

"Why?" The context of what was happening remained blurry to Chanyeol. But sensing the warmth
of skin-on-skin contact, he entertained the request and propped himself up onto his elbows, glancing up at the Kyungsoo-shaped shadow in obvious confusion.

Admittedly, the words that followed did clarify it for him.

"Let's fuck."

Chanyeol’s initial response was a shiver. Kyungsoo rarely swore-- outside of bed -- which made it an obvious automatic turn-on. But then he frowned - keen to further understand the non-sexy reasons as to why he was now being straddled in bed.

"Why?" He echoed again.

A short pause. Chanyeol knew him so well he could already imagine his expression shifting in the dark-- the depth of his gaze, the warmth of his breath escaping his lips as he contemplated the question, using his butterfly touches over Chanyeol's skin as a guide to say what he needed to

"Because we're hurting," Kyungsoo whispered, the vaguest sense of sadness in his voice, "and it helps."

All it would take was for the man to roll his hips once and suddenly Chanyeol started feeling-- a lot more than the hurt Kyungsoo had described. A surge of feelings -- an outburst of them ran through him in all directions - head to toe, north to south, fingertip to fingertip. Not all were pleasure; some were nostalgic. Around him, the sleepy memories began to rise with the glimmers of the caravan bedroom surfacing in the dark -- the amber gleam of the shitty lamplight, the cold air when their toes peeked out of the blanket because the heating was forever jacked. All good memories; and he instantly wanted to feel more.

The air was suddenly filled with the hiss of a can opening - followed by the stale smell of his favourite beer.

"Open up." Kyungsoo’s finger tapped his bottom lip and his lips parted automatically.

Bitter liquid filled Chanyeol’s mouth until he was spluttering.

He swallowed it down with a grimace. And then he sat up further, and this time he was able to touch him to keep Kyungsoo balanced and he was left with the overwhelming realisation that this was truly happening. Despite all that had occurred, his night was going to deliver him a beloved ex-- on his lap of all places.

"I can’t… see shit." And he wanted to see Kyungsoo. He wanted to see him so much.

"You don’t need to." His hands were taken and placed around Kyungsoo’s middle where he consciously began to draw circles as Kyungsoo leaned forwards, arms wrapping around his neck. The feelings came again - a wave of warmth which hit Chanyeol square in the chest and he immediately thought his heart was going to burst.

Mayday. Man down. Emergency landing required.

"No kissing on the lips." Kyungsoo whispered into his ear, as his fingers wound gently into his hair, "Just like old times."

A reference to the first two honeymoon months of their previous relationship. The source of his and Junnyeon’s definition for the NFF relationships that would subsequently dictate the last five years of his life -- i.e. No feels fucking. There was something about lips -- Kyungsoo’s especially -- that had
always felt undoubtedly affectionate.

Apparently he wasn’t in that mood tonight.

Yet Chanyeol was so ready to lose it -- to throw himself at the sensations he’d sorely missed with reckless abandon -- but just for a moment, he found himself faced with the realisation that his actions tonight could lead to a lot of future upset. Why? Because Kyungsoo had steamrollered him; and a lot of people had helped him make peace with everything and return to a semi-decent/sane version of himself. If he did this, there was every chance he would be letting them down.

Was this supposed to be the vicious circle?

"Huh?" Kyungsoo leaned back slightly, as if hearing the seesawing of his thoughts.

But god -- he smelled good. Chanyeol always thought so-- just like then. He used to hold him just like this, then too. And God, he missed him so much. He was right really. It hurt; and holding him like this made it all hurt less because it brought him back to a much happier time.

Considering that he was Chanyeol of all people, would he really let a sense of… guilt stop him from getting dicked? (By Kyungsoo, of all people.)

"Nothing." He affirmed then, fingers digging into the other’s skin as he grinned in the dark. Wicked. Guilt-free. *Fuck them.* Why should Chanyeol care? He never did before. "God you have no idea how bad I want you, Kyungsoo. *Fuck.*" Chanyeol removed his shirt, breathless, as Kyungsoo quietly hummed, tracing his toned chest with his fingers as they slipped down. Cold tips on hot skin.

"I’m all yours, trouble."

Chanyeol’s chest tightened at the old nickname as a cloudy heat flooded the front of his brain. He wondered if it had been a slip of the tongue or whether it had been on purpose-- a little harmless ploy to further tighten his grip on Chanyeol.

Power play and all that.

Not that there was no need to play. Chanyeol was in full surrender mode. He was at his lover’s mercy, end of.

"No regrets in the morning, yeah?" Kyungsoo murmured as he tossed his own shirt over his head and crumpled the beer can with one hand after draining it.

"With you? Always. Everything’s a regret." Chanyeol leaned forwards -- taking the first draw, the first cut-- as he kissed Kyungsoo’s collarbone, dizzy -- giddy -- with the taste, "But I do it anyway."

And he would do it again; over and over again like it was his favourite record that everyone else hated but he knew all the words to. He even knew the dance moves; and sat through the damn concerto.

It was *Don Kyungsoo* and Chanyeol was the lucky conductor.

"This is still strictly business, okay?" Kyungsoo’s mouth was on his temple. They were embracing now. It would’ve looked more tender if Kyungsoo hadn’t started to grind against him so hard.

"Got it."
Later on, Chanyeol would note that it didn't feel very "business" when Kyungsoo murmured his name into his hair to coax him into coming; or when he brushed fingers teasingly against Kyungsoo's sides after because he wanted to check that he was still ticklish and Kyungsoo hiccuped from laughing so hard--

But if this was the modern definition of "strictly business" then Chanyeol would take it.

And goddamn did he take. He was now content that he could fully shake the hands of the guardians of the second circle of hell and they would say “good job”. On to the next circle you go.

Inferno, indeed.

The next morning, Hyewon was met with the hideous sight of an uncle and said uncle's ex at the kitchen table. Both looked particularly rough against the brilliant white light of the kitchen LEDs. They were up early because she had knocked on her uncle’s door, keen to check on him after last night’s sop parade, and had ended up glimpsing the rotten state of the guest bedroom.

The sound of her screaming had been enough to get their feet moving.

Now, both were shamelessly wearing sunglasses indoors, seeming every bit as dazed as they had been upstairs. One was slouched over the breakfast counter whilst the other uneasily mouthed through breakfast cereal.

Hyewon watched with quiet amusement as Kyungsoo lifted a hand, then scuttled away to vomit in the bathroom -- as Chanyeol’s face planted onto the table with a thud and a pained groan.

"You two are gross. I am getting the bus." She murmured coldly, passing by her uncle and hitting him lightly on the top of the head with her bookbag.

He jolted upright, sunglasses falling away as he rubbed his eyes.

“Good luck on your test today, kid.” He croaked, reaching for a hug - “You’re going to do amazing.”

“You smell like sick. Please shower.” She then took a yellow post-it note from the row on their fridge and pressed it hard on his forehead.

2 MISSED CALLS; KIM JONG IN. EMERGENCY!

“Someone’s been calling you. He sounds worried so you better answer.”

Hyewon then walked to the door and glanced back at her uncle, shaking her head as she noticed how his head had hit the breakfast work top again.

“Bye kid.” Chanyeol managed.
“Bye.”

“Bye Hyewon.” This goodbye came from an unlikely -- and sickly looking source -- halfway down the steps.

It was strange but Hyewon was getting slowly accustomed to sharing the house with Kyungsoo too.

“Bye.” She greeted him, observing the way he brushed past her and took a glass of water from the cooler-- squeezing her Uncle’s shoulder gently in the process as he offered it to him.

God. *What a mess.* She thought with some amusement as she finally reached the front door, slotting headphones into her ears as she jogged across the yard to the bus stop--

Mr-Friend-Junmyeon was going to *love* this.

-//-

Chapter End Notes

@ chanyeol, wtf man. i suppose now i gotta add 'pinning' and 'sad sex' to our tags hsbdfs

so this chapter was pretty long and my thoughts for this one was, i knew where i wanted them to end up, and gave the rest up for a toss. where would they go today? and they did quite a lot lololol. also i realise now that i have the story so clear in my head that i skip over the fact that u guys don't and are actual angels for reading along and trusting me that i'll explain everything huhuh <3

and i will! dw, everything will be explained i.e why did they break up? wtf happened lololol. the next chapter will deal with the consequences of the end of this one and there are plenty (smh pcy). umm, other things - this is probs a good time to say that this story is going to end happily. VERY happily. lololol. look how sad they are all the time. i won't accept anything less c: - okay, thanks so much for reading! be well and have a lovely day as always c: !!
it’s the worst; who truly stuck the knife in first

Chapter Summary

-- i cheated myself,
like i knew i would,
i told you i was trouble,
you know that I'm no good --

-- you know i’m no good, amy winehouse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

//-

PRESENT DAY

//-

The plot for the telenovela epic Conflicto de amor comprised the fundamental elements of all telenovelas: a forbidden romance steeped in tragedy, murderous argumentative families, a shitbucket full of secrets, a “presumed” dead main character which miraculously returns during a family wedding etc. And yet, despite the cliched nature of it, and the fact that its storylines catered to a market which he didn’t primarily fit, Chanyeol still found them utterly encapsulating. There was something about the over-dramatisation of every-tiny-thing which entertained him in such a way that no other type of television could compare. Plus, their stories, convoluted as they were, had always provided a nice escape from the adrenaline-fuelled events of his past -- and the dreary hum of his present.

For example, he may be feeling pretty down today - but at least his Aunt Eliza didn’t just try and stab him with blunt safety scissors.

Today, Chanyeol found himself resting on his couch with an episode playing on his phone screen. His head still hurt like a fucker from the previous night’s festivities -- and since Kyungsoo was busy showering, he considered it best to use his free time wisely. It was actually a grand shame that he felt so poorly because this episode was undoubtedly one of the highlights of the week. The plot of Conflicto de amor centered on the beautiful Alma Ferrer and Julio Perez and their forbidden romance -- forbidden because they were the two oldest children of two rival families. Nothing criminal, thankfully - just harmless rival bakery businesses. It was set in the gorgeous city of Mérida in Mexico with the interiors filmed in a traditional manor set across acres of sprawling gardens. Today, Alma and Julio will finally reconcile after three episodes of turmoil -- spurred on by a wild accusation of infidelity by the embittered Rosa Fernandez, previously betrothed to Julio Perez and an all around bad-ass bitch.

Reading the subtitles with masked concentration, Chanyeol found himself yawning, observing the opening credits as they introduced the cast, his tired brain humming along with the music…
recognising the faces…

And then something astonishing happened.

The elusive sex-dream he had been seeking for days finally came. But in a form, he perhaps hadn’t exactly expected. Before he could figure out exactly what was going on, Chanyeol found his gaze widening as he peered at the phone screen, leaning forwards and mouthing a stunned “Oh?” as the faces on his screen appeared and became unexplainably… familiar.

Cue music.

INT. PARK FAMILY MANOR - AFTERNOON. THE UPSTAIRS LIVING SPACE.

KYUNGSOO. 26. MYSTERIOUSLY HANDSOME. ENTERS THE SCENE. HE SLAMS THE DOOR LOUDLY. CHANYEOL. 26. KYUNGSOO'S DEJECTED LOVER. GLANCES AT HIM AND BACKS AWAY. DRAMATICALLY.

CHANYEOL:
Kyungsoo! You’re back? After all these years?

KYUNGSOO:
Yes. Chanyeol. I have returned after the failure of my father’s online bakery business. Not only for my inheritance - But for the only thing in my life that ever truly mattered to me. Our love.

HE REACHES OUT FOR CHANYEOL’S HAND. CHANYEOL HESITATES. HE TURNS AWAY TO FACE THE WINDOW.

CHANYEOL:
I really can’t see how this can happen. Not after... what you did.

KYUNGSOO REACHES OUT AND TURNS CHANYEOL TO FACE HIM.

KYUNGSOO:
You have to forgive me, mi amor. I can’t help myself. I still love you. I never stopped loving you. I’ll do everything I can to gain your trust again.

HE PAUSES.

(CONT'D). I’ll even agree to all the bedroom stuff you are too afraid to ask about.

CHANYEOL NODS HAPPILY. THEY ALMOST KISS BUT JUNMYEON SUDDENLY ENTERS AND DISRUPTS THE

JUNMYEON:
Kyungsoo! You useless scumbag! How dare you show your face here! Don't you have any shame? You think you can claim his heart again after what you did? I'll kill you! I'll kill you!

JUNMYEON TRIES TO STAB KYUNGSOO WITH BLUNT SCISSORS BUT IS APPREHENDED BY A GLASS OF V
CHANYEOL:
It is too late, Junmyeon. I have accepted his love.
I will give up my father's extensive rival bakery business so Kyungsoo and I can finally be together.

JONGIN THEN APPEARS FROM BEHIND A CURTAIN. 24. SEXY. HEAD COUNSEL FOR THE PARK PATRIARCH-
THE THREE GASP IN UNISON.

CHANYEOL:
Jongin. You heard everything.

JONGIN:
How could you do this, Chanyeol?
You idiot!
How could you disrespect the rules?
You only had to follow three and now you are going to bring shame to this family!

JONGIN REACHES ACROSS AND SLAPS CHANYEOL ACROSS THE FACE. CHANYEOL SCREAMS. A FIGURE

YIXING:
Chanyeol! What's wrong? What are they doing to you?

KYUNGSOO STEPS BACK INTO HIS PLACE AND PUSHES YIXING BACK.

KYUNGSOO:
Chanyeol, who is this?

CHANYEOL IS UNABLE TO ANSWER. UNDERSTANDING DAWNS ON EVERYONE.

YIXING:
I'm Zhang Yixing of course. The man whom Park Chanyeol truly loves.

HE PULLS A SHOCKED CHANYEOL INTO A HEATED KISS. KYUNGSOO STUMBLING BACK IN SHOCK AND FAI!

“Chanyeol?” Another shake; with a tad more force, “Wake up.”

Kyungsoo peered down at the sleeping man with the mobile phone on his face as he mumbled,
dimples deep as he smiled.

“Hmm.” And then, “Y--Yixing?”
Kyungsoo’s face was unimpressed as he leaned forwards and tugged on the earphone where the faint music accompanying the rolling credits of the telenovela was audible.

At the sensation, Chanyeol finally opened his eyes, not even bothering to hide the glimpse of disappointment in his expression that his wonderful dream had ended. He removed the phone with a huff before catching Kyungsoo’s eye and smiling brightly.

“Hey.”

“We’re late.” Kyungsoo muttered, before walking to the doorway and flicking the light in the living room, causing the groggy man to whine loudly in pain as he shielded his eyes.

The drive to Jongin’s meet-up place -- a dirty junk yard (why.) -- was predictably awkward. Although Chanyeol was certain that they had mutually agreed that last night had been an event to forget -- it was hard not to recognise the context that lurked beneath it. Five years had passed since Kyungsoo took a hammer and shattered Chanyeol’s heart; and now, only a few days after locking eyes at a police station, they would have to live with the reality that despite the many empty years which had spanned, they remained very sexually compatible.

Very.

Chanyeol would’ve brooded on it more had it not been for Jongin and his anger.

Stood in the middle of the junkyard, covering their mouths and noses with their sleeves, the pair were frozen as they were angrily scolded by the hotshot lawyer.

“--I tell you, go find a safe place to sleep for a few hours. Let’s sort out bail. And then you fucking disappear on me? What’s that about? Jesus H.C. I’m there everyday okay, from 6am, working my ass off, listening to a bunch of whiny cops with self-confidence issues…”

The rant continued in a similar manner. Long story short, Jongin was peeved that he had been kept out of the loop of whatever shenanigans Chanyeol and Kyungsoo had been up to. They were supposed to be a team apparently -- and in their neglect, they had benched him like a coach with no taste.

It was hard to focus on his words however - for Jongin, in his Givenchy suit, was across a huge bonfire in which he was freely throwing papers and boxes in like a zookeeper feeding a huge fiery beast. Chanyeol coughed painfully, the stench of the smoke overwhelming, as he observed Jongin shake a set of folders into the orange flames -- the flicker of papers glimmering yellow as they crumbled in the heat.

“Honestly, bros.” Jongin finished, shaking his head, “You kinda hurt my feelings. You know how much I value client relationships and I feel like you shut me out.”

“We’re sorry.” Kyungsoo choked, waving the smoke away, as he patted Chanyeol on the back and
began to wander back towards the car - “He’ll explain everything. I’ll wait over there.”

Chanyeol internally groaned, shooting the man a look of derision as he walked. However he did as he was told-- covering the key parts of the past few days: the pursuit of the diamond, the potential gang-related source and finally the rat which had tipped the police about the Lockerman operations. Jongin listened intently, clearly satisfied now that he was clued in. Down to the last three boxes, Chanyeol stepped forwards, deciding to reverse the questioning on him -

“What the hell are you doing with all this?”

Jongin glanced at him before winking. “Spring cleaning.”

He chuckled warmly before adding, “So, are you and Kyungsoo are planning to find the rat? I suggest you do it quick. The police want someone behind bars-- more than they want to find the diamond. They think they can substitute the constitutional importance with the media play of Notorious criminal finally caught! Honestly.” The lawyer rolled his eyes, “I’m trying to stem the tide of warrants as much as possible-- but there’s only so many state prosecutors I can assassinate…”

Chanyeol blinked and turned to him in surprise. Jongin paused before laughing loudly.

“Your face! But honestly. Get to it. Otherwise, we are looking at the biggest criminal case this city has seen in our lifetimes and… I have a holiday to sunny California already booked two weeks from now.”

The last remaining box was tossed into the fire by Chanyeol as he laughed along. Jongin was such a fancy narcissistic asshole-- but so incredibly endearing at the same time. Truly… the devil.

“So,” Jongin looked at him then, deceivingly casual, “Are you and Kyungsoo fucking again?”

Chanyeol physically choked. This led to the lawyer’s next round of manic laughter. “Honestly, bro. You’re such an easy target.” And then, he shrugged as he explained, “I dunno, you got this whole -- matching sunglasses thing going. He touched you with that pat on the back. You’re obeying him like a little pup. You got this… vibe all of a sudden.”

And then when Chanyeol couldn’t formulate a straight answer, too hungover to think let alone lie-- he found himself being lightly hit on the head with Jongin’s briefcase.

“Seriously? It’s been three days, bro. What did I say? Remember the rules.” He sighed deeply then, glancing back at the car where he tossed a resting Kyungsoo a contrastingly happy wave -- “God, I only started taking sexual psychology lessons a few weeks ago and I’m already calling people left and right.”

Sexual psychology? Somehow the lawyer studying such a subject didn’t surprise Chanyeol at all. Later on, Jongin would explain that it was to advance his negotiation and mediation skills. Apparently, on the most fundamental level, plenty of criminals were actually very driven by sex and sexual appeal. Mastering this art of communication would bring him closer to them. In more ways than one.

“That’s bizarrely genius.” Chanyeol retorted as they walked back together, wondering about all the sorts of fun stuff he would find out if he had a similar intuition. Mostly about Kyungsoo, of course.

“What can I say.”
It was there that Chanyeol asked a question, fully intending to be subtle - “So, how do you know if… the vibe… if it’s mutual?” - only to be hit by the briefcase again.

They would reach a very sleepy looking Kyungsoo by the time Jongin recovered his briefcase which deprived Chanyeol of an answer. Afterwards, as the lawyer offered them each an unnecessarily long and intimate hug, Jongin would drop his sole legal (illegal?) instruction of the meeting.

“When you get your rat. Leave the tongue in, please.” He said sweetly, as if explaining recipes and not at all referencing top tier-torture, “We’re going to need someone who will testify. So minimal visible damage. Got it?”

The two nodded their heads in unison, further amusing the already piqued Jongin.

“Alright then. Keep me updated this time, yeah?” He waved them off with a dramatised priest’s blessing as he slipped into his brand new ride -- a deep navy blue Maserati granturismo -- “Go off and do good work, my children.”

For the first time in days, Kyungsoo and Chanyeol were going to be separated. Some anxiety about this parting had latched onto Chanyeol -- not only because he was an irrational lowlife, but he was aware that there was safety in numbers. Especially in their line of work. However, Kyungsoo had been insistent -- keen on using the time to configure his thoughts about how best to pursue their lead and offer Chanyeol the space to get on with his daily life as best he can. A daily life which Chanyeol had sorely missed.

Not.

“Here’s a phone. I’ll contact you through this.” They were at the subway station and talking through Chanyeol’s open car window. From behind him, Chanyeol could see other drivers getting disgruntled by his delayed stay at the drop-off point. He responded with a pleasant milieu of finger gestures as they drove past and Kyungsoo continued to say goodbye.

“Let me know if there’s any emergencies. Keep safe Chanyeol.”

“What?” Chanyeol lifted an eyebrow, returning his attention to him, “Are you worried about me? Please. It’s you I’m worried about.” Platonically.

Kyungsoo smiled as he adjusted his glasses, opting to wait until Chanyeol retrieved the phone before responding. “Also, I found a new place to stay. So I won’t be in your way anymore.”

“Oh.” Chanyeol blinked, uncertain how exactly he should process this revelation as he consciously pocketed the phone -- “Oh, that’s -- good. Yeah.” Disappointment marked his voice, plain as day,
and he frowned as he returned his eyeline to the road ahead. *Message received.*

At least, Chanyeol thought so -- before Kyungsoo then reached forwards and lightly squeezed his arm as a goodbye. There was no need for such blatant (platonic) appreciation for his biceps and yet there it was.

Message… failed to send. Inbox on fire. *Help.*

Instead of driving away, as he should have, Chanyeol found himself watching Kyungsoo as he disappeared into the subway station -- as platonic friends did -- and it was there that he was met by a vibration in his phone. Not his Kyungsoo hotline, however. Just the normal one.

Boring.

```
from: bunny
Oi dckhd
We need 2 talk
Ramen place asap
```

Almost instantly, a chill struck the back of Chanyeol’s head at the recognition that his beloved Junmyeon had failed to use any emojis or smiley faces. Even angry ones.

This must be serious.

The location of the best ramen in town, appropriately named *The Ramen Place,* had been Chanyeol and Junmyeon’s favourite eatery since they first started living together. It had been the site of many dinners and lunches -- birthday celebrations -- friend- ni-versaries-- and it also happened to be the location where they scolded each other about their life choices. There was something about having a hot bowl of noodles across you, as someone tells you to get your life together, that slightly soothes the sting of an unexpected intervention.

Chanyeol, still hiding his incredibly puffy and irritated eyes from the night before, found himself in this situation as Junmyeon eyed him coldly from across the table. It wouldn’t take long before the real reasons for their meeting was revealed. His friend extended his phone across the table and tapped the screen in three slow chilling beats-

It portrayed a Twitter conversation between Hyewon and Junmyeon. It turned out that they were mutuals on the platform -- an open channel of communication occasionally utilised by Junmyeon to remind Chanyeol (through his niece) that they would be meeting up. Without Hyewon and her dedication to maintaining an active post-it note wall schedule, Chanyeol would’ve 100% missed all of the game nights he promised his friend, and as such would have placed their close friendship in jeopardy. In many ways really, Hyewon was truly the primary guiding light of Chanyeol’s dreary existence.
“The fact that I would need to be tweeted at by your twelve year old niece to find out that your scumbag ex was back in town....” Junmyeon muttered, shaking his head as he downed his drink angrily.

The message exchange was as followed:

@hyewon234
@jm1991 u should call my uncle asap
we have a house guest
bit worried lol

@jm1991
@hyewon234 who

@hyewon234
@jm1991 um clues (ーー;
pandathrowingcomputeroutwindow.gif
guycryinginrain.gif
dualipanewrules.gif
matthewmcconaughey.gif

“Why is that guy there?” Chanyeol asked, narrowing his eyes at the moving picture of Matthew McConaughey, trapped in an endless loop, looking confused.

“It’s a climactic scene from Matthew McConaughey’s 2009 film *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*, you uncultured cow.” Junmyeon defended, before shaking his head in disgust as he retrieved his phone - eyes never leaving the guilty expression on his friend’s face - “So it must be true. Alright outside.”

He slurped the rest of his bowl and then jerked a threatening thumb at the parking area.

With his arms folded defensively across his chest, Chanyeol watched with some level of trepidation as the older man brushed past him and beckoned for him to stand across his van.

He knew exactly what was coming-- something unnecessarily dramatic. This was Junmyeon’s *style*. Whilst in anger, Chanyeol would be content with shouting out and hitting things -- in comparison, Junmyeon’s brief stint in film school coupled with his love for movies meant that he was oblivious to the nuances of conveying simple emotion. Why throw a fit over getting food poisoned (accidentally) - when you could throw a 2 hour dinner party whereby nobody turns up to remind your roommate that he will die alone because he won’t learn how to cook like a normal functioning human adult?

“Junmyeon,” Chanyeol sighed loudly, both drowsy and concerned - “What are we doing out here?”

“Simple.” Junmyeon reached into his van, clinging on to the door as he switched the engine on -- “What I want you to do is lie down, across my van. Flat. Then I’m going to *run you over*. And then, I’ll reverse and run you *over again*. And we’ll do that a couple of times.”

See? Junmyeon’s *style*.
Chanyeol groaned loudly as he buried his face into his hands.

“... then after, you’ll look in the mirror - see how fucked up you look- then, and only then, you may have some idea of what you were like after that dipshit Kyungsoo left you.”

“Junmyeon,” huffed Chanyeol, waving his hands in defeat as he sighed loudly - “I’m going back inside.”

He was not going to let his Miso get cold for this.

Unfortunately, his intervention was not quite finished. “No,” Junmyeon’s hand was tight on his arm, as he shoved Chanyeol back to face him, “Listen here you little shithead. I love you, right? I. love. you. So you’re going to listen to me. I want you to shake that little chestnut of a brain of yours and try and remember... think back to five years ago... what was it like?”

There was no doubting the effect of the question. It was a topic for Chanyeol that was contemplated even more rarely in his thoughts than his father -- his disownment -- and his brother’s death combined. And he really hated thinking about those things.

Five years ago, to Park Chanyeol, was the equivalent of every shitty part in the middle of a movie -- whereby the protagonist received the call that the job was bust, his Nana had died, his boyfriend was shacking up with the infinitely prettier cheerleader -- but unlike those, this was real life, and there had been no big happy ending to plaster up the gaping crusty wound left by the emotional trauma he experienced. It had just been a blackhole of bad that sucked up all the good that he had managed to build up in the years before. And so, when he found himself with the opportunity, he locked it all up somewhere -- with metal and bolted it tight. As he had done before with other things.

But this was a little harder to lock up now, with Kyungsoo back in his life and Junmyeon fiddling with the keys. And glimpses slipped through with ease --memories of broken things, broken him, an empty bed, a dead phone line.

Bang!

He still had scars. But those, from the attack, weren’t the ones hurting.

Five years was a long time. But a wound was a wound-- and it was clear now that Chanyeol’s never fully healed. It was chronic and ugly. And as the memories slowly began to trickle in -- of the tears, the burning heat of the anger, the terror of what he might have done to deserve such an end -- he soon found his emotional resolve failing to hold against the flood. It didn’t help that he could see how angry Junmyeon was. He had been angry then too - but not at Chanyeol.

Everyone just pitied Chanyeol. Poor bastard.

“You didn’t speak to anyone, Chanyeol. You didn’t eat. You didn’t sleep. All you did was wonder and ask why he left you…. And none of us could answer that for you. We wanted you to get better, we helped you with therapy of every kind, and all he did was make it worse. Even when he wasn’t there. Even in absence, he’s a total dick.”

Junmyeon then reached forwards having noticed the taller man sniffling. He gave Chanyeol a few comforting but hard pats on the back -- the sort that caused you to skip a breath or two.

“There, there, you little self-destructive sap. I’m here for you.”

He had been. There would be no Chanyeol today-- had it not been for Junmyeon’s infallible support in the past. Back then, Chanyeol had been too sick to take care of himself -- but too angry to allow
his family in. This had left his armed robber-friend to pick up the pieces and he did with surprising
care. If there was anyone Chanyeol should listen to then it was him.

“L...
“We had sex…”

“You had… what?”

And for the third time that day, Chanyeol found himself getting hit on the head -- this time by his sunglasses for he was fortunate that Junmyeon didn’t have anything bigger to hand. The fury was apparent as Junmyeon shoved past him, hard, as he beckoned him over with a loud -

“Get back in front of my fucking van, Park Chanyeol. I’m running you over for real.”

Another rant followed in front of the van. Shocked by Chanyeol’s actions, and a little touched by how much he was crying, Junmyeon did eventually ease up on the cursing of his future bloodline and promise that he would hunt Kyungsoo down until his dying day. There was no doubting that the damage had been done. The rules had been broken and there was little that Junmyeon could do to hold it all back. As much as he loved Chanyeol, he was truly the one letting it all happen. Out of nowhere, Junmyeon was suddenly reminded of a viral video he’d seen of a robotoy that was programmed to be attracted to noise: across it, there had been a small child clapping his hands hoping to engage, but instead the robotoy… followed the cars, crossed the fucking highway and got smushed.

Chanyeol.

“What evs man. Just don’t come crying to me when he Daniel Cleavers’ you.” Junmyeon sighed, as he handed his friend a tissue from the pocket tissues in his jacket. He always had them handy in case he punched anyone up and they got a nosebleed. Also, for these occasions, when Chanyeol was PMSing and crying over everyone every three seconds.

“You’re right though, man. He really owes me a lot.”

And it was clearer to Chanyeol now, more than ever, that what he really needed were answers for the barrage of questions he’d held close to his chest since they met again. The most pressing one being --

Did Kyungsoo ever love him?

Because if there was one thing Chanyeol remembered most clearly from five years ago, it was the gut-twisting feeling of loss and loneliness which had plagued him ever since.

-//-

FIVE YEARS AGO

-//-
A low whistle. Slender fingers then flicked the slip of paper, honing on the number of zeroes, as it was lowered and the unsmiling face of his client appeared clear across his vision.

“It’s for a loved one.” Kyungsoo retorted, bemused by the lawyer’s reaction, as he watched him.

“Oh, I bet.” Jongin chuckled, returning his gaze to the document as he scribbled down the value he’d seen -- “This is a lot of money. What do you think they’ll do with it? Buy and renovate a European castle? Invest in a fleet of yachts?”

The man across the desk raised an eyebrow. “That would be a little insensitive.”

“Sure,” Jongin smiled awkwardly, drumming a finger on the paper as he scribbled down the name of the recipient -- PARK, CHANYEOL -- “This is a will. I forgot. I don’t do many of them.”

It was true. Strangely, wills didn’t form as much of his practice as other areas -- tax, wealth investment, financial advisory. When they did, it tended to be contentious-- i.e. Mistress 1 was having royal beef with Wife 3 because Mr Mob Boss choked before he could change it and sign her in. Now with that example in mind, it actually made sense that his clients weren’t too fond of thinking about the beyond. After all, Jongin had observed that criminals, bless their damned souls, generally failed to acknowledge the high risk of their lifestyle… until it was too late. Once again, he found himself impressed by the foresight shown by Do Kyungsoo -- no doubt his wisest, and most mysterious client.

As the lawyer pursued quietly with his draft, Kyungsso found himself looking through the office’s open window. It was edging close to summertime. Close but not quite; it was the midway point. Spring was clinging with its fresh air and stunning blossoms-- but the days were getting longer. It was the perfect weather for a long walk -- in a park or by a coast somewhere.

Sandy and golden.

“You know, Kyungsoo.” Jongin began, as the man’s attention returned to him, gaze expertly still, “If you don’t mind me saying. You’re a kinda... ghostly guy. You know? There but not quite. Your documents all check out but I bet none of them are really real. You take the subway here but we both know you can afford a driver. You shake my hand but we all know I should be shaking yours.” The lawyer smiled his challenging shark-esque smile, “Long story short. Humor me. Can you give me one thing about you that is actually real?”

The sun was setting slowly - casting dark shadows over Kyungsso’s hands which remained still over his lap. He looked up and met the lawyer’s gaze as he smiled thoughtfully. Sunsets reminded him of Chanyeol. By now, he would be setting up with his friend Junmyeon. Probably wrestling each other to the ground as per routine.

“I have a boyfriend.” Kyungsoo spoke softly, fondly, gaze somewhere else -- with someone else, “He’s 185cm tall and he has big pointed ears like a tree elf. He spends all day with me and then at night he goes and digs tunnels to rob private vaults. He gets colds easily but he hates wearing warm clothes. He likes ramen but he hates egg fried rice. He likes animals even when they bite…”

Kyungsoo reached across and tapped a pale finger over the document.

“And he’s not going to be spending that money on yachts.”

Jongin smiled, eyebrow raised. The wording had piqued him. “Sounds like a keeper.” He then spoke quieter, “Are you planning on going somewhere, Mr Do?”
In the distance, the city bell rang welcoming the hour. Kyungsoo’s gaze had returned to that of the street across him, where the shadows were expanding as the skies stained oranges and pinks.

“A red Hyundai has circled your street five times in the past hour.” Kyungsoo said, as cool as a passing thought, despite the crease of worry which lined his eyes.

“Is something the matter?” Jongin looked towards the window with a frown, “Should I get someone?”

“No.” Kyungsoo shook his head, managing a smile as he urged for him to continue. “I’ll wait until you complete the document.”

His mind released the street -- drifting away again, with the thoughts of the beach. Hot sun. Quiet hum of the tide. And in this escape dream stood a giant.

185cm tall.

Kyungsoo privately smiled as he spoke again.

“It’s nothing I can’t handle.”

---

PRESENT DAY

---

A few hours after his and Junmyeon’s emotional weekly reunion, Chanyeol would find himself in a small shiny elevator zooming up to the penthouse of a skyscraper just outside the city’s affluent business district. In his hand, he held a bag containing two bottles of Prosecco, in his pocket contained unnamed necessities (clue: not gum), and in his heart, he carried the guilt that there was a large possibility that him and Kyungsoo were going to do something today that would further disappoint Junmyeon.

His fate had been sealed after Kyungsoo texted him his new address -- and a request to bring wine if he so wished. And back in the day, wine tended to mean one thing.

Clue: it would definitely not have pleased Junmyeon.

As the elevator door opened to the penthouse floor, Chanyeol found himself suddenly gripped with wonder at why he was going to allow himself to suffer through this again when he had only recovered from a bad hangover. But he quickly diminished the thought, deciding he was sounding way too much like Junmyeon, who was basically a senior citizen with a criminal record at this point.
“Fucking hell, Kyungsoo.”

Placing the two bottles of Prosecco on the kitchen worktop as he passed it, Chanyeol toddled forwards in his socks to gape at the floor-to-ceiling layer of glass which held beyond it the most amazing view of the city. He pressed up as close to it as possible, just managing to restrain himself from pressing his sweaty hands against it like a kid in an aquarium. He was blown away by how high up they were -- Floor 51 -- and how much smaller everything looked in comparison.

From above, he watched the roads which he’d driven on, the host of cars and traffic reduced to miniature moving shapes-- like round fat bugs. Ants. All in a line on their way home. The people crossing the pavements looked smaller still. No wonder why movie monsters never had any guilt squishing half the population. They looked so puny and insignificant from above.

The city’s imposing set of towers and skyscrapers on the other hand seemed much closer. Chanyeol only realised now how large they were, and finally identified who they belonged to, because he was finally at eye-level. Before, he would rarely look up. He never had to. Even in his armed robber days, buildings like these had to be penetrated safely from underground.

He then wondered which one of the sad cubicles he could view into was his brother’s workplace.

“The best part is actually through the bedroom.” Kyungsoo uttered, breaking Chanyeol’s train of thought as he beckoned him over to a door across the plush living space.

Chanyeol snorted. “Are you trying to seduce me?” He teased as he followed suit.

Kyungsoo looked back and smiled as he held the door open.

They crossed the bedroom. It was 25 strides across with a bed so big that it could probably house a village -- and a television so huge it could entertain a village -- you get the point. Chanyeol was too overcome with awe to fully register dimensions and details as he stumbled out onto a balcony that contained --

“Oh-- Fuck off, Kyungsoo.”

The penthouse, despite already being at the kingly level of a penthouse, also had an outdoor pool which had to be one of the most indulgent things Chanyeol had ever seen. It was a perfect square, overlooking an expanse of green, guaranteeing full privacy for whatever sinful and non-sinful activities one was planning for its lukewarm waters.

Bowled over, and being a total water baby, Chanyeol found himself sauntering over, crouching down, and making waves with his hands. The water was warm from the beat of sunshine. He couldn’t help but smile widely, before looking up at the penthouse’s proprietor and wiping his hand against his jeans.

“Have you taken a dip yet?”

Kyungsoo shook his head lightly, stepping back into the bedroom as he uttered the words,

“Not yet.”

It was fair to say that Chanyeol, at that point, was feeling thoroughly seduced.
The actual reason for their meeting, aside from potential bedroom activities, had been to discuss Kyungsoo’s lead. His name was Kang Minhyuk. 31. Handsome -- why Kyungsoo felt the need to mention that both baffled and ruffled Chanyeol a little -- and an ex-client.

They discussed the matter over Kyungsoo’s kitchen worktop. Over wine. Like two moms. Except instead of pictures of their beloved sprogs, the worktop across them was covered by pictures of criminals and lists of criminal activity --

“He ran a pawn shop, midtown. He had a side business in smuggling antiquities across problematic borders. Family connections. But get this, apparently in midtown he’s known as Mr Diamante because he’s so expert in telling between a dud and a diamond. It made sense now because he had an amazing collection… which I used to watch over. Until a few months ago when he withdrew. My contracts are open so I let him. But Mr Partis who lives in midtown talked about unusual levels of gang activity where he lived…”

Chanyeol rolled his tongue in his cheek as he smiled widely. It was so telling about how crap their city was-- how there were usual and unusual levels of gang activity. “Unusual, how?”

“Mr Partis runs the gang in the area.” Kyungsoo answered with a frown, “The guys he’s seen around aren’t his.”

“So.” Chanyeol drained his glass. Bubbly and cool. “The current theory is that they, the shitheads who want you dead, took this Mr Diamante. Got him to tip the police on their behalf. Picked him because he’s got a boner for diamonds and would do it for a bit of money and a chance to rub up against the diamond-to-end-all-diamonds. Bonus, he’s a client of yours. All his shit’s gone so he doesn’t have to worry about you tipping his beloved rubies in the gutter. But he’s a pawnshop owner and dirty. So he’s…. actually shitting himself. Even more now that the police are looking for the rat - - so he’s got some guys watching him. Correct?”

Kyungsoo toasted his full glass against Chanyeol’s empty one in agreement.

“Does he have anything that can implicate you?” Chanyeol asked then, as he watched Kyungsoo clear his wine glass, the golden bubbles slipping freely through his lips.

“He’s got a mouth.” Kyungsoo retorted with a grimace, glancing at the picture, “That’s enough for the police. Enough for my clientele.” He then tapped the printed out spreadsheet with a font that was too small for even Chanyeol to read -- “I’m tailing him for a day or two. And then I’m scanning inventory for any that fit the same profile. Ex-client. Relations to jewellery. Midtown-based so outside of my jurisdiction.”

It sounded pretty well worked out. As to be expected from the renowned, and yet lamely-named, Lockerman. Chanyeol nodded his head a few times, before shaking the first empty bottle of wine and shrugging his shoulders as he met Kyungsoo’s gaze.

“Sounds good.” He answered, puffing out his cheeks in thought, “Anything I can do then?”

Poor wording.
At some point, Chanyeol should’ve expected that the bed that could house a village would end up sighing under him. His mind was all hot and cloudy again-- like yesterday’s-- all the fatigue, and the crying, pushed to the very back with the rest of his conscious rational thinking as he focused on the slow pleasured sensations of hands and fabric, hands in fabric, hands on hands, hands on lips -- mouth -- face -- as Kyungsoo landed with perfect precision onto his lap-- “Kyungsoo--” Was this a good time to mention how he had come very prepared for this exact scenario?

Somehow, he felt like he wasn’t the only one. As his trousers were tugged down with intent, familiarly soft lips scaling the curve of his jaw and collarbone, Chanyeol found himself wondering if Kyungsoo had pictured this too. It made his heart skip -- and his response to that was pretty predictable. Wrapping his arms tightly around the other’s waist, he smiled playfully as he fell forwards and brought him onto the bed until he was safely tucked underneath.

And then Chanyeol did the unthinkable. He leaned forwards with every intention of pulling Kyungsoo into a long overdue kiss --

And for the fourth time that day, he was hit in the head. This one hurt the most because it was actually the heart. Kyungsoo refused him completely, gripping Chanyeol’s face tightly away as he looked up at him, mortified.

“I said no lips.” He murmured. Angry.

“Why not.” Chanyeol searched his eyes, then. Heartbroken. “Why won’t you kiss me?”

It would be fair to say that whatever mood they had created between them had now evaporated entirely. Kyungsoo eyed him-- read him-- and then rolled away in silence, scampering to the end of the bed with a sigh.

Something about it instantly struck a nerve with Chanyeol. “Why.” He repeated, firmer, as he followed him on all fours. “Come on, Kyungsoo. Tell me. I’m a big boy. I can take it.” No answer.

“Alright, can’t answer that? Why not another one. Why fuck me at all? Considering our history, it’s a bit stupid isn’t it?”

No answer.

Chanyeol was on a roll. Good thing he was a curious bastard because he could go at it all day. And in his current state - horny, brokenhearted and pretty fucking mad, he could go all night too.

“Allright. Let’s push the boat out a bit more. Think further back.” He watched Kyungsoo as his hands clasped together -- a nervous habit -- never looking back at him as he barked in his ear - “Five years back. Who are the Jungs, Kyungsoo? Why are you so scared of them--”

“That’s enough.” Kyungsoo stood up, sending a strict hand to the bedroom door, “Leave.”

His expression was undoubtedly angry. The same anger and the same asshole tone he used every time he wanted to get his way. Looking up at him, Chanyeol came to the full circular recognition that everyone who warned him had been right. Peel back the layers of time and people were still the same underneath. If they were full of shit five years ago -- then they were still full of shit now. Just richer.
Shame that the rule also applied to him. Sensitive and emotionally juvenile five years ago --

Chanyeol exhaled deeply, eyes stinging as he spoke, “Not until you answer at least one question, Kyungsoo. Just one. Easy one.” His heart squeezed hard, clamping against his chest causing him to stutter as he asked,

“Five years ago. Did you love me?”

Kyungsoo’s gaze moved away from him as he sighed outwardly, rolling his eyes as he answered, “You’re not serious, Chanyeol.”

The man then stepped out of the door with Chanyeol on his tail -- pulling up his trousers as he followed him past the kitchen work top and the living space --

“I was dying, Kyungsoo. I was at my worst and you fucking walked -- don’t walk away -- why won’t you talk to me? About anything? Huh? Is that all I am then? Some fucktoy you can play around with whenever your sociopathic ass gets a little cold–”

His jacket was thrust in his direction, as Kyungsoo guided him to the door. The smaller man was blinking frantically, head lowered, missing the burning focus of Chanyeol’s eyes. Without an ounce of hesitation, he jabbed the button to summon the elevator.

“Chanyeol. Leave.”

The taller man, on the verge of tears, fitted himself into his jacket and managed a laugh. “You’re really going to let me walk out of here, without answering a single question. Huh? Okay.”

Did you love me?

Kyungsoo was mumbling a reply. “This was a mistake. All of this. I shouldn’t have involved you. I definitely shouldn’t have made a move–”

The private elevator door opened. Chanyeol stepped in but halted his exit with a hand gripping the metal door open--

“Answer one. Did you love me?”

Kyungsoo looked into his eyes, tearful. Angry. “You know the answer,” was his soft reply as he gently pushed against Chanyeol’s hand and the elevator doors promptly slid shut.

“Fuck off, Kyungsoo!”

As the metal box descended, Chanyeol resisted the urge to kick his foot against every single one of the four walls until he broke something. His body was burning up-- he couldn’t breathe properly -- and all he could think about was his fucker-of-an-ex who wouldn’t even admit to loving him. He
knew the answer? Why would he ask the fucking question if he knew?

Expelling his fury with a single loud yell, Chanyeol’s outburst was promptly disturbed when his phone began to vibrate and a calm Christmas song began to play as the alarm tone.

Time to collect Hyewon from tennis.

Chanyeol exhaled, flushed, as he pressed his head against the metal wall and hit against it a few times.

He couldn’t take her home like this. He needed to calm down.

Seeing his niece jumping in the air after thrashing the shit out of one of her classmates in tennis was a tonic for Chanyeol’s weary heart. Hyewon was fiercely competitive. Just like her uncle.

“You look like a pro out there, kid.” He complimented her, as she glanced up at him and expressed a modest shrug.

“Thanks.”

They walked to Chanyeol’s car which was parked across the sports centre. “Did Junmyeon come to see you?” she asked then as she entered the passenger seat, having entertained that as the possibility for her uncle’s strange mood -- “I’m sorry if I upset you… I just wanted someone to know. In case.”

Chanyeol shoved her tennis gear to the back seats as he looked back at her.

“In case what?”

“I dunno.” Hyewon shrugged her shoulders, blinking at him as he entered. He looked upset. Whilst she certainly found a kick in upsetting him, there was a difference between his expression for that and his current demeanor. In fact, he looked like the girl she had just pummelled at tennis. “You okay?”

Her uncle smiled to reassure her, clipping his seatbelt and adjusting his mirrors as he added a thoughtful, “I’m good. Not upset at all.” The smile faded; he looked close to tears, as he continued, “Well, it was a good idea anyway. You won’t be seeing him anymore. Kyungsoo.” And neither will I.

“Oh,” Hyewon answered, feeling guilt stir in her gut as her uncle returned to frowning, “Okay.”
The car travelled along for a few minutes before the engine stuttered to a surprising halt. They ended up past the sports centre but around the back within the wooded area of the park. “Woah.” Chanyeol dismounted and opened the hood to investigate, only to be met by the bitter smell of smoke. A smell he knew all too well after his trip to the junkyard. He immediately diagnosed it as a radiator issue because his beloved Turbo had a history. Sighing deeply and cursing his bad luck, Chanyeol found himself glancing across the broad expanse of green space where beyond he spied a mirage -- a gas station.

Thank god.

“Hey Hyewon.” He reached down to speak to her through the closed window, “I’m going to go see if I can get some cooling solution-- stay here, yeah?”

Hyewon nodded.

“If some traffic guy or cop comes up to you just call me. And then--”

“Cry.” Hyewon nodded, waving him off as she popped an earphone in, “Got it.”

“Keep the door locked, okay? Be back in five.”

_Fucking, Kyungsoo. Trying to fuck me… fucking…_

If he was cursed to speak his daily thoughts out loud, Chanyeol was certain that he would’ve made his niece a millionaire from his contributions to the swear jar alone. This was his problem. His temper did wild things to his thoughts. The anger which existed deep within -- easily tempted and called -- scrambled him in a way that nothing else in the world could. He had been okay for a while but not now. And he was so angry that he was basically numb. It was like he had burned up to the point that he was practically cold. How did that make sense?

His thoughts continued to boil as he reached the front of the gas shop station queue -- a bottle of solution in one hand. In the distance, he heard a phone ringing and it would take a few moments before he realised it was his own.

Pinning it to his ear, he uttered a passive, “Hey,” as he approached the till and allowed the lady to swipe the solution through.

And that was when he heard her.

“Uncle Chanyeol help me! Help! Please!”

Hyewon’s screaming rang through his ear and his heart dropped.

An automatic motion kicked in. The solution was abandoned as he burst through the doors and ran to
the direction of the park. He could see his car from across where he stood and beyond the shield of the trees, he spotted the two imposing figures in black. Black like bugs.

“Hyewon!” he yelled down the phone, “Hyewon listen! Stay in the car-- I’m coming! I’m coming!”

She continued to sob.

And Chanyeol ran.

It was a blur-- he didn’t know how quickly he must have darted across the grass--- all his energy surged into the muscles in his legs as he forced a frantic speed, pushing through the rapid beats of his heart, the short puff of his breaths, a searing cocktail of adrenaline and fear and panic coursing through him as the sun assaulted his eyes -- blinding...

Hyewon.

She was inside, hands over her ears, as the first man burst through the passenger seat window with a bat, sending a glittery shower of glass through the interior.

Chanyeol found the second man first. Taking the man’s collar from the back, he pushed him up against the car and served his face with his fist -- once -- twice -- thrice -- and until he was dragged back, forced to stumble on his back foot by the second. The bat was raised and shot against Chanyeol’s spine causing the taller man to stumble forwards, agonised, but he threw the pain away quickly. With a cry, he pushed back against the assailant, thrusting his back against the car, before Chanyeol took his elbow and hit him twice square in the chest and struck a kick to his stomach until his breaths were wheezed.

A right hook across the side of the head followed. Chanyeol faltered back, stunned.

But he could hear Hyewon crying from here.

Using the advantage of his height, Chanyeol stumbled forwards and delivered a crushing strike to the man’s jaw -- and then another -- until he was on his knees. Chanyeol was then hauled back and shoved hard against the car. The vehicle trembled. He moaned quietly in pain as he willed a fist to the stranger’s stomach before he wrapped his hands around the man’s collar and grabbed him, butting their heads together with a pained cry. The stranger stumbled back and Chanyeol used the remaining residues of his energy to throw him back harder against the car, clawed the bat away from his fingers, and then struck him hard across the face with merciless precision.

He did the same to the other until he fell unconscious onto the pavement.

Ears buzzing, hands bloody, Chanyeol found himself raising the bat in the air -- before he heard soft taps against the car window.

“Hyew-won?” The bat was dropped and he quickly opened the door, catching the girl as she clung onto him, unable to speak as she cried, paralysed with fear. “Shh,” he murmured, attempting to comfort despite the growing buzzing in his head, “It’s… okay… kid… I’m here…”

She was shaking. He found himself releasing her to retrieve the phone which had fallen to the floor. His vision was a tad blurry but the silver of the phone was glistening. “You’re b-bleeding.” Her large eyes were filled with tears, as she gestured to his face and his hands which he nonchalantly wiped
against his hoodie. Chanyeol licked his lips and noticed then that his entire mouth tasted like blood.

Familiar.

“I’m okay-- We need to go. Need to go. Now.”

Shielding her eyes away from the two figures on the floor, they began to walk away -- stumbling at first but eventually some of Chanyeol’s senses recovered and he was able to pull them away to safety with more speed. Hyewon was continuing to breathe through the shock as she clung onto the fabric of his hoodie. Her uncle pulled the hood of the fabric over his head as he wrapped an arm over her.

“Alright. Hyewon,” he exhaled, attempting his best to sound okay -- “We’re going to go to that gas station, okay? Walk fast.” Chanyeol then took the phone from his pocket and typed in a single message -

    to bunny:
    Sos

A moment later and his phone began to ring.

“How quickly can you get to Leight Street?” Chanyeol blurted out instantly, “Need you here, man.”

Junmyeon took Hyewon into the fast food restaurant to eat. When she eventually stopped crying, she was able to explain how the two men had attempted to coerce her out of the car. And then at the sight of her calling Chanyeol for help, they approached the task with more violence. She was calmer now, digging into ice cream, and watching films on Junmyeon’s phone.

Chanyeol had left them to it. His face was beginning to swell and he was probably still bleeding. He took to the convenience store across the restaurant where he bought all the necessities. Just like old times.

The girl behind the till watched him with careful eyes as he spilled the godly collection of plasters, antibacterial solution, painkillers of every variety and cookies onto the glass counter. Only criminals could truly relate. “And uh… one of those please,” he gestured to what he presumed was a row of cigarette packets, “The… blue one.”

It didn’t matter which one. His eyes really hurt and he couldn’t really see a damn thing.

She performed the task with aching leisure. The sharp beeps of the machine made Chanyeol’s head hurt and he expressed it too as his fingers pinched his temple with obvious dismay. Eventually, she took his money and then offered his change. He was turning to leave when she stated --

“Take this too. On the house.”
A can of cola was offered and slid across. He looked up at her.

“For the eye,” she explained, gesturing to how his head literally looked like it was about to divide and grow another.

“Thanks.” Chanyeol murmured, half-hearted as he stepped out of the store and into the quiet street.

He took rest on the pavement floor. Whilst he was there, he pressed the cola to the side of his head, hissing contentedly at the cold sensation. After a moment, he lowered it to the concrete and reached out for the painkillers -- the plasters -- but in the haze of his vision, he noticed the trembling of his hands. It was manic. And then, his focus shifted, onto the cigarettes.

Resting it, unlit and dry, between his lips, Chanyeol rolled up his fist and hit the top of his head lightly.

He had forgotten to buy a lighter, idiot.

It was there as he was reaching into his back pocket -- to check for change -- when he realised that he still carried a phone. Kyungsoo’s burner. He took it out, glanced at the keypad curiously, before calling the first number and placing it to his ear -

The ringing stopped. The faintest hitch of a breath on the opposing line.

“Kyungsoo,” Chanyeol managed, voice low and tired, as his free hand ran and tugged through his hair - “I need you to hide something for me. I need you to hide Hyewon for me, Kyungsoo…please… ”


But the man on the pavement didn’t answer -- his response suppressed by the cry he held in as he lowered the phone and rocked forwards, burying his face against his knees, and allowing the cigarette to fall from his lips and into the dirty gutter.

“Chanyeol? Where. Please tell me where.”

Eventually, he answered. “B District…. across the burger place. Near the river.”

“I’m on my way. Hold on. I’m coming.”

By the time, Kyungsoo’s hands had found Chanyeol’s face-- he must have already cried until his
swollen eye gave in because he could barely see him. He heard him though - the soft gasp and then
the comforting murmurs. He said nothing as Kyungsoo crouched into the gutter and pulled him into a
tight and long embrace. Light and tender words were whispered soothingly into his ear-- into his
hair, and Chanyeol hugged him back, dwelling in the sweetness of his scent, a pleasant distinction
from the dirty air tainted by sweat and blood.

They stayed like that for a while - with Kyungsoo holding tightly onto his shaking fingers until they
were finally still.

-//-

Chapter End Notes

* holy fck this chapter gave me stress. so if u made it this far, i have tea. let's breathe
together. also i actually created a specific set of notes to write for this chapter bc i always
forget to tell u guys important things cryy. ok. i'll make a list.
+ all the flashbacks to date were written to be read linearly-- i.e. it will all culminate in
the two key flashbacks from 5yago (pcy's.... uh, demise. and the breakup seen through
ks.) then after, the flashbacks will end yay!
+ next 2 chapters will be even MORE plot heavy pls hold inbox on fire help
+ fun recognition i had was how we are slowly starting to see angry!21yo criminal!pcy
creeping back into calm, douchey 26yo pcy and now he's probs gonna be fully here. rip
everyone who tried to hurt hyewon/ks. is anyone up for a tarantino-esque ending?
leggo!
+ it's interesting reading my notes on the 1st chapter bc u can clearly see i had no idea
what this story was going to be. fair to say, i apologise about the non-mild nature of the
sexual references and the disgustingly poor level of jokes hsbfs
+ lay!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! is always a shirtless s3xy angel in my fics!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! i need to write
him solo and give him the attention he deserves.

ok bye now. thank you for reading! be well lovely exo-ls!
hold my hand i make a fist; a false promise

Chapter Summary

--i told a lot of lies
and called it a compromise
to keep you
(you said you would) --

-- promise, muna

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

-//-

FIVE YEARS AGO

-//-

Squinting at the message on his phone screen, Chanyeol laughed loudly. It was his niece’s birthday soon and his angelic brother had chosen to defy the wishes of the rest of the family and had once again invited him. The invite had been sent through his oldest email sk8erboypunk1333 -- the one he had used as a teenager to sign up to gaming forums and porno sites -- which was telling of how little Chanyeol cared about his online profile as he still used it for gaming forums… and occasionally, porn sites.

The message itself, to be fair to his brother, had at least been personalised:

Dear Chanyeol. I hope this message finds you well. I have attached an invitation to Hyewon’s eight birthday. I hope you can make it. Let me know if you have any questions. Regards.

Regards. Such a classy man.

Attached to the succinct email was a picture of his niece and an organised list of details for the shindig. When he had first seen the email, the first thing which had captured his attention was Hyewon herself and how big she was now compared to the Hyewon which existed in his memories. After all, the last time he’d spent any genuine time with her was when she could barely speak coherently - and now she was dressed up in school uniforms with silk stitching and had a birthday list which she commissioned.

Chanyeol visualised the event with amusement. It would be loud, reeking of cake from the oven and lost dreams from unhappy parents, as well as being stuffed to the brim of family and strangers. Neither of which he was particularly fond of. He would most likely run into his parents -- a definite negative point for any party -- and there was every chance he would greatly regret ever going. So why should he come? Why would he choose to skip a potential afternoon of making sweet filthy love to his boyfriend and instead attend a children’s party where ¾ of the people were going to wish he never turned up in the first place?
“I might go because he wants me to come.” There hadn’t been a year when his brother had skipped over his personal birthday invite for Hyewon’s party - even after he left them. He always thought that one day he would feel guilty for generally ignoring them and using them as coasters for his roll-ups -- and clearly the time for moral penance had finally come. “Maybe… I’ll just pop my head in then get the fuck out before my Dad gets his revolver and finally finishes the job.”

Chanyeol lowered his phone then and noticed how Kyungsoo had remained silent, posted at the end of the caravan bed. Possibly staring at the painting. As per norm. He had been noticeably quiet today. A little more than usual. Having been committed to a relationship for a good five months, whereby they had practically been inseparable, Chanyeol had grown more than attuned to studying the quieter man’s light shifts of temperament.

That didn’t mean he knew how to cope with them though.

“Kyungsoo.” Chanyeol poked him with his foot, and met him with a warm smile as he turned to regard him -- “What’s up?”

An innocent headshake was the response to his question. The smile remained on Kyungsoo’s face as he clambered onto the bed and plopped down on the pillow with a sigh beside him.

“Your brother sounds like a sweet guy.” Kyungsoo retorted then, demonstrating that he had been listening, as he smiled consciously at the invite, particularly at the picture of the little Park, with her small lips shaped into an adorable smiley pout.

“I’m sweeter.” Chanyeol affirmed, allowing his head to fall against the other’s tenderly. Family issues between them were rarely discussed, so he would consider this as a slip-- but out of everyone he shared blood with, Chanyeol had to admit that his brother had always been the one he was most fond of. They had been close for most of his life. “I think he got better after Hyewon was born,” he shared, smiling, “She was… 100% an accident. It was a shotgun wedding and boom, suddenly they’ve pledged forever, my sister in-law is the size of a hot-air balloon and then… on top of that they got a baby who can’t wipe their own shit.”

No wonder why his brother gained the hots for travelling abroad. Being at his own home must be draining.

Kyungsoo appeared to hold a differing opinion. “You say it like it’s...dirty. A lot of people want that kind of family unit, you know.” He said with a murmur, clinging to Chanyeol’s bare shoulder, “A mom, a dad. A dog. A cat. A house. A sibling. Siblings. What’s wrong with that?”

There was a pause as Chanyeol laughed softly, glancing down at him -

“Kyungsoo, I had that and I can tell you it’s not everything.”

“It’s something.” Kyungsoo contested with a smile, before reaching up to peck his lover’s lips lightly, “It’s still better than nothing, huh?”

The point was a good one, as with most of his boyfriend’s points whenever they were in discussion. However, it only served to highlight the great differences between the way they thought about life. To Chanyeol, romance and all its prim accessories, was history and he’d mourned at its grave with flowers. Kyungsoo was a little more inclined to deliver thoughts that would suggest he thought in warmth and colour. Certainly not what one would expect from the Lockerman.

“Eh, I like you better.” Chanyeol grinned against his lips, as he tempted him into a deeper kiss - “I
“Me too.” Kyungsoo responded, flushed in the uncompromising warmth of Chanyeol’s eyes as he yielded, arms wrapping around the other as thoughts of birthday parties and families quickly washed away into the dark and obscure corners of the room, left to disappear and be revisited in the morning.

-PRESENT DAY-

Truthfully, the Lockerman operations was a simple one: draft a form, submit it to your nearest representative and the group will take good care of the rest of the process. If there were any problems, an efficient and safe channel of communication will be established. Otherwise, the delivery/pick-up was good-to-go and ready for the big day. It resembled a similar procedure to anything within the service industry. Criminals of all types can go off, commit their deeds - and after, the necessary accompaniments will be taken care of and there will be a guarantee of absolute 100% customer satisfaction.

However, there were still rules to follow if one would choose to make business with them. Three, unsurprisingly.

Accurate completion of all necessary paperwork
A face-to-face assessment by a member of the operations
A clear exit strategy outlined

If you submitted a form that said your shipment of military-grade explosives would be kept within the scheme in two months - and then said shipment is not moved within that time, then they will be dumped into the nearest mudbank with earnest resolve. There was no residual guilt-- reduced risk of bribing -- no funny business because the operations were ran by people handpicked for their notoriety as sticklers, pencil-pushers and perfectionists. Qualities that ran through a very person’s veins and was deeply challenging to conceal or fake.

Any funny business? Then it was CODE 715. Dead stock. Generally associated with a shovel and working underground or somewhere muggy.

Hence the operation’s roaring success.
Although the operation itself was much larger than he was now, with many guiding the regional work with relative autonomy, nobody could contest that it all operated with Kyungsoo’s vision at its very core. There was no contract signed, no money exchanged, without an understanding that by signing their goods on -- they would be handing it over to Do Kyungsoo. The Lockerman himself. Irrespective of the undeniable jackassery of a name, it was Kyungsoo’s hand -- his life -- his promises which had built this huge underground dominion.

And when people thought of Kyungsoo, they thought of his perfect demeanour. Hand him a paper bag full of fajitas, or fingers, and he wouldn’t flinch. Numb had been the word used to describe him once. Kyungsoo himself preferred the word: adapted. And if they could look at Kyungsoo without feeling like he would snitch on them the moment police sirens blare outside the door, then why wouldn’t the highest ranking criminals of the city look to him for work? And once the big fish started to bite, the little parasites that gnawed on their skin and cleaned them up, shortly followed.

And so, with the perfect combination of criminal ancestry and ruthless ambition, Kyungsoo linked them all in a network that ran with aching efficiency. With him at the centre, of course: the man to be trusted with all the secrets; the man who would die for yours.

Kyungsoo was undoubtedly a powerful young man.

And today, he would be taking care of what was undoubtedly, one of the most precious cargo to ever fall into his hands.

Park Hyewon. 12 ¾. Chanyeol’s niece.

If she had been submitted through the post-office, then the yellow form would be filled out and resemble this:

TYPE OF CARGO -- YEAR OF SUBMISSION -- REGION -- INITIALS -- UC (UNIQUE CODE)

16.2017.NE.PCY -- ?

16 was the operation code for live stock. There had been many folk tales about what exactly live stock meant-- and whilst Kyungsoo had always maintained that it meant what it echoed, there was also the implication that live stock was priceless stock. Humans. Da Vincis. Diamonds of state importance.

Kyungsoo remembered now how Chanyeol had submitted the incorrect form the first time they met because it had been labelled with-- 61. It was why he’d rejected it the first time. Pip, Chanyeol’s employer, was noticeably careless and had clearly never bothered to learn the code for he rarely submitted the form correctly. This led to the idea that the Lockerman harboured some grudge for him, despite the fact that he barely came up to the dirt which scuffed Kyungsoo’s suede shoes.

No form would be submitted for Hyewon. After finding her and her uncle, she was immediately taken to the home of Kyungsoo’s closest and most trusted colleague. Byun Baekhyun, the journo, who lived in a quiet closed suburb in the North West with his mother. She had hugged Kyungsoo tight after seeing him -- and had accepted Chanyeol and Hyewon in with no fuss despite the strangeness of the hour and the request.

The entire situation had been understandably traumatic for the young girl. For Chanyeol too. Hence why the inevitable goodbye they shared took time. Fortunately, there was no rush. It was oddly comforting to be far away from the city centre where it had occurred. Here, where no bad memories were forged.
Kyungsoo sighed as he stood against the wall of the living room, listening silently to the voices behind the half-open door.

Chanyeol’s voice was tense but tender. “I’ll take care of school, okay? Just sit tight and it will only be a few days. You can’t use your phone or the internet but I managed to get your school bag so at least you can do homework whilst you’re here, right?”

Contrastingly, Hyewon was clearly ready to cry again. Her voice was vibrating as she responded, “But why can’t you stay here too? If it’s dangerous then why can’t you stay?”

“I can’t.” Chanyeol squeezed her hands between his own, voice falling into a whisper - “I’ll be back soon though. And I’ll call you everyday.”

“But what if you get hurt?” And there, Kyungsoo heard her voice break -- a certainty that tears had been shed- “You can’t get hurt, Uncle Chanyeol…”

They embraced and no further words of the conversation was audible.

When Chanyeol emerged from the room, Kyungsoo didn’t hesitate and walked after him. They had barely exchanged a word since they drove up here. Mainly due to Hyewon -- possibly also because he was recovering from being cold-shouldered by Junmyeon. There was also the obvious point that Chanyeol believed that he was responsible. Indirectly.

“You can stay, you know.” Kyungsoo murmured, keen to stress the point.

But the taller man didn’t honour his concern with an answer. He walked right up to Baekhyun who was sat, fiddling with an ornament on the kitchen table. At the sight of the bruised stranger, he stood up and met his grave beaten eyes with unflinching calm. A threat would open the conversation - Chanyeol, never the type to beat around the bush if he could help it.

“If anything remotely dangerous touches that kid, I swear to god I’ll make sure you never have any.”

“Chanyeol.” Kyungsoo warned, offering his colleague an apologetic look- “That’s uncalled for.”

Baekhyun smiled thinly, holding out a firm hand to the other. “There is nobody I care for more than my mother. You can be reassured your niece will receive the same care and protection.”

“Good.” Chanyeol’s resolve visibly softened as he shook Baekhyun’s hand, “I appreciate that.”

And then he walked away, with Kyungsoo once again a few steps behind, chasing after him.

It was dark now -- and the breeze was bitingly cold. The pair walked across the front yard towards Baekhyun’s car which was parked neatly in the driveway - ready for them to borrow for their trip home.

“You can come to my place to sleep.. Kyungsoo murmured, rubbing his shoulders for warmth, as they both entered the vehicle.
His response was met with an indignant laugh. “I’m going home.”

The stubbornness had always been a Chanyeol-associated problem. He was about as hardheaded as they came—especially when he was angry. At times, it was like trying to negotiate with a category F4 tornado. Kyungsoo, who had essentially no patience for such people, responded with a frown. Perhaps in the past, he would’ve handled the heat of his temperament better; but even then, they had never had to shoulder levels of stress this severe.

“Chanyeol, it’s not safe.” Kyungsoo announced gravely, before assessing the man’s swollen face with a sigh, “And you should consider being seen by a doctor.”

“If something important had burst, I’d be dead.” His passenger muttered darkly, stretching in his seat as he committed his gaze to the window beside him.

The new engine was animated with a smooth whirring sound—a stark distinction from the roar of Chanyeol’s turbo. Of course, neither would comment on it now. The car was in repairs after the smashed glass—and possible tampering with the engine’s cooling system. So, they commenced the short drive back into the city, a weight of unspoken thoughts stretched tautly between them. It wouldn’t take long before Kyungsoo would test the silence however. Guilty, in a different way.

“This isn’t your fault.” Kyungsoo murmured, willing for the words to provide comfort—“It isn’t.”

“I know.” Chanyeol affirmed as he turned his head and gave him a bitter smile, “It’s yours.”

The air was suddenly colder. All of Kyungsoo’s thoughts dissipated as he was stunned silent. Victorious, the taller man returned his gaze to the window and said,

“So, please do me a favour. Take me back to the city then leave me the fuck alone.”

The message was loud and astoundingly clear. Kyungsoo submitted himself to silence.

This led to a natural increase in the volume of his thoughts—which eventually fleeted to recall how he’d held Chanyeol on the concrete. How in the space of a few moments, the tornado had naturally calmed, sparing destruction. It was a response he had felt with every nerve of his body. Chanyeol’s hands held by his own. Chaos to calm. And within himself, he had sensed a similar transition except the opposite; a calm to chaos, apathy to anger.

But he didn’t show his anger in the way that Chanyeol did. So he was certain, that in some larger region of the other man’s head, it would register that Kyungsoo barely batted an eyelid. He didn’t care at all—not about anything.

Kyungsoo’s weary eyes rested on the horizon across him as the images and the thoughts dissolved—bewildered by the sight of the city centre in all its stunning bright lights. As they drove closer, they were welcomed by a dazzling host of artificial lights which formed a shimmer—a fog from above—but it was still dark where they were driving, where people were walking, talking, thinking and peer a little too long and the lights were practically--

Blinding.
The city centre was reached quickly using a shortcut. It was busy with people swaggering around to get to and from bars. Young men and women in nice clothes. Unsuitable for the temperature. Irresponsible. Kyungsoo also felt irresponsible for allowing Chanyeol to leave. He turned to him, observing with a pained expression as Chanyeol unclipped his belt and made for the door -

“Chanyeol, you can’t just go and find these people--” he began, only to be waved at.

The taller man turned to him then, furious.

“Why not, Kyungsoo? I don’t look for them, so what, I let them get away with it? Let them hunt her down and finish the job? That’s the thing. That kid? I love her. Okay? And she only has me. And I’m sorry that not all of us can be grand and empty like you. Some of us actually feel this thing called unconditional love. The love that makes you do stupid things because you would protect them from a fucking comet if you thought you could.” A humorless smile crossed Chanyeol’s upset expression, “This is a comet, Kyungsoo. And I’m going to blow it up.”

Kyungsoo exhaled shakily - sadly - as the man disembarked with no further care of his response. There was no arguing with him in this state. Anger had always been Chanyeol’s nemesis and -- closest friend. It was shocking how easily he submitted to its influence. Gripped within its mania, he always seemed more compelled and motivated -- but he also tended to act stupid.

Noticing that he had left his phone behind, Kyungsoo took it from the passenger seat with a sigh and attempted the pass code. 1999. It was still the same -- the last time his favourite team won the national baseball league -- and the screen flickered open to depict a wallpaper picture of… **Conflicto de amor.**

Naturally.

Concentrating, he scrolled to the contacts and typed in Junmyeon-- and failed to find a hit. He then searched his call list whereby a bunny came up as a number frequently called. In fact, it was mostly bunny - and places related to Hyewon. Her school. Dentist. **Little Steps.** Kyungsoo called the number for bunny and pressed it to his ear, swallowing consciously, as a gruff voice answered the other end,

“Chanyeol? What’s up? Is Hyewon okay?”

Kyungsoo cleared his throat stiffly as he spoke, minding how close he had gotten to a black-eye after their first meeting this afternoon. “Hello Junmyeon-- I--”

There was a loud breath and then a sneered, “Please hand this phone over to Chanyeol or I will hang up.”

“No-- no, please. Junmyeon. I need your help with--”

Laughter. “In what universe? What the fu--”

Kyungsoo was resolute. “He’s wandered off. He won’t listen to me. I can’t go find him -- I’ll make it worse --”
A tremble hovered over the edge of Kyungsoo’s words. His companion exhaled deeply, gut-deep.

“Leave it with me..”

Kyungsoo exhaled too. “Thank you.”

“Let me be clear. I’m not doing it for you. Please go fuck yourself.”

The line instantly fell dead. The engine was restarted.

Kyungsoo lowered the phone onto the seat with a sigh. He then pulled out his own phone from his jacket pocket, dialled a number, and greeted the line with -

“I need an update on midtown.”

And then he drove home.

The whereabouts of his distressed ex-lover?

Guess.

A dirty bar under a bridge whereby blood on the wooden worktop was considered a cultural discussion point? Bingo.

God, he looked like shit. He was never going to pull looking like this.

Chanyeol admired his -- and his enemies’ -- handiwork on the dirty mirror across the bartop, laughing coldly as he sipped through a particularly sharp-tasting gin. This had been his plan all along. There was no way he would be able to find Hyewon’s dirtbag attackers tonight -- so he would comfort his fury with the host of offerings it liked best: shitty gin, self-pity and … sex.

Again, he looked very subpar so he doubted he would get much traction on that final front tonight.

“What happened to your face, you poor thing?”

Ooh. Maybe he had spoken too soon. His kindly benefactor was a woman with legs almost as long as his own. The face was a solid 7. She gently took his face. Her fingers were soft as they addressed the parts where his face had met solid fist. Flaming and swollen.

“This is the part where you say, you should’ve seen the other guy,” she teased him.
Chanyeol licked his lips with a smile as he responded,

“Other guys, actually.”

She laughed warmly. Exactly the type of tonic which Chanyeol would’ve normally needed. Harmless flirting. Company. But he didn’t feel much stirring inside, which just served an even stronger reminder of the same hollow weight. His expression shifted as his gaze lowered and she noticed.

“Smile,” she poked his dimple gently, “You’re hot.”

“Yeah?” Chanyeol responded, observing the way the smile reached her eyes -- pretty eyes. Big eyes. Pretty dark and big eyes, sorta like -- “You should see the rest of me.”

She laughed again, tossing her head back, beautiful dark hair flicking back over smooth bare shoulders.

As such, by that point, Chanyeol -- and anyone else who was witnessing -- would’ve had quite an idea of a potential avenue for the rest of their evening. It would’ve probably involved a seedy club and drunken grinding; then regrets. A lot.

Typical night out for him really.

But thankfully, this crushing tide was halted by the fact that she had a boyfriend who happened to enter the scene during the time that she was peppering Chanyeol’s bruised face with tender caresses. Her boyfriend was smaller and stockier - and pissed. The moment Chanyeol heard the stereotypical testosterone fuelled faux-alpha-male greeting-- “are you chatting her up? Who the fuck are you?” -- the rest played out almost as he had imagined it. The boyfriend threw the first punch after Chanyeol idly commented that his girlfriend had been entertaining the possibility of getting a full frontal -- and then he threw the second, hungry for another chance to wreck a shithead.

What Chanyeol hadn’t expected was Junmyeon arriving out of nowhere and grabbing him by the collar, away from the fray.

“You fucking idiot, calm down!” His friend had growled at him, throwing him easily onto the bar floor, as the boyfriend squared up to Junmyeon, demanding that he took another hit.

“And you--” Junmyeon’s eyes were terrifyingly narrowed, nostrils flaring as he batted the other’s chest, sending him stumbling back onto his back foot, “Touch him again and I swear I’ll shove my foot so far down your throat you’ll have to take food up your ass.”

There was a round of quiet laughter.

“And you-- all.” Junmyeon yelled, glaring at the crowd, before smiling naturally, “How are you, fuckers? That you-- Claude? What the hell man…you didn’t tell me you were back from Macau!”

The pair left the bar after Junmyeon greeted some old friends, his battered best friend in tow. They
walked along the narrow streets, pitch-black, with Chanyeol, leaning his full weight dependently on Junmyeon’s broad shoulders.

“How did you know where I was?” Chanyeol asked loudly - ears still buzzing from the punch-up - “Did you bug me?”

His friend laughed as he glanced at him. “Dude, I know all your pin numbers. You don’t think I know the bars you go to get fucked up?” He snorted.

Chanyeol grinned as he reached across and patted Junmyeon’s face affectionately. There was no doubt whenever it came to Junmyeon. Whenever you needed him, he was there -- and even if you didn’t, he would still be there, fists and machine gun ready.

“Really, though Chanyeol? You were going to get yourself beaten up by some shoe-licking Westie dipshit just because you wanted to flirt with some chick?” Junmyeon sighed, aggravated, “You’re not even into women!”

“She was nice. She said she liked my face.” He slurred, before adding a quieter, “and she reminded me of K--”

Junmyeon interrupted him with a fiercer resolve. “If you say Kyungsoo, I’m leaving you. Right now.”

Chanyeol laughed immediately, legs half-dragging as he imitated zipping his lips -- the invisible key thrown somewhere in the air.

In hindsight, he didn’t think the woman looked much like Kyungsoo at all now. For once, she wasn’t cute and small -- she was almost as tall as him. And her pretty eyes; nowhere near as pretty as his.

Ugh.

They reached the car and it was there that Chanyeol’s blurry and distracted eyes came into focus and he looked across at Junmyeon with full appreciation of how much hurt he was feeling.

“I feel fucked up, man.” He murmured, as his arms slid away from the other, “I keep thinking about… what happened. You know, I would’ve died if something had happened to her. If they took her--”

Junmyeon reached forwards and gave his friend’s shoulder a hard squeeze, eyes trained on him.

“Shh. Nothing happened, okay? You did good. You fucking them up good.” He smiled at him - rare for it lacked irony, “Hyewon is going to be fine. Because she’s with Lockerman people, right? And you know I would kill Kyungsoo in a heartbeat, but he runs a pretty flawless operation.”

After a long thoughtful breath, Chanyeol agreed with a nod. Junmyeon smiled again as he pulled the car door open and guided him inside -

“He sent me here, you know.” He began, as he walked across and entered the vehicle - “And I appreciate that. But I’d still kick his fucking nut in.”

Chanyeol acknowledged the words, “Yeah?” before he snuggled into his seat after strapping on his seatbelt. He waited until Junmyeon started the engine, before patting his arm and delivering a gentle - “Thanks, man. Love you.”

The response was delivered with a full heart. “Love you too.”
With one eye shut, the passenger smirked. “You know… who else I love?”

Moment ruined. “Park Chanyeol, I will stop the car.”

The passenger expressed a low dry chuckle. He tilted his head against the glass of the window, icy but comforting. The slew of painkillers was starting its slow release in his system, and he felt it -- the unnatural weight which his head carried, the tenderness around his middle, the sting in his knuckles reduced to faint prickles of nerves.

There was some pain however - which no amount of ibuprofen would numb.

“I think I was too hard on Kyungsoo.” Chanyeol mumbled, glancing out onto the open road as they sped past. He crossed his arms, remembering how he had responded with unnecessary aggravation to his reasoning. It was a product of his anger. Sometimes, it was as if he was a dispensable puppet on strings to its unforgiving voice. “I should really say sorry. He really helped me a lot.”

Junmyeon scoffed, passing him a glance as their gazes met.

“Yeah well. You can suck him off tomorrow. For now you need to sleep and rest that ugly mug.”

“Fuck off, Junmyeon.”

Chanyeol whined, rubbing the top of his head with a palm as the driver roared with laughter. Once the car retreated back into a humdrum quiet, the tall man found himself opening his eyes and murmuring,

“That chick was so into me though, man.” Chanyeol nodded, expelling a sigh, “God.”

“Yeah she was hot shit.”

“Bit too tall though. I like them short.”

Despite the fact that he’d fully expected it, Chanyeol almost yelled as Junmyeon’s hand came out of nowhere and shoved him hard against the side. He laughed -- wailed -- then laughed again as an angry riposte was delivered -

“You fucker, I will not tolerate Kyungsoo-centric references in this car, you hear?”

The tall man with the bruised face and roughed up knuckles took a well-earned rest on Junmyeon’s couch. He didn’t sleep for a while though, mind still spinning from the residual adrenaline from the
stress of the day and the eventfulness of his night. He thought initially of Hyewon and how frightened she must be, leading to Chanyeol making a mental note to buy her home comforts tomorrow. As he pondered on that, heart heavy and face somber, his thoughts naturally pivoted and led him to --

Kyungsoo.

In the dark, his mind fixated on the faint remnants of the afternoon. The small pool of memories which had survived the burning heat of his anger. Chanyeol thought of how long he must have held him on the concrete - he had squeezed him tight until his breath was cold. All of Kyungsoo’s nice clean clothes from the day must have been creased and dirtied. Bloodied.

I’m here. Breathe, Chanyeol. It’s okay. I’m holding you.

If Chanyeol didn’t know better, he would’ve thought that Kyungsoo -- cared.

I’m holding you.

How nice that would’ve been, five years ago. When I needed you. Chanyeol thought with great amusement, as he blinked away a wet tear or two -- breathing through a slow and difficult breath, as he wrapped his arms over himself.

Lonely but comforted.

After a quick fry-up at Junmyeon’s, Chanyeol borrowed his van and spent his morning buying necessities for Hyewon. He bought her some clothes, including a new hoodie and new pyjamas -- a shit ton of cookies from the groceries -- and then finally, the best sketchbook he could find for her to fill out when she wasn’t completing her maths homework.

Stuffing the lot into a small box, he returned it to Junmyeon to deliver to Baekhyun’s office at the North West on his drive up to an assignment. He couldn’t come in person. There was too much business here to take care of.

Catching Junmyeon on his way out, Chanyeol plodded out of the bathroom, toothbrush hanging out from between his lips.

“Hey, man.”

“Hm?”

“Know whereabouts Pip is nowadays?”
Pip. Their old jerkoff of a boss.

“Hmmm, still the same probably. South East. Earl St. by the river...” Junmyeon arched an eyebrow, watching Chanyeol as he pursed his lips together, “You planning on going there? What for?”

“Why? Can’t I meet up with old friends?” He huffed.

Junmyeon snorted, clapping his hands, purely intending to wound. “I’m your only friend, you saddo. But anyway, I literally give no fucks where you go. Have fun. Try not to bring fleas back with you. I’m going to be off the grid for a few hours. But.” He tossed him a phone, “Take this.”

Chanyeol caught it with perfect synchrony and nodded in acknowledgement.

“Try not to beat anyone up until I get back?”

Chanyeol smirked, offering his friend a lazy salute. “I’ll try.”

The smaller man smiled and made for the exit -- before backing up and yelling out a quick, “Oh -- I’ve moved my handguns by the way. They’re in the...” He clicked his fingers, “Spare room. Upper cabinet. It’s locked but the key’s in my The Empire Strikes Back DVD. You should check out my new Glock. It’s sex.”

His ex roommate’s boner for guns had always amused Chanyeol. At some point, he must have understood it -- grasped it -- but being out of the works for a few years meant that they were confined again to being dangerous weapons with a flick.

Chanyeol did opt to take the Glock though.

It was helpfully weighty. Good for smacking around the head-- amongst its other designated uses.

Driving around in a van owned by an incredibly paranoid and deadly snipe, who moonlighted as an armed robber for kicks, had its obvious perks when one was doing a nudge of investigative work. Chanyeol having wound down from his fury from the previous night now only had one aim in mind and that was to kick in the heads of the men whom had tried to take his niece. He didn’t care who they were-- whether they were related to the Ocean Diamond case or just kidnappers who thought they would chance it. Whomever they were, they had marked themselves in his book and he was not
a forgiving man.

After leaving the van parked a healthy few streets away, Chanyeol flipped up his dark hoodie and strolled around the neighbourhood of the sports centre, marking the place -- as he had done in his job as an armed robber. Five years ago, he had most of the city mapped out in his mind: all the back alleys and side-roads so well-memorised that he could've given Google Maps a run for its money.

His work didn’t stop there. Chanyeol had strategised for every situation: which streets were best for a quick hide-out? Where are the blind spots across this well-pedestrianised area? Could a meet-up point be organised in these blocks of apartments where nine buildings all appeared identical?

This was a little taste of that old life. And there was no doubting that he was pretty still good at it.

With his phone and a map across him, Chanyeol had marked all possible inward and outward routes for the assailants. Alongside this, he had taken account of the cameras in the area. He had been unfortunate to stop at a blind spot along the back of the park -- too conveniently for the attackers perhaps -- but it would be impossible for them to get away without a vehicle or an exit strategy.

And Chanyeol was going to find it -- probably had. The answer had to have been caught on one of the 14 cameras of interest.

But technology wasn’t his thing.

Time to visit Pip.

Pip had recruited Chanyeol as a spotty kid fresh out of school, beating the shit out of some guy in a bar he was only just old enough to enter. Surprise, surprise. He was the epitome of middle-aged mediocre-criminal garbage -- but he had provided Chanyeol with the employment and subsequent salary which he had needed to live after being kicked out into the streets by his beloved family. They had never gotten along, but Pip was impossible to like. Manipulative and cruel -- sure. But sexist and homophobic too?

The amount of times Chanyeol had pictured taking his boss to a back alley and giving him a taste of his own shitty blood -- countless.

The day had finally come for the prodigal son to return home.

Chanyeol would come for Pip during his weekly grocery shopping. He had driven up to Earl St. -- and had found him easily because he still drove the same copper-coloured car. He then followed the man into the store, observing with quiet amusement as he shopped around for the branded can of beans and vegetables. That was the one redeeming feature about his old boss. Pip had never been a cheapskate. He wanted the good stuff and they were always provided with the best equipment to carry out their jobs. But the compensation and the armory was rarely enough for the level of risk associated with the work. It was the equivalent of working at a retail store where your manager bought you the most expensive cash register known to man -- but provided you with zero training and half of the stuff is written in a language nobody can read. As a bonus the cash register could kill you if handled wrong.

Chanyeol still remembered how he’d seen a colleague get shot down-- and Pip’s response had been to dunk his body in the river because the tide that night was moving right.

Following him now, watching him enjoy his spoils, was making Chanyeol’s blood unbelievably hot.
And that was the perfect state to be in for what he was about to do.

Reaching the front of the counter, Pip placed his pleasant collection of canned food on the moving conveyor belt. He physically flinched at the sight of two cans of cold cider being placed in front of him just as the woman in the cash register was greeting him.

“He’ll take these as well.” Chanyeol said coldly, taking pleasure in seeing the colour seep from Pip’s face at the sight of him -- “Thanks, Pop.”

He squeezed Pip’s shoulders as he paid for the food.

After, Chanyeol guided him to the alley and it was there that the shopping would be dropped and Pip would stumble back, hands raised in surrender as he was approached, full-intimidation-mode. Chanyeol’s fists naturally flexed. *Itchy.*

“Yeol. What the hell?” Pip greeted, trembling, bloodshot eyes wide awake - “If you wanted to meet up, you could’ve just sent me a message.”

Chanyeol laughed warmly, tilting his head sweetly - dimples out.

“And miss out on seeing you surprised? C’mon Pip.”

Pip laughed too. A little more relaxed -- missing out on the tense tremble in the younger man’s bottom lip. “So, to what do I owe the pleasure then, boy?”

“I need your help.” Chanyeol pronounced, watching carefully as the other’s expression shaped into one of amusement -- “I need your tech guy. The one that likes singing.”

The next laugh which slipped from Pip’s lips was colder. Chanyeol chuckled along too, before taking the handgun from his pocket and cocking the safety off with an obvious *click.* His next words were neither warm or kind. A cold gust of wind blew behind him -- just as people walked by, their voices audible -- a pleasant reminder that whatever would transpire between them, would just fly over the heads of the rest of the shitty people on Earl St.

“Either I blow your leg off, or you help me.”

Pip visibly winced, hands lifted in surrender as he glanced down at his leg. “And if I help you, you won’t blow my leg off?”

The aim of the weapon was lowered as Chanyeol pursed his lips, before smiling widely.

“I never said that.”

Irritating as he was, having a Pip that limped -- still meant that the world had a Pip, which concluded that blowing his leg off would’ve been a pointless wasteful task. And so, Chanyeol refused despite the burning temptation to fire the sexy Glock and appreciate Junmyeon lusting over it. Plus, Pip
acquiesced with barely a peep of complaint, clearly keen to get home and make his casserole before it got dark. He even invited Chanyeol for a future meal. Sweet of him.

The tech guy on the phone had been the one tasked with running the online operations of the robberies Chanyeol had worked on five years ago -- and he remained one of the best in the city. However, his public profile was incredibly secretive -- and being a tech guy, he could control how much of himself was out there. For some reason, he was loyal to Pip which gave the older man some credit on the streets when it came to pitching for jobs. He was known to them as CHEN.

CHEN. Every criminal had a signature and his was associated with music-- for he always sent a song recommendation along with whatever products he was intended to deliver. They were 75% always power ballads and would drive Chanyeol insane because Junmyeon used to sing along with shameless energy.

Honestly. The amount of Whitney Houston Junmyeon knew off by heart was shocking.

Today, Chanyeol would entrust him with the task of searching for Hyewon’s attackers. City-wide CCTV and security cameras from all platforms of the vicinity of the area would be explored-- with the single aim of identifying faces. For Chanyeol had been too busy beating the shit out of them to really catch anything recognisable.

They spoke in a cafe where Chanyeol was watching coverage of the upcoming state visit on a small television in the corner. It was muted, making room for the gentle strings of background hipster noise. On the screen, there were children painting banners and making flags. He thought of Hyewon then. He hoped she liked his gifts.

“So, when do you need this by?” The voice on the line piped up cheerily.

“ASAP.”

Groan. ”Come on, it’s always ASAP.”

“Telling ya, bro. It’s ASAP. Get it to me in two hours and I’ll throw in an extra 1500.” Chanyeol delegated, as he sipped his coffee and added, “It’s 2500 if you can get me a decent shot of faces.”

“Deal.”

The call ended just like that. Chanyeol’s eyes remained on the screen. He watched the happy faces of the people being interviewed and found himself quietly delighted about how much this must be riling state police.

The only light at the end of this very grim tunnel.

Two hours passed by. The email subject of the message which dropped into Chanyeol’s box was: From This Moment On. Again, CHEN liked power ballads. Chanyeol’s typed in a quick thanks, coupled with a few flying cash emojis, and then attended to a 24/7 copy and printer shop where he had the set of images sent to him printed. There must have been at least 30. He took them all and
looked through with restrained interest. Most were pictures of the unidentified vehicles—blurry snapshots, but clearer towards the end. No license plates, of course. Anticipation grew as he flipped through the monochrome shots, sensing what was coming — and *then* --

“All hail, CHEN.” Chanyeol found himself murmuring as he held up the photograph where three men were clearly seen entering a vehicle. The pair in conversation were those he had roughed up yesterday.

The final man?

Chanyeol reached forwards and peered closer—until his vision softened—and then his blood ran cold. He found himself lowering the page, exhaling a withheld breath as he gasped, suddenly feeling like all his nerves were being squeezed.

_Bang!_

There was no denying it. It was _him_. Five years ago. The man who would singlehandedly change the course of his life.

_Bang!_

The man who had started it all.

-/-

**FIVE YEARS AGO**

-/-

“And if I stay it will be double
So come on and let me know,”

Lips pouted as he drummed in rhythm against the dashboard, Chanyeol arrived home, mouthing an energetic, “*Should I stay or should I go?*” as he parked across the house and ran up easily to the front door. He entered, not bothering to call out because he knew Junmyeon was out visiting his gran. He had groceries because he was going out with Kyungsoo later. All the necessities figured out. _All._

It was as he entered the silent house, shoes wiped against the mat and removed, that he sensed something odd. It was instinctual, he supposed, because of their line of work. There was nothing
palpable really - just a twitch, a *sense*, and that was when he noticed it. The absent red light of their home security system - which his vision had consciously registered - after he’d hung up his keys by the front door as per routine. It was off; it was *never* off. He swiped his thumb over the dead bulb, and it was there that he slowly removed his phone from his pocket and silently typed his housemate their designated emergency message -

```
   bunny:
   Sos
```

He then stepped into the living room, hairs on end, lowering the groceries to the floor as he retrieved his semi-automatic from his back pocket and then --

*Bang!*

Chanyeol ducked immediately as the bullet zipped into the wall behind him. Loud. A splutter of dust from the curtains fell all around him. The gun slipped across from his grasp. He scrambled for it as he caught sight of his assailant. He grabbed it, firing with no care as to where - just to distract - as behind him, his phone began to violently vibrate on the floor. No doubt from Junmyeon.

And then he took a deep breath - taking with it the opportunity to clear his head and focus away from the harsh ringing in his hears, the bitter smell of gunpowder and mixed shards of wood and glass all over the carpet which pinched his toes. He stood upright, cautious, gun aimed, expertly still across him as he approached the dining room in slow steps. It wasn’t a huge house. There wasn’t much room to hide and it was obvious as he stepped into the dining area where his assailant was choosing to conceal himself.

Steps as light as air, Chanyeol grabbed one of Junmyeon’s abandoned trinkets -- a plastic pen holder -- from the dining table and approached the kitchen door which was closed. He attached himself to the wall and then threw the object hard against the wall. Two shots through the wood subsequently followed.

Chanyeol took the opportunity and kicked the door open, knocking the gun away from the man’s extended hand before his collar was seized and the man -- a similar build and height to Chanyeol -- smashed him against the round hard dining table. Moaning in pain, and letting his gun slip from his grasp as his wrists were squeezed, Chanyeol gazed up into the unfamiliar face of his assailant--memorised the youthful lines around his face, the dry chapped lips -- and then with gritted teeth, he freed his legs from the hold and kicked against the man’s stomach with a loud breath. As the stranger stumbled against the wall, Chanyeol lifted himself up and delivered a right hook - taking delight in the cry of pain as he took another, before the man grabbed his hands and threw him onto the floor with his full weight.

Chanyeol choked in pain as he inched forwards to retrieve the gun.

From his vision on the floor, the man had walked away to retrieve his firearm. Chanyeol knew then that there was no better opportunity in which to *go*. Run and not look back.

But he could feel the sharp beat of the anger surging through him. And *Junmyeon*. He would probably be on his way. What then?

Carried by that thought, Chanyeol with his bloodied lips and aching body, limped across slowly, into the living room. It was deafeningly quiet again - he could hear the cars roaming past in the suburban 25mph speed, and as he approached, he took each step with noiseless care.

But not careful enough. A cross to his left cheek would send Chanyeol stumbling onto his knees, his
skin comforted by the plush softness of the surface as his head swayed. The man then gestured for Chanyeol to lower his weapon, the muzzle of his own, cold and menacing, against the flushed red tone of Chanyeol’s skin. A moment passed and Chanyeol appeared to oblige.

And then ringing -- manic ringing -- roared through the house from the house alarm being switched back on.

What followed was a blur. An explosion of stimulus that could never be recalled clearly without one overwhelming another. As far as Chanyeol remembered, he had reached for his gun and had scrambled up, firing at the man, fully intending to score a hit against the chest-- but around the same time, the man would retaliate and fired at him in return. Chanyeol wouldn’t register it, just the beginning of a dull pain, as he gasped and pulled the trigger again. The other man cried out, falling to his knees - but by then, Chanyeol became overwhelmed with the pain as a second shot ripped through his gut.

And then he was on the floor, gasping.

What followed was a slow and strange acquaintance with the impact of his injuries. Shock, he reasoned. It was like waking up from a dream, groggy and confused -- but his body was shivering and he was on fire. He felt a type of disconnection: with the only recognisable sensation reserved to his hands desperately squeezing the side of his gut as he felt the blood pour out. Freely. Like a faucet filling a bath.

Too much. Stop. He thought, in despair -

And then -

Please. I’ll die.

At some point, seconds - maybe minutes after - Junmyeon must have entered the house, and scooped his half-conscious form into his arms and essentially saved him from death. The assailant would be abandoned as he’d pulled a shocked and mumbling Chanyeol into his car, handmade tourniquet around his wound fashioned from a scarf and a pocket knife as he’d rushed him into accident and emergency.

For a few days, Chanyeol would be completely out. Exhausted and medicated.

Once he started to register what was going on, he was still in intensive care and he would remember the smell of antiseptic and how much it reminded him of high school and the nurse’s office.
Junmyeon would be his primary source of conversation for the first few days. Once he was able to regain a bit more strength, Junmyeon allowed Chanyeol’s request to contact Kyungsoo -- on the condition that he would also be allowed to call his family.

(‘You need to get better, you owe me a new carpet,’ Junmyeon laughed, tired, as he patted Chanyeol’s hand.

‘I will. Nothing from Kyungsoo?’ Chanyeol asked then, scratching the tape over his IV line with quiet worry, ‘You gotta make sure he’s okay. In case they come after him too…’)

During his early recovery, he was informed that he had suffered two serious gunshot wounds: abdominal and pelvic. Internally, some of his abdominal organs - particularly the liver and kidney - suffered and were officially fucked up. His hipbone was shattered too. There was even emergency scans for the shrapnel around the spinal canal after Chanyeol haphazardly mentioned that his toes felt funny.

Surgery. More exhaustion and medication.

In between that, Junmyeon admitted that the assailant was gone by the time he was able to return home. So he had nobody to demand blood from. He didn’t want Chanyeol to worry. Promoted that he focused on recovery. Not on the bastard who shot him-- or his boyfriend who still hadn’t extended a helping hand.

(‘Chanyeol, who tried to kill you?’ His mom was crying. She hadn’t seen him in years. She looked older. It made Chanyeol sad.

‘If they wanted to kill me, they would’ve put it through here,’ Chanyeol said bitterly, flicking his forehead.
She cried loudly. He laughed before reaching out his arms to hold her, ‘Come on Mom, I’m okay…’)

Not a day passed when Chanyeol didn’t ask for Kyungsoo. Eventually, Junmyeon surrendered and inquired after the man in the post-office and he wouldn’t find him. Instead, what he received was correspondence from a Kim Jongin that all of Chanyeol’s hospital bills would be covered. Junmyeon was quick to reiterate through an irritated phone call that what Chanyeol wanted and needed was his boyfriend - not a receipt.

For the three and a half weeks Chanyeol spent in hospital, his Mom came every day; his brother every two days, with Hyewon on the weekends; and of course Junmyeon as often as he could between jobs.
Kyungsoo? Not once.

In fact, at some point before he left hospital, Kyungsoo broke it off with him through a single phone call.

(*Kyungsoo, please god. I need you, you can’t*)

A dead phone line.

Discharge. Therapy. Medication; exhaustion.

Chanyeol returned home after a month, too sick to continue on any assignments. He gave up cigarettes and alcohol, alongside a lot of hepatic tissue, and he underwent a lot of physical therapy to ensure full healing of his hip fracture. The next year would be spent cooped up indoors -- shuttled between his room, his house and the therapy room at the hospital. His only company was Junmyeon. Otherwise, he refused to open the door to his mother -- to anyone.

After the first year, his brother drove to his house on his birthday and slapped sense into him. Hyewon was there too. She made him a card.

Things improved from then on. He regained his inheritance - and he invested it into the beginnings of his security business.

Life moved on; but it was never the same.

It was strange to think how in the space of a five minute altercation at his home, Chanyeol was forced to give up everything: his job, his home and his love. Perhaps, he had made peace with it - hence why he’d never hungered for revenge. But as had been previously stated, life had a funny way of making circles and tying loose ends.

And if he hadn’t sensed the hunger for revenge then, he certainly felt it now.

-/-/
Back in the elevator to the penthouse, Chanyeol held the photograph firmly in one hand. He breathed calmly -- once, twice, thrice -- attempting to collect his thoughts - his confusion - knowing that if he even edged a wrong foot, there was every chance he would lose the chance to gain his answers.

But he would lose it.

Chanyeol walked out into the penthouse and he found himself exhaling shakily at the sight that welcomed him. Across him, the beautiful towers of the city had become obscured by -- paper. Photographs. They were mapped with precision, large and printed, across the surface of the glass windows - monochrome -- which doused the room in tall shadows despite the light oranges that peeked from the surface. Edging closer, Chanyeol looked out, horrified, a hand smoothing over the face at the recognition that the figures on the photographs mirrored the identities of the ones within his own. But there was more. There were more men-- more vehicles -- more time stamps -- and the one man, the man whom had made an attempt in his life, there was one shot right across the top which displayed him clearly.

The deceptively youthful expression on his features - betrayed by the aged snarl in his gritted teeth as he spoke to an associate across a bus stop.

Bang!

Across his photograph; a police cordon with a figure dead and splayed on the floor. Ankle exposed. Tattoo: three entwined snakes.

The caption read: Gang-related activity.

Chanyeol turned, dazed, and regarded the dark and silent apartment. Tears stung his eyes as he glanced around and desperately made his way to the bedroom where he saw the back of Kyungsoo’s lone figure through the balcony doors. He made for him, running forwards and felt himself grow cold at the recognition that the door was locked as he tugged against it. The key hung on the other side; teasingly..

“Kyungsoo!” he yelled, pulling hard against it until his palms were red - “Get in here! Kyungsoo!”

Kyungsoo didn’t turn. He was sat on the edge of the pool, form perfectly straight looking over the waters which were a gorgeous blue, reflected from the tiles.

Chanyeol slammed a hand against the glass, causing a loud thump. There was the faintest twitch in the man’s form but still he refused. “Kyungsoo!” he was screaming the name now, but outside it was quieter - muffled by the wind and traffic.

A swell of hot anger burst in Chanyeol’s chest and before he knew it, he had taken an office chair -- books -- photographs -- and had hauled it with unrelenting violence against the glass doors.
And then, as he stumbled off-balance, he stopped, heart squeezing as he exhaled. Wrecked from tears, in the clear, he finally recognised Kyungsoo’s play.

He had to calm down.

And once he had, he found himself slipping down against the balcony doors, breathing through clasped hands, as the doors were opened.

Silent, he approached Kyungsoo’s form who had calmly returned to the poolside. Chanyeol sat beside him, breathing deeply. Kyungsoo’s toes were in the blue water now and it was luminous. He was exercising them, childish and still.

“Who is he, Kyungsoo?” Chanyeol asked in defeat, unable to bite back his desperation as he pressed on - “Who is he to you? Who are the Jung Dynasty?”

Now, close to him - Chanyeol realised that he had been crying. His eyes were red and irritable, his cheeks were gleaming against the touch of the sunset, and his lips - swollen from biting.

But he spoke with the same unaffected voice.

“His name is Hajoon.” He paused, fingers clasping together, “The Jung Dynasty were major drug players in the region that moved local stock across to surrounding islands. Hajoon is the last surviving member of the three that ran their play. There is no Jung Dynasty anymore. the Jung Dynasty is dead.”

And then, Kyungsoo glanced up into Chanyeol’s eyes and said a simple,

“They’re dead because I killed them.”

He smiled; but tears pricked his eyes.

“Aside from Hajoon, I killed them all.”

And there, he shared a story; one he should have shared a long time ago.

Do Kyungsoo was the name for a child who didn’t really have a name -- or a birth date -- a real mother or father. It was a name which had probably been uttered on a whim, perhaps his Papa had seen it on a paper, or a letter, but he’d offered it to his newest son as the first thing he ever owned after he was sold. It was the honest truth. Kyungsoo’s very first taste of life had been with a price tag around his ankles.
By the time Kyungsoo could walk, he knew only the set of rules in their den: respect and profit. He was educated the basics of writing and arithmetic -- but those would be the only lessons he shared with the rest of children his age. He grew up in a stringent and full household where everything he was taught related to the aged terms of stock, money, loyalty, blood -- *crime*.

He was innately obedient and he was Papa’s favourite.

Death would come to his family early. Nine years old. He had been on his way home. Late - because he’d opted for a route B. The Northern Line skipped for the longer and more complicated District T line.

*Papa? Blood on the tiles. Blood on the shoes of the men who are holding his hand.*

Children craved safety. They craved the comfort and routine instilled within them by their first guardians. And so of course, at the sight of carnage - the young Kyungsoo went with the nearest escape route. He stepped up and admitted that he didn’t want to die.

He would work.

Kyungsoo exhaled softly, eyes lingering on the surface of the water as he spoke,

“I worked for the Jung Dynasty as a courier when I was nine years old for another nine years after my original family was-- killed. When I was with them, I started the beginning of the Locker operations. The Jungs were dirty and bad at business relations. Dynasties tend to be because they’re left to blood instead of ability. So I was sent out all the time. I met a lot of people and made friends. Friends I kept. And then, one day, I was looking through the books and I found pictures…”

18 years old. Kyungsoo would lift the photograph of his Papa and his first family to the lone light above him. A single old bulb tentatively hanging on a wire from a roof that consistently leaked. Their faces were as familiar to him; he could trace their features in the dark.

The confusion would last only for a moment. There was only one reason why they would be in the books.

And he wanted to hear it.

‘*I remember all their names? Do you know? Do you remember? They were kids! Just like me? You would’ve killed me!*’

*The gun is heavy in his hand. His fingers were too small. ‘Why does it matter?’ The head of the Jungs -- Hyeonho -- is on the floor, papers on his large abdomen, splayed. Greedy. ‘Kyungsoo, I took you in- you can’t -*

*Bang!*
“Maybe my fingers slipped.”

_His head was knocked back by the weight of the impact. A straight shot through the skull._

“I don’t think so though,” Kyungsoo glanced at Chanyeol’s face -- handsome in the dark, so _pretty_, unlike those he spoke of. _Ugly. Greedy._

Kyungsoo ran away. He continued the Lockerman operations - building bridges with those he had started business with. He created a wall before the Jungs could come after him. They were big -- but Kyungsoo’s friends were undoubtedly bigger. Suddenly, they couldn’t drive in the same streets that he walked because their murderer had friends in higher places that could squeeze them flat.

Eventually, it would culminate in Heon Woo. Heon Woo -- Hyeonho’s nephew -- who had attacked him out of his own personal vendetta and had carved out his kidney in the back of a dirty staircase. Kyungsoo had yelled out in pain, but never begged for mercy.

_Bang!_

Heon Woo probably did beg after a hit was ordered on him and he was found dead by the police outside a rowdy part of the south.

A short run of warm tears flowed from Kyungsoo’s eyes now as he exhaled softly.

“Hajoon was my roommate for eight years. He was two years younger than me. They kept telling me to make do with Hajoon. End it. Bad blood only grows more poisonous. Eventually, it will kill you.”

It was dark now. It tended to descend quickly nowadays.

Soft circles of air slipped between Kyungsoo’s lips in the cold.

“I still remember when Heon Woo came after my kidney. He was crying _so much_. He was so angry and he asked himself, asked… the divinity. What was stopping me to take the other? Do you know what I said to him?”
A pause. Kyungsoo’s pale lips curved, sadly, as he cast his gaze to the water.

“I told him to take the other. I told him I’d help.”

It became clear that death didn’t scare Kyungsoo. Why would it? When it had followed him with such unrelenting force since he started his life? It was as cyclical to him as sunsets and sunrises.

Circles. Life moved in circles.

The only time -- the first time -- it would ever fall out of its pivot was that day. The day he met Park Chanyeol at the post-office.

And despite knowing that it would turn out badly, Kyungsoo let it.

“Hajoon came after you, five years ago, Chanyeol. He came after you because he knew I loved you and it would hurt me. In the same way that he is now coming after my operations. He wants to take from me, what I took from him.”

Kyungsoo glanced up and met Chanyeol’s steady gaze. He smiled, resisting the urge to reach out and soothe the creases in his expression.

"So you want an answer? Here it is. They were absolutely right." Kyungsoo laughed, soft - almost noiseless, "And everyone else was wrong. I loved you, Chanyeol. You were the first and I loved you most of all.”

A hitch-- in his voice appeared then. The vaguest arrow perhaps, to the depth of the brokenness which existed in him - shared for the first time. An admission of love from a man who never fully learned what it meant until it was lost.

“I loved you.” Kyungsoo repeated, sadly, before his voice trembled - “And I’m s-sorry, I couldn’t do better.”
FIVE YEARS AGO

Adjusting his round glasses and lightly massaging his round cheeks, Kyungsoo rocked in his chair as he glanced at the time.

4:50pm.

Normally, time passed by quickly in the post-office. It was perpetually busy with people sending loved ones letters and packages and requiring attention -- but today, it felt particularly arduous. It was funny, when he thought about it. So many would come to his counter, carrying the yellow form with the codes and the regions related to his extracurricular work -- but in hindsight, he actually dealt with the public and their products more. So really, he was just a postal office worker in the daytime and he liked it.

He liked the calmness of it; the familiarity of the faces he saw.

Not all would be familiar however. A particularly tall man was in the queue today and Kyungsoo spied him through the glass, a sense of curiosity residing in his thoughts for he recognised most of the people in the line with him. Not him however. He was very tall. If they’d met before, Kyungsoo would know him.

Over 180cm. He didn’t see many of those around here. This was largely a population of the petite and short middle-aged and the elderly -- according to the most recent census which he had read for recruitment purposes two nights before.

Somehow, he should have expected that the tall stranger would come to counter 7 -- carrying the yellow form in his hand, with the codes, and not a package for a loved one or a remote corporate body in the city.

“Good afternoon sir, how can I help you.”

He had said the same greeting so many times that day that it came across as even more monotone than usual. Strangely, the man was unresponsive. Not even a forced hello, as with most customers. He simply stared, bright youthful face reduced to an almost eerily paralysed expression.

He was so tall that Kyungsoo had to peer up at an angle.

He tapped the glass lightly, hiding a smile.

“Excuse me, sir?”

The response Kyungsoo received was a flustered, and thoroughly confusing - “Uh, Hello. How’s your Mom?” And then the stranger’s mouth twitched, like he’d mentally kicked himself.

The form was slipped through with a mutter. It was strange. How even when he was angry - his dimples still appeared, demanding attention.

Funny. Kyungsoo thought, before registering the 61 with a frown. He spoke the usual sentence,
reserved to warn of an incorrect form, as he held it up to his vision, a thumb sliding over the code to hint at the mistake.

But the other was too annoyed. He missed it completely, choosing to scowl instead of taking note.

And then - “Are you sure I can’t make you change your mind?”

Some part of Kyungsoo’s brain instantly switched on with lights. His eyes widened, flushed as he blurted out an overly defensive -

“You can’t.”

That somehow made it worse.

It hit 4:58 pm when the tall stranger finally left the post office. Kyungsoo’s heartbeat was fiercely fast and uncharacteristically loud -- and he chased the sensation to a simple thought and conclusion, after, when he was on his way home.

Cute.

Mr 61, 180cm+ … was cute.

---

So of course, when he noticed him tailing him, Kyungsoo would lead him to where he could see him again.

---

Chapter End Notes

+ more stressssssssssss. more tea for us, here. i promise.
okay notes in linear form to fully convey thoughts

+ firstly, HAPPY BIRTHDAY PCY! I HOPE HE HAS THE BEST DAY, UNLIKE FIC!PCY WHOSE DAY IS GOING RATHER POORLY.

++ next chapter will be chansoo content of the PUREST content. that's right, i have dragged you screaming and crying through 50k of pure revolting sadness for probably 1k of chansoo being happy shdbfs. and it's not even new. it was five years ago but from ks' pov. shh, i promise it will be nice although i'll warn you, it does lead to the breakup which we got a slight taste of here :///

+++ this for me kinda signals the third part of our little saga, i.e. that part in the film where we find out all the secrets -- so now we get on with the heist. so ! that's good c:

++++ thank you so much for sticking with this story. i love it sososo much. it's actually
become my nano project so yay 50k! i've appreciated all the comments especially bc i know that these types of stories aren't always easy to read c: but someone's gotta take one for the team! hehehe! (me. i volunteer every time o_o).

++++ okay bc i've been binging on vines to watch to cheer myself up through this, i thought i'd share some of my classic favs related to this story,

_pcy 5 years ago_
junmyeon and chanyeol as roomies
let's take a chance baby we can't lose

Chapter Summary

-- and we're all just runaways
i knew that when I met you, I'm not gonna let you runaway
i knew that when I held you, I wasn't lettin' go --

-- runaways, the killers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

-//-

FIVE YEARS AGO

-//-

Kyungsoo was first exposed to love - the romantic kind - as a simple daydreaming passenger on the subway.

He used to watch, more curious than voyeuristic, as people travelled together hand-in-hand. Young or old-- they would exchange all sorts: subtle whispers delivered through the screen of fingers to keenly angled ears, butterfly touches of hands across seats, all the way to the blatant and public tonguing which tended to occur on train journeys later at night. Although he must have been an audience to these showcases since his very first journey, it never registered in his brain until the time when it tended to for most people - during puberty whereby children suddenly and without warning become starkly aware of how alone they were. This would subsequently spark the start of the emotionally chaotic time where they would develop all sorts of feelings for anyone who bothered to hand them the sparsest ounce of attention.

Kyungsoo hadn’t been immune to the pitfalls of being a young adult -- but he found that he revelled more in the distant intimacy that he saw from people whom, he believed, were truly in love. Not the ones that rutted shamelessly in the lewd videos the other boys would watch back at his den. No. Despite the occasional light curiosities about sex, Kyungsso found more mystery in the subtle touches of fingertips, the whispers tenderly pressed on lips, and the message of the eyes as people held meaningful conversations in silence on busy trips. The thought instilled within him a sense of wonder - a fantasy - which in time he began to privately crave for himself.

He had always been admirably ambitious. Why not wish for something-- indescribable? Priceless, in terms of value.

Admittedly, every fantasy received a certain level of push-back from the bitter bite of real life. Whilst Kyungsoo, in his private daydreams, imagined a prince- his real life was saturated with villains. Unsurprising - they were criminals after all. Nobody around him ever spoke about love; and when they did, it was a dirty word. It was always associated with a spin of regret-- pain. None of
which Kyungsoo would see in the faces of the people across him on trains as they would hold each other, beautifully balanced, as the train swayed from side-to-side on the tracks.

And in the brief moments of intimacy he would subsequently share with a few - out of boredom or convenience - he sought for a certain *distinction*. A feeling that separated him from the murky grit of his life - that echoed the delicate fantasy he held inside. But he would always be left wanting. Pleasure was all great and good; but at the end of the day, he would still be The Lockerman and when he fell from the momentary high - he was reminded of how overwhelmingly lonely he was underneath. And love-- it wouldn’t fall into the equation. How could it?

Nobody around him seemed to crave it. They were satisfied. He was certain that anyone who knew him would speculate the same.

But Kyungsoo, who read people as easily as books - who saw what he was missing on his commute on a daily basis - felt the loneliness most profoundly.

And lonely people often ended up being the most romantic - because lonely hearts often belonged to those who liked to pretend that they *weren’t*. Storytellers. Fantasists.

In the quiet moments, between passing thoughts whenever Kyungsoo caught himself in one of his moods - he imagined the touches with clarity-- soft fingertips around his, the warmth of a weight on his shoulder, the thrill of quick kisses on the subway. And when the imaginations would wash away, and he would find himself sat alone in an empty carriage, he felt an emptiness as heavy as anything else he’d ever had to carry.

At some point, the daydreams did ease - stifled by greater matters and thoughts.

But they would all come crawling back with bells and whistles around the same time he found himself face-to-face with a tall, dark haired young man who was in looks -- the most *princely* Kyungsoo had ever seen. It would strike Kyungsoo the instant the bathroom altercation occurred -- saved by the moppy-haired stranger with the iron fists-- that he was on a level that was beyond *cute*.

And he didn’t have a name for that because he never had to have one before. So he settled with - princely.

It wasn’t to say that Kyungsoo immediately *warmed* to Mr. 61 180cm+. He was smarter than that. But in their trio of strange but brief interactions, Kyungsoo found himself enchanted by the prospect he represented -- a change, a *difference*, which he rarely encountered in the ordinary humdrum life he lived. Ordinary, with context. Nothing about Kyungsoo’s life was necessarily ordinary.

But who wouldn’t say no to the potential of *extraordinary* if it was being handed to him in the form of a tall stranger with sunglasses and nice hair?

“Go home!” Kyungsoo called out to the larger man who was swaying unsteadily behind him, arms out like he was flying an aeroplane for balance, as he chased Kyungsoo on the pavement.

“I lied-- man,” Chanyeol slurred loudly, shrugging his shoulders, “I want to h-hook up. I was just j-joking before! Don’t leave yet!”

Kyungsoo arched an eyebrow and turned on the spot.

The other claimed victory and caught up to him, smiling broadly -
“I admit it, k-kay?” Chanyeol cooed, throwing his hands dramatically in defeat as he then punched the air with his fists. “When you punched that guy-- god it was the s-exiest thing. Promise.”

The awkwardly delivered thought - somehow - brought shameless warmth to the face of a very cold young man.

“What?”

“I said you’re s-sexy.” Chanyeol huffed, gritting his teeth at the words as he repeated them brashly -- sexy, sexy, sexy.

The man’s large arms reached out to hold him - floppy and gangly.

Others may judge for what Kyungsoo would agree to next. But it would be important to note that he too, was fairly drunk - and such interactions were generally how his evenings went. In the back of his head, he still felt the faint beat of attraction he’d held for the taller man -- and considering that this already edged him with a higher emotional rank than the few he’d shared a bed with, Kyungsoo obliged. Plus, he was rather convinced that once they fucked-- he could get this entire thing out of his system. It had always been the same with others. Set fire to something and it would burn itself out.

“Alright.” He shook his head, patting Chanyeol’s arm lightly, “But no regrets, tomorrow.”

“I’m not a regrets kind of guy,” Chanyeol announced, sounding deceivingly sober as he closed the distance between them, taking the drunken Lockerman’s breath away by the sheer shine of his eyes, “Let’s fuck in my car.”

Not the most romantic or princely offer in the world - but there had been something downright sensual about the blatantness that still had everything surging to the right places.

Granted, the altercation would not be memorable enough for Kyungsoo to remember fully. The night would come to him in pieces -- the messy tangling of legs and limbs, the smell of the car freshener, the smooth hair his fingers would run through. And yet despite their fragmentary nature, Kyungsoo would remember the images with a nervous sort of air-- and he soon found himself completely distracted at the post-office.

A week passed. Kyungsoo attended the bar. He didn’t tend to - two weeks in a row, not even three, but he felt like it. He would ignore the lingering sense of anticipation in the back of his head until its source would appear beside him -- as tall and quietly angry as he remembered. After a brief toast of the same hideous liquor which Kyungsoo was quietly addicted to, they would find themselves together at the dance floor, too close -- not close enough. The edge associated with their week apart would come undone the moment one finally planted a hand on the other -- skin on skin -- Kyungsoo would never remember who because of what would come after.

“Let’s go.”
It began there and then. The drunken hook-ups at the nicest hotel at the end of Hooker Junction -- and it would be drunken. A drunken Kyungsoo was serious but cushy; a drunken Chanyeol was sexually voracious, and in between, they found a balance whereby they would finish their dull Thursday tonight together. Contented.

“I thought you didn’t want to see me again,” Kyungsoo teased him, as his back rested on the bed, with Chanyeol clumsily clambering over him, breathing heavily -

“I don’t,” Chanyeol affirmed, frowning, “I really don’t.”

“Me too.” Kyungsoo huffed back, as Chanyeol rolled his eyes and planted a sloppy kiss on his lips - no tenderness, all tongue, large hands reaching to grip his waist -- then ass -- as he worked eagerly to tug his trousers down.

His inexperience would amuse Kyungsoo-- so would the stripe socks he kept on-- but he wouldn’t deny that there was some unspoken pleasure about having someone to hold onto during cold nights.

Hold and then subsequently dispense.

Contrary, to Chanyeol’s memory however -- the drunken hookups didn’t actually last for very long. After the third, they became noticeably more sober. They would each take a couple of shots at the bar and end up at the hotel with some level of wits about them - and they would exchange conversation. Not very personal ones; but the usual mumbles about the weather and the random assortment of music that they would host at the club.

That was the thing about something that starts out as a harmless Nothing. Eventually, it falls deeper into the rabbit hole and becomes a Something. And for Kyungsoo, the Something took its first steps after he found himself mulling longingly over certain things about the taller young man outside of their weekly time together. Habits. For example, Chanyeol’s habit of folding up his clothes after sex to keep them off the floor as he showered - his constant offer to buy Kyungsoo food or drinks despite clearly having no money - and the fact that he was constantly humming.

There were things about himself too, that Kyungsoo grew quietly concerned about. Perhaps most concerningly of all was his thriving habit of memorising all of the other man’s pressure-- no, pleasure spots. It wasn’t a game he had played all that much, considering his lack of experience with long-term partners. But with Chanyeol, the thrill of learning where and how to make him respond -- suck his teeth, drive up his heart rate, and hiss his name until it was downright pitiful-- was undeniable.

Heart-racing.

And it was Something; definitely not a Nothing. This made it infinitely more mysterious. It occurred to Kyungsoo later that it probably could’ve remained as the latter had Chanyeol not turned up one week-after-the-next. But he kept turning up, bringing with him a satisfying rush that Kyungsoo felt right throughout. So he kept his learning up too, hoping to deliver the same rush in return.
At one point, at Week 4 of their six weeks together, Kyungsoo may have finally grasped the seriousness of this transition within himself - and in Chanyeol too, although knowing the man he wouldn’t have noticed.

After informing the other that he would be late the week before, they had agreed on meeting at the hotel room. No guarantees that it would happen - but it did. He had walked into the hotel room, still stressed from work - and upon entering, his glasses instantly fogged up from the heat.

Chanyeol was relaxing on the bed, skipping channels and eagerly greeted him with laughter as he approached the bed. In his vision, the grey mist on his glasses confined the taller man into an almost comical outline.

“Here, let me,” Chanyeol sat up and beckoned for the glasses.

Kyungsoo blinked and let him. He watched, squinting at the other as he wiped them against his shirt which was of a better material than his jacket.

After returning the item, Chanyeol looked up at him curious - “You okay four-eyes?” He smiled the same dimpled smile as he offered him the cool beer which had been resting on the spot beside him - “Did someone at the post-office have the hump with you because you gave them the wrong stamps?”

Always soft to post-office related humor, Kyungsoo chuckled as he thumbed the frame of his glasses and removed his outer clothing and bag. He took the beer can and took a mouthful before offering it to Chanyeol who drank it half-heartedly, eyes remaining on the television where a repeat of a baseball game was playing -

“Drink more.” Kyungsoo urged.

“No, I don’t want to,” Chanyeol murmured, half-whining as he looked at him, “I’m still recovering from last week-- you sure, you’re okay? Man. You look ready to cry, shit.”

Kyungsoo rubbed his eyes, sighing loudly.

He didn’t like the attention; the questions. He huffed a deliberate - “Just work stuff.”

And then Chanyeol said something strange. Something, which at the time Kyungsoo had accepted as meaningless, but in hindsight, should’ve alerted him to the threat that their Nothing was on the move and transitioning into an improbable but also probable Something --

“You want to talk about it?”

Kyungsoo looked back at him, eyes narrowed - confused. “No.” was the defensive reply.

“Good.” Chanyeol responded equally as quickly as his gaze returned to the screen.

Something in the room suggested that neither were overly satisfied with how that played out - but the atmosphere settled. And Kyungsoo was reminded of why he had trekked here, after his horrible and dreadful day, instead of home where he could’ve had more sleep and better snacks.

“Think you can manage fucking me, sober?”

Chanyeol snorted. “What kind of question is that?”

Kyungsoo pressed his lips together, innocent - feather-light - as he uttered a simple,

“I mean, I want you in me.”
He wasn’t sure he had ever seen Chanyeol get undressed so quickly. And in the midst of their night, as Kyungsoo held onto the other, arms wrapped around his neck, fingers spun wild and wound around dark locks -- he felt his exhaustion deplete -- overwhelmed all of a sudden after the taller man groaned a particularly breathy, ‘Kyungsoo’ as he rocked into him a final time -

He would think about it after, as he rested on the bed, eyes centered on the dirty white of the ceiling tiles.

“Kyungsoo.” He imitated dramatically -- breathy and desperate, inching his voice just a tad higher for accuracy. And then he laughed - perhaps a little too cruelly for the man beside him would turn and frown.

“You’re really going to be like this.” Chanyeol deadpanned, shaking his head, “Asshole.”

Kyungsoo bit his lip, smiling as he shook his head, deciding to refrain from further laughter - “I’m sorry-- no, it’s nothing like that. It’s just your face.” He pressed his lips together, before clutching at his chest as he shut his eyes and huffed a darkly melodramatic - “Kyungsoo-- ah, Kyungsoo.”

And then he laughed, unable to stop himself.

Beside him, Chanyeol laughed too - keener on the appearance of the other’s laughter than the humor. Cheekily, he glanced at the other, testing - before erupting into a similarly theatrical - “Ah-- ah, Chanyeol, ah so good - moreeee- ah - ah - - Ow!”

The performance ended with Kyungsoo thumping him hard on the arm. He winced, teeth gritting together, before smiling and laughing again.

They stayed like that for a moment, warmly smiling to themselves.

“I feel better.” Kyungsoo murmured absently.

“Yeah.” Chanyeol puffed out his cheeks, before echoing him, “Me too.”

As Kyungsoo sat up, intending to pander to routine and shower - he found himself exchanging a look with the other.

“Did you have a bad day too?” Kyungsoo asked.

“Every day’s a bit bad, man.” Chanyeol responded, before smiling sadly, as the television was switched on - eyes remaining on him - “This is basically the highlight of my week.”

It was an oddly sentimental thing to say. And Kyungsoo knew he meant it-- because Chanyeol never seemed to lie about anything. He paused, biting his bottom lip ears tuning into the quiet background of a television advert, as he replied with -

“You want to talk about it?”

A chuckle escaped Chanyeol’s smiling lips as he turned towards the television -

“Just fuck off and shower.”
And that was how it was. Two more weeks would pass - two nights spent being a little more sober, perked up by a little more laughter. Although it would linger unmentioned, there was also a developing sense of longing - in the eyes, the touches, and tender laughter that emerged when no jokes were exchanged. Chanyeol wouldn’t show anger so much; and his heartbeat would race when it didn’t need to. Kyungsoo knew because he would hear it, recognising then how close they had become and how peculiarly vulnerable he felt in the silences that followed. They weren’t uncomfortable silences-- if anything, they were too comfortable. There was nothing to suggest that anything about their uncommitted arrangement had changed -- and yet something clearly had.

When he left him that final morning, Kyungsoo’s thoughts were airy.

He thought ahead -- to week 7-- with some apprehension. What would Chanyeol be like then? Could his eyes become any gentler?

Of course, Week 7 would never come to be. Heon Woo and the dreadful evening in which Kyungsoo would lose a kidney did mean that his priorities were reshuffled away from his weekly evening with the other. And he would forget the good in all the terrifying and terrible.

Agonised and alone, Kyungsoo fell to his lowest in a while.

And it was in this toxic haze of pain and pain relief, that he would be dragged up by Chanyeol at the post office. When he had seen him, he had presumed he had hallucinated him -- emerging in the most unlikely place, all princely, as he had done before. Kyungsoo had smiled, convinced that it couldn’t be real -- after all, it was neither a Thursday night or a bar. He was also in no shape or mindset to sleep with him.

Yet there Chanyeol was.

He recalled clinging onto his larger form tightly, the crippling strain from his injury momentarily numbed by the rushing joy which his heart carried at the thought that Chanyeol had come out of his own accord. Did this mean he thought of him, outside of their evenings, too?

“Sorry, sorry, sorry,” Kyungsoo murmured, head lolling forwards as the taller man anxiously guided him into his car.

“Don’t be sorry,” had been the gruff reply, as Chanyeol then attentively moved his head to rest against the back of the seat - “We all have our fucked up days, yeah?”

“Yeah.”
Blessed with a body that resisted inactivity of any sort, Kyungsoo recovered from the ordeal quickly. And there was no doubting that being able to show the depth of his gratitude to Chanyeol became one of his strongest motivations to restore his health.

He busied himself with thoughts of what Chanyeol might want: Money? Clothes? Shoes? All of those things certainly but Kyungsoo, who had never provided a gift to anyone outside of his close social circle before, felt that such average gifts would not fully reflect just how profoundly Chanyeol had helped him that day.

So he gifted him the Botticelli-- his absolute favourite. Because inwardly, he had known that he wanted to leave something behind that Chanyeol would only associate with him.

He recalled holding the painting and thinking how lovely it’d be -- to live on in a memory in this way.

And perhaps it was only then, that Kyungsoo finally recognised that the Nothing which he had created with Chanyeol had truly become a Something. He felt it in the instant flutter in his chest when Chanyeol suddenly kissed him. A kiss that conveyed an affection he had only speculated -- and Kyungsoo came to the concurrent realisation that what he wanted was not the kiss, but the man who kissed him. The man who folded up his clothes; who reminded him to take his glasses on his way out of the hotel room; who let him borrow his mp3 player when he couldn’t sleep, allowing his loud nightly thoughts to be drowned out by far louder guitar solos and hard drum beats.

It all seemed to echo what he had been missing. The gentle touches -- whispers -- silences -- all adding up to an image.

An irresponsible priceless fantasy.

“There aren’t others, just you.” Kyungsoo murmured, almost in despair, as he realised how fast his heart was racing-- how he feared that what he wanted to say, what he felt, wouldn’t make its way across.

But Chanyeol would respond with unsurprising ease.

“Me too,” His large hands remained cupped around Kyungsoo’s face, as he smiled brightly - the light reaching the very center of his eyes - “Just you.”

And the Nothing-- which grew into a rather strange and new Something -- only blossomed from there. Nourished generously by more meetups, more conversations, plentiful intercourse-- and the appreciation, that the Something was a nice thing. A thing Kyungsoo liked very much.

A Something which he would use to endure all sorts. Particularly on that awful day he finally ordered a hit on Heon Woo. His heart had ached until he felt it all over - goosebumps peppering his
skin and a heated thundering through his head. Kyungsoo attempted his best to distract himself, through cleaning the painting which had become his personal duty, and it was in this contemplative state that he found himself catching mumbled words from outside the caravan. It was Chanyeol’s voice - and the nervousness which edged his tone would eventually capture his whole attention.


Kyungsoo froze, mid-motion, eyes widening as he turned his head to direction of the voice --

“I was just talking with my roommate today and he was like, fuck, you sound like you’re dating - and I was disgusted. For about two seconds, mind you. I don’t really date, you know? Fucking waste of time. But - I figured, if that doesn’t flip you out, it wouldn’t actually be so bad. It just makes it easier to answer people when they ask me about why the hell I keep coming to work late smelling like dumplings all the time…. It won’t change anything. Not really. Well, maybe I’ll treat you more. And we’ll have to celebrate anniversaries and shit like that. Maybe not. There’s no rules on it really.”

Inside the caravan, Kyungsoo continued to wipe the corner of the frame with the cloth - as his free arm rubbed the sleeve of his jumper against his tearful eyes -- and the soft smile which had appeared on his lips.

Chanyeol continued on, none the wiser, as he packed away their meal.

“We can basically do what we want with it, you know? We can go all out or-- do nothing at all. I guess, that’s what I’m trying to get at. I’m okay with whatever-- gah, just don’t break up with me right now?” Laughter. “Otherwise I’d feel like such a fucking tool for saying all this. Oh my god, Kyungsoo-- please don’t even joke about. I’m feeling really pathetic here. Say something - or I’ll keep talking… ”

Exhaling, the smaller man cleared his throat and managed a surprisingly steady,

“Sounds good.”

“Really? That’s all. Kyungsoo-- wow,” Chanyeol managed, shaking his head, as he mouthed a silent motherfucker under his breath - “I say all that. I buy you dinner. And all I get is sounds good? I better get to fuck you later…”

Annoyed as he sounded, he wasn’t really. Chanyeol was actually rather pleased to finally release the words from where they had been cooped up and steaming for days-- weeks -- now. He approached the garage door, carrying the trash and it was there that he would hear the words that he had actually expected (and wished) to hear -

“I love you.”

Inside the caravan, the smaller man had his face buried into his hands - flushed red and all damp from his tears. He hadn’t exactly expected to say it -- but perhaps now, he understood that he had wanted to. For a while. It was a weight lifted from his shoulders - but not the heavy sort. If anything, he was slightly giddy.

The armed robber paused - and shouted out a cool -
“I know you’re probably just saying it. But whatever…. I love you too, Kyungsoo.”

He was oh - so wrong. Kyungsoo would never just admit to something like that. Words were powerful -- and those most of all. There was no way to describe how much meaning the admission would contain for him. And to hear it -- returned by another. Kyungsoo wasn’t sure he had ever felt so disoriented by anything before. And he felt the words everywhere; a beautiful little frenzy that spun his thoughts around and round.

* I love you too, Kyungsoo *

It was all he wanted to hear for the rest of the night - over and over.

Later, on, Chanyeol would step into the caravan, to reaffirm it. Thankfully, Kyungsoo had finally recovered, even if the delight privately lived on in the shy curve of his lips.

“You’re cool with it all, really?” Chanyeol asked, curious as he walked across the way and onto the bed beside him.

Kyungsoo nodded, large eyes focused on reading the expression on the other’s features -

“Hm.” He responded calmly, before adding, “If you meant what you… said. Because I meant it.”

Chanyeol narrowed his eyes before nodding seriously.

“Yeah.” He smiled, a hand then smoothing up to remove his cap - enabling Kyungsoo to see him brighten up fully. There was no doubting his honesty now - “I love you too. You believe me right?”

Kyungsoo’s heart squeezed tightly - the same feeling of joy and relief creeping up as he felt unable to answer. How could it sound better the second time?

“How about this.” Chanyeol, still chewing through his gum, pressed a kiss to his palm and held it up for a hi-five, “In my boys’ school, we used to spit on it and shook hands. That was a promise. But I get that that’s gross now. So, we’ll do this instead. And that’s how we’ll say it, yeah?”

“What are we promising, exactly?” murmured the other, gazing at the other’s hand.

“I dunno.” Chanyeol shrugged, before grinning as he tilted his head at the other, “That we mean what we say.”

It was a little childish-- but quintessentially Chanyeol. And it served as the final push as Kyungsoo finally - fully - obliged. Thoughtful, he pressed his lips against his palm, just as the other, and lightly touched Chanyeol’s hand who smiled before clasping their fingers tightly together.

And then Kyungsoo pulled them together and kissed him - a lot - because a schoolboy’s handshake was definitely not enough to represent just how full his heart felt.
With the formalities settled, and the untilted Something finally accepted as love, the rest of Kyungsoo’s months would be subsequently spent getting to know his new favourite subject: Park Chanyeol. What was it about him which made him feel so much all the time? It was ludicrous how Kyungsoo found himself unable to think or focus on anyone else. Most likely caused by the rush and intense high brought on by a first love.

Fortunately, there would be no difficulty in gaining opportunities to feed his curiosities. With the garage den as their designated meeting point, Kyungsoo found that they spent a lot of their free time together. They did all sorts together, aside from the usual mix of sex and sleep -- confined to the humdrum moments of working together and eating together to the more coupley selection of dances and walks. He was certain that there would be a day in which they would tire of it -- but their relationship was young, and he craved the familiarity and equal unfamiliarity of Chanyeol’s company almost as much as the other did.

And nobody was around to tell them any different -- to scold them, to tell them to slow down and think a little more. So they came at each other, full pace and speed - total commitment.

Kyungsoo did like studying him through these interactions. Intellectualising his qualities to the point that they only served to add to his growing affections for him.

If he could create a notebook full of notes - Park Chanyeol for beginners - the key points would probably be as follows:

One. He was a natural handyman. If it wasn’t blown into tatters, there was a chance that Chanyeol would attempt to fix it. The best example of this would be in the one time he accidentally fell asleep on Kyungsoo’s glasses and the black frame snapped beneath his weight. Despite reassurances that he would be able to make it home without most of his sight, Chanyeol had insisted on spending the afternoon muttering over the item with a glue-gun in the other hand. It was an inability to be bored, Kyungsoo reasoned - for he would do other strange things like take apart broken objects, e.g. a broken kettle from his house which he would then dismember, pulling out colored wires and copper tabs like a madman. He would then separate the parts neatly into plastic tupperware. “It’s for the next time the heating fucks up,” he would murmur, as if that made any sense to Kyungsoo.

Two. He showcased an incredible affinity for numbers. More often that not, Kyungsoo would be mulling over a tedious spreadsheet and Chanyeol would be passively glancing over it, head resting on his shoulder, and he would flick his hand towards an incorrect decimal place -- or where the equations had identified an error. “It’s super simple maths,” he would say modestly. Later on, Kyungsoo would find out that his boyfriend had graduated from the exclusive St John’s Academy in the East. It was a place somewhat familiar to him because he frequently saw the students on the subway on their way to class. Their uniforms were hard to forget -- pine green and silver ties, navy blue blazers and trousers, crisp white polos, and --
“The straw hats,” Chanyeol groaned, shaking his head as he spoke to Kyungsoo who was listening eagerly - “It was ridiculous. I had detention basically every day because of those fucking hats. I used to wear my cap all the way to the school gates and then made a show of taking it off in front of my Philosophy teacher. It used to drive him nuts.”

Kyungsoo smiled, before murmuring, “I used to see so many boys on the subway going to St John’s.” He blinked, “Maybe I even saw you.”

“Maybe.” Chanyeol chuckled, as he fiddled with a baseball on his lap, “I was always late to school though. I used to fall asleep when I took the subway.”

That wasn’t surprising in the least. “So, you were always a troublemaker then?” Kyungsoo sighed, reaching forwards and pulling Chanyeol’s cap over his eyes, as he returned to the couch, and therefore to work -

“I don’t even know,” huffed the other, as he naturally wrapped an arm over him, “Maybe I like getting told off…”

Three. Chanyeol did not like getting told off. In fact, his concept of himself appeared fundamentally clouded by the wild ideals he had decided to show others. He was used to being angry - so he liked to act angry. He was used to getting told off-- and therefore had prepared a cool and comfortable mechanism to cope with it. But he was actually desperate to please -- and gentle -- and it was obvious to Kyungsoo in the way he made the occasional fuss over incredibly tiny things --

“Honestly, it’s good. Chanyeol.”

“No, it’s shit. I’m throwing it away--”

His wrist was grabbed. Kyungsoo made a show of chewing through a light sugar cookie which Chanyeol had attempted after a rainy day had cancelled his and Junmyeon’s shipping heist. They were light, crisp and sugary - a perfect bake. The issue was that Kyungsoo’s reaction had not been perfect. He had responded in a way which had concerned the other, made him self-conscious, and he had attacked back with an offensive hand.

“See, delicious.” Kyungsoo replied as a pink hue tinged his cheeks, “I’m just not used to people cooking things for me. That’s why I looked a bit surprised.”

“Oh.” Chanyeol thought it over, before his face naturally broke out into a smile, “Alright, eat some more then.” The tupperware box was offered with more resolve, “I made way too much.”

“Okay.” Kyungsoo nodded, reaching in and munching through another, “Mmm.”

Chanyeol’s eyes gleamed, before he muttered a, “Fuck off!” giving Kyungsoo’s shoulder a light shove, as he whined with a - “Stop being cute-- I’ll throw up. I basically ate 60 of these already.”

They would eat another 60 between them.

And at some point, Chanyeol did almost throw up.
Unfortunately, as with all love affairs, it wasn’t always cookies and hugs. The nature of their jobs meant that they would often be mentally exhausted, carrying thoughts which weren’t easily soothed by the loving familiarity of the garage and the taste of fresh dumplings. There were times in which Chanyeol would snap at himself-- and his light spirits would be contrastingly heavy, and Kyungsoo’s penchant for listening and blunt honesty would have to be the tonic. It was a little difficult the other way around. Kyungsoo didn’t share. That wasn’t how he dealt with difficulty. Instead, Chanyeol consoled him through his dark days by providing a pleasant escape from them.

When his heart was heavy, and he felt like curling up somewhere dark, he would opt to delight in listening to Chanyeol sing the wrong lyrics to the rock songs he loved so much -- and when he felt cold, from fear -from anger, he found solace in the safety of Chanyeol’s long-limbed embrace. It was like that. Within his arms, Kyungsoo felt extraordinary small-- and there were moments, when that would be exactly what he craved. Small had too often been associated with something lesser -- and defeated -- when to Kyungsoo, it was also aligned with being shielded and secure.

Safe.

Danger never stayed away from Kyungsoo’s proximity because of his work. After discovering murmurs about Hajoon’s reappearance in the city, he found himself swiftly overwhelmed by his memories of the Jungs-- and suddenly, he was quiet, and frightened, and he couldn’t speak. And Chanyeol became overwrought with worry-- as Kyungsoo suddenly withdrew like a tide which refused to return to shore. A short but bitter fight in the garage over something menial would spark an announcement from Kyungsoo that he would appreciate being driven home.

Naturally, Chanyeol would agree -- but he wouldn’t drive him home. Not in that state.

It was dark and scathingly cold. A thin layer of fresh snow remained on the roads after the afternoon’s brief spell, still generously sprinkled around because of the lack of wind and stubborn freezing temperatures. Chanyeol would drive them to the city’s Eastern outskirts where the slopes sent the car slipping up and down, plunging them into occasional darkness as the canopies of old trees watched over them, blocking the moonlight.

Eventually, the driver chose his spot. Kyungsoo walked out of the passenger’s side, looking weary - as he glanced over the frozen lake with wide-eyes. It was absolutely huge. And with no trees to hide it, the moon appeared high and godly in the cloudless heavens, lending the frozen surface a stunning
-- yet eerie -- glimmer. He had never seen anything quite as equally natural and unnatural as this before.

Chanyeol clapped his gloved hands together as he made his way across before turning around and beckoning for Kyungsoo to follow him.

“Come on, chop chop. It’s safe. I promise.”

Kyungsoo scratched his nose - cold and dry. He nodded and followed, carefully taking each step, as his eyes trained on the ice which felt deceivingly solid beneath him. Soft breaths escaped his lips, contrasting with the harsh drumming of his heart as he finally reached the taller man who had wandered into the middle, hands extended for him to hold onto.

“My brother and I used to come here and practice hockey during winter.” Chanyeol shared, as Kyungsoo took his hands and moved closer to him - “I liked it because when I scored goals, I pretended like I was throwing it right back into the city.”

He then encouraged for Kyungsoo to turn and appreciate the unique view of the city. It was high and far away-- the lights of the center, not stark or assaulting, but solemn. Most importantly, it was a view of the city as a whole. With the centre as the brightest - it spared light and life to the other corners, less luminous but still in motion. It wasn’t overwhelmingly beautiful; because it wasn’t meant to be.

It was distant; and it was real.

“We’re so far away,” Kyungsoo murmured, puffing out air as he then gestured towards the ice beneath him, “Are you sure it won’t crack on us?”

Chanyeol smiled, before setting himself down on the ice, despite Kyungsoo insisting. “Come on,” he passed him a smile from below, eyes mirroring the shine of the lake, “It’s not even wet because it’s cold.”

After a beat of silence, Kyungsoo followed. He did so slowly, opting to cross his legs as he brushed the fragments of crushed snow away from where he would settle his palms. He leaned back and gazed across the horizon -- an intense sparkle of golds and yellows-- and he exhaled, recognising then how quiet it was. There wasn’t even the faint noise of a car horn -- or the rustling by a stray breeze. It was quiet, aside from his own loud breathing, and the recognition of how pleasant it was would bring him to tears.

“How did you know?” he murmured, turning to Chanyeol whose eyes were also admiring the distance - “How did you know I wanted quiet?”

“Because this was where I used to go. Back then, when I wanted quiet.” Chanyeol affirmed sadly, recollecting, “When I was scared-- because when I’m on the ice, then I feel brave.”

Kyungsoo looked around him and nodded, brushing away the tears in his silence. It was beyond comforting -- being here, being with Chanyeol, remote from the city, away from the fear. Sometimes, when it felt like the world was attacking -- a simple moment away, an opportunity to take a step back, was exactly what was required to frame everything again.

So, he felt fear. Didn’t everyone? And the world-- his world -- was so minute compared to what was out there. Beyond the city.

“You don’t have to tell me what’s going on, you know.” Chanyeol shrugged with a smile, arms
folding across his chest for heat - “I get that you being secretive is part of the package. But I want you to know that I’ll look out for you, whatever happens. That’s what happens when you love people. You look out for each other.”

Kyungsoo watched him, observed the way his lips curved as he spoke. He wondered if he knew how important he had become to him. How the blazing bright lights of the entire city paled against him. All the light -- and all that warmth-- Kyungsoo would ever need was here. Bigger than the city and beyond.

“Thank you,” was all that Kyungsoo could say, a familiar sense of joy twisting in his gut, as Chanyeol grinned and pressed his glove to his lips and reached out to him in a familiar practice.

Kyungsoo chuckled before kissing his own hand. He then patted Chanyeol’s cold cheek tenderly before - taking his larger hand and squeezing it tightly.

They stayed until it started to snow again. And by then, half the city was drenched in black. Kyungsoo would spend the drive back, with his head resting on the other’s shoulder, eyes half-awake - flickers of street lamps and signs occasionally drifting back and forth across his vision.

The snow melted -- and a gentle spring came and went.

Unsurprisingly, the worst came after.

On the day that Chanyeol was attacked -- Kyungsoo had been at the bar alone in the evening and had felt an unexplainable worry enter his mind at the start. He ignored it -- but it didn’t falter with every passing minute that Chanyeol was late. Eventually, he found himself driving to his home with Junmyeon -- and it was there that he would first walk into the empty house.

The electricity was down. The only source of light was a dirty orange beam - almost brown -- from the street lamp across the yard which flooded the living area.

Large patches of blood stained the carpet. There were holes in the walls. Shrapnel everywhere.

A run of incoherent flashes and thoughts entered his mind as he exhaled in disbelief -

*Blood on the tiles.*

Dazed, he had driven back to the garage den, half-expecting for Chanyeol to be there. In the silence
that welcomed him, he would curl up on the bed -- in silence, frozen with fear. He didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t make sense of any of it.

He had been holding him only yesterday.

*What if--*

Kyungsoo swallowed down a loud breath, hands clasping together painfully as he forced his eyes to watch the painting. He focused on the pleasant blues of the stars, willing his gaze to stray away from the orange flames which licked and reached from underneath.

At some point in the week, he received a brief message from Chanyeol’s roommate -- explaining how he was in hospital with serious gunshot wounds. The correspondence would include the hospital, the name of intensive care unit and his room -- as well as the crucial information that he was unwell but conscious.

Kyungsoo would let the phone slip from his fingers, suddenly hit by nausea, as he emptied his stomach into the bathroom.

He held onto the message for a while, fingers gripped solidly around the cold metal of his phone as he felt it -- the burning white of *anger*. It surged through him and he emerged all dizzy.

*Bang!*

Kyungsoo jolted awake from the ghostly sound.

“*Kyungsoo, are you okay?*”

“Find out who! Find out who it was!”

“Alright. I’ll ask around.”

More days passed. Kyungsoo wasn’t sleeping. He had taken a leave from the post office. He must have looked like a madman at the hospital counter, scribbling a cheque for hospital bills that weren’t
his. He hated hospitals. They had a funny smell; the lights were too bright.

“Are you alright, sir?”

“Yeah,” Kyungsoo’s eyes were watery, as he offered her the pen and asked, “Your hospital. It’s a good one, yeah? You’ll take good care of him-- the patients?”

The woman behind the counter seemed overwhelmed as she nodded.

“I’m sure they’re doing their best.”

He walked back to his car, and in the stark assault of daylight - his phone vibrated. He answered the call and was met by an instant -

“It was Hajoon. It was him.”

And Kyungsoo almost doubled over, clutching his stomach which churned painfully as he pounded his fist against the car door. In his stupor, he managed to enter and once inside, he did nothing but bury his face deep into his trembling hands until his forehead was touching his knees.

Images flooded his mind again. The same run --

_Blood on the tiles._ Blood on the carpet. The images would blend together and he felt instantly faint, sickly --

He felt like he could die from it.

But he wouldn’t. And because he was alive, he could do better.

Jongin became his principal channel of communication. Through him, he found out about Chanyeol’s procedures -- his gradual recovery -- and how badly Chanyeol wanted to see him.

“Would it... hurt to see him? I mean, I’ve literally got his asshole friend ringing me every five seconds threatening to hunt you and your ancestors down.”

“Do your job,” Kyungsoo murmured, taking a deep inhale as he glanced out of his car window - “Can you tell me again? It was abdominal… and then he had surgery for --”

On his lap, the dark-eyed man thumbed coldly through the set of monochrome photographs -- each face, each name, pinning themselves one-by-one to the front of his mind. He repeated them through
his mind through the drive, during his meals, and even in the seconds before he slept.

He repeated them until the syllables themselves enough were to rouse an immediate darkness in his eyes.

His own list of the damned.

Sometimes, Kyungsoo used his key and slept in the garage den - comforted by Chanyeol’s scent on the pillows and the sheets.

A pleasant temporary cure for the nightmares which kept him awake and the hatred which knocked the air out of his lungs.

His fingers would reach out, in the moments before he’d fall back asleep, and crumple the fabric of the pillowcase.

*Chanyeol, he’d murmur - *I’m so sorry.*

And then he would repeat the names with his lips, gaze drifting - allowing the tenderness in his heart to melt -- replaced by something harder and colder.

Familiar.

“Are you really leaving the country?”

“You can handle it for a while whilst I do some spring cleaning, right?”

“Sure-- will you pop by and say goodbye to my Mom before you go though? She keeps asking after you.”

“I’ll try.”

The phone call was ended. Kyungsoo glanced across the road where the tall building of the city hospital towered.

According to Jongin, Chanyeol was nearing a state where he was ready to be discharged.

That was a relief.
The final time Kyungsoo would speak to Chanyeol would be on that day. He would choose to speak to him, tucked in the quiet of the garage den, across the painting where they had kissed for the first time. This was a memory he couldn’t escape somehow, despite his every best efforts to focus on the challenging task ahead. It was almost as if his mind was pushing him back, trying to weaken him.

But it calculated him wrong. To remind Kyungsoo, how much he loved Chanyeol - only served to strengthen his resolve that what he would do was the right thing. The goodbye would honour what they had promised each other -- and that was to care for each other, whatever the cost.

Kyungsoo dialled the number.

Two rings. "Kyungsoo?" The relief in Chanyeol’s voice was palpable-- “It’s you-- really? Are you okay? Are you okay- hello?”

“Hi.” Kyungsoo answered, eyes focusing on the colours of the painting. The depth of orange in the fires immediately catching his attention as he found himself smiling - “Hi Chanyeol. It’s me.”

Tired laughter. “Shit. You-- it’s really you, huh? What the hell? Why haven’t you-- I was worried-- you know? Jesus. I’m just glad to hear your voice again.”

“Me too,” he answered steadily, as the early spots of tears began to well in the corner of his eyes, “I heard you’re recovering well.”

“Yes. I am.” A pause. “Why haven’t… you come yet? I really want to see you.”

Kyungsoo’s eyes moved to the stars then-- his vision blurring, with tears - watery, grey, the colours all mixing together as he wiped them away stubbornly.

“Chanyeol.” He exhaled silently, “I’m not going to come and see you.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s -- done. We’re done. I can’t. I can’t see you.”

“What--?”

Hearing the man on the other line gasp deeply triggered Kyungsoo’s grasp around the phone to tighten as he raised a sleeve to his lips as he withheld a sob. Cold wet tears slipped easily over his fingers as his body rocked forwards --

“Kyungsoo? Fuck-- are you breaking up with me? Are you... you know that I almost died, right? This makes no sense! Shit no... no…”

Chanyeol physically sobbed - and at the sound, Kyungsoo found himself leaving the phone beside him on the bed, as the other’s desperate cries rose up, still audible. The lone man in the garage folded forwards, squeezing his lips tight as he contained it with a hand - as his other hand tugged painfully hard against dark hair --

“Fucking hell-- come on.... I love you....”
And with his last ounce of strength, Kyungsoo retrieved the phone and uttered a cold and distant, “Please recover well.”

But the words would be lost in the frantic calls of the other -

“You’re breaking me here.... P-please, come see me. Let’s talk. I’m f-fucking losing it. Please. Kyungsoo, please god. I need you - you can’t-”

And then Kyungsoo concluded the call.

The subsequent silence that followed as he pulled away the phone’s batteries would serve as his audience as he finally broke.

Kyungsoo sobbed loudly -- the agonised sound pulled from the very deepest as it echoed intensely around the room. He felt himself punctuated with chills-- arms wrapping over his chest as he rubbed his shoulders -- rocking back and forth to console himself.

He squeezed his eyes shut and breathed in and out slowly.

*You had to do it.*

Just as he had done as a scared little boy after seeing the blood on the tiles -- and as a runaway with blood over his trembling hands --

*You had to.*

And later on, as Kyungsoo made his way to the airport in a quiet subway carriage with a single carry-on-bag, he found himself catching sight of a pair of figures -- faceless, with their backs to him -- swaying by the train doors.

He blinked once and observed them faintly as they left together at the following stop -- hand-in-hand across the grey platform.

The train doors shut. Kyungsoo gasped for breath as he violently burst into tears, his chest squeezing fiercely as he sobbed into his fists.

After a moment, he exhaled -- letting the misery dissolve until it was a dull ache.

He consoled himself like that - alone because he still remembered how. It was how it had been before.
And then he flew away. The city disappeared with the altitude. Eventually so would the rest, but it would take time.

He didn’t return until he was sure it had.

-//- 

PRESENT DAY

-//- 

“Hajoon was the only one left. Everyone told me he must have died. I came back about two and a half years ago. I drove past you once-- by accident. You were arguing with a parking officer.”

Kyungsoo smiled at the memory, signalling that the story finally ended.

There.

The water was cold.

Silent, he rose from the pool side and walked back into the bedroom, stepping directly into the ensuite and flicking the shower on. He closed the door behind him.

Chanyeol followed after a soft exhale. Registering the sound of the running water, he sat on the edge of the bed and removed his shoes. He zipped out of his jacket and neatly placed it on the hook on the back of the bedroom door. He then stepped out and moved across to the kitchen. After making a quick assessment of the cupboards, which were mostly empty aside from --

Ah. The gasoline drink. Chanyeol now knew it was a type of liquor comprising of some deathly Balkans vodka.

He pulled out two shot glasses, gave them a rinse and walked back into the bedroom. He then shuffled up the bed and poured out two, letting them rest on the bedside table.

Kyungsoo emerged from the shower after about twenty minutes. Chanyeol was patient, back against the headboard, gaze mildly aware of his actions as the smaller man stepped out in fresh pyjamas. Silence was sustained between them as Kyungsoo warily sat himself across the other.

Chanyeol then reached across and handed him a shot glass. They toasted together and downed it.

The burn was as unpleasant as Chanyeol remembered. He exhaled, teeth gritted as he hissed.

“Want another?”

“No, I’m okay.”
Chanyeol nodded as he took their twin glasses and returned it to the table. Idle, he returned and stared at the other, focusing on the dark circles around his eyes and his lips which were dark and slightly swollen from biting.

“I told Junmyeon I burned the painting,” he murmured softly, as Kyungsoo finally looked up at him, “I couldn’t bring myself to burn it. I think a part of me wanted to give it back to you.”

He exhaled a long breath. Kyungsoo nodded, the vaguest smile expressed as he left the bed and reached for his wallet within his abandoned trousers on the floor -

“Look.” He removed a piece of yellow paper from the front and offered it to him. Chanyeol took it and looked at it against the dim light. The letters had basically disappeared and it was crinkled - but there was no doubting what it was. A post-office form.

“It’s the first one. Technically, the second one. It’s got 61 on it,” a finger reached over and tapped the top where Chanyeol’s ridiculous scribbling was clear - “It was wrong. You filled it out wrong.”

Chanyeol scoffed, thoughtful, before returning it to him.

“I’m glad you didn’t burn the painting.” Kyungsoo murmured, as he tucked the object away -- blinking at the taller man who quickly shook his head.

“I really couldn’t.”

Silence. Chanyeol’s head lightly tapped the wall behind him, causing a hollow thud. Dark weary eyes then turned and looked towards his companion. Kyungsoo’s own eyes were on the sheets, gaze deep and contemplative.

“So, what now?”

Kyungsoo’s lips pursed as he shook his head. “I don’t know.” He looked up and offered Chanyeol a sad smile - “What now?”

And there, they remained, perfectly still for a moment. The weight of the lost years steadying between them -- tipping slightly at the faintest clap of emotion --

Unsurprisingly, it would come from Chanyeol.

“How can I believe anything you say?” He said weakly, shaking his head as he mouthed - “How?”

“Why would I lie?” Kyungsoo pressed, stunned slightly by the sight of the tears which had welled up in Chanyeol’s eyes, “Did you really think I would leave you?”

“Fuck that.” Chanyeol straightened up, exhaling angrily as the first splutter of tears came - “Because you still left me. You left when I needed you there. I needed you there Kyungsoo. You can’t understand how shitty it all was. All the fucking surgery and therapy-- but you leaving me? Fuck, man. That hurt more than any of it.”
He gasped, fists curling and uncurling as he shook his head -- holding it all back as he turned away. Kyungsso’s lips trembled as he resisted reaching out to comfort. Too afraid.

“I just wanted to keep you safe. I wanted to look out for you.”

“That’s not how--”

“I never loved before.” Kyungsoo managed, as he bit his bottom lip hard - “I didn’t know better. You have to believe me, Chanyeol. Thinking that you could have-- that Hajoon could have--”

Kyungsso sucked his teeth in as he wiped his irritated eyes.

Almost concurrently, a large sigh escaped Chanyeol’s chest -- agonised -- as he wiped his face messily against his shirt sleeve.

And it was there that Kyungsoo did the only thing left that he could think of.

Thoughtful, he lifted trembling fingers to his lips and planted a soft kiss - tears deep in his eyes as he then offered his hand across.

Chanyeol stared at the outstretched offer, a memory flickering - awake - in his eyes, as he managed a tired smile. He exhaled deeply, before he finally did the same, breathing against the warmth of his palm as he touched it gently against Kyungsoo’s hand. He gripped it lightly -- then clasped their fingers together -- before scratching the top of his head and muttering a frustrated -

“Come here.”

And then he pulled Kyungsoo across to him, alongside all the weight and guilt of the last five years. Kyungsoo immediately wrapped his arms around his form, as natural as any motion - resting his head easily on Chanyeol’s shoulder, dampening it. He let his fingers rest on his back, grasping the fabric of his shirt as he focused on the mismatched synchrony of their breaths -

“I missed you so much.” Chanyeol eventually whispered into the crook of his neck, burying his tears into the familiar skin - “I missed you so fucking much, Kyungsoo…”

It was a heavy weight he’d carried and Kyungsoo smiled, tearful, as he felt the man soften at its release. He swallowed thickly before pressing a comforting hand over the other’s back, smoothing over the areas he could reach.

“I missed you too.” He hummed back, lips brushing his shoulder softly - “So much.”

Kyungsoo then leaned back, held his lover’s face with steady hands and kissed his lips, guiding them open as Chanyeol kissed him back hard, pushing him easily onto the soft bed as he did so. He sighed tenderly into the kiss, the familiarity of it overwhelming, as Chanyeol’s hands moved to brush his cheeks - all damp and sore from the tears, but becoming wonderfully flushed at his light touches.

Then - as their lips parted for breath - Chanyeol stopped.

Eyelashes fluttering open, clearing the moisture away, Kyungsoo gazed up curiously into the eyes of the man above him -- who was staring down at him wearing a strange expression.
“We’re older now.” Chanyeol murmured, large pretty eyes all swollen.

“Yeah,” affirmed Kyungsoo as he then placed gentle caresses on the bruised spots on Chanyeol’s face, “And you’re still getting beat up, trouble.”

The taller man smiled, gaze tracing the other’s face closely - familiarising himself with the marks and lines that hadn’t exactly been there before. The only real remnant of the time they had apart. Everything felt-- *natural* all of a sudden. They were in a penthouse but it felt as quiet and private as the garage did five years ago. They hadn’t spoken in five years and here they were, holding each other-- kissing each other-- like they hadn’t been apart a second.

“Why does nothing feel different?” was the question he would pose to the other, as Kyungsoo smiled, drowsy eyes blinking as he would let his hands rest over Chanyeol’s smooth cheeks.

“Maybe because you don’t feel different.” A pale glimmer would cross Kyungsoo’s eyes as he smoothed his thumbs where the tears had made tracks - “Maybe you still feel the same.”

“Do I?” The taller man tilted his head at the other, who smiled warmly as he responded -

“Maybe.”

Chanyeol smiled, managing a soft laugh as he reached up and pressed a kiss to Kyungsoo’s forehead. Damp hair clung to the skin, masking it with the scent of his shampoo; still the same. Showers were like opiates to Kyungsoo. He was plainly tired; and would probably doze off if he tried to make out with him again.

“Maybe.” He echoed, before expelling a breath, “You need to sleep, you know.”

The taller man then rolled over, landing flat on the spot beside him. Kyungsoo turned to his side, gazing at him with narrowed eyes. Chanyeol would move towards him, also rolling onto his side, startlingly close - until they were almost at kissing distance again. Not quite.

“You know, we’re going to get them *all* don’t you?” Chanyeol whispered, delivering the words as tenderly as any secret-- any promise, “All of them, Kyungsoo. Every single piece of shit out there that tried to hurt us. Every name. No mercy.” He smiled, tone gentling - “So close your eyes and rest.”

Kyungsoo would echo the smile as a gentle hand extended across and stroked Chanyeol’s warm cheek -

“All of them,” he murmured back, eyes heavy - “We’re going to get them all. Both of us.”

“That’s right.”

And then, Kyungsoo said something-- *obscure* which Chanyeol hadn’t expected. As the smaller man allowed his hand to slide from his cheek to cling firmly to his shoulder, he shared a hushed -

“Then no more.”

He smiled mysteriously, head tilting into his pillow -

“No more.”
Later on, after a short sleep, Chanyeol would find himself leaving Kyungsoo on the bed and sitting himself across the pool, cross-legged. Across him and the balcony, the lower grounds were devoured by blackness -- the only lights confined to the occasional pale flicker from a passing vehicle. He sat there alone, screened beneath deep cloudy skies, with a mind louder than the roar of traffic. All of the case was now before him; the play and the players, the victims and victors, with the past finally entwining with the present.

And with a clear head-- no beat of anger or fear in sight -- he connected them all together.

Flicking the lighter switch with a thumb, Chanyeol watched the small orange flame welcome the windless evening as he allowed it to hover over the corner of Hajoon’s picture. Not quite touching.

Dark eyes watched his frozen face as Chanyeol tilted his hand, allowing the flame to reach across and lick at the spot of paper.

This was the centre; he was the centre. And he would find his way to him - even if he had to plunder all sides to get there.

The yellow heat consumed the paper hungrily, gnawing the edges of the faces on the photograph until they were black and falling as dirty char on Chanyeol’s lap. He continued to watch its animations, until the very final moment - when the vaguest brush of heat would tease his skin - and then he let the final speck of it fall into the pool water.

Gone.

No more.

And in the darkness, Chanyeol would do the same to the rest in quiet solemnity - preparing for what would be an eventful next few days.

Every name. No mercy.

-/-

Chapter End Notes

and the award for the SADDEST CHAPTER GOES TO--
+ ok so i gotta admit it to u guys, that phone call part in the flashback ++ when kyungsoo is on the subway. i will get stress dreams, possibly for the rest of my life. i don't think i have ever felt so violently sad in my writing fiction life - and that segment alone made me re-think posting today bc i presume we are all feeling pretty down

++that aside, that was the mother of all flashbacks. all 9k of it and we will not have any more. thats right that's it. it ends here. the past and present have met and they have kissed each other and said sorry, and it WILL NOT GET ANY SADDER THAN THIS SGDFHFB I PROMISE! i personally cannot take any more. i have reached my limits and i'm sure u all reached urs about 45k ago. even if the handshake was cute! gotta say, first love cuts the deepest but it is the most beautiful to write ugh @ __@

+++ that aside, aside, omg somewhere in the above mess, i mentioned how pcy and ks used to take the subway to the school and now i have this headcanon that they have crossed paths before !! but probs, as fate has it, will always miss each other i.e. pcy and ks will sit together but pcy will be asleep with his cap on so theyll never interact lols

ok that's it from me. thank you as always for reading. if u, like me, had to sit thru the mama mess today, pls remember that exo loves u and u love exo and thats all that matters. also some chansoo happened to day. go look it up c: thank you again for always being kind and following my stories! be well exo-ls !

(*kisses palm and hi fives u*)
as promised, bc i'm an old schooler, have some inspiration!vines before u go!

pcy/baby_byewon
junmyeon w/chansoo
at the end of it all, i'm coming back to you

Chapter Summary

i wanna know, i wanna know, i wanna know
that nobody, no face could take you away
due to the life we've got
two's a life to the things we do
to tell the truth, i only want you, baby

-- the line, dvsn

Chapter Notes

a necessary summary:
in tonight's extravagantly long episode, chanyeol is entertained by kyungsoo wildin in the dark side dressed in a leather jacket / and our favourite marksman kim junmyeon finds a kindred spirit.

warnings: for mild description of torture, grown men crying, consolatory cuddling, plotplotplotplot, sexually frustrated men, plentiful mentions of dicks, two bros roleplaying 5 feet apart bc only one is (apparently) gay, guns, bad people doing deals with other bad people, 90s/000s boybands appreciation, and emotional night swimming

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-//-

PRESENT DAY

-//-

Considering the sheer emotional intensity of the previous night’s events, the expectation would be that Chanyeol would open this new chapter of his renewed relationship with Kyungsoo-the- (not so) - dirtbag-ex with a rich plethora of bedroom-related activities. The thought, alongside the need, had grown in the time he had spent studying the criminals he shortly planned to decimate, with the small jumpy part of his brain focused on recalling how lovingly Kyungsoo had kissed him.

Thus reawakening a hunger of a different sort.

Alas, he would wake up later than his companion. And once he realised that Kyungsoo’s hands were patting his jacket for his keys and not tugging down at his trouser waistband, he figured that his
morning was not going to play out in the way he would’ve liked.

Still, never one to disappoint, Kyungsoo offered Chanyeol the opportunity to go somewhere where his heart was certain to race.

“I’m going to pay a visit to our rat. Want to come?” The room was dark; the only refuge was the sharp white light leaking through the open ensuite door.

Smoothing large hands over puffy cheeks, Chanyeol watched Kyungsoo through heavy drowsy eyes.

“Will you let me beat him up?” He murmured, a sense of anger already stirring in his gut at the delicious prospect.

“Nope.” Kyungsoo’s tone was amused, “Jongin told us not to, remember?”

The taller man pouted as he relapsed back into the bed, sighing into the comfort of the mattress. “I’ll pass. Have fun conversing.”

Chanyeol closed his eyes, long fingers crumpling the soft sheets. He felt Kyungsoo near him, focusing on the gentle pads against the carpet as he moved around the bed towards him. Sensing the added weight on the mattress as he took a seat, the taller man rolled over and blinked lazily up at him in greeting.

Now at a closer distance, he spotted Kyungsoo’s choice of outfit-- an all black ensemble with a cap which was angled to completely obscure his eyes.

“About last night.” Kyungsoo thoughtfully pressed his lips together, “We can talk about it more later if you like.”

A sleepy smile crossed Chanyeol’s expression. “What for?” he hummed, “It’s done, okay? Let’s focus on what’s important. Like coffee.” He squinted with one eye open as he sat up, flicking the lamp beside him to turn on. “Do you have any?”

“It’s been made.” Kyungsoo murmured, as he reached forwards and pressed warm, comforting lips to Chanyeol’s tired left temple, lightly brushing his closed eye-- as his hand concurrently placed the icy metal of a handgun into the sleepy man’s right hand, “Fifteen minutes, Chanyeol.”

“Mixed messages, much,” was the inevitable whine of the other as he was left, abandoned on the bed, scratching his head idly with the hand which still held the gun.
Mornings clearly didn’t comprise Chanyeol’s peak mental activity hours. However, he would admit that getting out of bed for this one had been more than worthwhile. Adrenaline and coffee was a terrific mix.

They were at Mr Diamante’s lovely furnished two bedroome home. Just him and Kyungsoo-- and two particularly unhappy looking men outside of the house in a suburban-family Civic. Gangster-friends, most likely.

The party commenced at exactly 5:30am-- and because he wasn’t witness to it firsthand, much of what was occurring upstairs was left to his imagination. Fortunately, he had a terrifically vivid one.

And so, circa Chanyeol’s Sleepy Brain Productions, the early scene upstairs unfolded as follows:

5:30am. Pitch black outside and it’s gusty. Start-of-horror-movie-atmospheric. Upstairs, Kang Minhyuk-- Mr. Diamante-- is shaken awake by his alarm for his morning medicine. He takes it by his bedside table. As he returns to drift back into sleep, he notices the landing light which is on, bathing the floor with warm yellow light.

He never leaves it on.

Spooked, he reaches for a phone on the dresser (missing), a gun under his pillow and inside his wardrobe (also missing). Panic explodes in his chest as he swears and grabs the nearest thing to him he can use as a weapon.

(Chanyeol’s best guess is the glass vase which he had, personally, pitched slightly closer to the door.)

He walks down the stairs, trembling-- completely unaware that it’s all a terrible trap that was concocted for him the day before-- from the drugging of his mid-evening pizza to provide a few hours of forced unconsciousness for his house to be meticulously searched, to the strange quiet which had surrounded his home since he tucked down in his bed to sleep.

He lands the bottom step and looks across at the living room. He sees the faint tint of light reaching across the far wall where he can also see that the curtains are drawn. Again, he never leaves it fully drawn. He walks in and turns to find a man, slightly smaller, dressed top-to-toe in black-- Friday casual, Grim Reaper style. His shoes are shinier than the tears which glaze over his own eyes as the intruder brushes a delicate finger over the visor of his cap, lifting his head to reveal the tensest of smiles.

It’s hot.

But the homeowner almost shits his pants from terror.
Chanyeol wasn’t sure whether all his estimations had matched up, considering how distracted he became by the sight of Kyungsoo in a leather jacket, and the fact that his role was largely confined to guarding from a far distance. However, a few minutes after 5:30 am he did spy a man holding a vase by the living room door across from where he was observing. Expertly silent in the dark, the tall man watched with keen eyes as the pawnshop owner entered, his legs quivering as the vase slipped from his grasp, landing on the floor with a loud thud.

“Don’t pick it up,” hummed Chanyeol quietly beneath his lips, as the man crouched down to reach for the object— only to have it in agony as his legs twisted beneath him.

He collapsed, confusion now mixing with the terror. The physical effect was undoubtedly from the short-lasting paralytic which the gangsters had replaced his statins with from the night before. It was a common tactic now - to disarm and daze for a kidnapping or interrogation. They had left the tablets on his bedside table with his water to take for the morning.

Chanyeol had spotted the bottles after taking a particularly indulgent piss in his nice bathroom. He was quite a medicated man, Mr. Diamante. He took all sorts. The younger man recalled assessing all the bottles in turn, piqued by the host of colours and shapes, from capsules to pills. He imagined the ongoing chaos they must trigger within his body— a cloud of chemicals surging as waves, smashing one against the other, some mixing, some dissipating, leading to a haphazard delivery of messages to the brain.

Grimly, Chanyeol thought that this must make his blood taste funny. Although, it would also taste rather anxious if his medicine cabinet was anything to go by.

Easily anxious men never made good criminals. No matter how excellent their insight might be-- much of the success in their twisted world depended on the perfect maintenance of nerve at the right time.

An element of his outer character which had always come naturally for Kyungsoo, who was perfectly still and situated inside the room, entertained by the terrorised face of the traitor.

His operations had no mercy for those who betrayed. The penalty was often far simpler than this with Code 715 in place; but his lawyer had made him promise.

“Sorry if I came at an inconvenient time.” Kyungsoo pronounced coldly, angling his gaze to meet the other’s eye as he smiled. “I’m an early riser.”

He stepped across, lowering his arm as he lightly tapped a silver blade against his thigh. Menacing.

The man nodded eagerly, greeting him, with a frenzied - “Kyungs--soo, I can explain--” before the man in black cut him off, tutting, shaking his head and muting him instantly as he waved the blade in the air.

“I think I’ve had enough of you talking about me, Mr. Kang.”

Taking his time, Kyungsoo lowered to a crouching position and leaned forwards, almost speculative as he tilted his head at the other. It was there that Chanyeol would appear for his only role which was to tie the man up, a feat which he would manage in under two minutes. Having been warned not to manhandle, Chanyeol obeyed -- but he toed the line as best as he could, leaving only once Kyungsoo admonished him with a single look.

He left through the door, flashing the smaller man a playful peace sign which prompted the other to smile.
But it quickly faded. Overlooking the frightened mumbles of the homeowner, the younger man took his blade and rested it on top of the man’s open mouth. A whimper resonated, harsh and hard. If he attempted to cry, there was no promise it wouldn’t cut so he held it back, causing his upper body to shake violently.

“So, today we’re going to talk about you.” The lightest pressure was placed on the sharp, prompting the man to inhale deeply, “And depending on how well you answer, the sharper the blade I’ll use. Okay?”

Jongin had said to leave the tongue in; so he would. But he wouldn’t let Kang Minhyuk forget what a traitor’s punishment should be.

And Fear was merciless; it rarely left memories.

“So, let’s start with something simple.” Emotionless, Kyungsoo crossed his legs, sitting at level with the other man, as he pulled a fabric envelope towards him. Inside, the rest of the sharps were housed-- all of varying types and thicknesses.

Expressionless, he tugged at the other man’s lifeless left leg, rolling up the pyjamas to reveal the skin. Kyungsoo looked up before patting the flesh gently, reassuringly-- as he began. The sensitivity was returning now and it was obvious in the dawning horror on the older man’s face.

“Ready?” Kyungsoo’s lips curled, “When did you start working for Jung Hajoon?”

Much of what he would reveal during the earlier stages of questioning were geared to reveal facts which Kyungsoo had established out of his own digging. This would guarantee some reassurance that the man was cooperating. As the questions further channelled into Hajoon, less was known-- which highlighted the limitations of the diamond expert’s knowledge.

However, he would prove himself useful in some aspects. As any wise businessman, he had kept a record of his business with Hajoon-- through a signed correspondence with a known associate. This would please Kyungsoo’s nitpicky lawyer.

But the most important revelation he would make would catch Kyungsoo completely offguard.

“Hajoon! He’s g--going to auction it off. He doesn’t want the d--diamond anymore. He knows that the police are looking and he wants it out of his back pocket. He’s going to run a dynasty auction, contact specific buyers and then he’s going to sell it off.”

It sounded like something fabricated-- geared to steer his focus away. Kyungsoo then fiercely accused him of lying, examining his reaction to it with absolute attention. The way the man sobbed as the blade teased his flesh, rough and blunt, suggested otherwise.

“He asked me to value it. Please-- I can show you the messages, please, please, you have to believe me.”

The messages were assessed and deemed legitimate.
“A dynasty auction is a risk.” Kyungsoo countered, “Why would he risk it on such a high value item?”

“I don’t know,” was the expert’s answer, “All I know is that he’s got a buyer in mind. He just wants to be sure they’ll take it. The date— it’s tomorrow. He wants to do it before the state visit officially happens.”

The questioning would end there. A series of instructions followed, including committing to hourly contact with his men -- particularly about any correspondence from Hajoon’s side. Some warnings would be shared but the ultimate one would be delivered last.

“You lied to me before,” Kyungsoo’s grasp was firm around the man’s collar, fingers striking flesh and collarbone, “Betray me again and nothing of yours will survive my next visit. I will end everything and everyone associated with you and your filthy mouth. Do you understand?”

The unsparing heat beneath his threat would render the traitor dizzy. He nodded after a few seconds, absolutely drained.

“My lawyer will get in touch with you in due course. For now, please take your medicine and stay well. Play your part and you won’t see me again.” Kyungsoo smoothed damp hair back, laced with sweat, as he placed on his cap. He packed up, untied the man, and walked out of the house, followed earnestly by Chanyeol who was absolutely drowning in questions.

One glance at Kyungsoo would suggest that none would be answered for now.

The smaller man mulled over the meeting, strict-faced and thoughtful, on the drive back to the penthouse. Being naturally nosey, Chanyeol was uncomfortable being left in the dark. He parted his lips, fully intending to ask a question, until he noticed that Kyungsoo’s head had adorably lolled to the side as he parked in the private garage space.

He was— sleeping.

“Kyungsoo,” he called out, after the engines shut off, “We’re here.”

“Oh.” The man rubbed his eyes and looked up, pulling his cap back slightly, revealing uncharacteristically pallid skin, “Okay, let’s go up.”

Assessing him suspiciously, Chanyeol extended forwards and grabbed Kyungsoo’s hand to no resistance. His fingers enveloped around the other’s wrist, and it was there that he sighed a horrified, “Fucking hell, your heart’s going nuts. Come on.” He unclipped his seatbelt quickly, squeezing Kyungsoo’s hand with a sigh, “I’ll make you breakfast.”

“There’s no food upstairs,” contested Kyungsoo as he stepped out of the car.

“Shit--yeah. Okay. I’ll go buy some. Go up. I’ll be five minutes. What the hell is wrong with us? All we’ve eaten for the past 10 hours are fucking… mini cookies.”
After a few more irritated mumbles, some of which would let slip during his prompt trip to the nearby convenience store, Chanyeol would manically cook up eggs (as close to Kyungsoo’s specific way) and would serve him breakfast as he rested, all thoughtful and quiet, in bed. It would’ve looked far more romantic had Chanyeol not entered the room, panting breathily, almost tripping at one point as he shoved the plate in the other man’s direction.

“Eat up before your heart explodes.”

Fortunately, there would be no hesitance as Kyungsoo was clearly starving. He ate in silence under Chanyeol’s unrelenting supervision. “It tastes good,” he complimented, passing Chanyeol a tired smile, a complete contrast to the icy facade he’d held onto barely an hour ago, “Thanks.”

It was only then, as Chanyeol was hit by a staggering sense of déjà vu, that he realised how he had done this before too. Five years ago. This unwinding had always been one of Kyungsoo’s tells—whenever he was anxious. His worries would manifest physically, like a sudden illness, draining him of colour… sense and eventually voice. He could fall silent for days on end. It had been an obvious source of friction in their early months as a couple—resolved only once Chanyeol stopped being an oblivious idiot and figured it out.

Unfortunately, with the said auction now at their feet, there was no time for Kyungsoo to shut down. And so, being the heroic bastard/pathetic loving ex that he was, Chanyeol decided to skip ahead and provide the best remedy which had worked wonders in the past. “Come on.” Removing his shoes and neatly arranging them by the side of the room, the tall man climbed into the bed, landing in a wild heap beside the other, “Finish up and…” He reached across his side and planted a pillow to the empty spot beside him. Chanyeol would gesture towards it, hoping that the offer of consolatory cuddling would be received.

It was something they had done five years ago; partially buoyed and drowned by the warmth of first love. Clearly, this was a very different situation. And for him, it was probably as significant as the kissing hurdle which they had only overcome last night.

And his heart was probably—definitely—going to hurt later. But he could sort it out, with a drink and greasy food, later.

“I’m not really in the mood right now,” Kyungsoo said softly, as he removed his glasses and blinked, “To fuck.”

“No. It’s not for that.” The large eyed man frowned, frustrated, as he patted the pillow again, “I just want you to lie down. Rest your head. You’ve had a long morning.”

Understanding dawned in the other through the softening of his tense shoulders. Kyungsoo obliged, falling against the pillow and curling up naturally. The close and familiar scent of his hair and skin would’ve probably dumbfounded Chanyeol, had he been less focused on his internal task of serving a five-star level of comfort. He focused on his breathing, waiting patiently until the other began to echo the rhythm. After that, he decided a tad less subtlety was in order.

“I’m going to hold you now, is that cool?”

With dull eyes, Kyungsoo would turn to him, and answer with a simple,
“Sure.”

The smaller man rolled over to his side, facing away. Chanyeol then wrapped a long and heavy arm over the other, allowing his fingers to search and entwine with his. In this position, he used to allow Kyungsoo to dictate how closely he wanted to be held— and he appeared to remember, communicating his wishes with simple tugs, urging for Chanyeol to be bolder and inch closer to him until they were cozily pressed up against each other.

Chanyeol’s head hummed with happy, mellow and totally-PG thoughts, as Kyungsoo pulled his arm closer to his chest, breathing with more ease, his tight grip around Chanyeol’s fingers never relieving. After a few minutes, with Chanyeol almost nodding off again, Kyungsoo opened with,

“Hajoon is going to auction the diamond off.”

“I heard,” mumbled the other, close enough that his breath teased the short hairs dusting Kyungsoo’s nape, “We can’t let him do it.”

“We can’t.” echoed Kyungsoo, “But I need to think about how. I told Jongin. He’s thinking about it too.”

Chanyeol nodded before imposing another question.

“So, a dynasty auction. Explain that to me.”

“It’s last-minute. Invites with specific details are sent out to select target buyers on the day. The inventory is only revealed during the event. The items are frequently high value and too tricky for traditional trade. I’ve been invited to dynasty auctions before and helped secure inventory. Once the items are sold, they go off grid. This is why these auctions tend to be geared for the foreign and powerful.” Kyungsoo exhaled after a moment, “I think Hajoon’s motivation to steal the diamond wasn’t to do with its value. It’s political. Maybe for foreign clientele. But if that diamond leaves the city, it won’t be easy for me to get to it.”

“And it’s tomorrow.”

“Yeah.”

“Shit.” Chanyeol cursed, as he bowed his head which pressed against the back of Kyungsoo’s neck.

They would fall into silence for another few minutes, cushioned by the sound of their synchronised breaths and the occasional rustle of the bed sheets.

Sensing the other’s grip around his hand stiffen, Chanyeol looked up and took the conscious step of planting a kiss on a sensitive spot on Kyungsoo’s neck. Just beneath his ear. Tentative at first— and again at the second— but by the third, fourth, fifth, there would be no concealing his eagerness, and by the sixth, Kyungsoo was sighing, thoroughly resigned as his skin flushed warmly beneath the superficial touches.

It must’ve been like this before too, Chanyeol thought with some degree of smugness. And sure, sure, he really should’ve been the responsible adult in this situation and casually guided the conversation back to the auction and all such pressing emergency matters, but this was inescapably nice.

And Chanyeol was weak for a little tenderness. A clear fact since he was now in his ex’s bed, lowkey getting off on kisses, like some leading man on a romantic comedy film. Daniel Cleavers. His mind hissed.
No, no. He would 100% be a _Darcy_.

Naturally, such closeness, an intoxicating level of physical _need_, and private thoughts about the hunky Mr Darcy, would lead to the inevitable.

And that was a disastrous cockblock at the worst time.

Today, it would be Kyungsoo’s phone ringing shrilly in the distance, just as Kyungsoo had finally succumbed and rolled over, their lips finding each other’s— their kiss as sincere and natural as it had been from the previous night’s.

“I have to get it,” Kyungsoo murmured, after overlooking three loud rings. He moved up the bed, reaching for his glasses before taking the phone and muttering, “It’s Jongin.”

Exhaling deeply, _sorrowfully_, Chanyeol nodded, head falling onto the bed as he muttered, “Put it on speakerphone.”

The call was answered.

“Jongin?” was Kyungsoo’s wary opening.

“Mayday, mayday, mayday! My darling, Kyungsoo. Do you recall that craptornado I spoke of once upon a time? Well I’m afraid it’s on the horizon and it’s lethal. I’ve been surviving on a diet of pills and _Dr Pepper_ for about 50 hours, so I’m about to go down for a four hour power nap in a _hiber-egg_. Don’t ask. So I’m going to keep talking and you should just sit tight and absorb, okay? The tide of warrants? It’s coming. I’ve ran out of ways to hold the landslide back but I’m hoping once I sleep, something else will come to me. But for now, if you’re thinking about getting that diamond, you can’t touch anything that will get you into trouble. Do you understand? You can’t do anything that will give the cops the slightest hint that you are anything but the kind orphan angel I’ve been telling everyone about--

Glugging was heard. Possibly pills. Possibly _Dr Pepper_. Most likely both.

“Now, because this call is on speakerphone, I’m presuming Chanyeol is there. Bro, hello.”

“Hey,” Chanyeol greeted, focused on the worried lines which had blossomed on Kyungsoo’s face as he looked up at him from his position.

“Sup, bro. So here’s the deal. Kyungsoo can’t do anything that will get him into trouble. Period. But if we get that diamond, I can get this case to tank faster than a bird who accidentally ate pills thinking it was breadcrumbs… I mean. You catch my drift? I know I’ve told you before about second chances and how boning your ex is super unhealthy for you, spiritually. But I’ve actually become very fond of you both and the many clients that I have that rely on the Lockerman. So, I’d like Kyungsoo to stay out of prison too.”

“Got it,” Chanyeol affirmed, sitting up, “Have a good sleep, bro. We’ll catch up later.”

“Peace.”

The call ended.
The look of worry was evident on Chanyeol’s face and Kyungsoo was quick to respond.

“Don’t worry.” His voice was always steely. But there was no overlooking the tired flickers that crossed his eyes as he murmured, “He’ll think of something.”

“I’m not worried.” Chanyeol responded, scratching the top of his head -- clearing the emotional cloud which their pathetic cuddling had pulled over his thoughts as he reached into his pocket for his own phone, “I’m... thinking.”

“Okay.” Kyungsoo answered as he wearily stood up from the bed and plodded towards the ensuite, “I’m going to go shower.”

“Yeah, shower. I get the routine now.” Chanyeol muttered, scrolling through his phone’s notes where he had already gathered the figures of interest from his previous night’s investigation. He had narrowed his hit list down to a top five.

With this shitshow now gaining an impossible deadline, there was no discarding the growing itch to go all out and add more.

The taller man frowned even more. Great; he had made himself harder by thinking about how scrumptious revenge was going to be.

“Kyungsoo,” he called out to the bathroom, “I’m going to go take care of my dick, so I’ll be back in a bit.”

“You’re going to... what?”

“Take a drink,” muttered the other, as he walked out of the room, fully intending to sit and consider through the strategies which had already began to form solid networks in his befuddled brain.

He was just going to have to consider the less sexy options first-- for the sake of his rather pitiful crotch situation. “---Good morning, sunshine.” Pressing the phone to his left ear, Chanyeol slid through the kitchen, rinsing out another shot glass as he opened another of Kyungsoo’s bottles, “How did the job go yesterday?”

“Killed it. Where the hell are you? You didn’t call.”

“I’ll explain in a bit. Forty minutes. Ramen Place, you game?”

“Sure, so long as you don’t bring your pisspot of an ex.”

Taking the shot, the taller man smiled as he swallowed down the lukewarm liquid. God, what terrible things he did to his beautiful vessel of a body.

“I won’t!” He lied, seething as he exhaled through the sharpness of the liquid, “See you in a bit.”
Forty minutes passed and the pair met Junmyeon outside of The Ramen Place. Having lied about Kyungsso’s attendance, Chanyeol approached the van and watched with idle amusement as the older man shook his head violently, mouthing a colourful stream of curses which were perfectly visible from the distance--

“Nope! Nope! Fucking, nope!”

Chanyeol tapped at his window, inching his head to the side. “Junmyeon, come on man. It will take two minutes. We just need to talk it out.”

Unsurprisingly, his neutral offer was met with a landslide refusal. Junmyeon lowered the window, revealing the full breadth of his anger as he yelled out of it, unrestrainedly. “Are you kidding? I’m not letting that piece of shit in here. Do you know I have four concealed firearms at a proximity to me and I have always had one reserved for him?” He then tapped the soft fabric of the roof above him, showcasing the obvious weight coated inside, “See that? That’s a revolver.”

Having expected this level of unnecessary drama from his best friend, Chanyeol humored him, affirming the great irritating burden that Kyungsso’s presence now placed on both their shoulders -- and accepting that he was the world’s biggest asshole for lying to him about it. Eventually, the situation concluded as it normally did with Chanyeol getting his way.

After getting beckoned, Kyungsso entered the back seats, awkward, as he caught the deadly dagger eyes which Junmyeon was giving him through the dash mirror.

An update was quickly given by Chanyeol to alleviate the stifling level of hostility. It focused on the diamond and Jongin’s phone call -- with the main message communicated that the world was demanding for them to have something in place by tomorrow if Kyungsso was to escape incarceration.

“A dynasty auction?” Junmyeon licked his lips, brows furrowed, “Never been to one.”

“You would not meet the criteria needed for an invitation.” Kyungsso said pointedly, “They are very strict about financial--”

Junmyeon then reached for the roof and Chanyeol quickly stopped him with his hands. “I think what Kyungsso means is that it’s very exclusive.” He exhaled, sending Junmyeon a look who promptly shook him off, “So anyway, I’ve thought about it and we’ve got two main options. First is that we do nothing. We wait five hours and hope that Jongin dreams up a solution and we let the law work it out.”

“Great idea.” Junmyeon retorted.

“No, it’s a shit idea.” Chanyeol sighed, shaking his head, “We are not doing that one. Ever. Okay, second, we involve the cops. Dynasty auctions. They’ll know how to handle it. They have the firepower. And by grassing out, we may be able to prove that Kyungsso didn’t steal the diamond. Plus, if we give them the evidence that something’s going down, they can probably stop it all before it happens, saving us the footwork.”

He narrowed his eyes then, indicating that option two was on par with the shittiness level of option
one. “But that involves working with cops and they’re useless.”

“Fucking coppers.” Junmyeon muttered, spitting out of his car window in protest, “And I’m not snitching. I’d rather get shot.”

“Exactly,” Chanyeol spat out of his own side of his window, “Right, so that leaves option three.”

A smirk crossed the taller man’s lips as he turned to his best friend -- and previous co-armed robber-- and said a simple,

“We steal the diamond back.” He leaned forwards keenly, “During the auction. I’ll make it happen. By the end of the night, we will have a big-ass diamond which we can give to Jongin, a willing witness, Mr. Diamante, to burden all the deserved blame, leaving no room for further interest in the Lockerman operations.”

Of course, the man in the back seat would protest.

“No,” came Kyungsoo’s predictable refusal, “Chanyeol. Listen to me, a dynasty auction invites criminals of a certain pedigree. You can’t just go in there and commit more crime--”

But by then, Kyungsoo’s words of sense would be lost in the reawakened exhilaration between two armed robbers whom had only come to the passionate recognition of how badly they had missed each other.

“Wait,” Junmyeon breathed, absolutely thrilled, “Are you saying that you’re… back?”

“I’m back, baby.” Chanyeol announced with a smile, before reaching across and grabbing Junmyeon’s hand as they crossed, hands trembling with excitement.

“Holy fucking shit! This is the best day ever!” Junmyeon yelled out as he laughed excitedly, before exploding into a timely rendition of Everybody by the Backstreet Boys with a shockingly stunning voice.

Naturally, Chanyeol would join in-- tasked with providing bass -- overwhelmed by the nostalgia which included knowing this exact song off-by-heart, having spent many heists listening to the same songs over and over with Junmyeon at his side.

“Backstreet’s back, alright!”

Behind them, Kyungsoo was groaning silently into his hands. This could not be real.

“Chanyeol, you can’t seriously think you can organise a heist of this order in a day. At most.” He said dully once they quieted down.

“I agree.” Chanyeol affirmed with a smile, as he looked back at him, eyes comprising the same manic joy associated with anger, “But that’s where you come in. Having your intel basically cuts my work in half. All I’m going to need is location, time, and firearms.”

“You also need guys. Especially a tech guy,” Junmyeon mumbled, as he started the engine, “Can you get the one that sings?”

Chanyeol mumbled about how he had his number and began to scroll through his phone. Behind him, Kyungsoo narrowed his eyes, bending forwards intently as he met their gazes -

“Wait,” he murmured, “My tech guy sings.”
CHEN -- real name Kim Jongdae -- had been one of Kyungsoo’s earliest associates during the early years of the Lockerman operations. Little was known about his background and Kyungsoo certainly wasn’t going to share. However, there had been the intimation during Kyungsoo’s explanation that Jongdae’s talent and passion for technology and puzzle solving had landed him in plenty of grim predicaments as a young man. The partnership he would forge with Kyungsoo, as with many of those closest to the Lockerman, would provide him with a steady client base to create a valued and prosperous life.

Admittedly, work wasn’t the principal reason for their meetings. Jongdae was actually a keen and highly able tennis player and they frequently played together in doubles. It was as harmless as it sounded, putting aside the type of people whom they may have ended up playing against.

They would meet at the courts after a brief emergency message.

Chanyeol was surprised to see a highly athletic man with a great backhand playing against an automatic tennis ball machine. Jongdae turned, eyes brightening up at the sight of Kyungsoo whom he embraced immediately.

“Kyungsoo-yah,” he greeted, cheery, “It’s been too long! I hope your forehand’s still as great as I remember. Here!” He then offered him the racket, and clicked his fingers twice, signalling some unspoken command for the machine to rotate and stalk Kyungsoo as he walked across the court, showing no hesitation. Smiling even.

Chanyeol, who had no idea of this secret hobby, watched his ex keenly-- only to be taken by Jongdae who greeted him politely with a handshake. “We’ve spoken so many times! It’s nice to put a face to the voice-- and you as well,” he turned to Junmyeon then whose eyes were wide.

Awestruck.

“It is such a pleasure,” Junmyeon blubbed, much to Chanyeol’s confusion (and internal delight), “I am a huge fan of your, uh-- musical choices.”

“Agh, really?” Jongdae chuckled. The sound was sweet and friendly. “Well you must be the only one in the city!”

It was there that the sound of tennis balls being hit was heard. Kyungsoo hit them in perfect rhythm, one-by-one, showing deep concentration and almost lethal accuracy as they were clipped away.

“Woah.” Chanyeol murmured, before walking across, eyes narrowed, “Oi! Let me try!”

Convinced that it was a fluke, Chanyeol would soon find himself eating his words as he was
peppered mercilessly by the hard tennis balls. He would subsequently return to the pair, holding his hip which had taken most of the battering. Kyungsoo, thoroughly smug, did attempt to comfort, wrapping an arm around the other.

“Bad luck.” Jongdae continued to smile, as he patted Chanyeol’s arm lightly before asking, “So what can I do for you boys?”

“I have a job for you.” Kyungsoo interfered, before the others could speak, “Think of it as the repayment for the EXO’rdium files.”

Jongdae’s smile broadened as he shook his head and reached for Kyungsoo’s hands.

“Please, Kyungsoo. For you, anything.”

Eventually, they did bid farewell to their resident kingpin. Having recalled Jongin’s warning of putting Kyungsoo’s security and image preservation as a top priority, the Lockerman was instructed by the rest of the party to return to his apartment and provide his key assistance remotely.

They said goodbye at the parking lot. Kyungsoo was muttering something about charging phones--and hourly updates--and all Chanyeol felt was an overwhelming hesitance to separate. Being an irrational sappy lowlife aside, he knew that nothing good had come out of being apart the last time. So all in all, nobody could blame him for wanting the other to be at an arm’s reach.

“I still think it’s a stupid idea,” murmured Kyungsoo, looking up at the taller man, “So I’m going to go back to my apartment and think of a better one.”

“Sometimes, stupid ideas work.” Chanyeol retorted with a shrug, “And I’m going to make this work. Nothing is impenetrable. If they can smuggle a national treasure out of a dock manned by state police, then I can pluck it back from a few thugs, alright?”

“You make it sound like it’s easy. Not totally deadly.” Kyungsoo returned with a slight chuckle, “Like it doesn’t scare you.”

“I’m more scared about the idea of you going down for all of this. It will fuck up the food chain, you know? Think of what it would do for us petty criminals.” Chanyeol admitted, thoughtful, as he smiled, “So let me be stupid, okay? Stupid might save your doomed ass.”

The other smiled back, hands smoothing softly over the front of Chanyeol’s creased shirt.

“Just be careful.”

“Will do.” And it was there that their quiet moment would be rapidly disturbed by the sound of
Junmyeon abusing the car horn. Chanyeol shut his eyes in frustration before whispering, “You know, I’d probably kiss you goodbye but Junmyeon would absolutely shoot me in the back.”

A bemused smile appeared on Kyungsoo’s face. It was affectionate-- and went straight to Chanyeol’s chest, making it all tingly.

“Sure. We can’t have that. I’ll get something organised for the firearms later on.”

Compromising, Kyungsoo pressed a kiss to his palm and patted Chanyeol’s cheek, before turning around and offering the furious driver a polite wave. The taller man didn’t dare wait longer, jogging back to the van as he was treated to a further round of obscene yelling.

Kyungsoo paused and watched them go from the back of the parking lot until his phone vibrated. He glanced at the screen once, reading the number. Baekhyun.

“It’s me,” he answered, pocketing his free hand as he darted up the stairs to the main building.

“Got word of something at the North East office. A package. Addressed to you.” Baekhyun said directly.

“Me?” Kyungsoo lowered his voice then, “Who from?”

The pause that followed suggested a layer of agitation. “No idea. You better go and pick it up. It’s scaring the shit out of our temp.”

Dread tinted his voice as Kyungsoo closed to call with an abrupt,

“I’m on my way.”

For the larger half of Kyungsoo’s rescue party, the rest of the afternoon would be spent at their favourite hideout: the neglected garage space slash Chanyeol’s ex-love den with Kyungsoo. The latter title was one which Junmyeon had disgustedly blessed the place with after the initial excitement of discovering something new about his best friend.

“I’m not sitting on that couch. Now I know what this place was for.”
This essentially commenced a game whereby Chanyeol would watch him search for a spot, and after settling on a surface, the taller man would respond with a playful shake of the head to quietly affirm that it had indeed been a hotspot for his and his lover’s sexcapades. This would deem it a no-go zone for the number one Kyungsoo-anti, Kim Junmyeon.

“Here too?” gawked Junmyeon as he threw his hands on the splintered tool table, “You’re gross. I can’t believe I let you use my toothbrush.”

As a fairly easygoing guest, Jongdae was far less prone to high maintenance outbursts. So, he was offered the warm and comfy inside of the caravan to complete his tasks.

“Woah, is that a real Botticelli?” Jongdae whispered, glancing at the painting as he sat on the bed, crossing his legs.

“Yeah,” Chanyeol murmured, before delving into a cupboard, pulling out a large sheet and throwing it over the painting, “But best hide it from Junmyeon. He’ll freak out.”

“Oh,” the tech guy arched a brow, glancing to the direction of the door, “Is he a big art fan?”

The thought amused Chanyeol and he scoffed. “Yeah, we’ll go with that.”

The conversation would soon return to business. Stealing the spot beside the smaller man, Chanyeol smiled and held out his phone for the other to take which contained the set of men of particular interest to him.

“I need as much information about these men as possible. I know you gave Kyungsoo the names and histories. But I’m going to need to find out where the auction is happening. We’re limited in what we can do because this auction has to happen so tailing is too dangerous. Planting a bug is a better bet as then we can confirm their positions even during the heist.”

Observing Jongdae’s screen which would rapidly begin to bring up the pictures of the five, Chanyeol added, “I’m particularly interested in bars and clubs. It’s going to be the best place to find people like them. Kyungsoo said that the easiest way is to look through gang associations…”

“I got this,” Jongdae crooned, smiling at Chanyeol reassuringly, “Don’t worry. I’ll find you your men. And we will get Kyungsoo out.”

Chanyeol could’ve hugged him then. It was nice knowing that he wasn’t the only person in the garage that actually cared about this death mission. “Thanks, man.”

“No, thank you for looking out for him,” hummed Jongdae, as he popped headphones into his ears, “He doesn’t really get relationships that well. You know? He doesn’t get that if he leaves, there’s a chance that the people who love him would lose their worlds, their hearts, their souls…everything good in their lives…”

“Yeah,” affirmed Chanyeol, nodding his head in understanding, “Exactly.”
“How would you live without him, Chanyeol?” pressed Jongdae, utterly serious, “What kind of life would it be?”

“Exactly.” The other would nod, in synchrony, before murmuring, “Well, I have lived without him. For a while. But it was-- wait, this is a song isn’t it?”

The absent humming that would follow, accompanied with the rapid sound of the keyboard clicks, would suggest that his estimation was right.

Typical.

There would be no further admonishing of the holy CHEN however.

It was glaringly obvious to Chanyeol now that there was nobody in the city that could possibly compete with his technical and research abilities. By his and Junmyeon’s third argument of the day over the best baseball team in the history of the national league, Jongdae would deliver him with the critical piece of knowledge that Guy #4 on his hitlist had a bar he frequented in the city centre. And even better than that, he had a particularly expensive habit of getting services from one of the club’s residents-- a stripper. With key evidence even implicating a prospective relationship that extended out of the establishment.

Of course, none of the key information really mattered as Chanyeol and Junmyeon would only focus on one thing.

“I volunteer to go to the strip club.” Chanyeol affirmed quickly, before providing his strong argument to be chosen, “Because I don’t think there’s a strip club in that part of the city that hasn’t shadowbanned you, Junmyeon. Sorry.”

Junmyeon was aghast. “You little shit! Come here and say that to my face!” He hollered.

The other would laugh. “It’s true! You get so weird around women.” Chanyeol had brief flashes of the last time he’d paid for a lap dance for Junmyeon. It was New Year’s last year; and the poor girl had almost cried after Junmyeon asked about her future aspirations. “So, on that I’ll be best placed to do it.”

“Oh, I bet Kyungsoo would love that, right?” Junmyeon countered, almost hissing as he tested the other’s resolve, “Hearing about how you’re out there, masquerading as an Eastie-Boy hetero at some dirty bar again!”

Chanyeol’s jaw fell open. “You’re really going to go there, today huh? And anyway, Kyungsoo and I. We’re not… together. So he won’t get-- and even if he did-- ugh, stop trying to rile me up. I’m going to the strip club, try and stop me dickhead.”

The exchange would go back and forth, each threat bleeding a nudge more violence, before Jongdae finally piped up with a solution,

“I can go if you want. I’ve been to this club a few times.”
There was silence before the two turned their aggression to him. Jongdae awkwardly revealed how the owner of the club was a client of his as he had helped them bolster their firewall for what would be their more illicit business on the side.

“You’re going to need some game for this, Jongdae.” Chanyeol cooed, narrowing his eyes curiously at the young man in the oversized hoodie and burgundy-coloured skinny jeans.

“Yeah,” Junmyeon said, as he leaned forwards keenly, “How often do you go to strip clubs? To actually… see strippers and not to fix up their wi-fi.”

“Not that often.” Jongdae admitted, scratching the back of his neck, “But if you just want me to… bug a phone. I don’t think--”

“No, no. It’s more than that, man.” Chanyeol sucked in his teeth as he leaned back into his chair. Sweet computer-man Jongdae. It was rather sad to think that he didn’t fully grasp the sheer weight of his role. This was why Chanyeol had wanted to do it, for aside from getting some sweet lap action—this was actually more of an intimidation than anything else. After all, they were essentially going to ask her—no demand her to risk her life by planting a device in her lover’s phone.

In exchange for her life—and that of her family’s—whom were somewhere in lovely Sydney Australia. The intel was courtesy of Kyungsoo who had happened to know the smuggler her family had used to escape the city after accidentally pissing off one of the Southern syndicates.

Somehow, all of this sounded like it would be better received taken from the lips of a six-foot, bruised-up thug—with the warm sparkly eyes of an actor in a perfume commercial.

Fortunately, Jongdae was going to get help from the best in the business. Since Chanyeol doubted him and Junmyeon would ever stop being stubborn and surrender to each other after all that shouting.

“So, this is how it’s going to go down. Watch.” Junmyeon clicked his fingers and beckoned for Chanyeol to get up from his chair, “Chanyeol, you’re Mona the stripper. Come here.”

“Why do I have to be the stripper?” was the whiny riposte of the other.

“Because your Mam-- nope,” the older man shook his head as he inhaled, “I’m not going there. Your Mom is a wonderful human being. She doesn’t deserve you. Now get up and dance for me.”

They swapped places. Chanyeol began to sway awkwardly on the spot, limbs all free and flowing, as Junmyeon swept across and stood behind him. Dramatically, the six foot man whipped around, feigning a gasp and inching his voice into as close to a falsetto as he could manage,

“Hey baby, are you free for a dance?” was the squeaky effort.

Junmyeon rolled his eyes, unimpressed, having never appreciated Chanyeol and his lack of performance art. The former acting student expelled a deep breath to recover his character. “And you—” He jabbed a finger at Jongdae, as he edged closer to the taller man, “You’re going to say
something mysterious like-- *I don’t think you want to dance for someone like me.* Create that mystery. You’re going to be the most good looking guy this girl has danced for in the week so make that fantasy happen for her, okay? She works hard. Okay, so after this, you eye-fuck a little and then she takes you to her little booth…”

The director pulled his co-actor to the chair where he subsequently sat. “And then, you’re going to let her do her thing. She’s going to try and get to-- *no, no.*” Junmyeon held Chanyeol by the hips as he attempted to sit down, “You douchebag. You and your flat ass are not going to give me a lapdance.”

“Excuse you! Watch me.” Chanyeol began to sway his hips, completely off-rhythm, prompting the other to frown, “So, she’s going to be giving it like this and you, Jongdae, you have to stay focused and then she’s going to say something like… what can she say?”

“Uh,” Junmyeon’s hands remained on Chanyeol’s hips, as the other continued to wiggle, “Oh! Something like, *Oh, are you a bad man?*”

Chanyeol’s eyes brightened in agreement. “Yeah, yeah!” In his distracted state, he managed to snag the spot on Junmyeon’s lap and he smirked darkly, “Then you’ll say something back, which would lead to her saying something super-hot like, *Daddy is that your gun or is my dance making you happy?* To which you will promptly reply…”

An elegant hand was offered to signal the delivery of the punchline.

“Nah, baby that’s my dick.” Junmyeon cocked a finger gun against Chanyeol’s temple, fingers pressing very gently into the skin, “*This is my gun.*”

Chanyeol clapped his hands in delight as the rest of the roleplay turned into something encased in more edge as it covered the intimidation-- all the details about the family and the payback of all the debts they owed.

“Finally, if she asks whether you’re telling the truth or not, tell her that we’ve got eyes on her brother in kangaroo country and he’s wearing a blue jumper today.”

“The end.” Chanyeol beamed, as he stood up, swapping with Junmyeon who occupied the spot across him. “Did you get all that, Jongdae?”

It was evident that it had overwhelmed the smaller man. His eyes were wide and his cheeks were flushed pink. It took a moment before he could provide a clear answer, lips seeming a tad dry.

“I think so. I probably won’t be as good in any of that as you guys but I’ll try.” He answered stiffly, before murmuring, “Do you guys do *that* a lot? And you’re *best* friends. Not even a little--?”

“What?” Junmyeon challenged, defensive as usual. “He’s my best mate. We roleplay scenarios so that he doesn’t get anxious about jobs and starts to beat people up when they say the wrong thing. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing!” Jongdae murmured, unaccustomed to Junmyeon’s unique style of *response*, “Honestly, it’s nothing.”

“There better be nothing.” Junmyeon barked, before erupting into a soft smile as Chanyeol squeezed his hips where he was most ticklish, causing him to laugh. It was a short but soft noise and Chanyeol was swiftly reprimanded with a poke on the forehead--

“You piece of shit. Do that again and I’ll hit you on the head with my gun. My *actual* gun. Not my
Later on, as they prepared to journey where Jongdae would be dropped off and he could set up the necessary technologies for the heist, Junmyeon shared a rare piece of personal history with the visitor in the car as Chanyeol was away locking up.

“I had a younger brother who I lost.” He revealed to Jongdae who glanced at him as he spoke, “He was a bit like, you know. Chanyeol. He was happy one minute then he was really angry the next. He made stupid decisions and talked like a fucking idiot.” He shook his head, smoothing a tired face with pale hands, as he then smiled with obvious warmth, “I loved that kid so much but I didn’t watch over him as well as I could’ve. He loved 90s and noughties music. Like the ones that you send out. All those sappy songs. So when I get them in my inbox, I get happy. So thanks. People must complain about it all the time but you should just keep doing it because it’s the purest fucking thing we got around here.”

Jongdae’s eyes were contemplative as he smiled sadly. “Sorry for your loss. But I’m glad it helps you cope,” he paused then, “If you want, I can send you some, even when we’re not working together.”

“Ah, no.” Junmyeon returned gruffly, “I’m not for that pity party bullshit.”

“It doesn’t have to be for that.” Jongdae would answer, somewhat ambiguous as he added, “I could just give you my personal number for--”

The rest of that sentence would be lost after Chanyeol clambered into the van, loud and whistling, as he then glanced at the two at the front. Junmyeon cleared his throat as Jongdae tossed his gaze aside. The collapse of the conversation weighed heavily in the atmosphere of the vehicle, easily detectable, by the most attentive of the three.

“Sorry,” Chanyeol leaned across, hands holding onto the edges of the seat, “What are we talking about?”

“Your flat ass.” Junmyeon muttered, gravely, as he shoved Chanyeol’s head away and reached for the gear stick, “So, where are we going after we drop Jongdae off?”

“West as well.” Chanyeol answered, already excited by the prospect of being reunited with
Kyungsoo, after a few hours of being apart, “It’s for the arms deal. Kyungsoo promised me we’d get the new stuff.”

“Look at that,” Junmyeon crooned, smirking as the van reversed, “Looks like your sugar daddy’s useful for something after all.”

Before the taller man could gratify the sorta-kind words with a response, Junmyeon’s mixtape would start, saturating the large-blacked out vehicle with the upbeat sound of NSYNC’s *Tearin’ up My Heart*.

And for the first time in probably ever, nobody in Junmyeon’s van would mind— with both of his passengers knowing the words to the late-90s classic and shamelessly hollering along as they crossed the highway into the city.

The song would continue to play in Chanyeol’s mind as he participated in the quick firearms transaction, reclining against the hood of Kyungsoo’s luxury rental.

The process of selling firearms was generally a tense affair. Fortunately, Chanyeol had attended many, after being designated as one of Pip’s primary sources of muscle. So, he knew exactly how to read them-- better than other deals, like those which were financially motivated or the one off stock-drops. His take on this meeting was that it was going to be simple and swift and so he watched the interaction take place with lazy interest, mind still humming.

It was three to three. Kyungsoo, himself and Junmyeon. The dealer and two foreigners.

They met at the underground parking lot of a motel. It was near empty with the only vehicles around them gathering dust. Most were probably abandoned by mobsters who used this place as a cover to exchange getaway cars.

They had arrived second due to traffic. Five minutes late. Whilst it would’ve been nice to honour Jongin and not have Kyungsoo contribute, it would’ve been near impossible with the efficiency of this deal fundamentally dependent on Kyungsoo’s close relationship with the dealers’ family.

“Sorry for the delay.” Kyungsoo’s polite apology was met with the dealer spitting abruptly to his side in obvious derision.

Chanyeol flinched, lips parting. He allowed his response to be confined to the comfortable flexing of his fists -- as Kyungsoo remained cool and bowed his head politely.

“I know you must be busy nowadays.”
“Nah, man. It ain’t about that. I heard one of yours put one of my boys down. What are you? Who do you think you are? Can’t you leash up your dogs like the rest of us? Your lucky my Pa likes you or I would’ve done you in myself.”

Kyungsoo licked his bottom lip thoughtfully, exhaling as he felt the sting of the words on his skin. “You signed a contract. You signed him as collateral. My men do as they’re told. Now, for the goods, please.”

Junmyeon was beckoned over and he came forwards easily to inspect it. It wasn’t a large shipment so he could memorise what was ordered on the top of his head. After weighing some of the larger ones, he nodded to signal to Kyungsoo that everything promised was present. Chanyeol then came over, obviously unhappy, to help him move the order into their vehicle.

Kyungsoo then placed the phone to his ear, dark eyes pinned to the dealer’s motions.

“Transfer it.” He then pocketed the device, “The money’s also been sent. Tell your Pa to rest his back and I’ll see him at poker next month-- oh, and--”

And there, Kyungsoo delivered a square punch, right between the eyes, causing the younger man to immediately stumble back. The metallic flick of safety locks were heard all over the site, with everyone carrying a firearm choosing to display a little arm.

This sent the tension in the room hurtling up.

Suddenly everyone was a nudge hot and bothered.

The dealer would soothe it as he wiped his lip, sending a signal to his own men to stand down as he offered Kyungsoo a cold stare.

Kyungsoo’s voice was as unyieldingly chilling as it had been this morning.

“I don’t take well to threats. Not to my men and especially not to me. Take some lessons from your older brothers and learn respect.” The punch had certainly intended to mark as the other man struggled to open his right eye--“I bet your Pa said not to try anything funny with me. So if you don’t want him to hear about how his son talks like a little bitch, then you tell him that you got into a fight at a Westie casino.”

The words were delivered to all other witnesses as the man in black turned and walked back to his vehicle, catching Chanyeol’s gaze directly afterwards.

He looked bowled over.

Kyungsoo sent him the vaguest hint of a smile.

“I have a surprise for you at the apartment.” He would whisper to him on the drive back, as he’d reached across, tossing Chanyeol’s hair which were all knotty from spending the afternoon by the dock.

Just the word -- surprise -- was enough to cause the taller man to choke a little. The implications; he
couldn’t even begin to ponder otherwise he certainly wasn’t going to be able to endure the drive back.

“Yeah? I hope it’s what I think it is.” Chanyeol mused innocently, as he stared through the abysmal dark across them, “I’ve been thinking about it all day.”

The surprise would turn out better than the brand new swivel cuddle chair which Chanyeol had seen on a television advert this morning.

In his free time between organising deals and making inquiries from his close associates, Kyungsoo had found time to order his penthouse pool to be cleaned and readied. He was aware of how badly his companion had wanted to take a dip-- and had wanted to present his efforts as a necessary show of gratitude.

“So, it’s all warmed up and ready for you to…” Kyungsoo blinked, sensing that he was talking to the air as Chanyeol eagerly stripped down, the glee behind his smile caught in glimpses as clothing was tossed onto the bed, “Here are… the swimming trunks….”

“Thanks. I’m so excited oh my god…”

Barely ten minutes had passed since they reversed into the garage, and Chanyeol was already paddling up and down the square pool. He was like a-- six-foot baby, on a school trip, and it was beyond endearing. Kyungsoo watched him fondly as he finally exited onto the balcony, sensing the mild cool temperature of the air as he slung the towels over the side rail.

“Kyungsoo! Watch!”

A delighted Chanyeol would disappear, performing an underwater handstand. At the sight of his large feet poking through the glowing blue surface, the smaller man laughed softly, breathing in the warm heat of the pool water as he waded in. “I want to try,” he mumbled, as his companion resurfaced.

He would attempt it successfully but with less effect. The pool was deep and due to his height, he could only touch the bottom with his fingertips. When he recovered from the dive, his ears were met by loud laughter-

“Ah, Kyungsoo, you look so fucking cute.” Chanyeol complimented, dark hair all swept back, tired skin refreshed, “Do it again.”
Faintly aware that he was probably going to regret it, Kyungsoo humored his request and accepted. He used the force of the water to flip over and was readying to swim to the bottom when he recognised his companion doing the same. Not in possession of goggles, he could only watch him for a second-- but he still forced one eye to open, squinting, and burst into a smile as the other reached out and attacked him with pokes at his sides.

He was ticklish. A weakness he regretted sharing with the other five years ago.

They resurfaced together with Chanyeol gasping with laughter.

“Not funny!” huffed the other, mouth tasting of chlorine as he cleared his throat, “I could’ve drowned.”

“As if I’d let you,” teased Chanyeol, as he took Kyungsoo’s scowling face with his large cool hands and kissed him until he was certain that the expression had faded.

He was successful. Kyungsoo was swept aside by how differently he felt here-- all plush and tender. His lips were warm and soft too; the hard dust and grit from the city bathed away. With it, the day dissipated too-- all the guns and phone calls, mysterious packages and strip clubs, 90s music and tennis clubs lost in the comforting mist of the water and the stunning quiet of their environment.

His heart squeezed hard when Chanyeol broke the contact, still grinning, as he happily sank bank into the water and reappeared a few lengths away, committing to a few strokes. The smaller man wouldn’t entertain his further calls to play, choosing instead to swim towards the metal steps leading to the pool’s exit.

By the time Chanyeol returned, he became aware that the scowling face had returned to Kyungsoo’s face. A variant of it at least.

“Hey,” he paddled towards the other, before standing upright, “What’s up?”

“I think it finally hit me that I might be going away.” Kyungsoo blurted out, large eyes blinking frantically, “This could happen as soon as tomorrow. *Fuck.*”

“Come on.” Chanyeol gave his shoulder a light shove, “Lighten up, we’ve got something haven’t we? Jongdae’s going to get our bugs up and running tonight. I’ll have something ready by the auction time.”

Despair crossed Kyungsoo’s expression as he shook his head.

“It’s *impossible.*”

And there, the comforting hands would return, holding his exhausted face up to the sky as his lips fell mute--

“As if I’d let you go down.” Chanyeol echoed, voice deep and firm, as he laughed, “As if I’d ever fucking let you.”

“I might.” Kyungsoo exhaled, hot tears rising to the surface of his eyes, “This might be it.”

And there, as his breathing rate began to increase, and his skin began to bloom red from the hurried surge of his heartbeat, Kyungsoo found his fears soon mixing with the bewildering sensations of Chanyeol’s fierce kisses. All his complaints, and his words of warning, dissolving into faint moans and hums which the other swallowed down until Kyungsoo was left with no choice but to *concede.*
And he did so, by kissing his lover back twice as hard-- the rough grazes and the mismatch of rhythms rendering Chanyeol desperate and shaky, as Kyungsoo was backed into the solid pool steps by the other’s need to satisfy, to please, to touch--

“This isn’t it.”

Kyungsoo would let Chanyeol’s words wash over his own lips, muffled, as he felt his legs lift from beneath him, wrapping around the other’s abdomen as his back arched against the slippery hard tiles. His breaths came in, staggered and hot, as his long fingers wound tightly around the other’s dark damp locks.

“We’re not done.”

Hot breath lavished his skin, merciless. The water was cool-- and Chanyeol was shivering as he pressed furious kisses wherever his lips could reach. Kyungsoo’s fingers swiped his hair back, exhaling, lips parted, as he brushed the tips over Chanyeol’s drowsy eyes.

“I don’t think you get to decide that, trouble.”

“No, we get to decide that.”

The correction was pressed as an open-mouthed kiss to Kyungsoo’s weary lips as large hands tugged at the thin material of his trunks, reducing his next breath to a whimper of syllables. Throaty laughter would bubble from within Chanyeol as he savored the other’s swollen lips again, shimmery against the blue light. His hands then pushed down against Kyungsoo’s legs, untangling them from his waist, and as the smaller man billowed, sinking slightly from the loss of balance, Chanyeol grabbed him from behind and pressed his steady weight against his middle.

Anchored; pressured.

“Fuck you, if you think we’re done, asshole.” He would murmur, dotting his bare chest with kisses.

The slur prompted Kyungsoo to smile as his fingers toyed with the other’s locks, experimenting with a tug-- and then another-- and then a third, comparably harder, until the other finally resigned, relieving himself from Kyungsoo’s skin, teeth gritting together as he exhaled.

“Let’s go back in. You’re getting cold,” were the soft pained words shared, as Kyungsoo gratified his efforts by holding his face within his own smaller grasp and murmuring, “And you’re right, we’re not done. Not even close.”
And then the man smiled right at him—personal and affectionate. A perfect strike into the soft centre of Chanyeol’s chest. Lightning fast. 100% accuracy.

Chanyeol had to admit then. Despite the fact that he was genuinely freezing and pruned up, his heart was suddenly feeling almost as hard as the rest of him.

Almost. “Let me touch you next,” was Kyungsoo’s final poolside promise as he exited into the cool evening air first, meeting Chanyeol with the larger towel as they carefully made their way back inside.

And so, the rest of the night was spent cozied up in the bedroom that could house a village, fulfilling most of the surprise which Chanyeol had initially expected—minus the cuddle chair.

The final conversation that would take place before an exhausted Chanyeol would abdicate to sleep would occur with the single lamp-light on. They were resting in an identical position to how they had been this morning, following the visit to the pawnshop owner. Chanyeol with his head angled slightly against Kyungsoo’s, as the smaller man held their woven fingertips close to his lips, smoothing the skin with gentle breaths.

“Are you going to sleep now?” Kyungsoo queried, sensing the other grow still.

“Hm.” Chanyeol’s feet brushed against each other as he answered, “Good night.”

“Night.” And in a softer voice, the other added, “Big day tomorrow.”

The sleeping man smiled and with his eyes squeezed shut, burrowed his lips into the other’s nape.

“Can’t wait. It’s a Saturday. I love Saturdays.”

A smile blossomed on Kyungsoo’s lips as he pressed a final kiss to Chanyeol’s fingertips as he felt him fall into a quick and deep sleep.
He wouldn’t follow. Shortly after, the doomed man would abandon his lover on the bed, navigating the room in complete darkness as he exited.

He approached the living room and retrieved the box he’d hidden beneath the largest couch. The box contained the package he had been asked to retrieve in the afternoon; and after assessing it outside of the apartment, he’d resolved it to contain a single device.

A burner phone with one stored number.

He had hesitated all day-- allowed it to breed fear and misery into his thoughts. But there was no better time than now, with the moonlight as a witness.

The number was selected; call; followed by two sharp rings. And then a soft breath.

“Hello, Kyungsoo? Long time no speak.”

Tears would soften Kyungsoo’s eyes at the instant recognition of the voice.

“It’s been so long. Have you missed me too?”

Kyungsoo shut his eyes as a hand reached up to wipe the moisture away.

“What do you want, Hajoon?”

“How does your schedule look tomorrow?” There was a pause. In the background, the faint sound of scribbling, “I want to invite you to something of interest.”

The same striking sense of dread numbed his heart. “Something?”

”An auction.”

–//–

Chapter End Notes

@ crime chansoo get that d!!!!!!!!!!evoted road to eternal love back on track!

anyway, i apologise for this monstrously long chapter. Idek what to say. I just kept writing and i couldn’t stop. I hope it all makes sense. Tl;dr: hajoon is going to hold an auction where a lot of bad stuff is deffo going to go down. So i’ll warn ahead now for all the bad and bloody stuff you would come to expect from the end of a revenge/crime flick. Okay, i can’t promise that the chapters will be any shorter at this point as i really just keep adding more but hsbfgd you guys have to understand that this crime au
Chansoo is fast becoming my ride or die CS, I will give them everything including the last speckle of strength I have in my typing fingers /cries but I do have an ending in mind I promise I’m not just going to keep dragging it on ahaha

Oh my god on a complete 90° to last chapter, I couldn’t write the stripper/roleplay between Pcy and JM without laughing like I actually got a headache bc of how much I wanted to cry but out of joy we love gay Pcy and lowkey sexually ambiguous JM

Okay, thank you as always for your kind words guys! I appreciate them so much - esp for this story as they are so motivating through these mind-numbing lengths of prose hsbdafs I feel closer to you all, like we are truly taking this journey together !! so thank you for that, thank you so much. Be well always exo-Is! Also let’s keep streaming electric kiss omg it’s a masterpiece wow we are not worthy :___:

*and as if I’d forget ehehe unnecessary vine list of inspiration is here
junmyeon
Pcy and JM saying Ily after a good day’s work
A summary of Chansoo’s relationship in this fic
only you can save me i'm a sinner

Chapter Summary

-- these bittersweet notions of forever
blossom and find me in my dreams
if we should die, i hope we die together
if not, at least i'll know just where we'll be

i'm going to hell with you, with you, with you, with you
i don't care, i'm in love --

-- goingtohell, miguel

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

-PRESENT DAY-

The weather lady on the television said to expect a 90% chance of precipitation for the entire day. A storm was on the way apparently.

Citizens beware.

Unsettled, Chanyeol glanced across the apartment’s tall glazed windows and observed the heavy grey clouds which had engulfed the skyline. The lights of the city were still visible through the cold fog: pricks of reds and yellows, the occasional sharp blues from the billboard sponsored by the soda company. However, there was no charm in it-- no awe. It was a grey that drained and it appeared to echo Chanyeol’s theme for his Saturday morning.

Today was the day after all.

Face explicitly still as he rested it on the arm of the cream couch, Chanyeol threw his baseball up in the air and when he caught it with his hand--

He also caught a memory.

One which had also occurred on a grey day; during a grey time; and involved the deliverance of ‘tough love’ which was probably a love he would feel today.

Amongst other kinds.
A year had passed since Chanyeol experienced three significant life-changing events in close proximity to each other: he was shot in the house he lived in, ditched by his heartless ex-boyfriend, and his favourite TV series of all time was cancelled. It would be fair to say that Chanyeol was not having the smoothest recovery period from his series of collective trauma.

Today, it would appear that his roommate had finally reached his uppermost limits of unconditional love and care.

The light in Chanyeol’s bedroom was flicked open as the door smashed hard against the wall. Something was thrown, made a whip sound in the air and hit him directly on the forehead. Definitely his baseball. Chanyeol moaned in pain, rubbing the spot instantly, before muttering an irritable--

‘Junmyeon, stop.’ He pulled old unwashed sheets over himself stubbornly, ‘I’m not going out.’

‘Yes you are.’ Strong hands dragged his skinny legs from the bed, causing him to roll off onto the floor with a loud thump and hit his head hard against the bedside table.

He groaned in pain again. ‘Junmyeon--ow. Sheesh.’

‘Boohoo, bitch.’ Yet the older man’s eyes were undeniably tender as he offered his friend a hand, ‘Get up. You said you wanted to learn so I’m going to teach you. You want him to come back here and shoot you in the head this time-- no? No? Then get up. Get up and learn how to fight and shoot like a fucking grownup.’

Boots and freshly washed clothes were thrown over the whining lump on the floor.

‘Junmyeon.’

‘I’m not going to ask again!’

He didn’t have to. Chanyeol obliged because he hated making Junmyeon angry.

In hindsight, the contrasting combo of activities that would occupy Chanyeol’s return to ordinary living amused him even now.

In the day he would be attending lunches with his brother at the bank and the law firm to set up his accounts and organise the semantics of his future business venture. A few hours later, after dinner and a gaming session, he would find himself stood with Junmyeon at an abandoned farmhouse outside of the city training with an assortment of firearms. They started noticeably tame at first, with Junmyeon’s 9mm handgun collection -- to perfect the technique -- and then with time, he was trusted with the bigger and badder stuff-- assault rifles and 50mm machine guns and sniper pistols.

Junmyeon never wanted to say it but Chanyeol was a natural. Of course he would be. He had near perfect eyesight; generally steady hands; and had copious experience with firearms anyway. There was also the unmentioned element that Chanyeol at this point was wholeheartedly angry. He was angry at himself -- his assailant -- Kyungsoo -- but had no outlet for it because of his injuries preventing him from boxing it out like he was used to.

So this training programme provided him with an alternative. And there was no denying why he
drove through it despite all the nagging and criticism. Chanyeol’s primary motivation came from the idea that with each successful hit and each calibre mastered -- he was securing the probability that next time, the *next fucking time* this happened, he was not going to be the injured ragdoll and *miss*.

Sometimes, on his drive back, ears still buzzing from the range, Chanyeol would daydream about it too. He would picture going on his weekly supermarket visit, list in one-hand, most likely lusting over the bottles he couldn’t have in the liquor aisle-- and he would spot him at the check-out. The same young man with the terrible mouth. And this time, he wouldn’t miss. The list would be abandoned; the aisle would be empty. And Chanyeol would be out there, by the stranger’s car, waiting.

And by the time he snapped the trunk shut, all his fresh fruit and vegetables inside sitting pretty, the stranger would look up and--

*Bang!*

No questions asked. Problem solved.

Of course, what tended to follow was an unsettled sickness in his gut-- the only remnant of human guilt he had ever fully known. And perhaps, this was the only thing that fundamentally reminded Chanyeol that he was no killer. There were some who could do it all the time. Snipes like Junmyeon. But he knew long ago that he wouldn’t do it. He *could* though. He could if he wanted-- which meant that he wasn’t all that nice either.

No. In fact, when he wanted to be, he could be downright awful.

“You should bring an umbrella. It’s supposed to rain all day today.” Kyungsoo joined him on the couch where he was resting, gaze confined to following the regular turns of the rotating ceiling fan above him.

The baseball was thrown in the air once before being caught with the opposing hand. “You were talking to someone last night.” Chanyeol licked his bottom lip as he glanced at his companion, “I heard you. And *now* you’re skirting around the subject. Who was it? Your secret husband from South America? Checking in that you’re behaving?”

The corner of Kyungsoo’s lips twitched into a calm smile but it promptly disappeared. There was no deviation from the truth. His words were as direct and plain as his tone.

“I spoke to Hajoon.”

At the name, a flicker of fury flinched in Chanyeol’s chest. “What?”

“He’s inviting me to the auction.” Kyungsoo’s eyes moved to his companion, already expecting
what would follow as he revealed, “And I’m going to go.”

In the distance, the menacing rumble of early morning thunder.

“You’re joking,” was Chanyeol’s humorless reply.

“I’m not.” Kyungsoo responded, toneless, as he edged forwards in his seat, “By doing what I did, we now have a confirmed address. And if I’m in there, I’ll be able to help you.”

His cold explanation was met with a sound that was a cross between a groan and a scoff. Idly, the smaller man arched an eyebrow, lifting his phone to his eye level as he then adjusted his glasses. “So, you’re allowed to act on stupid ideas straight away. No complaints. But when I have one, which is considerably less stupid, it’s crazy?”

Every part of the question irked Chanyeol. He fidgeted with the baseball, fingernails digging into the hard leather skin.

“My plan’s not suicidal.” He muttered.

“Please,” A dark edge carried Kyungsoo’s voice as he scoffed, fully intending to offend, “If Hajoon wanted to put a bullet in me, he could’ve done it yesterday when we were making out on my open balcony.”

The taller man on the couch threw his baseball in the air in time with a deep exhale.

“Whatever man.” Chanyeol sighed, gaze narrowing at the ceiling until he felt his head ache, “If you want me to believe your bullshit that bad then I’ll bite. Go. Go to the auction.”

Tensely, the other turned back to him. “What are you saying?”

The faintest grimace appeared on Chanyeol’s lips. He waited a moment before expelling another leisurely breath as he threw the baseball in the air. Already, he could feel the anger dripping into him bit by bit - like raindrops.

A fitting comparison as in the foreground of the thunder it had started to rain again.

“You don’t think I got the hint when you were telling me your life story? Hajoon was my roommate for years. He’s two years younger than you. You spared him all this time because some part of you is soft for him. I get that too. Maybe he looks like one of the little kids you lost when his family massacred yours. Every time you think of killing him, you remember all those types you ate from the same noodle cup. Just know this. I don’t care if you embrace him with open arms and have your sappy little dynasty reunion. He tried to take my niece. He put a bullet in me. And now he’s trying and, can I say, succeeding in fucking with you.”

The baseball was thrown. Caught.

“Trust me when I say he won’t make it past me tonight.”

Kyungsoo’s lips trembled. His expression fell into one of displeasure.

“I can’t believe you.”

“Why? Am I wrong?” Chanyeol’s unfeeling gaze met the other, almost mocking as he smiled at him, “I dare you to say I’m wrong.”

Kyungsoo accepted the challenge with a single curt glance.
“You’re wrong.”

Chanyeol was momentarily tempted to throw the baseball high enough to grind the ceiling fan. He contained himself though, expelling the surge of rage into a laugh as he sat up. “And you’re full of crap.”

Silence.

And then an unfamiliar buzzing. Jolted upright, Chanyeol immediately reached for his handgun which was resting prettily on a coaster on the coffee table.

Kyungsoo, whose gaze had returned to his phone, scrolled at his screen as he revealed its source.

“That’s my doorbell. Jongin wanted to have breakfast.”

The private elevator door opened. Jongin entered, sunny and smiley, and in a far better state than either of the two figures on the couch. He was wearing the most casual outfit Chanyeol had ever seen him wear. A royal yellow jumper covering a white shirt-- navy blue trousers accentuating long skinny legs -- topped off by a tall denim jacket which warmed him to his knees. Thus, he looked like a model who had leapt straight off one of Hyewon’s brightly colored tween magazines.

The bastard.

“If it isn’t my favourite criminal power couple. Come here.” The lawyer approached and pulled Chanyeol into a long hug-- and then offered one to Kyungsoo, whom he also kissed hard on the forehead, “I’ve missed you both. I’ve brought coffee, waffles, cannolis. Let’s eat and be merry, fellas. I hear you have a lot to tell me.”

The breakfast meal that followed was a little tense with Chanyeol opting to fall purposefully quiet, in an effort to remain calm, as he was still obviously pissed with Kyungsoo. This meant that the waffles, which were sweet and crisp, tasted particularly stale in his bitter mouth.

A goddamn shame because he sure loved waffles.

“...so you’re going to this auction then?” Jongin inquired as he caught up with the story, chewing through the final bite of his breakfast as he caught the brief exchange of glances between Kyungsoo and Chanyeol who remained in pronounced contention about the subject. “Ah,” he nodded, fork in the air, “It’s still up in the works.”

“Nothing is in the works.” Kyungsoo responded coolly, directing his gaze back to his lawyer, “I’m going.”

What followed was the sharp ugly sound of Chanyeol pushing his breakfast stool backwards, scraping it against the wooden flooring. He wiped his mouth against his shirt sleeve, as he clicked a
finger towards the clock which hung high above the living room television.

“Jongin. You had an appointment at half past, right? You should go if you want to miss the morning traffic.”

“Ah!” Jongin smiled agreeably, taking a napkin and neatly dabbing his lips, “Great call. I should be going. Sorry I can’t cover the updates I have on my end. Long story short, I tugged on a string and Dolly is in.”

Chanyeol moved across the room as he made for his shoes and jacket. “Dolly?”

“Dolos.” Jongin tilted his head curiously at Chanyeol before glancing at Kyungsoo. “Does he not know who Dolly is? Gah, he’s adorable, Kyungsoo. How you get anything done with that level of blind obliviousness to indulge and educate—”

The tallest man returned, pulling on his coat and cap.

“What was it again?” He asked.

“Dolos.” repeated Jongin as he retrieved his briefcase from where he had left it by the breakfast bartop, “Responsible for half of the cold cases in the city. I’m sure Kyungsoo will explain it to you.”

Buttoning the buttons on his coat, leaving a gap each time because he was lazy, the taller man chuckled. “Oh, no. I’m not staying here. I need a ride. You cool with giving me one?”

Jongin blinked, catching the slightly taken expression on the smaller man’s face as he murmured a noticeably hesitant-

“Uh, sure! Of course. As long as you don’t mind coming with me to something. It’s Dolos business, actually! Best way to show you what I mean. Is that okay with you, Kyungsoo?”

“Why wouldn’t it be.” was the unwavering response as Kyungsoo finally stood up from his chair, abandoning the half-finished pastry on his plate as he turned to face Chanyeol who was tying up his shoelaces together.

Their gazes did not meet with the taller of the two choosing to walk directly to the private elevator.

He was pissed; Kyungsoo was pissed; and poor Jongin was so intuitive that he detected and felt rather awkward sandwiched between all the tension.

And it wasn’t even the intellectually stimulating sexual kind.

“Okay,” was the awkward and breathy conclusion that Jongin decided on as he stepped towards the elevator with Chanyeol by his side.

Kyungsoo had disappeared into the bedroom for a few minutes but he returned with an umbrella in his right hand.

“I’ve sent CHEN the address I was given to assess. You can all decide what to do with it.” Kyungsoo offered the item to Chanyeol who glanced down at him, missing the centre of his eyes, “Take it, Chanyeol. It’s going to rain.”

A seemingly endless moment would pass before Chanyeol finally obliged and took the navy blue umbrella with the metal handle.
Refuge from the strained environment came when the elevator sent them down. It was there that Jongin would turn towards an obviously fuming Chanyeol. The taller man had naturally pocketed his hands. They were shaking slightly.

“So, trouble in paradise?” the lawyer quipped with a stiff smile.

Chanyeol looked at him and managed a weaker smile in return. “What gave it away?”

His companion chuckled before returning his eyes to the rapidly decreasing numbers in red on the screen hovering above them. The descent from the penthouse was dizzyingly quick; but it felt like for Chanyeol it couldn’t hit ground soon enough.

“Do you think it’s wise? To be bickering on a day like this one?” Jongin began, gaze back on his companion and waiting until the attention was reciprocated., “All that I’m saying bro is if my bae had to deal with half the crapshow that yours is currently dealing with, I’d be paying for all the back massages, golden honey facials and *Louis Vuitton* handbags I could get my hands on.”

Chanyeol looked at him like he was speaking in holy tongue. Honestly, there were times when Jongin spoke complete garble and it took a moment for the astute meaning behind them to be comprehended. Once the taller man finally grasped it, his expression shifted into a thoughtful one. So Jongin was asking him to be a little more empathetic.

Honestly, if only he knew just how much of his sympathies Kyungsoo had already tested and betrayed from this morning alone.

“I don’t think massages and handbags will help… my bae in this case.” Chanyeol contested, unable to hide his guilt, because of course he wanted to be considerate.

This was Kyungsoo after all. There was no greater bae deserving of the title for Chanyeol.

The elevator doors opened with a light ping! to the basement garage space. “Look bro.” Jongin stepped out of the door first, holding it open for him, “It’s your love story so I’m not gonna get involved. But there are scary times ahead. Times when you need a friend-- a lover-- or even that one in the middle. The last thing you want is for both of you to end up on opposing sides alone, you know?”

They walked across together in silence. There was no doubting which of the new cars parked in the space was Jongin’s. Across the dark space, there was a yellow lambo that shone like a gold statue.

It was El Dorado; parking lot style.

Finding himself adjacent to the expensive vehicle, Chanyeol was even more dumbfounded by its beauty. He was immediately reminded of how back in the day, he used to plead and plead to take on car robbery contracts just to have the chance to drive these types of luxury cars which he would never be able to buy for himself.

But it was a genre of work which had always been considered too petty by Pip.
“Be honest, bro.” Jongin looked at him amusingly, wrapping an arm over his shoulder, “My baby is a knock-out, isn’t she?”

Chanyeol nodded encouragingly. “Yeah, man.”

And it was there that the lawyer would chuckle, as his free hand which carried the set of car keys, patted Chanyeol’s chest.

“Go on then, cutie. Just don’t cream your pants on the leather, okay?”

Producing sunglasses out of thin air, the man in the tall denim jacket moved over to the passenger seat as Chanyeol swapped to the other side and hopped into the driver’s seat. Giddy.

Inside, he found himself almost shrieking at the gorgeous roar of the engine.

With a few smooth and easy manoeuvres, Chanyeol would drive them out of the garage and into the artificial city roads of the business district where the rain had momentarily stopped falling. Around them, a few pedestrians were already milling around in long coats, seeking caffeine and shelter from the cold.

Occasionally, a head would turn and pass their extravagant vehicle a nod of approval-- with a dash of hot envy.

“So, where to?” Chanyeol asked, as he bobbed his head to the deafening sound of the bass which was bursting from the car speakers.

“East. Suburbs. Do you know it? I need to double-check the address.”

A smirk appeared on Chanyeol’s lips, wondering how close to his old home he would end up driving to.

“Got it.”

The Eastern suburb which Jongin would take him was not dissimilar to the one he had grown up in. In fact, he was certain that all suburban areas in this region of the city were probably identical: a mixture of tall apartment complexes and townhouses separated by man-made lakes and large unsightly patches of grass they designated as parkland. Fortunately, they would bring some life to the cold scenery with the stark yellow sheen of Jongin’s car proving a beautiful contrast against the lonely wet streets.

Running to escape the short burst of rainfall, Chanyeol followed Jongin up the front steps to a beautiful town house. Inside, it was the usual geography-- three floors, three bathrooms, one scary attic, one scarier basement -- and eerily similar to Chanyeol’s childhood home. In fact, he would drift back and forth into nostalgia until he reached the living room where Chanyeol suddenly spied-- feet
peeking from the end of one of the large black leather couches.

Human feet.

He angled his head slightly and spotted an entire body-- capped with a tangled mess of dark hair on the top bleeding into the colour of the chair.

“You’re probably wondering why it doesn’t smell. It’s been in storage for a while. Give it a few hours.” Jongin noted, still on his phone as he stepped into the kitchen.

Fair to say that, Chanyeol really wasn’t wondering that and the bewildered feeling he had left him instantly seeking Jongin’s presence to get some explanation.

In the kitchen, there was a small mess of black bags dumped over one another-- two of which Jongin would take and he would beckon for Chanyeol to do the same.

“Now come on and help me out. I’ll explain Dolly whilst you help me with this.”

And thus, another criminal pillar was introduced to Chanyeol on the very day he was certain he’d had quite enough.

Dolly, of Dolos Inc., ran a specialist type of creative agency in the city. She was a nice girl. Young. Ordinary. But from a young age it became blindingly clear that she was a born liar. The type of girl who wasn’t afraid to speak up to the teacher and point fingers in the wrong direction to ensure she or a friend escapes trouble.

So naturally, she would become a writer.

Now, she was the creative head of her own agency and she was tasked with doing what she excels in: spinning tales. Think of her as criminal PR but far more experienced. It was a well known fact that Dolly was indeed responsible with half of the cold cases in the city because she could visualise and stage a crime scene in a matter of seconds.

Do you have a diversion you want to run? An indirect story you want to leak? A set of stolen goods which you want to return out of the goodness of your own heart?

Dolly was a single bank transfer away.

“...cold cases are her specialty. They’re cold because they’re not real. There’s no shortage of dead bodies around, Chanyeol. There’s actually a shortage of where to put them. Dolly is going to help us with state police. Watch the news later. We haven’t decided on what to break yet. A sex scandal? A limb in a pot plant? Whatever will fan the flames down a little whilst you all do your cool heist-thing. Ya feeling me here?”

Jongin turned to him after their third trip back into the house. They only had a few bags left and could make it back in one trip. Across him, his shadow’s jaw was looking a little slack.

“Well,” the lawyer began, “I’ll continue anyway. So this is an empty safe house we’ve borrowed. Everything you’ve seen here has been cleaned or changed in the past couple of weeks. Enough that
it will pass as circumstantial evidence in court. Later in the night, maybe in the week, the police will get tipped off by a member of the public-- probably a postman or maybe an estate agent that the place is smelling a tad funky. If they come here, they’ll find a dead body. That will keep a team busy enough. It also fits a serial killer story that Dolly planted over 20 years ago. So it will open up a cold case team. Later on, in another part of the city, we may stage a mini-riot amongst the market people who are warring over whose cabbage fields are bigger. That will get a few teams busy too. You get the picture, right?"

“Wow.” Chanyeol murmured, eyes blinking, “That’s fucked up.”

Jongin chuckled softly as he thrust the final two black bags into Chanyeol’s hands. He continued speaking at a fast pace as they exited the town house, passing by the dead body a final time--

“It’s a lot, yeah? Man. You have no idea about the half of it. This is why I always recommend thinking twice about dating the pillars of our little community you know? The big men play a hell of a different game, Chanyeol. You and I. We’re the little fish that go extinct once the humans overfish and kill us all with plastic. People like Kyungsoo? The old crime families? They’re the big blind scary fuckers at the bottom of the sea that have been around since prehistoric times. They’ll outlive us all, my darling because to them, the world is dark and stays the same. They don’t get tempted by the surface-- by the light. They stay down in the dark, in the depths, where the rules are the same and they survive.”

The image which Jongin’s words drew in Chanyeol’s brain frightened him. He had never enjoyed imagining the unknown creatures which roamed the bottomless ocean depths and now here he was, saying that the guy he’s boning was basically one of them.

There may also be the fact that the lawyer’s description gave a forcibly negative outlook on Kyungsoo’s future. He was just another blind freaky lone fish soldiering on; and he would keep going, alone and freaky, in this hellhole of a life.

“I think Kyungsoo wants an out.” Chanyeol shared softly, as they returned to the car where he retired as the passenger, “He hinted at it once.”

No more. Chanyeol would never forget it because it was in the way he said it. He had sounded so spent and exhausted. Like he had finally given enough to this existence.

“Everyone wants an out.” sighed Jongin as he clipped his seatbelt and returned his dark sunglasses to rest over his eyes, “But very few of us are lucky enough to get one. So, we should just accept our fate and live the life we’ve been given, you know? He chose this life, bro. He chose it. It chose him too. And anyway he’s rolling in cash. Literally drowning. Did you know he stopped taking a proper salary because it became so difficult to launder?”

The taller man blinked before laughing bewilderedly. “What?”

Jongin flashed his usual starlet smile as he started the engine. “Yeah!” he affirmed, before adding, “Not that he used a lot of his money anyway. I think it’s mostly in property and anonymous charity investments. I drafted him a will five years ago actually and… oh, well I shouldn’t really say. But.” Lowering his voice, the lawyer theatrically whispered, “If he croaked, you would cry. But your pockets would not be crying. Your pockets would instead be hiring a private jet, buying gold bars, and smoking Cuban cigars in the cockpit sat on the gold bars…”

The heaviness of the revelation caused the other man’s face to slump forwards, muting the rest of Jongin’s cheery words.
“I’m in his will?” Chanyeol gawked, partially horrified- “I’m in Kyungsoo’s will?”

“You and some orphanage.” Jongin chuckled, as he registered the other’s reaction, “You really didn’t know? Shiiiit! Well don’t get any ideas now. I don’t want you to kill him because that will make me morally conflicted and that’s not a natural state for any lawyer…”

As the shock wore off, and the driver fell quiet with a renewed focus on the unfamiliar roads, Chanyeol found himself finally recognising the vibrating phone in his pocket. It had been doing so periodically for about thirty minutes and he had skipped it due its larger inconvenience.

Scanning the alarm message, he immediately paled.

“Hey Jongin, can you get me to the nearest subway station? I need to go see my ex-co-brother-in-law.”

The lawyer blinked at the description before smiling brightly.

“Sure, bro.”

In the bewildering chaos of the past hours, it was easy to forget that Chanyeol actually had a life that was separate from committing crime and beating the living daylights out of rowdy men.

A nice ordinary life, which was ran in a manageable pace, and devoted to the semi-effective care of his niece, Hyewon. This was a life he had shared with his ex-co-brother-in-law, Yixing. And so, naturally, Yixing would grow concerned at the sudden lack of contact with his niece the past few days. Chanyeol had provided Hyewon the opportunity to contact him but her lack of complaints about her taller uncle had apparently triggered the doctor to worry even more.

So, Chanyeol was here to say hello, reassure, and do a nudge of damage control. It was also fitting because it was around this time that they tended to commit to their monthly Hyewon-focused meetings. A time where they could talk about their niece, update each other on her activities, and generally share the stresses of being kinda parents to a tween.

Chanyeol used to joke that it was his monthly date with the doctor.

This did not please Hyewon at all.

Entering Yixing’s lovely house, Chanyeol was shocked by the clean and orderly interior. It was hard
to adjust his brain to the burdening ordinariness of a suburban house-- having spent the last few days at a penthouse and only an hour ago in a townhouse with a semi-decomposing corpse.

Yixing’s house was cozy and familial. The walls were dotted with diplomas and pictures of loved ones-- Hyewon’s art-- and every room held tributes to the many countries Yixing had visited. He was quite a traveller.

A humanitarian really; for most of the trips had been to developing countries to help cure sick children.

Indeed, Chanyeol had to compete with that kind of uncle.

“...I really want to see her. She says she’s been studying a lot. But you can understand why I’m worried right?”

“Sure.” Chanyeol turned to meet the older man, having tuned out of the conversation, “She’s worried me too. She’s not normally this studious... I mean did you see her algebra grade last summer? I almost bawled.”

Yixing chuckled as he passed him a steaming mug of aromatic tea with the same dimpled and friendly smile.

“Well. I trust you, Chanyeol.” He affirmed, nodding his head, “Especially since you came all the way out of here with a face that looks like that. Are you getting all roughed up in those boxing lessons again?”

Without warning, Yixing touched his face; and Chanyeol withheld a choke as he almost spluttered tea all over himself.

“Yeah,” he managed after swallowing thickly, “Boxing.”

On a normal day, Chanyeol would have probably taken this comment further. He tended to because Yixing was as typically oblivious as he was stunning. And as one of the only two men that Chanyeol trusted in his life, the kind doctor was subjected to most of the failed, unimpressive, charmless one-liners that the taller man couldn’t use in clubs to pull because he was too busy helping his niece with her times tables.

Yixing. You should see how hard my abs got punched up. I almost called the ambos!

My arms got bigger did you say? You should see my thighs.

Maybe in another time; in another life.

“Well, be careful next time. I can’t have you looking like that at our next PTA meeting! You know that bad boy bachelors are trendy with moms right now!”

Yixing laughed loudly, warmly -- innocently -- and Chanyeol chuckled right with him like he was the funniest guy in the world. This was generally how most of their meetings went. Every month they went through the same cycle of old-men closeted-gay-dad-level flirting. Hence why Hyewon tended not to come. She said the vibe between them was off.

Or was it vomit-inducing?

“Anyway, let’s eat! Sit! Come on.” Yixing beckoned him into the kitchen.
The temptation had been there. Irrespective of how much he (platonically) loved him and his poreless face, Chanyeol also really enjoyed Yixing as a person. He had missed talking to him and considering what extreme-god-tier level of shit he would probably have to go through later, he knew it wouldn’t hurt to have a nice vegetarian lunch with someone he truly cared for.

But he had a time-limit. His day was going fast and there was so much preparation left to complete for tonight.

“Yixing, I would. But I’m super busy today.” Chanyeol responded.

His heart immediately sunk at the sight of the other’s disappointed expression.

But Yixing didn’t argue. He took the refusal with a smile and even sped up their conversation to accommodate for Chanyeol’s obvious busyness. After giving him the care package he had prepared for Hyewon which included packets of new vitamins and the specific seaweed crisps she liked, they said their usual goodbye at the doorstep.

And my god, the goodbyes were *long*. This was to reflect the fact that they didn’t meet all that often.

The hug took the longest to complete. And then what followed tended to be a set of sappy words including the key words ‘thanks’ ‘amazing’ and ‘extraordinary’ in a mix of sweet and gracious sentences.

“Thanks Chanyeol. For everything you have done this month.” Yixing uttered, each word delivered as romantically as if they were scripted directly from a drama, “I would not be able to do this extraordinary thing without you.”

“Me either, man.” Chanyeol patted his back lightly, “I appreciate you right back.”

“Take care of yourself, yeah?”

“Course. And even if I don’t, I can always come see you, right?”

The two laughed together, almost in synchrony.

And then Yixing would complete this session by slapping his ass as he walked away for no obvious reason. Only to prompt them to laugh more.

And normally, Chanyeol would laugh-- and would 100% take the godgiven opportunity to do it back -- but one accidental turn of his head and he caught a surprising glimpse of Kyungsoo’s rental Mercedes across the road.

Suddenly, his fingers didn’t feel all that itchy and he settled for a platonic final wave.
Running across the damp lawn as he registered the faint sound of thunder in the distance, Chanyeol entered the rental car, with the umbrella in his hand.

Kyungsoo was in his cap, gaze fixed on him, both hands on the steering wheel.

“Did you text me? Sorry the signal around here’s shit.” muttered Chanyeol.

“Yeah,” Kyungsoo answered before offering his explanation, “I got the call from the garage about your car because you weren’t picking up. Jongin said you would be here. So I thought I’d take you there as I have some errands to run in the city.”

The taller man nodded dumbly, as he removed his cap and lightly tossed his hair whilst staring at the dash mirror. “Cool, thanks.”

The car engine ignited with a smooth rumble and they were instantly off driving across slippery streets out of the nicest city suburb.

“So, he’s a keen hugger, huh?” would be Kyungsoo’s neutral commentary after a few minutes of wet silence.

Admittedly, the meeting had already long faded in Chanyeol’s head. Now, his focus had returned to the task at hand-- his brain darting through the various strategies he had discussed with CHEN during his early morning calls.

“Yes.” Chanyeol answered thoughtfully as he glanced at Kyungsoo with a bemused smile, “It’s like hugging a sexy marshmallow ma-- ow, ow…”

Feigned whines of pain would fall from Chanyeol’s parted lips as Kyungsoo playfully pinched his left earlobe. It lasted only for a moment, the contact softening, as his ear was brushed more gently and Kyungsoo returned his hand to the wheel.

Almost instantly, the pair of young men smiled in harmony. It was a clear contrast to the stunted and cold mood of their morning -- and they clearly appreciated the renewed warmth enough to pursue it.

“I’ve never seen you jealous before. It’s weird.” Chanyeol retorted, totally intentional on teasing.

“Please.” scoffed Kyungsoo, “As if I would be jealous of a paediatrician.”

“--who has the second best ass I’ve ever held-- ow, ow!”

The fingers were back around the ear. A momentary admonishment as once again they would be rubbing soft circles against Chanyeol’s shoulder blade.

“You’re first, obviously.” Chanyeol surrendered, watching the smile blossom on the other’s lips. He waited a moment before murmuring a quieter, “Sorry about sulking this morning.”

The apology hovered: heavy and testing.

But with one glance from Kyungsoo, it would dissipate.

“I’m sorry too. I should’ve told you about the call right away.”

And then the driver reached across with one hand and squeezed Chanyeol’s left thigh reassuringly.

It would be fair to say that at that point Kyungsoo was officially forgiven.
“Your thighs are really big now.” Kyungsoo commented innocently as they joined the highway. Chanyeol was gushing.

Make that super forgiven.

However, the highlight of his day was yet to come.

Screw lambos.

Taking the keys from the mechanic, Chanyeol ran a fond hand over his baby’s new glass window, before being instantly overwhelmed with the faint gloomy images of that damned afternoon. The most persistent of which were the startling black apparel of faceless men; his niece’s terrified screams; and the thud, thud, thud of his fist against flesh.

But the images fell away as his fingers returned to his pockets.

“So, all good?” He queried at the mechanic behind him.

“All good.” The mechanic smiled at him, as he then gently patted the hood of the car, “Let me get you a service receipt before you go.”

Kyungsoo was beside him, scrolling through his phone. “You missed her, hm?” He asked as he caught the slightly dazed expression in the taller man’s eyes.

“I’m actually going to fucking cry.” Chanyeol muttered, just managing to hold the emotional dam in as the mechanic returned, with the receipt at hand, “Thanks man.”

Once the engine was restarted successfully, Kyungsoo affirmed that he would be returning to the apartment in his own car as Chanyeol shared that he would be attending to specific heist business at The Black Pearl in the T district.

They then expressed wanting to converse privately. They probably could’ve done so inside the car. But instead, they unwittingly settled on being pressed up against each other against the vehicle because they had no time and that was absolutely the same thing.
“The Black Pearl is kinda…”

“It’s a strip club.” Kyungsoo affirmed for him, glancing up at the man who was straining his back against the metal passenger door, hands in his pockets.

“Yeah. It wasn’t me that chose that place. It was CHEN. Turns out he’s provided the security systems for half the night life in the city.” Chanyeol mumbled, as he watched Kyungsoo’s hand reach up and adjust his cap to face the centre, before adjusting his own.

“I’ll see you back at the apartment then.” He nodded his head before adding a playful, “Have fun.”

“I wooooon’t.” Chanyeol teased back, as his eyes privately scanned the quiet garage, before leaning forwards and capturing Kyungsoo’s lips into a chaste kiss.

A soft and meaningless gesture but he felt like the other had anticipated it-- and he was only too happy to deliver.

“Be safe.” was Kyungsoo’s goodbye as they parted and the other returned to his own vehicle.

Still warm and smiling, the taller man entered his car. Moments later, a figure in a mechanic’s jumpsuit emerged by his window, tapping lightly. His face was obscured by a cap. Above him, the faint flicker of old purley lights.

“Sir! You forgot this at the office.”

Kyungsoo’s umbrella was held up for a view. Chanyeol blinked at it and quickly opened the door, “Ah--thanks.” He took it from the figure and shoved it back to the passenger seats behind him.

“It’s supposed to rain today. Drive safe, sir!” The figure said cheerily.

“Thanks!”

Chanyeol left the garage, faintly registering how the stranger’s figure had remained at the door-- frozen and hollowed out by the dark light behind him before his car eventually turned a corner allowing the shadow to instantly vanish from the side mirrors.

The rain was falling again. His beloved windshield wipers kept him alert to the road, waving back and forth in smooth motions like it was greeting him over and over.
“How are you, baby?” Smoothing large hands over the wheel, Chanyeol sighed contentedly, feeling utterly saturated with affectionate emotions as he drove back into the city centre.

For days, he had felt like a stranger in other people’s vehicles. But here-- he was *home*. And there was no better reminder of this than the ageing to-do list which remained taped tightly to the dashboard.

A key piece of his current life-- the cushiony half-life existence -- which he could return to once it’s all over.

Jacking up the volume on the radio, Chanyeol nodded along to the staggering beats of the music silently. His mind was already away and distracted -- resounding with thoughts of Yixing and the PTA meetings -- of Hyewon and her dance recitals -- and then finally, of Kyungsoo.

Kyungsoo and his lips and how they had felt against his-- flashed cold and dry from his car’s air conditioning.

It was sad really; how something so short-lived and insubstantial could feel as real and sensory to Chanyeol as anything else he had experienced countless other times in his current life, like the post-it note or the PTA meetings or the dance shows.

And as he drove off, he considered the approaching hours with more thought and sensed a growing heaviness turn his stomach as he recognised the conclusion which it would all inevitably add up to.

It will all end soon.

*He will probably be gone from your life soon, too.*

He could cope with it right?

He had before.

The storm was inching closer on the horizon now. The city was disappearing beneath low clouds and a grey mist, with its residents reduced to ashen shadows crossing damp streets under large hooded umbrellas to protect from the unrelenting rainshowers.

Fortunately, Chanyeol would reach his destination on schedule.
The Black Pearl was named after a beautiful Polynesian gem. In their city, it was a club in the West district -- frequented by drunk foreigners, drunk criminals, drunk foreign criminals, and in their heyday -- by Chanyeol’s small team who took advantage of the 10% discount from the club owner who had wanted to thank them after the smooth running of a difficult job. The aforementioned job had been a personal contract-- to retrieve one of the bar owner’s old family heirlooms from a rich rival frenemy. The target -- frenemy -- had been battling with a chronic illness and had planned to sell most of the objects abroad for maximum profit.

Naturally, the bar owner couldn’t have that so Pip was hired to steal everything back. Unfortunately, it turned out that the target actually owned a broad assortment of goods from other rival families-- which meant that on the night that Chanyeol and his team turned up, other rival robbery teams also came to plunder.

Granted, much blood was spilled that day. Not even necessarily related to the work but because of Junmyeon’s pissy mood. He had been overcharged for his internet bill that day-- which directly led to a sharpened focus on a win. So, the rest of the robbers had no chance the moment he left his van, pistol in hand.

Today, the Black Pearl was preparing for another busy Saturday evening. And in one of its private rooms, a quiet meeting was being held for the small team that would be carrying out the Ocean Diamond heist. Junmyeon, CHEN (through voice call), and two of the teammates whom Chanyeol had primarily worked with in their old team.

They had been Pip’s team B; all designated with B nicknames.

Chanyeol entered the room, privately giddy from excitement as he poked his head in and lifted his arms in greeting.

The response ranged from Junmyeon sleepily glancing up from his cards, to the more animated welcomes from the two he hadn’t seen in awhile --

“....Huh? So you really are alive? You didn’t die from jacking off to too much weird dark-web-porn like we all bet on? Wow. I owe so many people so much money.”

This lovely hello would come from the equally-lovely Kim Taeyeon. Pint-sized. Rarely found in anything but oversized grey boy hoodies, skinnies, and heavy boots. Notorious for a sublime level of shit-talking that surpassed anyone else in their line of work.

Her nicknames varied - but the one that stuck to them in the end was ‘Bangs’ due to the fact that she was addicted to her beautiful fringe and its strict upkeep.

In their team, she was frequently tasked with the delicate stuff. Stealth was easy for her due to her stature. She was also the one always picked to be hauled over fences and walls. Again, because of the stature-- and the shit-talking.

Oh-- and she had the cutest dog in the world.

*Chewy* the little spaniel.

“Bangs, loving as always.” He grinned as he greeted Chewy who darted to him, having recognised him at the immediate moment he walked through the door.

Chanyeol walked over to her, as she smiled up at him, and opened her arms. He lowered down and
allowed her to wrap her tiny arms around his neck and tug him into a headlock.

“I missed you! What would our team be without the taller, smarter, funnier and all-around less shitty version of Bunny?” she cooed into his ears.

Across them, Junmyeon flipped the middle finger with the free hand that wasn’t holding the deck of cards.

Chanyeol chuckled as he pressed a soft kiss to the top of her hoodie before catching the extended hand of the man occupying the seat right beside her.

“Yo!”

The second member to be introduced was Kim Minseok. “Ignore her,” he jostled Taeyeon a little, “She’s annoyed because another one of her internet dates turned out to be a catfish.”

All-around nice guy. Oldest in the group. They were both each other’s kiss whenever they were bored during traffic and played the kiss-marry-or-kill game with their team names (of course Junmyeon had to be his marry). Minseok’s specialty was simple as he was the group leader and equipped with the most on-the-job experience as one of Pip’s earliest recruits. Tasked to keep all of them in order, he was offered the nickname Boss.

None of them ever called him that though. Instead, they called him Baby because he was the smallest and looked adorable as their occasional getaway driver.

“You're still looking for love, Bangs?” Chanyeol queried, tilting his head at her as he scooped a barking Chewy into his long arms.

“Of course I am.” Taeyeon huffed, glancing irritably at her phone, “He’s out there, somewhere.”

“Probably in a ditch.” Junmyeon snickered as a folder was then chucked at his head.

After rolling her eyes, the young woman returned her attention to Chanyeol.

“So.”

It was probably time to reveal Chanyeol’s nickname too. As the last member of their team, his title had been quite a fun deliberation for the more experienced members. From ‘bumbag’ to ‘beanpole’, they all eventually agreed on a nickname to reflect his stature, his background and the accent he had come with when he first joined them--

“Barbie.”

Motherfucking Barbie.

Taeyeon sighed softly, before bursting into an excited smile, as she leaned across, “We are trying to set Bunny up with the IT guy. Any ideas?”

“IT guy?” It was there that Chanyeol noticed the phone in the middle of the table. It was playing a familiar boyband song. Chewy was on his lap, yawning, wagging his little tail as Chanyeol smoothed a hand over his back. “Oh-- is CHEN on hold?”

“Yeah.” Taeyeon grinned, as she took Minseok’s arm and looped it around her own, “So we’re trying to help Bunny get in there when he comes back. He told us earlier that they were texting last night. Post-eleven o’clock news hours. Sexy stuff.”
“I was trying to set this meeting up, ugh. You two are such fucking idiots—” Junmyeon muttered, as he placed the cards down, having finished organising them in order.

“Look at you! So red! Ah! I love it!” Taeyeon clapped her sweater paws together, before leaning across keenly, “So, any ideas, Barbie? Any insight into how we can subtly tell IT guy that our Bunny wants to load up his microprocessors? Ram into his firewall? Stroke his—”

The music stopped, surprising even Taeyeon who paused midword--

“Back! Sorry about that guys! Is Chanyeol there yet?”

“Present.” Chanyeol affirmed, as he quickly pulled his phone out for the notes he had made.

“Cool! Hi Chanyeol! Okay, so let’s get this started. First thing’s first. Has everyone read the Lockerman contract?”

“I read the salary.” Minseok commented dully, lifting the document to his eyes, “Want to simplify it for us?”

The abbreviated Lockerman contract was the one everyone got sent whenever they chose to involve themselves with Kyungsoo. It mentioned the specifics of working as part of the operations— the confidentiality clauses, the breach of contract repercussions, and the all-important end date which was tonight.

Once the diamond was in Kim Jongin’s eager hands.

“Right, so in terms of what is actually happening. We have a few hours to finalise but our current outline is as follows...”

After assessing the data from the bug, it was confirmed that Kyungsoo’s invitation had been accurate and that the location of the dynasty auction was going to be in an abandoned opera theatre in the South East-- a once thriving hub in the lost cultural centre of the 60s. The theatre was old, huge and comprised of three floors. Irrespective of the complex nature of its geography, they were going to gear it to be a quick 15 minute operation. This would be dependent on Kyungsoo’s accurate identification of the place where the diamond was going to be held. Possibly in a showcase area before the auction itself. All outside communications would be shut off during the auction, as per auction traditions, but CHEN was going to ensure that they would have the ability to manage partial handling of the comms and the security through a network contrivance he could implant through Kyungsoo also.

All the blueprints would be studied by Chanyeol and the final exit strategy will be decided dependent on the intel about the location of their target object. The predicted entry time was somewhere between 10:35 and 10:45, to reflect their plan of striking before the diamond is sold.

Weapon usage was encouraged. Kill on site, approved.

After successful retrieval, the team will hand over the Ocean Diamond to a marked site for Kim
And then, once all that was done and dusted, they would probably return to *The Black Pearl* to get thoroughly hammered.

As the group took a quick break, Chanyeol would catch Junmyeon’s arm on his way out of the room for a smoke.

“What’s up?” the older man asked, arching an eyebrow at his expression.

“I’m worried about Kyungsoo.” Chanyeol murmured, the seriousness in his gaze strengthening, “I think there’s something bigger about this. You know? The invitation. It stinks.”

Junmyeon showed some understanding of what he meant as he nodded. “Well, yeah but you can’t go in there with him. You’ll get shot on site.” He retorted with a frown.

“I know.” said Chanyeol, before he scratched the back of his head and added, “I guess what I’m saying is this job has to happen, Junmyeon. Whatever the cost. We have to get that diamond at the end of the night. So whatever happens to me-- or Kyungsoo-- you have to promise me that the Ocean Diamond will be in Kim Jongin’s hands before tomorrow.”

There were no jokes this time. His friend and closest ally took his free hand and clasped it tightly.

“Okay. I promise.”

Naturally, what would follow was a very long and necessary hug.

He embraced Junmyeon tight-- in the same way he had at the end of every difficult situation they had endured as long-term friends. And they had battled through many-- far more than either of them really deserved.

“I love you man.” Emotion bubbled up in Chanyeol’s chest from a place too familiar because he had lost his count of how many times he had said he loved Junmyeon-- and felt utterly indebted to him, “I owe you so much.”

“Don’t be so fucking soft.” Junmyeon clapped him hard on the back, the faintest emotion edging his voice, “You’re family. This is what we do for each other. So make sure that whatever you plan to do, you think about it and you commit. And don’t shoot like a dipshit. If you swing, you swing hard. You shoot- you shoot to kill.”

If Junmyeon’s voice didn’t make the series of instructions sound so chilling, Chanyeol was certain that his eyes would have filled up with tears.
“If something happens to you. Chanyeol. I swear to the holy family--” The religious gesture was performed, before Junmyeon’s eyes narrowed, “I’ll come after Kyungsoo myself.”

Chanyeol sniffed slightly before he smoothed a gentle hand over the side of Junmyeon’s head.

“Okay,” he hummed, “But can I ask you a quick question?”

“Shoot.”

The vaguest smile crossed the taller man’s lips as he whispered, “Do you actually want to bone CHEN? Because it’s cool if you want to talk abou−”

Chanyeol would whine loudly in pain as Junmyeon hit him on the side of the head with his Glock which was pulled from nowhere.

“Junmyeon-ah,” wailed the taller man as he followed his friend who was making a suspiciously quick escape, “it’s okay to want to talk about unresolved feelings. Sometimes you discover these things later on in life…” He followed him out, grinning, as the Glock remained raced menacingly in the air.

“One more word, Chanyeol and I will _shoot_ you down.”

A few hours passed, lost in planning. By the time Chanyeol found himself leaving the club, the final preparations for the busy evening was being completed-- with the typical ultraviolet lights and staggering club music paving his exit.

Unsurprisingly, a troubled feeling would grow within Chanyeol on his drive back from the Team B meeting. He supposed that saying goodbye to close friends-- before engaging in a night of incomparable peril -- would feel strange because of how long it had been since he felt like that. Before, these goodbyes happened every two days-- even hours -- because every contract he’d worked on as an armed robber held the same uncaged simmer of danger and death and the only way to cope had been to grow numb to it. But five years had passed since then.

And he had grown involuntarily accustomed to a life that was dreary-- but _secure_. Sure, there were days in which he felt like the suburban rhythm would simply smother him; but the instinct to crave safety and protection was in every man. He couldn’t help feeling it too.
Pausing at a stop sign, the tall man allowed his gaze to hover over his side mirrors and through the screen of rain, he caught himself eyeing a lone black Mazda which he realised had been sitting prettily behind him from the bar. There were tell tale signs to surveillance vehicles-- subtler ones when it didn’t include men rolling out with big guns and bats. The usual list comprised of blacked-out-windows, the use of cars that Moms used, drivers with sunglasses on, nonsensical number plates.. etc.

With a few clever lane adjustments, Chanyeol was able to confirm that this was the case with the black car.

He knew the city better than anyone so he was soon able to drive off through a short byway via a few short lane maneuvers which the Mazda wasn’t able to emulate. But the tailing itself was incessant. Each time he disappeared, another car would be found, minutes later, blatantly pursuing him in place of the previous. In the end, it would last an entire hour, before Chanyeol began to feel really pissed off.

The new object of his anger was a black Subaru. If it hadn’t been rush hour, he was certain that he would’ve probably succumbed to the developing temptation of stopping his car in the middle of the road and smashing his windshield with Kyungsoo’s fancy umbrella.

Breathing slowly through his rage, the man glared at the image of the vehicle through his mirrors before he flinched hard at the sensation of the phone ringing in his pocket. One look at the name and his grievances were momentarily tempered.

Hyewon. Shit. He forgot he told her to call around this time.

“Hey kid.” Chanyeol greeted, eyes firmly on the road as he pressed the phone to his ear, “What’s up? How’s your day going?”

“Hey. I’m okay. I got sent some of the online worksheets from school so I’m doing them now.”

Making an abrupt left turn, the driver managed to huff a happy, “Ah really? Cool. Tell me about them.”

Unaware of the ridiculous amount of dangerous driving maneuvers her uncle was currently performing to escape a potential tail, Hyewon launched into a long and oblivious spiel about her schoolwork. Occasionally, some of them would peter into Chanyeol’s consciousness-- long multiplication was boring, learning about the First World War was interesting, she missed art class--- But most were lost in the sound of screeching tyres, car horns and the merciless clunk of the heavy raindrops over his car roof.

Fortunately, through bypassing a main road, Chanyeol managed to lose the car again but he was further away from his destination than he thought.

“Shit.” He cursed.

“Huh?”

The young man blinked before shaking his head and smiling as he pulled up to a side road. “Nothing, kid. I’m just saying I’m glad you’re getting on even though this is all a bit shit. You’ll be home really soon I promise. I’m going to pick you up from there and we’ll catch up on all the Conflicto de amor episodes we’ve missed. I’ll buy ice cream and cookies. We’ll make a night of it.”

There was a pause. An empty crackle on the line. He imagined she was smiling.
“I really want to go home soon, Uncle Chanyeol.” The young girl shared.

A considerable weight settled in the centre of Chanyeol’s chest as he accepted the words, a tired hand smoothing over his beating forehead. “Yeah, yeah. Me too kid. I want to be home with you as well.” He then found himself inhaling sharply-- bringing a flurry of hot tears to his eyes as he spoke into the phone.

“Are you okay?” came the worried words over the line.

Chanyeol wiped his eyes with his sleeve, looking inexplicably guilty, as he tilted his head to glance at the roof.

“I’m good.” He responded as his gaze then sunk to regard the dark road across him, an empty black. With each word he spoke, his chest only served to hurt more-- because he was aware that he was withholding, and he shouldn’t because she was big enough, but at the same time, she wasn’t--

“Hyewon. Kid. Can I just say that I love you. I don’t really say it as often as your Uncle Yixing does. But I really do. Always have. Ever since I saw your bald ugly face at the hospital nursery.”

Hyewon laughed in response. “I know that, okay…. and I love you too of course.”

And there Chanyeol became burdened with the thought that he was selling his niece short because of how emotionally messed up he was. There was so much more that he could share that would suit this situation and provide the comfort-- and the love-- but he wasn’t reasoned enough to figure out what they were. All he could say was that he loved her; he loved her more than the entire fucking world and he was well aware that if anything happened to him--

“I need to do the rest of my work now. Can we talk again this time tomorrow?”

The sound of papers rustling was heard in the background.

-- she would never forgive him.

“Sure.” Chanyeol answered, nodding his head, “Tomorrow.”

She hummed her goodbye. “Bye Uncle Chanyeollie…”

And it was so warm and familiar-- and homely that it would trigger a final splutter of tears to leak from Chanyeol’s eyes as he mumbled an equally affectionate, “Bye bye kid.”

The line went dead but he held on for a few more minutes in the dark.

Afterwards, Chanyeol became so concerned about the tailing that he opted to abandon his car in a nearby public parking lot.
He ran through the rain, not bothering to take his umbrella as he set off on foot onto the subway lines to complete his short journey.

In the flood of people during rush hour, he was lost and faceless.

Nobody could’ve followed him then; for he was just another miserable commuter on the way back home.

By the time Chanyeol reached the penthouse apartment, everything in his body *ached*. His feet-- his head-- his *soul*. Not to mention the fact that he had practically drowned in rainwater. And it was in this wretched and dire state that he would enter into a thoroughly warmed apartment, dimly lit and saturated with the aroma of a cooking meal. It was a full sensory haven -- expertly capped by the sound of Sinatra’s deep silky voice resounding from the speaker system.

A little overwhelmed, the man entered quietly, removing his shoes at the front as he padded in. Across him, beyond the glass, the intensity of the rainfall had completely obscured the city providing them an added layer of privacy in the altitude. Pulling off his jacket which was drenched, he snuck his head out to glance across the kitchen space where he spotted Kyungsoo who was chopping and quietly --

Humming.

“There are fresh towels in the bathroom,” the man in the round spectacles called out, as if reading his thoughts.

“Ah, okay.”

Overtired, Chanyeol ensured to dry himself properly before changing into a set of casual clothes which the other had neatly prepared on his side of the bed. Behind the door, a long black suit carrier was hanging-- presumably Kyungsoo’s choice of outfit for the evening.

When he returned to the kitchen, the music had changed but there was no more humming. Chanyeol chose to quietly observe from afar as Kyungsoo hunched over a boiling pot, sprinkling seasoning and stirring.

“Need a hand?” He asked eventually.

“Nope, I’m okay. Just sit down, it’d be another five minutes.” Kyungsoo answered with a smile as their gazes met.

The cook seemed so settled in his element like this. All smiles; no heaviness or coils in his posture.
Pleased to see it, Chanyeol naturally obliged. He sat on a stool by the kitchen island and spotted then that there were objects neatly arranged in the middle of the surface. One glance at the photograph on the top and he recognised that they had been the items from his safety deposit boxes. After noticing that the other had made no move to hide them, as he had before, Chanyeol slowly pulled the picture towards him and admired it with a close eye--

“I bet you’re this one.” Chanyeol held up the picture of the little boys, pointing at a small boy at the front, with the unhappy expression, “You were probably angry because you couldn’t see. You didn’t have glasses yet.”

Kyungsoo tilted his head at it as he glanced back, tasting a fingertip. “Yeah.” He answered, spooning the vegetables into bowls, “That one’s me. And that one’s my Papa.” He added as Chanyeol took the other photograph of his father with the military boots and held it up to the kitchen light.

The steaming main dishes were ladelled into equal portions and offered across. Seafood pasta and vegetables.

It smelled delicious; and Chanyeol was starving. But he opted to wait until Kyungsoo was ready, aware that out of all the etiquettes in the world, blatant disregard for the mealtime etiquette had been the one that could drive the smaller man unnecessarily antsy. He liked it quiet and orderly. Food was respected.

“Why 12?” Chanyeol placed a finger on the number behind the picture of the little boys which had been written in striking black marker pen. “It’s your safety deposit box number too.”

After pouring them glasses of water, Kyungsoo answered with a quiet voice.

“I wrote that myself. I was the twelfth boy that my Papa took in. So I was also given twelve as a courier name. I could’ve kept twelve if I wanted to but I liked Kyungsoo.”

He then gestured towards the food as he finally occupied the seat across Chanyeol.

“Let’s eat.”

No further encouragement was required. Chanyeol dug in with blind fervour-- amusing his companion as he spent some of the initial seconds puffing out loud breaths because the crab had been too hot.

Once he’d cleaned half of his plate, more thoughts entered Chanyeol’s head. Coherent ones; distinct from the distracting and pathetic swoons over the fact that someone had cooked dinner for him like he was a husband being gratified after slaving at one of the corporate offices across the penthouse.

“So, what’s all this about. The crooners. The dinner for two. Are you pulling a last supper on me?” Chanyeol asked, passing his companion a direct glance.

“Well.” Kyungsoo smiled, as he cut the vegetables neatly, “I’ve always wanted to cook for you.”

There was an element of hesitation-- of resignation-- in his reply which Chanyeol noticed but he couldn’t bring himself to further pressure. He didn’t need to know everything; to ask about everything; because there were some answers that he could probably already guess right. So instead, Chanyeol decided to channel his focus into the fact that Kyungsoo was smiling at him -- and the room was just under the right amount of dark, and the music was the right amount of sound, and the food was the right amount of food, and the space between them was --

“Does it taste okay?” Kyungsoo asked, voice soft against the rain and the tune of the strings.
“It tastes great.” Chanyeol took a particularly large mouthful and smiled at him before allowing it to fade away in the flat curve of his lips.

Sadly and happily in equal proportion.

The space between them was just the right amount. Not too close; not too far.

Chanyeol focused on this space as he finished his dinner, having finally grown to accept inside that he really loved Kyungsoo.

It had been a revelation he’d accepted at some point between the fifth -- or sixth -- mouthful of pasta. Just an admission that some remnant of what had been there five years ago remained with him now.

He wasn’t sure if this essentially prompted him to eat his dinner or slower. For as much as he’d wanted to preserve the balance of acoustics between them, he knew that there was little else that he would’ve liked more than to hold him much closer tonight.

T-2 hours until Kyungsoo was to leave for the auction.

After their dinner, Chanyeol had swept the smaller man quietly into his arms, opting to end the meal in the same way that any good dinner should end -- with an impromptu dance. He made none of his usual nonsense jokes, deciding instead to let the music make the invitation for him. It was the perfect sort of atmosphere for it-- with the rain and the music type -- and Kyungsoo obliged with barely a peep of protest.

Granted, Chanyeol wasn’t much of a dancer, so it was more sensual swaying but it was nice feeling so close to Kyungsoo even if the height different was more marked in their state. Regardless, Kyungsoo swayed with him in perfect rhythm, choosing to lay the hand that wasn’t grasped in Chanyeol’s grip on the taller man’s opposing bicep. In silence, the pair whirled around and around the length of the living room, dictated by the pace of the songs -- sometimes quick, sometimes achingly slow -- moving through light and shadows, both in slippers and sweats.

Beyond in the city, the rain only seemed to fall harder, pulling with it the snarl of thunder and occasional dart of lightning -- layering an element of slow menace into the warm music which boomed around the penthouse. Dizzying.
“When you arouse the need in me
My heart says ‘yes indeed’ in me,
‘Proceed with what you’re leadin me to’…”

For Chanyeol, his captivation with the scene across him would only dull when Kyungsoo finally looked up at him far more alluring eyes. Chanyeol met the gaze fully, tilting his head to the side with a smile in a knowing gesture.

The smaller man’s expression immediately softened.

“Can I ask you something?” Kyungsoo asked.

“Sure.”

What followed was a simple and measured, “Five years have passed. Why are you still alone? Why haven’t you found someone?”

The question was a little harshly put, circa Kyungsoo’s blunt honesty. Having expected this question to come up eventually, albeit not tonight, Chanyeol continued to spin them around the spot as he considered the question, gaze rising to the ceiling.

“Uh, well. It’s a combination of things really…."

And there he propelled into a rather empty spiel about how he practically didn’t leave his house a year after the attack; and in the years that followed, his self-confidence took such an earth-shattering knock that talking to strangers at bars didn’t become ordinary again for another little while. Occasionally, he would hint and skip over a potential anecdote—of interactions with foreign hitmen he met through Junmyeon, or the salesman he once fucked in a museum on a night-time Valentines outing. He wouldn’t delve any further because he couldn’t even remember their faces; only the reasons why he let them fuck him.

Boredom.

Loneliness.

To add ghostly ticks to the sexual bingo calendar him and Junmyeon had going for a time when they were roommates.

“There was one guy. He was nice. We went on four dates. But he had problematic political views. We couldn’t hit it off long-term. The sex was good though. And after him, well my brother died. So that was that.”

This would earn him a soft nod from the man he held, who had listened to every story with an unmoved expression. Like he was in a club and listening to the sad-sex-stories about someone else. Chanyeol supposed that he probably did make it sound like that. There was nothing about his voice which suggested that any of his interactions really made any significant emotional impact on him and his life.
And then Chanyeol paused, swaying still, as his lips pursed together.

“I suppose the simple answer to your question was that in the past five years, I haven’t really met anyone who made me think that I shouldn’t be alone.” He shrugged passively, “Every time I held someone new, I think a little part of me just thought that it w--wasn’t--”

He stuttered a little and he felt Kyungsoo’s fingers tighten around his arm as he exhaled shakily.

Chanyeol then smiled, as if to reiterate that he was okay. Nothing about his answer was particularly sad. But that was a little sad thought all on its own.

Taking a moment and allowing the music to take over, Chanyeol found himself murmuring,

“I would ask it back. But I don’t think I want to hear it, Kyungsoo.” His gaze had moved away now, as he pressed the other man slightly closer, allowing him to rest his head against his chest as they made feather steps side-to-side, “I don’t want to hear it.”

Kyungsoo exhaled softly, his free hand pinching the fabric of Chanyeol’s sleeve as he felt the tension grow in his lover’s form. The insecurity of not knowing; of wanting to know proving hard to grapple with.

Fortunately, he would not torment him tonight.

“Chanyeol,” The name would fall from Kyungsoo’s lips fondly and deeply, as he whispered, “You’re the love of my life.”

Silence.

And then a muffled sniffle.

“Are you crying?”

“No,” Chanyeol lied, angling his rapidly flushing face away as Kyungsoo leaned back to assess him.

The smaller man grinned and rolled his eyes as he gave Chanyeol’s chest the lightest and most playful thump with his fist. “Shh. That’s enough now.” He mumbled, reaching forwards and gently swiping the other’s blushing cheeks, “No more tears.”

“Does that mean that after tonight I can ask you out?” Chanyeol asked abruptly, eyes still puffy as he continued to cry despite Kyungsoo’s best efforts to soothe him.

Admittedly, Kyungsoo probably would’ve cried too, had the sight of the crying man across him been less endearing. “Yeah,” he supplied with a smile, “You can.”

The taller man finally smiled as he poked Kyungsoo’s forehead, bright eyes beautifully blurry even in the dark.
“Do you really mean that?”
“I do.”

Their lips lightly touched.
And then fingertips touched; marked by more kisses.
They would celebrate by dancing together for another few minutes, lost and happy and distant.

Showtime.

Across the city, the storm which simmered in the heavens surveyed the powerful chaotic flurry of activity on the ground.

10:05 PM
Kyungsoo was at the auction.

After a thorough security assessment, with all of his electronics and personals removed including his watch, the man in the black silk shirt and deep burgundy suit would find himself in the second floor of *The Elysium Amphitheatre*, admiring the set of inventory that would star in the evening’s festivities. The collection was being given the full star treatment tonight: some were even hoisted in beautiful large glass cases like museum ready pieces. Granted, much of this external show was being provided by the sellers, due to the striking market value of some of the objects.

Of course, only object would truly catch his eye. A set of five numbers: 82401.
A glimmer of crystal in the distance that would catch the light and he would momentarily glance over with a keen eye. Not too long; he wouldn’t stare too long.

“Kyungsoo?” a figure called out to him. This must have been the fourth time his name had been called in the space of ten minutes. Most of the people in the room were people he knew; both current and old clients and friends.

That was no coincidence. “Marco, ¿Cómo estás?” Kyungsoo greeted the man politely, allowing himself to be pulled across the room as the agent introduced him to his most recent acquisition-- a beautiful shimmery golden suit that had apparently been seized from a cartel kingpin’s grave by his own son to sell. It was all hand-embroidered -- every precious gemstone mined from the very tunnels which the cartel watched over. A suit for a dead king; now being flogged by the prince because it was worth enough to buy territory back from a rival.

“Did you say it was indestructible?” Kyungsoo asked, chuckling slightly as Marco nudged him --

“Superman suit.” Marco uttered, beaming, as he gave Kyungsoo an encouraging clap on the back.

10:05 PM

Chanyeol was on his way back to the business district.

Having comforted himself with the sight of seeing Kyungsoo enter the doors of the amphitheatre safely, he was now rightfully back in his own car. The streets were largely empty, with most people choosing to stay in or take shelter in the clubs and bars away from the aggression of the storm.

Humming to himself, he flicked the radio on as he approached the skyway back into the business district--

“-- has followed the concerning reports today of violent altercations between police and farming unionists in the North West and East over high taxes on goods and agriculture--

The sound of people complaining entered the airwaves alongside the noise of shattering glass.

Blinking dully, the driver switched over to his personal playlist, and smiled as he recognised Muse’s cover of *Can’t Take My Eyes Off You* playing as the opening entry. He listened intently, fingertips drumming against the smooth curve of the steering wheel, as he found himself halting at a red light.

A familiar black Mazda would pull up on the lane beside him. Blacked out windows. No
recognisable number plate. Soccer mom car.

Sixty seconds later and the traffic light flicked a luminous green.

But neither car moved.

With the music playing loudly in the background, Chanyeol would find his car door being broken into as he was dragged out yelling by three large hooded men into the barren street. Cold droplets of rain would stream down his face and hair as he fought bravely against them -- even using the umbrella he’d managed to hold onto to prod an eyeball or two -- but his show of unwillingness would be short-lived. They had clearly learned from the last time they had tried to fight the six foot male fair and square.

As Chanyeol was busying himself with some uncoordinated fist-fighting with the two largest, the third man would procure a large metal bar from the vehicle and he would knock Chanyeol out cold with a single heavy strike to the back.

10:05 PM

Team B was parked around the back of a seedy night club. Not far from the amphitheatre.

“The best Whitney Houston song is I Will Always Love You. Don’t fight me on this Minseok. It’s so obvious.”

Nonsensical games comprised the majority of the coping methods that Team B used during the boring listless period that preceded a heist. Today’s choice was music-based. Which hit was the best? Taeyeon and Minseok decided to start controversially to create discord: with everyone’s favourite, the legendary Whitney H.

“Fuck off and stop being a fake fan.” Minseok frowned, stretching on the van floor, “It’s One Moment In Time. That song was used for the Olympics for god’s sake.”

As the pair continued their argument by singing over each other, they were disturbed by the van doors flipping open and a grumpy Junmyeon appearing carrying some of Jongdae’s technical gear. After a few smart quips, Taeyeon eventually obliged and helped him move them along into the vehicle. Jongdae was beside Junmyeon, holding an umbrella over them both, and smiling warmly.

“You’re so cute,” preened Taeyeon, as she then beckoned him in, “Come on in quick. It’s so cold
outside."

Behind her, Minseok was just unwrapping some of the wet sheeting when he called out a loud,  

“Hey you two-- hand on heart, which of Whitney Houston’s songs were the best?”

Junmyeon tilted his head, tossing wet hair back as he scoffed at the simplicity of the question. Beside him, arguably the biggest Whitney-fan was equally as taken aback by the obviousness of the query. They would answer together, both doggedly passionate about their answer.

“It’s obviously *I Have Nothing* from The Bodyguard--”

“Hands down. *I Have Nothing* is an unmatchable ballad--”

Instantly, the pair glanced at each other, wide-eyed, partially horrified -- partially impressed.

“No joke, I got chills.” Taeyeon mouthed, as Junmyeon quickly responded with a scowl, shoving the last of the waterproof boxes in her direction.

“Can you shut the fuck up and work please?”

She received it silently, genuinely taken aback, as she shared a look with Minseok whose hand had covered his lips to conceal a grin.

Clearly, the game had been won so the pair dropped it. For now.

“Gotcha bunny.” Taeyeon’s eyes then regarded her electronic watch to check the time. She instantly frowned. “Where’s Barbie?” she asked then, “He’s supposed to be here by now.”

This clearly concerned Junmyeon but he quickly shook the expression off, recalling what he had promised Chanyeol earlier in the day. After guiding Jongdae into the van, the sniper then moved into the driver’s seat with Minseok hopping off the back to occupy the passenger seat.

“He’s probably decided to go in with Kyungsoo.” He called out, keen not to distress the team -- and himself, “So I guess we’ll meet him in there.”
All the buyers were offered seating in the amphitheatre; but the real buyers were offered the private theatre boxes. Kyungsoo was led to his own booth by an armed man who then decided to stand right by him as he occupied the comfortable velvet chair. Judging by the illuminated stage, and the telephone which was propped on a table beside him alongside a small bedside clock, pen, paper and a glass and bottle of wine -- the auction was going to follow the lines of calling in bids to a specific hotline. This tended to be the preferred way during dynasty auctions as it ensured buyer privacy and efficiency -- especially for the larger transactions.

Dark eyes registering the clock on the table -- 10:25 -- Kyungsoo blinked at the recognition that the white telephone beside it was ringing.

He answered it under the scrutiny of the armed man beside him.

“Kyungsoo.”

Hajoon’s voice was still and confident. It was funny how even through phone calls, it was easy to tell when a person was smiling.

Across the stage, there was movement. The auctioneer was waving his hands -- controlling the lights -- as paper was taken across to the stage, no doubt containing the full list of inventory, "Here we are. You. Me. The Ocean Diamond. I remembered it when I first got the contract for this job. How you used to scold Heon Woo. Why didn’t you get it, huh? Idiot? It’s not like it’s the Ocean Diamond or something? So of course I had to take it-- which meant I had to take you."

Laughter. And then it faded: cold and crisp, and the tone that followed was laden with bitterness,

"Do you remember that? You must remember. All of this is for you, Kyungsoo. All of this... I made this all happen for you... sure, it started out as a client contract but hell! I could’ve stopped the state visit with an assassination. But by doing it my way, it suddenly means so much more to us, doesn’t it?"

The lights on the stage dimmed black and flashed white.

Cold tears splashed onto the dark sheen of Kyungsoo’s trousers as the voice in the phone murmured,

"I gave you the best seat in the house, Kyungsoo. Because you are my star buyer. You are going to buy every damn thing in this auction. Every fucking piece that they bring up on that stage. You are going to give me territory. You are going to give me property. And then you’ll bleed money for me until there is absolutely nothing left. You want the Diamond? Have it. I can even have the proof of purchase laminated to give to the cops when they come for you in the week."

The man in burgundy exhaled shakily.

“And if I refuse?”

Silence. And then a cold laugh. “Each time you refuse, Kyungsoo- I am going to snap a little part of the little fucktoy you love so much. I have him here and I have to give it to you. My god you picked a bloody fighter. And I’m sure he’ll be able to take it for a long time. But can you, Kyungsoo? Can you take it?”

Kyungsoo gasped loudly, his quiet sobs muted by the artificial noise of the auctioneer testing the sounds.
“Let me speak to him, Hajoon. Let me speak to him. Please.” He murmured frantically.

There was movement-- the sound of a chair scratching the floor-- and then familiar grunts which developed into jittery words.

“Chanyeol?” Kyungsoo breathed, eyes fluttering shut as he listened to the deep breaths on the other side of the line.

Chanyeol’s voice was hoarse as he answered a weak and settled,

“Kyungsoo, I think I’m in trouble.”

And there, the man in the box inhaled sharply, almost choking, as he buried his face into his free hand-- shielding an expression of pain.

Of relief.

-//-

ONE HOUR AGO
-//-

After helping Kyungsoo with his cufflinks as he prepared for the auction, Chanyeol finally revealed to him how he had been tailed mercilessly in the afternoon. With that, he shared the now glaring presumption that his car had been bugged; and there was every chance that Hajoon was going to use him in the night as a key piece for the broader play.

So why not get ahead?

“If I go with it, it will make sure I’m in there too. In case anything does go wrong.” Chanyeol said, as he reclined against the ensuite bathroom door, observing Kyungsoo as he smoothed the lapel of his burgundy blazer.

“He could hurt you. Really badly.” Kyungsoo warned him, gaze hard on the other’s face, “You know he won’t have forgotten what you both went through.”

“I’ll behave.” Chanyeol shrugged, as he slid against the bedroom wall and thumped the back of his head lightly against it. “I can even send you a safeword. So you know I’m okay after they get to me-- how about trouble? Trouble. That’s an easy enough word to include in anything.”

A bemused smile crossed Kyungsoo’s face as he thoughtfully ran fingers through his hair. “Trouble. Trouble. Trouble.” The syllables would remain fresh on his lips as he turned and approached the taller man, leaning easily against his form. “If you think it can work, then I trust you.”

Chanyeol smiled tenderly, as he cupped his lover’s face between larger and warmer hands. Beneath, his chest felt staggeringly calm; a sense of instinctual confidence he knew he could fully depend on.
“I need to be there. I know it will all work out as long as I’m there.” He promised.

Kyungsoo’s heart raced as he nodded his head and placed his own hands over his—twisting their fingers together protectively.

“Then give them hell, trouble.” He lowered his voice, mimicking the other, willing himself to believe—just as the other had.

A smile would brush over Chanyeol’s lips as he took in the full sight of the man before him.

“Every name, no mercy.”


-//-

PRESENT DAY

-//-

“*Kyungsoo, I think I’m in trouble.*”

It took a moment before Kyungsoo finally composed himself to answer. “I’m coming for you. Please just hang on.”

Noise entered the line again. In the distance, he heard Chanyeol’s soft cries of protest being muffled.

“So will you play, *Kyungsoo*?”

Hajoon returned to him, having organised the pieces into the perfect order.

Below him, the first item was already being rolled onto the stage as more figures began to occupy the other theatre boxes in anticipation.

Kyungsoo kept the phone to his ear, the angry heat on his skin comforted by the cool ceramic of the telephone.

“Okay, Hajoon-ah.” He pronounced, straightening up in his seat and casting a long glance over the stage— the lights — and the players around him, “I’ll play.”

"*Good.*"

The line died.

Moments later and the auction commenced.

-//-
+ LOOOOOOOONG. I know you guys said not to apologise for the long chapters so I won't but shdbhsb i'm so so so conscious of pacing and i hate feeling like i give you guys too much in one go bc it's stupidly overwhelming already with all the heavy content shdfbsf but i am hoping the next 2 chapters will be less dense so that's a bonus at least c:

+ suchen i cried. also i tried to write practically everyone into this chapter as a sorta goodbye? probs why it was so dense (welp)

+ in terms of the next 2 chapters, it's going to be the climax of our ridiculously long ride guys. pls hold me shdbfsbh - have any of you seen john wick? bc that's basically chapter 10, but the bargain 99p 75% discount version i'll be attempting to write lolsfosdl so i will warn ahead that there will be lots of death and people killing people and people falling over and swearing more than usual in chapter 10 as it's an amphitheatre full of mobsters and also pcy is pretty hellbent on getting revenge sfhsh -

+ that aside, we will be getting closer to the happy ending i promised!!! yes, i'll remind that that is still on the table omdjfgndfg i want this journey to end full circle too!!!

+ ok, so be well my lovely exo-ls! thank you again for choosing to take this stressful journey with me your tired and sleepy author! your kind words have been the tonic for my stretched out brain ahahahahh be welll and stay warm my lovelies! (and enjoy cafe_universe!)

+++++vine recommendations for chapter 9
basically this fic (chapter 1-3 vs 4-8 vs 9+)
crime!junmyeon i'm crying
lawyer jongin
team b attempts an internet challenge jm as the thrower, pcy as the throwee, and babie minseok as the cameraman
Chapter Summary

-- i shoot the lights out
hide 'til it's bright out
whoa, just another lonely night
**are you willing to sacrifice your life?**
-- monster, kanye west

Chapter Notes

summary: chanyeol comes to collect his pound of flesh from multiple people and we get a taste of junmyeon wick chapter 1.

**WARNING** to reflect increase in rating for safety as i really think this is 8k+ of just death: extreme violence (largely implied? I think idk), single use of homophobic/derogatory language, minor character death, gun violence, blood, injuries, implied torture.

I won’t leave a super long a/n as i normally do as this chapter is long enough! ! i will warn that it is very very busy + contains the above. Just happy 2018! Thank you as always for your kindness and for supporting this story of ours! The end is nigh and we will soon see sunrise!

Be well always guys!

-//-

PRESENT DAY

-//-

Every organisation carried an emblem: often to enforce loyalty and underline territorial power. Criminal dynasties were no exception. There were many interesting ones over the years -- some more recognisable than others. The image carried by those loyal to the Jung Dynasty was one of three boa constrictors entwined so closely that they became one, with the top blossoming into three lifeless heads with wide gaping mouths. The three creatures represented the three brothers who began the organisation; and the everlasting bond formed with their kin.

The choice of creature had always piqued Kyungsoo. Boa constrictors did not kill their prey through the fantastic choice of natural poison-- no, they **constricted** the life out of them. Boas would wrap their muscular body around their victim, squeezing mercilessly, and cutting off all access to the fundamental circulatory system before swallowing them whole.

There was no partial suffocation; no potential for survival.
Once it is caught, the boa’s prey was subjected to the cruelty of feeling every flicker of its life force drain away.

A fitting comparison when one considered how Jung Hajoon was currently bleeding Kyungsoo of his assets-- drop by drop-- a laboured and calculated process of mental torment that preceded absolute… submersion.

The ultimate promise of total emptiness for the man who did not fear Death.

There was an element of sophistication in the theatricality of it all. The auctioneer announced the item-- comprising the usual set of stolen goods that featured within similar events: firearms, art, off-shore properties, international trading secrets-- and the bids would be fed through the hotline. The auctioneer at the front would then announce the trading price, encouraging for the audience to bid higher-- up and up -- teasing the audience to give more and more, then in the final seconds, Kyungsoo would be forced to call in and his own price would be named.

His most recent squander was for a priceless (but frankly useless) piece of historical china. Kyungsoo lowered the phone, jaw clenching as he agreed to offer his control over the Western side of the North East port.

The auction closed. Nobody was none the wiser.

And it went on. Yet despite his stirring frustrations, Kyungsoo showed no obvious physical response to his circumstance, hyper-aware of the eyes which were watching him constantly. Any remnants of fear-- or pain-- had long emptied into a solid darkness which formed over his thoughts, now looming over him like a huge and heavy cloud, shielding him from the blinding anger that itched at the corner of his frozen lips.

He had to exercise patience.

After all the constrictor could squeeze him; deprive him of breath and blood. But death would only come with the full surrender of his heart-- and his heart was somewhere else.

Somewhere in this place. Safely tucked inside the fist of a man with a bloody face and calloused hands.

And there was no way they would get it whilst it was in there.

Not without a fight.

And when it came to fighting, his man would fight them all.
The time glowed a terrible red: 10:55pm.

_Gunfire._

The manic sound of flying bullets was dazedly loud against the microphone static. An instant stammer of noise arose as people rose to their feet— naturally alert to the sound of gunshots being the seasoned criminals that they were. Keen not to trigger mass panic, the flustered auctioneer reassured the audience with half-hearted calls to remain in their place and to do so calmly.

A smart tactic when one considered that ¾ of the room were druglords and traffickers who would hang him by his _Gucci_ necktie if he was found at fault.

Shooting an innocent glance at the armed guard behind him, Kyungsoo watched curiously as he spoke gruff words into his radio, privately seeking information for the source of the commotion. Expertly calm, the dark haired man waited until he heard the familiar muffle of the radio being switched off before he leapt to his feet with the cushion on his lap and _lunged_ at the taller man.

Kyungsoo’s escape would be over in moments.

It was a perfectly executed burst of momentary events. With a single knock of his fist against the other’s face, the guard would stutter back against the wallpapered wall behind him. Kyungsoo grabbed the handgun from his belt and pressed the cushion against his belly. Expressionless, he shot him twice directly through the cushion, muffling the shot into a faint _zip_ and creating an explosion of white charred feathers, as the man slumped backwards with a pained and heavy cry.

The subsequent rise of noise, generated from the heightening panic, would further mask the whimpers of the guard as he slid in defeat to the floor.

The man in burgundy took a conscious step back, wiping the mouth of the gun against his thigh as he stepped quietly out of the booth, slotting the weapon in his back pocket. After dusting off his blazer, he walked out into the long corridor, a sullen expression on his features as he was welcomed into the safe curve of the shadows.

Around him, the static of the radio communicated a single message, stunningly clear despite the sound of distant gunfire and footsteps--

_“DO NOT TOUCH DO KYUNGSOO.”_
Almost directly a floor above him, a bloodied Chanyeol was feeling a tad abandoned.

For the past forty minutes, his whole world had been confined to listening to the incoherent drones of the three ugly thugs tasked with watching over him-- one of which happened to be Guy #5 on his list. Admittedly, there had been a fair selection of beatings in between his contemplations. Five bruising kicks to the stomach; four face slaps; three slaps to the left-side of his head; two instances of minor torture play involving his hands--

And a partridge in a pear tree!

Gunfire.

The holy sound of gunshots from nearby signalled that Chanyeol’s period of one-sided suffering may have finally come to an end.

Head rolling wearily to the side, the man watched with bleary and amused eyes as his three guards discussed their following strategy in quiet panicked whispers. Deciding that they would inevitably land on another pathetic and non-effective solution, Chanyeol channelled his attention somewhere else. His gaze naturally latched onto a set of strikingly red apples on the desk encased within a clear bowl. There were at least seven inside the bowl: next to the pistol, and two revolvers, the crowbars, pile of old magazines, four crumpled coffee cups, bag of vinegar crisps, and papers--

“Why do all three of us need to be here? I’ll watch the fucking cox sucker. Go downstairs, I got this.”

Guy #5 had a filthy mouth. He would use it to deliver a leery smile in Chanyeol’s direction as his colleagues gladly acquiesced.
Considering that his mouth was taped up, there would be no giveaway that the use of the tired slur had prompted Chanyeol’s jaw to lock. No, as far as everyone was concerned-- everything was dandy and that was best for what was to come next.

Chanyeol waited until they were finally left alone, smiling again at the sound of the door clicking behind the two that departed. After a moment of silence, the taller man smiled-- and there was no doubting that he did, for the tape which covered his mouth could not hide the gleam in his eyes which also scrunched up in private unshared mirth.

His captor chuckled as he reached for his travel magazine. Humorless.

Never a patient one, Chanyeol started to hum the moment he knew the other had settled comfortably. After a few bars of Queen’s Don’t Stop Me Now, with some honourable gusto, his captor’s impatience finally reared its ugly and weak head. He groaned out loud, throwing his magazine away as he reached for the black bag which they had forced over Chanyeol’s head during his roadside kidnapping.

“Noisy again huh? You fucking asked for it!”

“Hmmmmm!” was the melodic response as Chanyeol hit a high note, his bare feet tapping against the solid floor.

“Shut up!”

Chanyeol shook his head, continuing to hum to the beat, imagining the guitars and drums -- louder -- wholeheartedly encouraging, toying, challenging, his captor to try and lay a finger on him.

His play was blindingly obvious of course. It was the first thing they taught you at Junmyeon’s armed robber school; if a hostage is playing with you, then they were probably going to try something funny.

There was no difference here. Chanyeol had a play in mind and it was a howler.

Guy #5 inched closer-- closer-- and when he was close enough for Chanyeol to smell the gin on his breath, the hostage seized his head with hard hands and smacked their heads together. Hard enough to cause an audible thwack sound. See? If he was smarter, he would’ve assessed Chanyeol’s restraints before he allowed his colleagues to leave. It was common sense-- especially considering that they had been pre-warmed that Chanyeol was not just a tall and handsome man but a tall-and-handsome-man that would thoroughly beat the living shit out of all of them if given the smallest opportunity. And did they really believe that a man who spent his formative years trying to get out of dodgy situations wouldn’t be able to flick open a pair of measly handcuffs with a thumb-sized sharp he had hidden up his shirt sleeve?

Hence, this was in many ways-- a deserved conclusion because of some rookie oversight on his captors’ part.

The man’s head was whipped back by the impact. Chanyeol held onto his collar, teeth bared as he swung a large fist and hit his target once -- twice -- and then planted a lucky third on the man’s face until he was a pained heap on the floor.

Chanyeol took this opportunity to get back on his feet and snatch the tape from his lips. He exhaled loudly, wiping the unpleasant taste of the material from his mouth with the back of his hand as he stepped across and retrieved the pistol from the desk.

He was a little shaky. No news yet on whether that was because of the beatings-- or how pissed off
he’d become in the past hour.

“What did you call me?” Chanyeol managed, voice rough as he stretched his neck and glared at the man below him with pressing eyes.

The man immediately reached for his gun. Chanyeol was no rookie and immediately stomped on his fingers, earning an agonised whimper as he pressed his entire body weight against the man’s trembling wrist. The searing pressure was maintained as Chanyeol cocked the pistol and pointed downwards, right in the space between the man’s terrified eyes.

(Also known as the glabella, a fun fact he had learned from training with Junmyeon who always told him to try and aim for the glabella-- if he was feeling fidgety.)

“What did you call me?” Chanyeol managed, voice rough as he stretched his neck and glared at the man below him with pressing eyes.

The man immediately reached for his gun. Chanyeol was no rookie and immediately stomped on his fingers, earning an agonised whimper as he pressed his entire body weight against the man’s trembling wrist. The searing pressure was maintained as Chanyeol cocked the pistol and pointed downwards, right in the space between the man’s terrified eyes.

(Also known as the glabella, a fun fact he had learned from training with Junmyeon who always told him to try and aim for the glabella-- if he was feeling fidgety.)

“What did you call me?” Chanyeol managed, voice rough as he stretched his neck and glared at the man below him with pressing eyes.

The man immediately reached for his gun. Chanyeol was no rookie and immediately stomped on his fingers, earning an agonised whimper as he pressed his entire body weight against the man’s trembling wrist. The searing pressure was maintained as Chanyeol cocked the pistol and pointed downwards, right in the space between the man’s terrified eyes.

(Also known as the glabella, a fun fact he had learned from training with Junmyeon who always told him to try and aim for the glabella-- if he was feeling fidgety.)

“What did you call me?” Chanyeol managed, voice rough as he stretched his neck and glared at the man below him with pressing eyes.

The man immediately reached for his gun. Chanyeol was no rookie and immediately stomped on his fingers, earning an agonised whimper as he pressed his entire body weight against the man’s trembling wrist. The searing pressure was maintained as Chanyeol cocked the pistol and pointed downwards, right in the space between the man’s terrified eyes.

(Also known as the glabella, a fun fact he had learned from training with Junmyeon who always told him to try and aim for the glabella-- if he was feeling fidgety.)

“What did you call me?” Chanyeol managed, voice rough as he stretched his neck and glared at the man below him with pressing eyes.

The man immediately reached for his gun. Chanyeol was no rookie and immediately stomped on his fingers, earning an agonised whimper as he pressed his entire body weight against the man’s trembling wrist. The searing pressure was maintained as Chanyeol cocked the pistol and pointed downwards, right in the space between the man’s terrified eyes.

(Also known as the glabella, a fun fact he had learned from training with Junmyeon who always told him to try and aim for the glabella-- if he was feeling fidgety.)

“Please.”

So he spoke. Suspended above him, gun between them, Chanyeol searched his inner thoughts for some-- understanding of what he would commit next. But instead of mercy, or kindness, or some terrible wash of last-minute guilt, all Chanyeol’s brain recollected was Guy #5’s file. His instrumental role in the thieving of the Ocean Diamond and the recruitment of the poor blanks they had dragged into the operation. He was part of why he was here-- risking his life for his asshole-of-a-soulmate-ex-boyfriend instead of watching Netflix family movies with his niece.

He was part of all of it. So he would have to be dealt with as such.

“It’s okay, bro.” Chanyeol hummed, voice cold as he smiled, “I heard you the first time.”

And then he changed the angle of his gun and shot him right in the dick.

Tucking an apple into his pocket as he shoved one into his mouth, Chanyeol pushed the pistol and the colt into his back pocket, alongside two boxes of cartridges, as he also opted for the long metal crowbar which they had used to knock him out.

Pivoting on the spot, the man blinked at the sight of his assailant on the floor, moaning and cursing loudly as he clutched his crotch, sobbing from the pain.

Chanyeol took a large bite from the apple before crouching down and pressing it into the man’s hesitant lips. There was a bit of a struggle at the start-- somewhat telling of the man’s inexperience with taking big things into his tiny pompous mouth.

But with a nudge of patience, he took the apple in like a pro.

“Shh,” Chanyeol hummed, giving the crying man a light pat on the shoulder, as he finally accepted the fruit into his mouth.
And then, Chanyeol left through the door, twirling the large crowbar in his right hand.

Still barefoot, Chanyeol walked out onto the cold stone floor of the hallway, immediately hit by the distant sound of the chaos, as he ran long bruised fingers against the cool metal of the crowbar. It would take a minute before he remembered where he was and what he was doing-- for his actions inside the room just now had felt almost automatic.

It was like a switch had been flipped inside of him and he was glowing with the adrenaline which flooded him.

Inside, his thoughts flashed ultraviolet as he realised that he had just ticked a guy off his list. Ultraviolet because it was the colour of the screen that appeared during the games whenever he eliminated a target.

Oddly, his quest was a little like the games him and Junmyeon played: as virtual soldiers in a warzone, speeding together in a field, decimating opponents at every level. They had a list there too but Chanyeol thought the game was comparably harder compared to fighting in real life. Here, people were shot and they stayed dead; in the game The Galaxy Wars: Conflict of a Thousand Sons, the dead tended to make a habit of returning as ten-foot worm-like parasites.

There had been none of that so far.

So in hindsight, Chanyeol was doing pretty well.

> #GUY FIVE: ELIMINATED.

On the same floor, Guy #4 was stood with a colleague on high alert. They had been heatedly warned on radio to remain at their vantage points but there was an increasing sense that these were instructions that didn’t quite reflect just how disordered the situation had become. There was so much confusion around-- and it didn’t help that people weren’t answering. Vanishing, as his colleague put it.
“I heard something down there. Think he’s okay?” Guy #4 said, voice laden with anxiety.

“Uh, I can go look.” His colleague suggested.

Nodding, Guy #4 watched him leave as he persevered to create contact with someone -- useful -- on the wavelengths. Failing to acquire a solid signal, possibly due to the generous scattering of thick pillars across him, he walked quietly down the long corridor and called out for his colleague. An unsettled silence was the response.

Unnerved, he walked across deeper into the blackness and it was there that he would spy the solid figure of his colleague lying rigid on the floor.

Panicked, he lifted his gun-- but with a single harsh blow to the side of the head he quickly found himself unarmed-- reduced to panting breathlessly on all fours on the floor.

Chanyeol emerged from the side, stepping across to him, serenaded by the hideous drag of the bloody metal against the icy concrete.

“Hey.” His foot sent the man’s gun sliding behind him, as he took the metal bar and forced him to turn his face, “Remember me?”

Up close, despite the sparse lighting, there was no doubting that he had been one of the two men whom had tried to take his niece that fine afternoon.

No answer was offered. Instead, the assailant did his best to fight back. He clambered to his feet and caught Chanyeol with an accurate hook-- but the taller man hit back harder, and his height meant he was able to easily overpower the other. With a cry, Chanyeol threw him powerfully against the wall, causing the other man to fold forwards, sighing out in pain.

“You really thought you could get away with it huh?” Chanyeol hissed, retrieving the crowbar which had fallen out of his grasp as he gave the other man a particularly harsh strike around the head, triggering another pained sob-- “Kidnapping innocent little kids?”

“You’re--- robber-- do the s--ame,” was Guy #4’s Judge-Judy level masterful defence.

“Yeah,” Chanyeol agreed as he neared him, blocking his fist as he tried to hit him again, allowing the metal to fall to the floor as he retrieved his revolver from his pocket-- “But she was my kid. And nobody comes after my kid.”

He would end the altercation with a pair of brutal kicks against the stomach and a single close-range gunshot to his middle.

“Bastard,” was the pained response to Chanyeol’s efforts.

So he shot him again for good measure.
Rubbing his cheek, Chanyeol exhaled as he retrieved the crowbar by his feet, swaying slightly. If this was the game him and Junmyeon were playing, then this momentary lull would constitute the part where he would pause the game and take a long piss break.

Everything was hurting-- yet at the same time nothing was.

Pausing in the middle of the corridor, the tall man raised his hand in the dark and watched his fingers float seamlessly in the middle-- buoyed by an invisible weight. They were bruised again-- but most importantly they were still--

He could feel it -- the searing violence of his anger -- the promise of total uncontrollable chaos finding a balance with the quietness and focus needed to complete a clean job. To deliver on what he promised himself and Hyewon; and Kyungsoo.

For the first time in the night, Chanyeol was able to admit that he felt fully in his element. He felt 21 again-- except that he was equipped with more muscle, facial hair, superior firearm experience and officially a committed pseudo-father.

This was what had made young Chanyeol so heart-flutteringly wonderful as an armed robber-- and what had probably attracted him to Kyungsoo in the first place--

He was practically fearless. Even now; especially now.

And if he wanted to get this done, then he would.

The prettiest Grim Reaper to ever grace the earth aimed for the lower floors next. After marginally avoiding a few stray gunshots carelessly shot from the ground level, he managed to find his way in the dim and trudged down a set of narrow steps.

At the instant recognition that someone else was coming upstairs, Chanyeol aimed his gun-- almost stumbling back and missing a step as his attention had waned.

The face that would welcome him -- appearing every bit as surprised-- would trigger the weapon to be immediately lowered.

It was Mr. Feng in a nice pinstriped suit. The dumpling genius. Admittedly, seeing the restaurateur in anything but his familiar combination of loose grey sweats and old crumpled red apron was a little shocking and Chanyeol did have to blink twice to confirm his identity.
“It’s ugly down there.” Mr. Feng recognised him however, and smiled widely, dissipating his doubts, “Are you sure you want to go down?”

Chanyeol smiled and bowed politely before nodding. “Afraid I have no choice, sir.”

Mr. Feng grinned before passing by him slowly and adding, “I think I saw Kyungsoo at a box on the second floor.”

Chanyeol acknowledged the information with a grateful nod before his gaze acknowledged the familiar cold graze of the crowbar against the steps. He immediately turned and called out to the older man, “Oh sir, take this.” He offered him the metal pole. “Just in case.”

Mr Feng paused before he took it from his hands with a gracious nod, “Thanks. You’re a good boy.”

(Oh, the duality of man.)

“Be careful sir.” Chanyeol hummed, wishing him the best, as he then accelerated his pace and ran down the stairs.

“You.”

The next man he would encounter was no kindly old-time gangster slash pseudo-father-to-Kyungsoo.

Instead, it would be the smuggy face of Guy #3. His niece’s fellow kidnapper. Oh, what are the odds?

Their eyes met. Both would reach for their gun at the same time but at the instant surge of rage, Chanyeol reversed the instinct and decided to—well, lunge.

They fell together, rolling down the stairs. Once they landed in a pathetic heap at the bottom, Chanyeol managed to twist his legs around the man’s waist, trapping his access to his gun holster, as he wrapped large hands around the man’s neck and squeezed.

Think a ketchup bottle on its last legs.

When he started to choke—really choke—then Chanyeol decided to be a little nicer.

“I’m going to let go in five seconds. And you’re going to shout out where Hajoon is. Are you ready?”
Mouthing his countdown, Chanyeol reached zero and a half and released his grasp as promised. The man opened his lips, taking a large heave before emitting a large shriek-- which Chanyeol managed to promptly silence with a quick whack against the head.

His nose burst; blood everywhere.

“Wrong answer pal. Fuck’s sake.”

Dragging him up to his feet by the material of his collar, Chanyeol pressed the mouth of his gun against the pressure point behind the other’s neck as he guided him forwards, a steel grip around his trembling hands. The hallway across them was empty but Chanyeol knew exactly where in the floor level they were-- and how they were essentially a corner away from the exhibition hall where the items were being kept.

He had planned to pay the room a visit, still uncertain how the heist had gone.

Unfortunately, it was also a place that would certainly have enough men to outnumber him.

But he had a plan for that too. Of course. In *The Galaxy Wars: Conflict of a Thousand Sons*, Chanyeol was a level 30 sharpshooter and a level 14 fighting analyst. He knew all the moves and the cheat codes as masterfully as he knew his weekday television schedule-- after all, he hated losing to Junmyeon. Not to say of course that these games were direct parallels to real life, but when it came to thinking quick on his feet. He was no duckling.

Fishing the man’s gun out of his own holster, which happened to be a lip-smackingly beautiful new German pistol (equipped with a better range than his own), Chanyeol edged the man closer, amused by his increasing hesitation.

Suddenly, they were at the end of the corridor. One right turn and they would be facing the long stretch to the exhibition hall.

“How many at the door?”

“How many?” was the man’s quiet answer.

And then Chanyeol shoved him forwards. No warning-- and hard enough to cause a panic as he stumbled and wavered unsteadily in the middle. And as he meandered in, he was battered with gunshots from the shocked guards at the door.

Pity.

Applying use of his immaculate reaction time, Chanyeol immediately slid across to the corridor where he spied the two figures and he delivered a pair of quickies-- one fell to his knees with a clean head shot whilst the other stumbled back as he took a hit on the chest. Chanyeol bolted across, so quick, that he almost ran right into the door.

With his ears ringing, head swimming, the young man collapsed onto the floor by the door, pinned right between the two bodies. Within seconds, the door behind him opened and two more figures emerged, guns already greeting the air. Chanyeol didn’t give them a chance to recognise him. He took one pained breath and aimed at their backs as they stumbled dumbly into the middle of the empty corridor.

With two shots, both would fall.

And then a gracious silence.
Expelling a deep sigh, Chanyeol’s head hit the door with a harsh thump as he pressed a hand to his lips and sent it to the lone body right across the corridor--

“S-Sorry man.”

> #GUY THREE: ELIMINATED

(And then some.)

But there was no time to really dawdle.

Piss break over.

Rising to his feet as he tossed sweaty dark hair back, Chanyeol blew a hot breath over his nails before fishing out the guns from his back pocket and kicking the door to the hall open.

Now, as in the words of the 2001 classic-- Chanyeol was officially coming up, so it was time to get the party started.

Across the street, within a dark van in an indoor parking lot, Team B’s job had been successful. Jongdae had toyed mercilessly with the technology, providing the group the perfect cover to commit the re-robbery. Considering they had expected the worst, it had gone well-- with most of the gunfire confined to once they had already unscrewed the Ocean Diamond from its bulletproof stand (which they had to shatter with a rather heavy axe, which Junmyeon had unsurprisingly been carrying in his weapons duffel.) This meant that the hitman Junmyeon was able to take care of all the trouble with no major strategic distraction.

Jongdae, who had never liked the stress of live jobs, turned up the music in the van-- already in a celebratory mood-- as he lowered his laptop to the van floor and crawled to the end of the vehicle where he’d stashed away his early dinner. Sweet chili chicken noodles.

Mouthing along to Queen’s *I Want To Break Free*, he spooned the vegetables into his mouth in rhythm as he bopped his head to the song.

‘...I’ve fallen in love, yeah
God knows, God knows I’ve fallen in love…’
Returning to his laptop and idly regarding the cameras he had been monitoring, Jongdae found a mouthful of noodles spluttering messily out of his lips as he absorbed what he was seeing unfold before him.

He scrambled for his specs and watched-- no, **spectated** on what could only be described as a Roman colosseum-level of human barbarity and suffering. Within the small square of Jongdae’s monitor, the scene was bloody, anarchic and impossible to follow: so far, Jongdae had identified flashes of black being thrown across the room-- a figure entering and falling backwards shot by an invisible assailant -- dark blood sputters against the clean floor -- and then a familiarly tall figure backed onto the screen, yelling silently into the air, to a person he couldn’t see, and as a man came at him, he watched in horror as Chanyeol -- his sweet, dorky, occasional roleplay stripper Chanyeol-- chokeslammed a grown man onto the ground.

The van door was hauled open and a yelling Junmyeon entered. In his arms, a shaky Minseok--

“Baby, you little bitch, I can’t believe you got shot.”

“Shut up, shut up! I wouldn’t have got shot if you threw me the axe!”

“I would *never* share my axe with you--”

“Both of you-- be quiet!” Taeyeon screamed, as she pulled Minseok in with her, resting his head on her lap and smoothing gentle fingers over his quivering body-- “Shh, poor Minseok.”

Jongdae quickly came to their side, first aid box in hand. “Is he okay?” he cried out.

“He’s fine. He got hit in the vest.” Junmyeon muttered, quickly beckoning for the laptop, “Have you seen Chanyeol yet?”

“By an AK!” Minseok moaned, clutching his side, “It hurts Junmyeon-ah! It hurts!”

Junmyeon caught Jongdae’s worried glance, rolled his eyes and mouthed *drama queen*, before peering at the screen--

“Wait is this?” His lips parted, as he looked up and turned the monitor to face the rest of the party, “Is this--”

“Chanyeol is beating the hell out of everyone.” Jongdae was pale, as he dabbed Minseok’s forehead with a tissue, “How is he doing that? Why is he doing that? Someone explain how I didn’t know he was a maniac?”

Team B exchanged a lengthy three way glance.

“He’s our baby.” Taeyeon took responsibility for the story, as she pressed her lips together and murmured, “But he’s always had a few issues with his anger. And… other things.”
The following story was told with the atmospheric scene of Chanyeol continuing to beat and haul various men on the screen-- choosing to convert the innocent exhibition items into weapons of destruction. No priceless paraphernalia was spared-- not even a painting which was used to whack a particularly stout gangster in the face.

“Barbie-- Chanyeol-- was Pip’s go-to when it came to muscle. At first he was just a pet. He was an Eastie boy. He didn’t know that ¾ of the jobs he got signed up to were marked as high risk with likely fatalities. But what Pip noticed early on in Chanyeol’s career was that no matter who fell around him, he always got out fine. Why was that? He never expected him to live through the first month and yet there he was bringing home the goods every time. And then he got put into our team and we saw him in action firsthand. Chanyeol… doesn’t feel fear like normal people. He doesn’t look at a gun aimed at his forehead and consider the possibility that he’s going to get shot. For him, it’s an itch he can brush off. And this means that when it comes to jobs, he can beat the life out of people as easily as he can take a swig of water. And he liked that. He liked fighting. And he liked it most when he was sparring for a prize. Even when it’s his life.”

Taeyeon offered Minseok a drink of water before blinking softly, “Not to be that criminal, but the rest of us ask for forgiveness on Sundays you know.”

The strange image of Team B kneeling on a pew at church caused Jongdae to blink.

“We have to pray for that dumb fool because he never turns up.” Junmyeon muttered, shaking his head, “Honestly, Chanyeol could tell you any fucking sob story but the truth is this. Five years ago, he became a criminal because he was good at it. Because he found a job where it pays not to care. Because there was something about it, the constant threat and promise of a perpetual voidless end that filled an emptiness that nothing else ever could-- not until--”

Junmyeon rolled his eyes as he wiped his bloody hand on his thigh, “Not until he got with that bushy-eyebrowed twitfuck he calls a boyfriend. Suddenly, he went all soft. I remember this one time he came to me all peppy like Oh, Junmyeon! I have found something to live for!”

“How cute.” Minseok whispered.

“It was a joke.” Junmyeon echoed, recalling how blatantly he’d encouraged all that sappiness-- never knowing it would only hurt his best friend more in the breakup aftermath.

They fell into a thoughtful silence, watching with muted awe as Chanyeol scrambled for a gun which had fallen out of his grasp and shot directly into a man’s face-- who would promptly collapse on top of him.

“When Kyungsoo left, I taught him how to shoot like a man.” Junmyeon murmured, smiling slightly, “And now look at him…”

“You taught him how to sharpshoot?” Minseok groaned, “What the heck is wrong with you? I thought you were going to be responsible?”

“I love that kid. I’m not going to let anyone shoot him in the gut ever again!” Junmyeon barked back.

“He’s even barefoot.” Taeyeon murmured, shaking her head, “What the heck Barbie…”

“Gentlemen and woman, we are witnessing a legend.” Junmyeon murmured as he made a mental
tally of the body count for future bar anecdote reasons.

And there the screen flickered, and the four fell into another silence as they watched Chanyeol finally address the camera. The tall man, appearing slightly blurry on the screen, held a phone in his hand, which he waved at the camera with the red light--

Jongdae jumped into action, searching for the active signal and quickly handing the reins over to Junmyeon who texted him a message.

    from: unknown

    target in transit 1min
    pisspot last spotted ground floor
    also
    Nice work

They watched as the message was sent and subsequently acknowledged by the lone man on the screen. A reply was received after a few seconds.

    to: unknown
    nice job guys
    also
    I look sexyyyy right??? lol
    ;)

Junmyeon read it and rolled his eyes back so far that Jongdae swore he saw whites. Peering over their shoulder, Taeyeon gave Junmyeon’s head a light smack, as she reached for Jongdae’s shoulder--

“CHEN, I swear they’re not fucking. They just have a super weird and unhealthy emotional attachment to each other--”

“Shut up, Bangs.”

    from: unknown
    Sht the fck up
    get out asap dont hurt yrslef
    .
    sexy af
    8)

Chanyeol appeared to chuckle as he passed the camera a V sign before flashing a thumbs up. He then stretched his arms and the group followed him as he disappeared from their screen, entering a blind spot and reappearing seconds later on another monitor.

He paused and froze across one of the few displays which he hadn’t yet used as an accessory to cause mass bodily harm.
“He’ll be fine, so long as he doesn’t do anything dumb,” Junmyeon huffed, as they all prepared to leave-- patting the bag which held the Ocean Diamond which was now safe in their van.

“Uh,” Jongdae kept his eye on the laptop as he beckoned to Junmyeon, “You should probably have a look here…”

Junmyeon obliged and after a few seconds of mentally assessing what was to come next, the man yelled out a loud incoherent curse as he smacked his hand flat against the top of the seat--

“Don’t do it, you fuck--- don’t!” He yelled helplessly at the screen, as he watched Chanyeol take a few conscious steps forward, “Don’t you take another step, Park Chanyeol!”

The source of his aggravation happened to be the most stunning piece of clothing Chanyeol had ever seen.

The golden three-piece suit.

Enchanted by its golden-- everything-- the young man admired the unrelenting sheen of its fabric, absolutely extravagant behind the glass, the exquisite twists of its sleeve decoration and the overwhelming power of the color. It was a fashion statement and Chanyeol didn’t need to think twice.

He had to have it.

Faintly aware that this sudden impulse may be due to the considerable adrenaline his body was trying to expel-- and the few generous thwacks to the skull he’d taken-- Chanyeol shrugged the small voices of doubt off. He then took his gun and shot at the display, displaying a burst of manic delight as the glass dissolved across him. He reached across to safely pull the jacket from the display. As he returned to his, he then began to pluck away the cold shards of glass which had spattered back onto the clothing.

His ears were still ringing so he failed to notice a man enter the room until he heard a loud yell.

Chanyeol was quick to aim-- but the man across him was wearing velvet which was an immediate giveaway that he wasn’t one of Hajoon’s men.

“I’m just here for my egg,” the man said, flustered, “Please. It’s an heirloom.”

“What egg?” Chanyeol managed, frowning, unable to keep his eyes away from the man’s get up.
“Well, it’s actually an early timekeeper. The Nuremberg Egg. It’s an original Heinlein. It’s priceless.” The man pronounced, as if expecting that dictating its priceless would soften Chanyeol’s heart.

He would be left disappointed as Chanyeol shrugged in response. The words were meaningless—especially the word priceless. Everything had a price; and the egg-owner would’ve probably realised it had the auction gone as planned. But he wouldn’t be so lucky. There was a 99.9% chance that tonight’s festivities were cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances.

“Don’t care.” The tall man’s eyes lowered, chewing his cut lip as he swung the assault rifle he’d dragged from one of the displays and settled it over his shoulder, “What size are your feet?”

The man across him paled.

“Excuse me, son?”

“Your feet.” Chanyeol spat to his side, tasting blood, “What size?”

Right then, a figure entered from behind them-- and Chanyeol took care of the threat with an accurate shot. The man landed on the floor with a thud before the other even pivoted on his heel to protect himself.

Before he’d known it, the man had removed his shoes.

They were nice and comfy boat shoes. The type that old fancy men used. They were slightly big but that was perfect for the amount of running Chanyeol may have to do.

“Here’s your egg.”

Chanyeol had pocketed the item because it reminded him of his baseball. He threw it across to the other as he smoothed over his golden jacket and then pulled it over him. It was a little snug around the shoulders but the inside of the material was soft and warm, and brought an immediate heat to his cheeks as he thought of how much it reminded him hugs.

“What do you think?”

But the man with the egg was too busy throwing up on the other side of the room.

After a second, he would turn, wheezing into his hands.

“Can… I go?” he managed.

Chanyeol considered it, tucking his hands into his new jacket pockets, as he murmured, “Sure. But one more. By any chance, are you wearing Kevlar?”

He had opted not to wear a suit, aware it would arouse suspicion in his captors. But he was feeling pretty tattered-- it was time to take precaution for the latter edge of his mission.

The egg-man seemed taken aback.

To help move things along, Chanyeol deliberately placed a gentle hand on the strap of his AK.

A few seconds later and egg-man was enthusiastically stripping down-- waistcoat and all.
Back in the parking lot and Junmyeon was raging. In a matter of minutes he had already restocked his duffel with guns and cartridges (axe excluded) and had hauled the heavy bag over his shoulder. Jongdae had shaky hands on the steering wheel as Junmyeon barked at them-- harsh and loud albeit with strangely caring instructions,

“---get Baby to the doctor! Buy him all the painkillers! There’s cash in my CDs!” He stumbled out of the van, jabbing his foot against the edge as he fixed the loop in his boots.

“Junmyeon, you don’t have to go back.” Taeyeon whined as she held Minseok’s hand.

“Of course I have to. Did you see that jacket? He’s going to be a moving fucking target and a van of reinforcement has just pulled up in the underground parking lot-- if I don’t go out there, he’ll die and that little shit is not going to beat me to heaven.”

Scratching the top of his head, Junmyeon tilted his head to catch the eye of the driver through the dash mirror.

“Jongdae! Kill the lights when I leave! And-- leave now. Nothing happens until you get that diamond to Kim Jongin, okay? Sorry Minseok.” He stepped down to the concrete and then closed the van door.

Moments later and the door was reopened,

“Also Jongdae, if I survive this and I’m not indicted for murdering Chanyeol twice-over… do you want to get ramen with me one time?”

His team-mates responded with a united gasp.

In the driver’s seat, Jongdae smiled suddenly as he nodded--

“Yeah, yeah!” he blubbed, “Yeah, okay!”

“Cool.” Junmyeon nodded, expelling a loud breath as he crossed himself, “Now take care of each other and… fuck off all of you.”

The van door was slammed shut and two lucky knocks were delivered to the door.

Junmyeon then ran across the parking area, aiming to re-enter the theatre, cursing Chanyeol (and praying for his continued safety) as he did so.
But, what of Kyungsoo?

Contrary to his lover, Kyungsoo had yet to gain the opportunity to fully appreciate the various sights across the floors of the theatre. He had been confined to the pained endeavour of surviving the panic and violence which had ran rampant across the lower floors.

The smell of blood was heavy in the air. It was hard to describe it: metallic, **weighty**, and hot. Kyungsoo moved through the hall, reaching across to help those he could-- as the sound of yelling and gunfair stifled the air. From all directions: there was no sense to it. Everyone was fighting with everyone. The mayhem had turned absolutely toxic-- with most gangsters without weapons now using this closed opportunity to unfold and exact revenge on old rivals.

Undoubtedly there was every chance that they would all die here.

Kyungsoo remained calm, determined to locate Chanyeol amongst the madness. He’d had a feeling that the heist had gone well-- and now, all he wanted to do was to find Chanyeol and escape. There was no need for the rest of it. Not with this level of risk and disorder.

Conversely, Kyungsoo was also stifled with the worrying sense that his man was probably contributing to the trouble somewhere— as risk and disorder was the sort of environment he liked. It was the equivalent of a great white shark being drawn by the vaguest trail of blood.

Except this wasn’t a trail; there were pools of it everywhere.

Every predator's dream.

“Kyungsoo,” Marco was hiding behind a row of chairs and beckoned him over, “Kyungsoo. Hide with me.”

“Are you hurt?” Kyungsoo moved towards him and squatted, offering what he hoped was a comforting smile.

The older man wasn’t visibly hurt but he looked in obvious pain as he held his arms close to his chest.

“I think-- this is… set-up,” the agent murmured, patting Kyungsoo’s face lightly, “They won’t let anyone out.”

Kyungsoo nodded his head softly. “I’m trying to find a way out too. I’ll let you know okay?”

The man in burgundy rose to his feet, eyes dark as he left his friend to rest at the side. He continued to walk across the floor and passed a corridor where the fighting appeared to have stopped. It was there that he heard something **ring**. The sound was startling and in his keenness to restore quiet, he identified the source as a phone within the pocket of a rigid figure, presumably dead on the floor.

Tentative, Kyungsoo lowered himself and then-- out of habit-- glanced up in the distance. It was there that he met the soulless screen of a security camera pinned in an archway.

A flicker; a **light**.

The phone was taken. He answered, observing how the silence that followed was even more
disquieting than the shrill muscle of the ringing.

“Hello.”

The owner of the voice wouldn’t shock him.

“Let’s talk. Face-to-face this time.”

Hajoon sounded shaken. Kyungsoo smiled but it would be concealed in the sudden darkness that fell amongst the theatre.

_Gone_

All the light vanished.

It was pitch black which caused the noise level of the theatre to drop-- and then rise to an even higher flurry of panic and chaos with cries and curses immediately filling the air. Breathing deeply, Kyungsoo pressed the phone closer to his ear as he delivered a firm,

“Where?”

Above him, Chanyeol was in his golden jacket running away from a new set of gangsters. He was just running panickedly into the circular hall of the theatre when it was plunged into absolute blackness. He had paused mid-step, breathing heavily, and as he turned, he gripped tightly onto the rough material of his jacket as he resumed running, hearing the vague sounds of gunshots through the already persistent ringing in his ear.

Behind him and the laboured force of his breaths, there were at least six heavily-breathing men in pursuit.

Minutes later, and there would be five.

_Four._

Junmyeon had finally found him and flicked off his targets one-by-one, each time uttering a prayer paired with a curse for his ex-roommate who continued to be the principal source of all the headaches in his otherwise perfectly satisfying life.
But perhaps the most important element of the story was occurring across town, where a Kim Jongin with his new-perm was warmly greeting Taeyeon, the Team B representative at the designated meeting place. The place being that of a parking lot of a fast-food restaurant, as was the preference of most of the city’s brightest and baddest. They had raced there, out of their panic to provide Minseok with swift medical attention. His condition had deteriorated somewhat, indicative of an injury way beyond a simple bruising of the ribs.

“Merci beaucoup..” Jongin drawled as he received the item in the cloth.

He walked towards his Granturismo where a particularly pallid looking Mr. Diamante was leaning across the hood.

“It’s fake,” was the expert’s assessment after resting the large diamond on his palm, “Considering the amount of carats, the Ocean Diamond should at least be 3g heavier.”

“Excuse me?” Jongdae echoed, as Taeyeon’s face fell.

“It’s fake.” Mr. Diamante pronounced, as he waved lazily at Taeyeon, “It’s about as real as your extensions.”

Taeyeon gasped and lifted a fist-- only for Jongin to wave a peaceful hand between them.

“Let’s stay on topic, friends.”

“That’s not the Ocean Diamond. It’s too light.” Mr. Diamante said before murmuring a thoughtful, “They probably didn’t exhibit the real one. Now I’ve thought about it I did make them a replica when one of their original plans was to replace the origin--”

A loud whack against the head with Jongin’s briefcase would silence Mr. Diamante.

“And you mention this now? You--” Jongin clenched his fist and screamed internally, before turning to the two across him, “You need to tell them now! Now! Now!”

“I c--can’t! I have to bring Minseok to the doctor! He’s shaking!” Taeyeon yelled as Jongdae nodded, quickly reaching for his phone--

“Comms are still a goner in the theatre. I’ll have to go back.” He sighed out in defeat, resisting the urge to smack the device against the pavement.

“Do it,” Jongin clasped his hands together, composure in tatters as he reached forwards and grabbed the smaller Jongdae by the shoulders, “If you don’t go back now, there’s every chance that all of this would’ve been for nothing.”
And there, the kindly IT man Kim Jongdae was faced with a challenging dilemma.

To run away and take his pay? Or to risk his life for a project that he probably shouldn’t have agreed to in the first place?

He thought of everything and came to a simple and logical conclusion.

And then, all such sense would vanish as his eyes moved across the road and his gaze rested on a display advertising a new set of holiday special ramen flavours.

“Okay, I’m going back.”

The announcement fell like a heavy weight across the three.

Jongin exhaled shakily as he bowed in gratitude.

And Taeyeon, with her eyes brimming with tears, reached across and pulled him into a tight embrace. And all three stood there together, sharing one comforting moment as strangers-turned-friends against the shimmering neon of the winking restaurant lights.

Within seconds, rain began to fall.

The clouds were gathering again but the moon hovered high and menacing.

Rain was starting to fall—light enough to endure, its soft icy drops tangible on his eyelashes.

Kyungsoo held the phone in his hand as he exited the theatre and stepped onto the large grounds behind it, whereby a large artificial garden stood over harsh infertile land. Around him, the plastic trees towered like spectres; swaying at the absolute mercy of the wind which was slowly recovering
its might.

Across him, a figure was perched on a bench, his familiar boyish face illuminated by the wave of moonlight. He rose to his feet, revealing how his familiar features were a little more scarred now; a little more rounded; and he was taller than the last time Kyungsoo had seen him. But despite all of that, Kyungsoo found himself thinking how little he’d changed-- how so much of him remained the same despite the many years that had spanned.

The man in burgundy remained still, allowing Hajoon to approach him. He would reach for his gun just as the taller man wrapped his long arms around him.

Kyungsoo winced as his wrist was then snapped away and held firmly.

“No guns,” was whispered in his ear, “We’ll fight just like how Uncle taught us, yeah? Clean and clear.”

After a moment, Kyungsoo nodded. He felt Hajoon smile against him as they embraced.

“Do you remember that?” Hajoon held him tight, squeezing his body -- as Kyungsoo expelled a shaky breath through his nose, “Well of course you remember. You taught me everything. Your little Hajoonie.”

Tears edged the corner of Kyungsoo’s dark eyes as Hajoon softened around him, his following words delivered with more-- emotion, a sense of wonderment.

Familial.

“You practically raised me, didn’t you, Soo-ah?” And there, Hajoon’s voice broke, “Your Hajoonie. You remember me, don’t you?”

And there, a bright and visceral image flashed in Kyungsoo’s head.

The moon and the rain vanished-- and he was thrown violently into the suffocating confines of a small dark room-- his frail frame still heavy and trembling, the smell of the bloody tiles pervading his nostrils-- his thoughts-- as he stifled the need to be sick throw up all the filth which had invaded his insides.

The blood. There was so much blood… on the tiles.

He clenched his fists as he bit down on his tongue.

He was 9 years old and he was scared: of being here, of being introduced to an unfamiliar bunk, with sheets and pillows that weren’t his.

But he wasn’t allowed to cry. Good boys don’t cry.

He was a good boy.

*The blood*—
The need became too much and the power of his memories overwhelmed him. Kyungsoo threw up all over himself, mostly dry, as he bit down on his lip and cried silently— his bare stomach emptying onto his lap, the floor, and the unfamiliar bed.

Quiet followed as he forced his body into a shaky stillness.

"Hajoonie, show your new brother where to clean up."

And there, tiny warm hands came from within the unexplored darkness and unfolded Kyungsoo’s hard and trembling fists. “I’m Hajoonie,” The voice was soft and meek, as he wrapped his smaller hands around Kyungsoo’s, “Let’s go together.”

Kyungsoo did so. And together, the two small boys walked hand-in-hand down the dark corridor with the peeling wallpaper and shadowy corners— and as one trembled, the other naturally tightened his grasp. Darkness oozed from every corner of Kyungsoo’s vision, but he found it strangely comforting.

For it was probably dark at home too.

And in this strange familial darkness, came a question.

As soft as moonlight; as raindrops.

“Are you really my new brother?”

Large bright eyes peered up at him from the darkness: curious and probing.

Blinking away his tears, Kyungsoo found himself glancing down at the smaller boy and nodding.

“Yes.”

“Your Hajoonie. You remember me, don’t you?”

Tears fell from Kyungsoo’s eyes just as raindrops continued to glaze over his eyelashes. Slowly, he lifted his arms and wrapped them around the other, expression unmoving as he delivered a whispered
and achingly familiar--

“Yes.”
so you think you can love me and leave me to die?

Chapter Summary

open your eyes, look up to the skies and see,
i'm just a poor boy, i need no sympathy,
because i'm easy come, easy go,
little high, little low,

any way the wind blows doesn't really matter to me --

-- bohemian rhapsody, queen

Chapter Notes

* 
So here we are folks. We are on the cusp of the end. I will warn that this chapter is heavy in all aspects: dialogue, plot, words, action, angst, love, a tiny sprinkle of the usual... death. This is basically the culmination of all the chapters, with all the kidnapping and secrets and 90s music... just.

I am so overwhelmed. With this, we also surpass 100k words which is just stunning to me, your author, who really just started this for the giggles and now— welp. Thank you for taking this journey with me again. It’s not the end yet— but in many ways... It kinda is?

I can also honestly say that this has been my favourite chapter to write so far (Number 5 was a tough one to beat ahaha). Just because a. I know this probably marks the end of me making you guys upset with my unnecessary cliffhangers lidjfsjdfg (eep) b. Hajoon. c. just general pride that this is really it. the heist is done and we made it wow!!!!!!!! (at least in writing).

As always, be well and stay warm lovely EXO-Ls! Thank you again for being kind and giving me, and these crime boys, a lot of love. Your words are so kind and i am always so thankful! on this, bc it's the end, i've basically only solidly planned up to this point of the story so if there is anything at all you want written, hmu! hdsfbsdn always up for that chansoomaterial or suchen even idek

alright. let's go. have some tea on me; see you at sunrise!

**WARNING:** for brief implied physical childhood abuse / violence / death / general distressing scenes

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Fresh raindrops slid along Kyungsoo’s features, marking flesh, creating tracks -- journeying from his eyelashes, to his cheeks, his lips, and finally crossing his jaw. He became forcefully aware of these simple sensations, as if the periscope in which he viewed the world had collapsed inwards, dragging everything into the weight of Hajoon and their embrace.

Affectionate.

There was no other way to describe it. The way that they held each other suggested comfort -- familiarity -- even, familiality. And as what had grown starkly clear to Kyungsoo (and to many of those both invested and passively contributing to this tale), to comprehend the significance of this scene required a brief but precise revisitation of the past.

A past where all Kyungsoo had been was a delivery boy with short untamed hair -- tending for a younger brother whom he had loved more than the world.

For this however, further travel is required.

To a time that can be regarded as 3 years B.C.

(B.C. referring to Before Chanyeol; and thus the subsequent chain of events that their passionate love story would subsequently spark.)

EIGHT YEARS AGO

Posted at a grimy den in the South were three young men.

The first man stood by the only window in the room, watching the blue sky through a scuffed muggy glass frame — the youngest sat with his chest pressed up against the back of an old chair, hooded in black, fiddling with a tooth in his mouth-- whilst the last, the eldest, rested with his elbows on a wooden table, hunched forwards, puffing a cigarette and scratching the beginnings of black stubble around his mouth as he drew his card and told his story.
A stuttery story. Jung Heon Woo had a stutter. Origin: unknown. Whilst many would testify that he’d suffered from this impediment as a boy -- others blamed a particularly bad night out in which a sixteen year old Heon Woo sustained a head injury so severe that he forgot his name for a good fortnight.

(And with nobody in the family instructed to claim him, Jung Hyeonho had allowed his nephew to remain there, clueless and alone, until he found the answer within himself and took himself home.)

The elaborate tale of innocence was as follows:

“...It was 6am. I was at the bus—s stop, getting ready to get on the 84a. My bus is at 6:05. Stop D. That’s where I was. Been there since 5:55 so I’m freezing my sa— sack off. Anyway, I’m minding my own business, smoking a cigarette, probably thinking about breakfast or some shit like. I’m f— freezing, as I said, and my hand’s holding on to the bag with the stash really tight. It’s just a normal plastic bag. A blue one. Like the ones you get on the markets when you buy l—lemons? That kind. I put it in there, and I’m s—smoking, and then right across the street, I see this chick. Now you know I’m a f—focused guy. But still a guy. So I look at her and I see that she’s staring at me. Really staring at me. We stare at each other for a bit and then I decide to go over there and ask her about it. My bus wasn’t for another five minutes, why not? So I go over there, crossing the road, nice and casual, caus—ssse it’s empty and she’s smiling and laughing. I think nice smile, nice l--laugh and I smile too cause I think she’s being friendly or something and then— two huge guys come out from right behind her and they g—grab me right, one arm each and I am pissed right and I was ready to yell out—“

“Wait... hold on. Hold on.”

The youngest - Hajoon - waved his hands in the air, removing the thumb he’d been wiggling his tooth with and narrowed his eyes at his cousin.

“You’re telling me this chick had two big guys right behind her and you didn’t see nothing before they came out?”

“That’s w—what I’m saying.” Heon Woo nodded, somewhat frustrated that he had been disturbed as he hastily continued, “They grabbed me. So I d—dropped the bag and went. You would’ve done the same. I’m not an i—idiot!”

“Neither are we,” Hajoon spat, rolling his eyes, “Just admit you sold the stash to get money for yourself so we can go see Uncle.”

His cousin lowered the cards, a menacing coldness in his eyes.

“I’m not doing that.” Heon Woo said stubbornly, “F—Fuck you. And if you say I’m lying again I’ll c—cut your—“
The words dissolved into a cry of pain as Heon Woo’s head was pulled hard from behind. Tough calloused fingers rigidly curled through his hair, digging ever so slightly into the flesh of his skull as his feet scuffed the concrete floor, eyes rolling backwards.

The cigarette from his lips fell onto the floor.

Hajoon grinned, scratching the top of his head which remained tucked underneath his hood.

“See, Soo-ah agrees with me.”

“I swear I didn’t— se— sell—“ Heon Woo whined, emitting a gasp as he pulled at Kyungsoo’s arm, “I s—swear—“

Kyungsoo released him, expressionless as he moved closer to him, crushing the cigarette beneath his foot in the process. In his other hand, he held the envelope with the money and proceeded on to hit Heon Woo’s temple with it -- gentle enough not to cause pain but hard enough to be rewarded with a whimper.

“Our cuts are all there. You are short. Tell whatever bullshit story you want to Uncle but don’t waste my time anymore. I’m sick of it.”

Heon Woo grasped the envelope with a sigh, planting his face flat into the sea of cards across him.

From above, Kyungsoo smiled, placing his hands on either side of Heon Woo’s broad shoulders and laughing softly.

“Did it hurt? Don’t cry yeah. Just preparing you for what Uncle will do once he hears your sob story.”

“Fuck o—off, Kyungsoo! I am telling the truth!” Heon Woo insisted, “You r—really think I’d give up my s—stash like that?”

“Don’t cry for me Argentina,” Hajoon sang, as him and Kyungsoo serenaded their comrade together, breathy with laughter as Heon Woo continued to lament.

“It’s the truth.” Heon Woo insisted, hitting his chin against the table.

“The only truth is that you were out in a club down Robber’s Alley again.” Hajoon hummed, referring to a particularly deadly part of the South, which his cousin had some obsession with frequenting, “Told you it’s a diirthole and you still go.”

Resting his own chin on the top of the other’s head, Kyungsoo smiled, meeting Hajoon’s eyes as he rolled his own seamlessly.

“Look. I know who bought the stash off you.” Kyungsoo explained, having caught wind off it last week when he had been on outer city cartel business-- “So you can stop bullshitting me and your cousin.”

Heon Woo swiped him off defensively with a hand, grumbling - obviously defeated.

“Hajoonie, clean up before we go out.” Kyungsoo instructed, squeezing the other young man’s shoulder one final time, before adding, “Heon Woo-yah, did you have to sell it at a discount too? You know better-looking barmaids will probably give handjobs for free if you asked nice enough.”

Hajoon howled with laughter, silenced only by Heon Woo throwing the full envelope of money at
his head. The sandy coloured paper crumbled at the impact, causing an explosion of coloured notes in the air. The youngest of the group continued to grin, grasping at the notes and stuffing them playfully into his hoodie pockets.

“You’re both cleaning that up.” Kyungsoo warned, as he moved towards the window again and began to wipe the dirty glass with his hoodie sleeve.

As the moist crusts of dirt withdrew from the surface, clinging now to the fabric of his sleeve, the faintest strands of light finally entered the room.

Kyungsoo lifted his fingers, letting the rays fall selfishly onto his skin, and smiled tenderly at the sight.

After a moment, his tired gaze rose and he came to the faint recognition of how dark the rest of the room was in comparison.

Kyungsoo and Hajoon left the den and ventured out to catch the subway into the city centre.

With his head still fixated with the images of the sun -- the window -- and the lost warmth on his fingertips, Kyungsoo almost missed the frantic call from behind him after he swiped his card easily through the subway barriers.

“Soo-ah!”

Kyungsoo turned and watched as Hajoon frantically tried to get his card accepted through the subway turnstiles. It was continually rejected; his efforts taunted with a huge and terrible red ‘X’ on the screen.

Above him, a light was flickering, enlarging his panic.

Calm, Kyungsoo eyed the dying bulb before approaching the boy slowly. Their train was already at the platform. They had less than a minute before the doors closed.

“Just jump over.” Kyungsoo instructed coldly.

Hajoon was wide-eyed, grip on his card wallet tightening. In his black hoodie, fringed and big-eyed - with the flashing blood-red ‘X’ and the jittery light -- he looked almost animated.

“I thought you said—“ he began, as he assessed the height of the turnstile.

Kyungsoo shook his head, exhaling deeply as he beckoned him over.

“Fuck the local government. Just this once. Come on.”

The instruction was timely for the train guard was already panting and running down the stairs, having anticipated what would come next after spotting the two young men on the security cameras.
Panicked, Hajoon easily leapt over the silver metal bar, using his arms to slide upwards and across. He stumbled forwards, finding his balance, as Kyungsoo took his hand and they ran together down the short flight of stairs and leapt across into the first set of subway train doors.

Seconds after the train guard reached the bottom step, the doors slid shut.

As the train motioned forwards, the pair collapsed against the doors, breathless, and sweating profusely. They caught sight of each other and then burst into tired laughter.

“Happy birthday Kyungsoo. Happy birthday Kyungsoo. Happy birthday, dear Kyungsoo, Happy birthday Kyungsoo!”

Hajoon leaned forwards and lit the cigarette between Kyungsoo’s lips as him and the restaurant owner cheered. As the hesitant birthday boy, Kyungsoo watched the festivities with dull eyes, the faintest hint of a smirk on the corner of his mouth as he drew the cigarette smoke in. He exhaled with a low satisfied sigh before scuffing the cigarette dry into the dirty ashtray across him.

They were now at a booth at his new favourite dumpling place. And as per usual, Hajoon was being a little shit.

“Make a wish, Soo-ah. It’s a tradition.” Hajoon insisted, eyes fixed on the dying cigarette light.

“I wish…” hummed the older, “For you to stop singing. You’re…. kinda awful at it.”

The first generous order of dumplings was quickly given to them. Mr. Feng squeezed Kyungsoo’s shoulder comfortingly with a bright smile as he presented their drinks: a beer and soda. Kyungsoo greeted him politely, making casual small-talk, as the younger Hajoon quickly stuffed the dumplings into his mouth, two at a time. This was a free lunch and it was obvious that the other had every intention of squeezing out all the value of such a promise.

By the time his conversation with the proprietor had ended, most of the order had gone.

“I was gone one week. Did they stop feeding you?” Kyungsoo inquired, more concerned than amused by the other’s blatant hunger.

“Kinda.” Hajoon shrugged, “Nobody’s got any money spare right now so I’ve been surviving on tofu and rice cake.”

Hajoon consciously left three dumplings on the side. Kyungsoo was quick to offer them to him and the other obliged with a grunt.
Deciding that the vegetable ones needed a splash of soy, Hajoon unconsciously rolled up his sleeves to protect them from stains. From there, the bruises around his wrists were obvious. They were bluish against the shy glow of the restaurant light; and definitely new.

“Those weren’t there when I left,” Kyungsoo commented, hands balling into fists as he remained still across the stable, “Hajoonie…”

The observation fell on deaf ears. Kyungsoo’s tone grew firmer, as he dragged the plate of dumplings towards him,

“Hey. Hajoonie. Oi. Look at me.”

The younger glanced up, eyes dark. He swallowed his mouthful before speaking, wiping the corner of his mouth with his fingers.

“Look. I get it, okay? But we all go through this. You had your nose burst once or twice. This is how it is. I’m not grown proper yet. Course Uncle is gonna pick on me. I just have to take it like you all do. It’s no big deal.”

Resignation marked his words. Everyone in the den knew that Jung Hyeonho had always treated Hajoon differently. Worse than his other nephews. A private vendetta brought on by some unspoken derision towards his brother and his family.

“He’ll keep doing it.” Kyungsoo stated sternly, “If you let him he’ll keep--”

“Just drop it, Soo-ah.” Hajoon looked up at him with a sigh before pushing the empty plate across. “Let’s get another--” He waved at one of the waiters who quickly acknowledged the request, “You got to eat some too, Soo-ah. It’s your birthday.”

Finally surrendering, Kyungsoo took his chopsticks off the table as the next order was served. This time they were mixed seafood. Asking for soup and selecting a few main meal dishes to serve to his clearly famished companion, Kyungsoo thanked the server before resting his gaze on Hajoon -- who was eating as voraciously as before.

“You know what I wished for? I wished that you stop being a dumbass and go to school.” Kyungsoo announced thoughtfully, humoring him as he shifted the subject.

“What for? So I can be one of the poncies from St John’s and become a fucking accountant. No way. I’m going to carry my family name and be a legend. Heon Woo is a dumb fuck so he won’t come up to nothing. But I got a secret weapon.”

Kyungsoo lifted an eyebrow. “What?”

“You, Soo-ah.” Hajoon beamed, “Everything will stay good so long as you’re around. You’re good at this stuff. Good at everything. Nobody plays this circuit better than you. Uncle knows it. That’s why he gives you the shitty jobs.”

The elder chuckled, shaking his head, as he took a sip of his beer.

“It’s true. I got ears. I know this locker thing of yours is getting somewhere. I want in, Soo-ah. One day, you got to clue me in. I’ll do anything. Be your right hand man, you know?”

“You got to learn how to count properly first,” Kyungsoo teased as he reached across and tossed Hajoon’s hair fondly, “Plus you, you piece of shit, are a Jung. You won’t need my lockers. You got to help Uncle. Well.” The man exhaled, “Once he stops beating the shit out of you.”
There was a consciously long pause before Hajoon would respond, the familiar warmth returning to his features as he reached into his pocket and said,

“Oh— I got you a present by the way.”

Hajoon produced the purple handkerchief, unfolding it delicately with his fingers. The sight of it would cause Kyungssoo’s lips to part-- for the significance of this specific gift was beyond comprehension. The purple handkerchief was a gift only for those closest to the dynasty-- and in the past, this only meant blood. Each Jung child was gifted one at a birth. Those on the outer circles tended to prefer marking their loyalty through the usual channel of body art.

Something which hadn’t enchanted Kyungssoo yet.

“Thanks,” was all he could say, holding it tightly between his own hands as he offered Hajoon a gracious smile, “Did Uncle approve?”

“Yeah,” Hajoon nodded, “But I think he’d still want you to get the tattoo. Heon Woo’s going to get one on his ankle. I told him I’d probably get one around the collarbone. Maybe a long one here too,” He lifted his arm, running his hand down his side to his stomach, “Maybe even here.”

His index finger elegantly traced a line from his temple down to his jaw.

Kyungssoo observed his actions before laughing softly.

“Come on, you’re too young for that stuff. Why don’t you eat first?” Tenderly, he scrunched the handkerchief between his fingers once more, before murmuring, “And then after, we can get you new shoes, yeah?”

“I told you I’m not going to school.” Hajoon whined, shaking his head, “And it’s your birthday not mine.”

Kyungssoo’s gaze observed the way the boy’s wrists were shaking as he retrieved his chopsticks. He wondered how hard Hyeonho had held him; how hard it had to be to mark like that.

“I know,” he expelled a sigh, before dragging a smile onto his lips, “But this is what I want for my birthday. I want us to eat together and buy new shoes.”

“If you say so.” Hajoon gulped, “Thanks Soo-ah.”

“You’re welcome, Hajoonie.”

---

PRESENT DAY

---

Spears of electric blue flashed across the heavens but the rain didn’t intensify. It was all amplifying the sense that the storm was simmering; gathering strength, recruiting the strengthening wind and the approaching thunder.
But the effect of that would suddenly be lost on Kyungsoo-- whose grip on time and reality was weakening, as he fell deeper into the wall of his past. Even the calming and familiar sensations he’d desperately fixated on was fading away. The freshness of the rain was gone; it was burning him.

“It can end here,” whispered Kyungsoo, “Hajoonie, it can end here.”

The younger man inhaled sharply. The action was so visceral to Kyungsoo that it was almost like he had sensed the air being sucked in from the atmosphere itself. When Hajoon exhaled, Kyungsoo felt him struggle, the voice he spoke with, burdened with unshared hurt.

“I was there, Soo-ah.” Hajoon murmured, “I was there when you killed Uncle. Forget the end. Forget the end. Was that… when it began for us?”

Words. All the words were melding together and creating noise where clarity should be -- bullet, murder, death, Uncle -- Hajoon, dazed, having just entered the den, stumbled into his dorm room where he walked into a frantic Kyungsoo shoving clothes and objects sloppily into his rucksack.

‘Soo-ah,’ he spoke, eyes still on the door, heart hammering against his ribcage, ‘Did you hear--’

The words were left strangled in his throat at the sight of the blood on the silver door handle. When he turned, he saw that Kyungsoo was shaking-- crying-- and his hands were still smearing blood on the surface of the jacket he was pulling on himself.

‘No,’ the word was gasped, ‘Did you…’

‘Hajoonie,’ Kyungsoo stumbled towards the window as a knock was heard from behind the door, ‘I’m sorry-- I didn’t--’

Kyungsoo escaped through the open window. A terrified Hajoon opened the door and was faced with the question of where Kyungsoo was.

The query rang through his ears a few times before he found himself stating a distant,

‘I…. don’t know. I didn’t see him.’

“…. we did our best to be peaceful.” Hajoon continued, recalling how hard it had been -- on everyone since Hyeonho’s death -- “But then you had to k-kill Heon Woo.”

Kyungsoo began to cry, unable to help himself as he heard Hajoon stutter,

“I didn’t even s-see his body, Soo-ah,” seethed the younger, suppressing a sob, “I couldn’t understand….”
Heon Woo is gone.

Shot down.

He was alone now.

The news was delivered to Hajoon as he sat alone in the subway cart on the way home. Before he’d known it, he had missed his station and he resigned to remain on the train until its last rotation of the circuit, applying that time to manage the crushing reality of his loss. The young man, barely nineteen, rocked side-to-side against his seat, fingers curled into its harsh metal arm, as it was announced:

‘This is the last stop. Please all change.’

“He was our brother. He grew up with us. With you. He wasn’t just another middleman. He loved you. He loved Uncle. He was hurt. He came after you because he was like that and you knew that… you knew that and you still put a bullet in him like he was a fucking nobody….”

‘Hajoon. We have agreements with his people-- you can’t just--’

The harsh click of a gunshot was heard in the air as the man took a shot in the forehead and stumbled back, hitting the wall, blood and mush splattering against it. Hajoon glanced at the room of men across him, their faces stricken into silence.

His eyes flashed black with hatred.

‘Anyone else?’

The wind was lashing a little harder now, cold and relentless against the nerves on their skin.

“Because of you, I grew up Soo-ah.” Hajoon hissed directly into his ear, his fingers digging into the flesh of Kyungsoo’s back as he smiled against the raindrops, “Because of you, I understand now what it’s like to be alone. What it can make you do. You took them all and left me to fend for myself. Just like you, right? You must be proud, Soo-ah. This is what you wanted right? Me to be like you?”

“It wasn’t like that… Hajoonie… please let me explain.”

“What for?” Hajoon’s eyes grew blank as he smiled, “They’re all dead and we are alive. This is the only truth I need.”

Kyungsoo exhaled shakily, the hatred behind the words burning into his skull.

“Too much blood has been spilled,” he responded, “It needs to stop.”

Hajoon chuckled softly, as his hand slid upwards and wrapped viciously around Kyungsoo’s neck. Behind him, the bay trees swayed, concealing his acts from the moon, as dark clouds gathered
overheard,

“It will stop.” Hajoon said, almost dreamily as he flexed his fist and smiled at the look of horror which crossed Kyungsoo’s vision, “Once I say so.”

He lifted his opposing fist.

Kyungsoo’s vision went black as the moonlight disappeared.

Inside the huge Elysium amphitheatre, having finally reached the confusing confines of the ground floor, Chanyeol was disappointed to find that it was almost as impossible to navigate as the upper floors. Running into more people than he would’ve liked, the man darted into an empty corridor, and then finally, he found the room he had been looking for.

The security room.

Chanyeol pumped a fist at the sight of the glowing sign against the torchlight — a guiding element he had pulled from some dying gangster only moments before.

When Chanyeol entered, he was panting at a deathly pace, having spent an unhealthy amount of time running. Stumbling forwards, he barreled right into an unsuspecting figure in the dark.

Due to the lack of light, there was a fair bit of screaming, limbs entangling, as the torch was dropped, causing a projection of confusing shadows against the wall as fists met knee, and face met chest, and hair met mouth — and when the torch finally stilled, Chanyeol found himself towering over a man against a desk, pinning their figures together against the surface. His manic gaze landed on the other’s face, a little awkward as he murmured,

“You’re familiar.”

And around the same time it would register in his brain that the man across him was Guy #2 on his hitlist— the aforementioned guy would drop a mind-bending bombshell,

“No kidding,” And then the stranger smiled, a sparkly handsome smile, even in the dark, “We’ve
As had previously been covered, the past five years for Chanyeol had been a string of one-night stands, barring from the handsome hitman with the unhealthy political idealisms about dictatorships. Large as the city may seem, it was actually a rather small one, especially when one considered those working the criminal circles which frequently overlapped with jobs being thrown from all over the place.

Guy #2 happened to be an international consultant of sorts -- recruited into Hajoon’s close ranks at the start of the job by the foreign buyers whom had paid for the political ruse to impede the state union.

It was during one of his first nights in the city, perhaps the very first, that Guy #2 found himself at a museum, having inadvertently signed onto the event through an accidental click on a Facebook link.

There, his beautiful eyes and plush lips would catch the eye of a tall young man whom had been dragged into the ridiculous Night at the Museum: Valentines Eve experience by his best friend — whom at the time had expressed his interest in the event after his hatred of the tourists which flooded its walls in the daytime, thus preventing him from fully indulging in the cultural enlightenment.

The one-time lovers would bump into each other by accident at the registration section. What followed were a few complementary glasses of wine, semi-lustful bonding over the state of the baseball season, and the promise of a half-hour free-for-all tour around the museum preceding bedtime by the 7m high dinosaur—

Yes.

Guy #2 was indeed the guy whom Chanyeol had fucked in a museum.

“I blew you in the Reptilian fossils gallery, remember?”

“Shit.” Chanyeol flushed; cheeks sweaty and pink, “That was you?”

“I cut my hair.” The man’s voice was familiar -- sexy -- hence why it was pretty much the only thing Chanyeol could remember, “It’s a shame you don’t remember me, mate. I can’t even go to that museum that much anymore. I feel like the Triceratops skull looks at me funny.”

Admittedly, that poor little skull had been treated to a little more than the reptilian fossils that night. Chanyeol swallowed thickly.

“Nah, man. I remember you.” He nodded, as he exhaled with a laugh, “It’s just a bit awkward, that’s
Chanyeol was still holding onto his gun. Guy #2 laughed at the sight. “Yeah, I was kinda surprised to see you too. Except not really. I figured you were too hot to just be a security guy.”

“Oh, I am.” Chanyeol affirmed, “But it’s… on hold right now.”

“Understandable.”

“I totally believed you were a salesman though.”

“I am,” the man said, “Sorta. Less retail, more criminal intel.”

Up close, it was obvious that Guy #2 had perfect teeth. *Fuck.* Chanyeol couldn’t risk being nostalgic— because previous experience would dictate that that tended to lead to… well, sex. “You’re thinking about it aren’t you!” accused the man beneath him with a chuckle, before his large lips relaxed into a smirk,

“Honestly?” The man rested a soft finger on Chanyeol’s bottom lip, flicking the flesh as it traced teasingly downwards, nail lightly scraping the span of smooth flesh connecting the jaw — neck — throat, “I always thought we should’ve just skipped the *Midnight Butterfly Garden Tour* that night and fucked by the aquarium. You. Me. 200 different species of coral. 300,000 gallons of water. All that glass…”

“Fuck. That’s sexy.” Chanyeol groaned, exhaling deeply as he shook his head and flicked his forehead with his free hand.

> **Non sexy thoughts; applied: Heist. Hitmen. Hitlist. Hajoon. Turtlenecks.**

Damn. Who was he kidding? They were all innately associated with Kyungsoo which meant that they were instant turn-ons. At this point, so late in the game, Chanyeol knew he had to do his best and keep his shit together. Unfortunately his slight (read: *moderate*) concussion was only making him more imaginative. It had to be said that having sex by an aquarium had suddenly climbed up his list of sexual-fantasies a lot.

Second, only to perhaps— getting it on during a stressful heist.

“Fuck.” Chanyeol swore.

His head spun as hands playfully tugged against the pockets of his jacket, seizing him closer.

“*Let’s.*”

Nope— he was not going to do this.

“I really *can’t*....”

“You said that at the museum too.”

“*Fuck.*”
Fortunately for Chanyeol, salvation from another potentially regretful sexual encounter finally came at the sudden sound of movement behind the security room door.

Startled, he immediately fell forwards, gun pressing against the man’s side as he squeezed their bodies closer, planting his free hand across the other’s mouth.

“God,” Chanyeol whispered, as the man beneath him wrapped his legs around his waist for comfort - “Now this is really ringing bells.”

The door opened and a loud, familiar, and frankly scandalised voice would breach the dark,

“What the hell is going on here?”

“Junmyeon?” Chanyeol turned, as the other lifted his own torch and shone it against his eyes.

“Yeah.” Junmyeon answered gruffly, before shining a light on the figure wrapped around his best friend's form, “Who the fuck is that.”

“Guy 2.” Chanyeol blurted out, eyes scrunched painfully before adding, “Hajoon’s man.”

Junmyeon frowned.

“So why the hell are you humping him?”

“I’m not!” Chanyeol cried out, as he immediately yanked the other’s legs away.

He turned back and met the face of the smaller man across him. “Look,” began Chanyeol, “I’m genuinely sorry.”

And then he hit him -- in the face -- hard enough that he passed out immediately, his head hitting the back of the desk, body flopping lifelessly with him.

Chanyeol practically ran into Junmyeon’s arms. Thrilled— and a tad relieved with the timing.

“Don’t hug me with that on,” he spat, gesturing towards the golden jacket, “What part of don’t do
anything dumb didn’t you get from my brief? From the text I sent you before we got started? From
the phone call we have every single fucking day?”

“I’m sorry.” Chanyeol murmured, sighing as he retrieved his own torch from the floor, “I got caught
up. I hit so many guys, man. I was on a high. Plus it looks so good on me——“

“Yeah, okay it does. And the exhibition hall beatup was pretty cool.” Junmyeon sighed, clapping
him hard on the back before gesturing to the door, “Now let’s go. We got the diamond. We can
leave.”

“Wait.” Chanyeol looked around the floor, shining the bright light against the mess he had walked
into-- there were papers everywhere. Clearly, his ex-sex partner had been in a rush to gather and
possibly get-rid-of a lot of the stuff now swimming around them. “Jongin said to try and get evidence
if we could. We should take this stuff with us. In case there’s anything that might help Kyungsoo.”

Junmyeon paused and cast the doorway a cursory glance before nodding. “Alright. Quick.”

He emptied out his duffel, spilling the handguns onto the floor, as they began to grab whatever they
could and gathered them into piles inside the bag. Clamping the torch between his lips, Chanyeol
lowered himself to the floor, directing his search to the corner where he was certain the man had
been running to before he came in. He grabbed the bag which Guy #2 had abandoned and reached
forwards to rummage through the contents. There was plenty of paper -- a gun -- more paper -- a box
--

Curious, he pulled the torch from his mouth and beamed the light inside as his fingers reached for the
box --

Bang!

“Fuck!”

Bang!

Ringing filled Chanyeol’s ears as he opened his eyes and found himself face down on the carpet. In
seconds, his bearings had vanished. His own insignificant claim on the earth’s gravitational axis
fucked -- leaving him spinning, confused and dazed, into an incoherent dark. A vague light in the
distance was blurring in and out of focus.

He blinked a few times before he gasped for breath; and it was there that the weight finally forced
down onto him, crashing hard on his chest, as a sensation of unspeakable heat tore through his upper
limbs.
An agonised cry slipped from his lips as his body was turned over by a huge shadow looming over
him, extinguishing the light.

God?

“No,” Junmyeon was screaming, “Chanyeol! Fuck! Are you dead? Can you hear me?”

“God.” was all Chanyeol could manage as he managed a few more breaths.

“....fucking guy, shot you. Shit. Shit!” Junmyeon’s panic was so palpable that it was enough to shake
Chanyeol back into some sensibilities.

The crippling pressure on his upper chest and shoulder momentarily eclipsed by his need to comfort
his distressed best friend.

“I’m okay.”

“You better be! I’m not g--going through this a--again with you…”

Junmyeon would shortly discover that despite all of his protests, the combination of the Kevlar and
Chanyeol’s priceless golden suit (enriched with one of the strongest polymer fibres known to man)
was enough to absorb and disperse most of the impact of the carelessly shot revolver bullet,
minimising the possibility of fatal organ damage.

“You really are one lucky fucker,” whispered Junmyeon, teary, as he kissed Chanyeol’s head,
hugging him close to his chest, as they sat there together in the dark corner of the room. All sense of
urgency had dissipated now, lost in the ebbing scent of gunfire. The hitman released a breath as he
muttered, “Fuck, that scared me so much…”

Chanyeol laughed as he raised a shaky hand and patted his friend’s head lightly.

“Did you… kill… guy?” he asked.

“Course I did.”

Chanyeol expelled a breath, in terrible pain as he sat back up, blinking warily--

“Good.”

> #GUY TWO:
Heavily breathing, sweaty -- one in shock, whilst the other in shock -- was how the pair of men in balaclavas would find them.

With shiny silver handguns held in the open darkness, the two figures entered the room, illuminated by the torches they held in each hand. They started to yell the instant they realised they weren’t alone. There was an explosion of jumbled noise as Junmyeon lifted his own gun and torch and began to holler back. A flustered exchange followed, which was comical to imagine, considering the quality of their vision was confined to the scope of their torchlight -- and due to the vivacity of the light, and the depth of the darkness, it resulted in neither party seeing very much of each other.

“Who the fuck are you two!” cried one.

“We’re just here for the auction!” Junmyeon yelled, his embrace on his fallen comrade tightening.

“Who do you work for?” the other barked.

“L--Lockerman!” Junmyeon returned, equally as spiteful, “Don’t k--kill us! He’ll fuck you up!”

If Chanyeol had been more conscious, he was certain to have laughed-- but he was in terrible pain and the best he could do was nod in agreement.

This revelation appeared to strike the pair across them who paused at the mention of the Lockerman and glanced at each other.

“Prove it!” one accused.

“What the-- I don’t exactly have a membership card to hand, do I?” Junmyeon grunted. He then gestured to the man spinning in and out of consciousness beside him, “See this guy? If he dies, The Lockerman will kill you and...probably all your family. He’ll do it! He’s done it before!”

Eventually, the shouting and the toing-and-froing of questioning finally attracted the attention of someone capable of helping them. Almost on cue, the lights in the theatre switched back online, causing instant groans of discomfort as the room of men shielded their eyes. Junmyeon and Chanyeol
then gazed across at the door as an elderly man appeared from behind the two men in balaclavas -- now a lot less threatening against the scrutiny of the bright theatre lights.

“Ah-- there you are,” Mr. Feng greeted, his eyes as bright and friendly, as he quickly waved at the two balaclava-wearing men to step away, “We are evacuating now. Time to leave you two.”

After signalling to Junmyeon that all was well, Chanyeol was helped up to his feet albeit shakily. The pain was wearing off a little now, with the impact on his limbs -- particularly his shoulder -- finding some balance with, well, the rest of the pain he was feeling. He wasn’t in a good shape but it had to be said that he was probably handling it better than most would in his situation.

“Did you s--see Kyungsoo, sir?” queried Chanyeol as Junmyeon took the bags they had collected into his other hand.

Mr. Feng shook his head. “I didn’t. And we have searched all of the indoors now.”

“I didn’t either,” Junmyeon added quickly, turning to Chanyeol who was looking more concerned than agonised, “But we need to get you somewhere safe, man.’’

As they stepped to the door, the heavy and thick smell of gasoline was overwhelming. “Be careful, it will be a little slippy,” Mr. Feng added as a bizarre group of men swept by, whistling, as they doused the corridor floor and all its contents with the liquid.

In the haze of his vision, Chanyeol caught the words: *cleaning services* on their navy workmen’s uniform.

“We must go,” repeated Mr. Feng, shooing them ahead, “Come.”

“But Kyungsoo,” Chanyeol repeated, shaking his head, “I can’t leave him. I can’t leave until I know where he is. He can’t just disappear…”

And that was when it hit him: *Indoors*. The recognition of it almost as breathtaking as a literal shot to the chest.

An unexplained surge of strength filled his body, as he asked,

“There’s a garden outside, right?”

Mr. Feng nodded.

“I’ll go there. Junmyeon take the stuff, put it somewhere safe, make sure he’s not in there -- and I’ll meet you out back. It will take two minutes to search the gardens… please…”

Chanyeol put on the bravest face he could.

“Fine.” Junmyeon resigned, “But you have to take off the jacket. And you have to wait for me, okay?”

The pair smiled at each other, just as they heard the opening lament of the storm -- with the combined sound of the wind and rain growing loud, almost *shrieking*, as it slammed its forceful hands against the walls of the theatre.
Rain fell heavily from the sky, obscuring the path which Kyungsoo was desperately running on. They had fought each other, clean and clear as Hajoon wanted. But after suffering a particularly harsh blow against the chest, Kyungsoo finally had enough. He could not lift his fist -- he couldn’t take another hit. It wasn’t even the blood, it wasn’t the pain -- it was him. He couldn’t bear it anymore. He wanted it to end.

Behind him, Hajoon’s voice was drifting with the icy wind. The words were being yelled forcefully but against the louder cry of the storm, it sounded faint and dreamlike.

“Soo-ah! I did exactly what you did. So tell me, what makes you think you deserve better than us? Why do you deserve to live and not Uncle? Not Heon Woo? Not the ones you slaughtered? Why do you get to run and the rest of them have to stay buried?”

Kyungsoo’s legs tangled beneath him, slipping easily on the mud. He landed with a thud -- jaw first into the wet and dirty grass. Cold mud splashed against his eyes as his fingers dug into the sharp grass blades. His lips parted for breath-- filling his mouth with the bitter and rough taste of dirt.

Hajoon approached him from behind and rolled him over with a hard kick to his side.

Expressing a restrained cry of pain, Kyungsoo opened his eyes and faced the unrelenting dark of the heavens as raindrops battered his face. Hajoon’s eyes flashed grimly as he lowered himself, leaning across to brush his hand tenderly against Kyungsoo’s cheek-- who responded by straining to keep his eyes open.

“You are living through the answer, aren’t you? I know. I see it. I feel it. You remember all of it and it plays out second-by-second in your head. The family you left to die. The Uncle you murdered. The brother you shot. You hear them too, don’t you? The ghosts. When you turn your head, you feel them watching you. This is hell, Kyungsoo. There is no hellfire. There is no repentance. It is all here. Your damnation is in the voices you hear that don’t belong. The shadows you see in the dark. The blood on your hands that never washes off. This is your punishment. This is your hell and you will…. never be able to leave it.”

Warm tears flowed from Kyungsoo’s eyes.

“Just kill me,” was his murmur as he took Hajoon’s hand and pressed it harder against the flesh of his cheek.
Hajoon smiled, and for the first time, appeared sympathetic to his plight as he removed his hand from the other’s grasp and brooded closer still.

“I’m trying my best, Soo-ah.” Tears blossomed in his own eyes as he returned to plant a hand around the man’s collar, “But first, you have to surrender.”

Suddenly.

A familiar voice broke through the sound of the rainfall and the storm.

“Kyungsoo! Kyungsoo!”

Chanyeol. An oblivious Chanyeol who was stood, clutching his right arm unsteadily with a left hand that was also holding a gun. He had promised he wouldn’t wander until Junmyeon returned. But he didn’t think much on the dangers of calling out. He could practically taste the menace in the air and he was beyond the realms of being complacent.

The sensational sound of the voice would trigger a cruel coldness to grow in Hajoon’s eyes as a renewed sense of awareness appeared in the other. He tugged at Kyungsoo’s collar and smiled warmly,

“Look who it is, Soo-ah?”

As Kyungsoo’s lips parted readying to scream, to warn, Hajoon slammed down on his lips hard—earning another strangled cry of pain as he dragged the smaller man up to his feet. He moved around him, trapping his throat with his arm as he urged them forwards.

A dreadful chill ran down Kyungsoo’s neck as he suddenly felt the cool metal of a knife press snugly against his throat.

“He just won’t die, will he?” grinned Hajoon cruelly, jeering into Kyungsoo’s ear, “Well, you know what they say. If you want something done…”
The three met on the wet cobbles by the opening of the garden. Chanyeol raised his handgun steadily at the first instance of footsteps. At the sight of Kyungsoo, emerging, with a knife pressed level to his throat, a shaky breath slipped from his lips, betraying the steel of his resolve.

“Shit,” Chanyeol exhaled, meeting Hajoon’s eyes briefly before landing on Kyungsoo who was shaking his head, muffled by the grip of Hajoon’s hand, “Kyungsoo...”

His grip on the handgun tightened as his gaze returned to that of the assailant. Against the unabated sound of the rainfall, and the overwhelming dusk, very little appeared to have changed for Chanyeol and Hajoon. Here they were again, across each other, bloodied and beaten: only now, Kyungsoo was here too. And somehow, his presence fundamentally complicated the balance of things.

Life. Death. But then there was the object of Kyungsoo himself-- and for either man, it was only the fate of the latter that truly grasped his focus.

“Be good and turn the gun on yourself.” Hajoon instructed, watching the man across him with unmistakable curiosity, as he smiled, “Do it. Now.”

He purposefully removed his grip on Kyungsoo’s mouth.

“Don’t do it!” Kyungsoo yelled out madly into the space, practically sobbing, “Chanyeol-- please! Please! Hajoon-- joon -- please--p--please...”

Kyungsoo moved against him, squeezing his eyes shut as his hands frantically moved back in the delirium of his panic.

Hajoon ignored him, absolutely fixed on the actions of the taller man.

Over the course of time he had studied him: Park Chanyeol had been nothing less than remarkable whenever it came to anything associated with Kyungsoo. And now, he would bless them all, with a final display of resilience -- of unpredictability --

Of love, if one called it that.

“I wanna see you do it.” Hajoon called out, before tilting his head, as he cupped his hand hard against Kyungsoo’s mouth again, “Will you?”

A few moments passed; silence, aside from the rain.

Time passed with agonising leisure.
It was with a rain soaked sleeve that Chanyeol would oblige as he raised and planted the mouth of his silver handgun onto his left temple. His gaze never wavered from the other as he smiled a tired and beaten smile, raindrops dripping from the gun’s mouth, splashing easily onto his face.

Suddenly, time was accelerating and Kyungsoo was hit with the raw force of it; left breathless by the sight, and the reality, as he was confined to thrashing, screaming.

“Look at that Soo-ah! It’s almost beautiful, huh?” Hajoon whispered gleefully into Kyungsoo’s ear, resting his head hard against the other, forcing him to still, as Kyungsoo beat his fists against him. The sound of his desperate sobs drowned out by the violence of the storm.

“We have everything we need now.” Chanyeol managed, even managing to raise his weak right arm in surrender, “Why not just tell me what else you want and let him go? You don’t have to do this--”

“And neither do you,” Hajoon quirked his head, smiling, “But you’re here aren’t you?”

Almost speculatively, Hajoon urged the blade even closer to the curve of Kyungsoo’s throat. One swipe; a single mistaken brush; and the man he held would be bleeding out in seconds. The truth of how dangerously Kyungsoo’s life hung in the balance was even more clear now as he observed the look of alarm which concurrently flashed across Chanyeol’s face. A sense of alarm which failed to cross his features at the recognition of his own hand pointing a gun at his own head.

“Do it.” Hajoon’s voice was void of challenge or accusation-- only curiosity, as he forced Kyungsoo’s face to the sight across him, “This is what I want. I want you to do it. I want him to see you.”

He pressed his lips to Kyungsoo’s ear again. There was no resistance; he felt the strength in Kyungsoo’s form completely dissolve, as his motions were reduced to pathetic shivers.

“Look at him, Soo-ah. Watch.”

A defeated Chanyeol nodded his head once at the request; then again.

What followed was the flick of the safety lock.

Kyungsoo shook violently.
“Kyungsoo,” Chanyeol called out, as their gazes met and Kyungsoo continued to shake his head, the brunt of his terror apparent in his eyes, “I’m not scared! D--Don’t be scared! It’s o--okay!”

A stunning flash of lightning fractured the sky, breaking the clouds.

The rain fell harder.

It was there, against the brutal foreground of the rainfall, wind and lightning that the theatre behind them --

**Exploded.**

Bursts of powerful and violent flames consumed the concrete -- brick -- glass and the sheer impact of the blast sent the three hurtling across the garden.

The heat was intense.

It was radiating from the bright red center, *burning*, creating a stifling halo of smoke through the curtain of rainfall. It was the sickening smell of it that would trigger Kyungsoo awake.

He sat up from where he’d fallen onto his side and gasped at the sight of the huge violent ball of fire in the distance. Kyungsoo scampered backwards immediately, hands splashing through the mud, only for his hand to grip on something within the grass blades.

It cut him.

Running his gaze over the object, he shakily gripped the handle.

“Soo--ah...”

Hajoon fell to his knees across him. “Soo-ah.”

Against the distant blaze, his shadow was like a mirage. Perhaps a part of him had believed it so.
For without a single thought, Kyungsoo raised the blade and pushed it directly into Hajoon’s gut. He looked up at him, blank, tears flowing freely onto his cheeks, as he drove the knife in deeper, causing Hajoon to choke outwards painedly, lips still upturned into a smile. Kyungsoo’s eyes were blown wide as he watched him, both hands gripped around the handle.

His lips shaped the syllables of Kyungsoo’s name again--

And then a bullet zipped right through Hajoon’s right temple and he fell onto his side.

Dead.

The realisation of what he’d done; and what just happened followed in a series of jumbled and visceral flashes. And before he’d even realised it, Kyungsoo was screaming.

Chanyeol abandoned the gun on the grass, having taken the shot whilst on his stomach, only landing from the pair a few feet away.

He scrambled quickly to Kyungsoo’s side, splashing onto the mud on all fours as he reached for him. Kyungsoo was sobbing violently, muttering incoherent words, hands clawing at his face in hysteria, mixing dirt and blood, as he laid them, trembling, on Hajoon’s lifeless form,

“Kyungsoo,” began Chanyeol shakily, as he rose to his knees and pulled Kyungsoo’s head into his chest, wrapping his arms around him, “I’m here… I’m here. Shhh…. It’s okay…. I’m here…. Shh….. Fuck…. I’m so sorry…. I’m so sorry… I’m sorry….shh…. ”

Squeezing his eyes shut, he planted his lips onto Kyungsoo’s forehead as he rocked him backwards and forwards, through the storm, steeped in dirt, and away from the fire. He remained there, as he nosed his face into the damp locks of Kyungsoo’s hair, as his smaller body continued to shake intensely.

Eventually, Kyungsoo’s fingers moved from Hajoon’s bloodied clothes and latched onto Chanyeol’s sleeve.

Chanyeol then leaned back and held Kyungsoo’s face, which rolled forwards weakly in his grip.
Splashes of Hajoon’s blood had landed on the bridge of his nose, forehead and cheek. Chanyeol wiped all of it away quickly, before pressing his lips comfortingly to the spots he’d touched.

The other man was frozen throughout it, barely a flicker of consciousness despite his eyes being wide open.

“Kyungsoo?” He began to shake him, “Are you with me? Stay with me… come on….come on…. ”

Kyungsoo responded with touches, as his fingertips lifted and rested around Chanyeol’s larger hand.

With the glow of the fire raging in the background, Chanyeol fell silent, as he retreated again to simply holding the other, entwining their fingers together as above them, the rain finally began to ease.

Junmyeon found them minutes later. Chanyeol, gasping from pain -- and Kyungsoo, practically unconscious in Chanyeol’s embrace.

And together, the three endeavoured to complete the final stretch.

“What do you mean the diamond’s fake-- no, I didn’t see him! The fucking theatre’s exploded! Yes I mean exploded. Boom! Boom! Gone! I can’t call him-- well, I fucking hope he’s not in there! Yes, I’ll keep trying. Try harder too! Shit! Shit!”
Junmyeon was manically driving down the dimly lit highway away from the theatre, one hand on the wheel, whilst the other held onto the phone where he was conversing with a panicked Taeyeon.

Chanyeol and Kyungsoo were behind him in the passenger seats, apart on either side. As the Lockerman did his best to wipe the blood from his trembling fingertips, Chanyeol was rummaging through the duffel bags of evidence with his one good arm for any spare cartridges.

“The diamond’s fake apparently.” Junmyeon shared grimly, grunting as he wiped his eyes with tears he refused to shed, “And… Jongdae’s AWOL. Dunno if he’s roasted-- Fuck, that’s a poor joke. I didn’t mean that. . . .”

The two behind him didn’t answer. So, Junmyeon continued talking.

“How could that diamond be fake? None of us could’ve known that, you know? We used the intel that we had and did our best. We still have all that paper anyway so…. Shit. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry…”

Junmyeon, who valued a successful job over any of his outward hostilities, expressed a rare display of tenderness towards Kyungsoo as he glanced back at the other man who was still wiping his hands with the stinging antiseptic,

“Kyungsoo, I’m sorry. That’s on me.”

Kyungsoo looked up, eyes sore. “It’s okay,” he answered softly, “It’s okay.”

They managed to escape a safe distance through a few carefully chosen side-roads. But as they were driving a stolen car, they couldn’t go further into the city center where the cameras would certainly pick up on them within seconds. This meant that the half a mile distance to the meeting place would have to be accomplished by foot.

“I’ll go.” Kyungsoo took the duffel from Chanyeol, who was watching him closely, “I’ll go to Jongin. Thank you.”

“No, I can do it--” Junmyeon began.

“Please,” Kyungsoo lifted a hand, wiping damp hair away from his forehead, “Just bring Chanyeol to the hospital.”

The car stuttered to a halt and was parked across the side of the road.

Kyungsoo stumbled out, breathing heavily. On the other side, Chanyeol also emerged, clutching his aching arm.

“Chanyeol, I’ll go. It’s okay.” Kyungsoo announced, finally meeting his eyes.

Tears threatened to bloom in his eyes as he watched the man limp towards him in the dark, barely holding his balance. The car was angled on a slope which would naturally lead to Chanyeol falling clumsily onto his knees.

He moaned in pain.

“Chanyeol!” Kyungsoo called out, spluttering, as he stumbled towards him, “Stop-- please, just go with Junmyeon. Go see the doctor…”

“Kyungsoo-- wait.”
Chanyeol’s head tilted upwards then, beaten face illuminated by the muggy yellow of the car rear lights, as he placed a hand into his jacket and produced what was -- undoubtedly, *wonderfully*, a shiny diamond, nestled in smooth velvet fabric.

The biggest diamond either of them had ever seen. And it dazzled, *startling*, projecting majestic shadows as it reflected against the light.

It had been in the bag all along -- the very item which Hajoon’s man had failed to secure in the final minutes before Chanyeol had stumbled into the office. And some part of him had known this; he’d known even before he’d realised it was there.

“I wanted to hold it,” Chanyeol said wearily, unable to swerve a smile, “How many people in the world can say they’ve held something as beautiful as the Ocean Diamond, huh?”

Carefully, the armed robber then raised the jewel to the Lockerman who shakily dropped the duffel bag and adopted the item within his own hand.

Their eyes met; both in tears.

“Last bit,” was Chanyeol’s tired murmur, as his thumbs brushed against Kyungsoo’s knuckles. He then folded Kyungsoo’s fingers over the object into a protective fist.

There, Kyungsoo dropped to his knees too, as he shakily pressed his cold lips to Chanyeol’s forehead.

“Run and don’t look back.” Chanyeol whispered, “Run, Kyungsoo.”

Kyungsoo ran.
He ran with the final ounce of strength he had left: duffel bag in one hand, diamond in the other, and as he ran, consuming the distance between the darkness and the lights, his shoes snagged on the uneven concrete and he fell forwards.

The lights flickered away; imposing an instant crushing darkness; as the bag and the diamond slipped from his grasp.

When he looked up again, his head swayed and he heard only silence -- his vision now sharply reduced to the sight of his bloodied hand outstretched, the diamond glistening within tall grass blades inches from his reach, and finally, finally, the ghostly haze of the city lights in the horizon. An ensemble of images collected together in a perfect parallel line; one after another, the perfect path to his resolution, all laid out, if he wanted to take it.

Kyungsoo stared and stared until he realised that he was crying --

*Last bit.*

With a tight and laboured breath, his fingers edged ahead, gripping the diamond tightly until it scraped the skin of his palm.

“*Kyungsoo.*”

The voice cut through the mist and Kyungsoo exhaled, “Chanyeol?” he blurted out instantly, glancing up into the dark as the wall of sound hit him-- distant traffic, loud wind and the easy rustle of trees.

“Kyungsoo-yah, it’s me. It’s Jongdae.”

Having located the group through the activation of Junmyeon’s phone signal, Jongdae had darted after them — and finally pursued after Kyungsoo —following a brief interaction with the pair by the car.

“Come on, let’s walk there together, yeah?” Taking the bag, he helped the dazed man up to his feet.

“Last bit,” whispered Kyungsoo, blinking away tears, as the other nodded, wrapping an arm over him.

“Last bit.” Jongdae affirmed as the pair walked into the city together, meeting the early remnants of the fog as it began to descend on them, signalling the end of the storm.
An hour and a half passed. The city was drying up. Fallen trees and broken roof tiles littered the concrete roads.

In a familiar convenience store, the girl tasked with the overnight shift was observing the two men in bloodied clothes across her with unfeeling eyes. Suspicious of them, she flicked down the page of her magazine to glance at the array of painkillers, plasters, bandages, and *ice cream sandwiches* scattered over her countertop.

“And two of those please.” Junmyeon stated, pulling down on his cap as he waved a hand at the row of cigarette packets behind her, “Blue ones.”

She obliged and scanned all the items through at a leisurely place. The total was tallied up; the money handed over. An unimpressed expression crossed her face as she uttered a dry,

“It’s twenty two. You gave me a twenty.” Her fingers stretched out the colourful note.

“Shit. Left my cash in the van,” muttered Junmyeon, glancing at the man beside him -- whom the girl observed resembled a walking-homicide victim on the foreign programmes -- with the cops and dead bodies. CSI. That was the one. “Come on, man. Let us off this once. It’s fucking two--”

She shrugged coolly, mumbling something unhelpful.

And then, just when Junmyeon’s fists were balling, the tallest of the two produced a wallet from his back pocket and opened it, foraging through the compartments quickly.

“Ah.” He wiped his swollen eye as he took out a few notes and placed it on the counter, “Here you go.”

She placed a hand over the money. Subsequently, Chanyeol would place a hand over hers. Firm.

He met her eyes as she gulped.

“There’s a three hundred in there.”

He tipped his head towards the security camera hovering in the corner, directed towards the till. “The one in the back too.” Chanyeol added as he tapped his index finger against his cut lips, indicating a *hush*, before helping gather their things into a suspiciously large duffel.
Outside, the pair of young men sat on the damp pavement. The sky was rapidly lightening now -- dark still, but the shadows cast by the old lamplights were fading, easing with the dark clouds above them which were rapidly clearing away.

“Where did you get the cash?” Junmyeon asked, planting and lighting a cigarette between his lips.

“Dunno. Can’t remember.” Chanyeol shrugged, using his teeth to bite the plastic casing of the Hello Kitty plasters, as he began to carefully smoothe them over the tender cuts of his sore knuckles.

Junmyeon puffed out a few gasps of air before lighting another cigarette and offering it to Chanyeol who clamped it naturally between his lips. They stayed silent for a few minutes, all muscles relaxing with the familiar action, before the older of the two reached for the painkillers inside the bag and shook the box, squinting at the tiny words on the back.

“Here,” he shrugged it off, popping out a few from the foil cover, “Take these for your shoulder.”

Once again, Chanyeol obliged in silence, swallowing the pills down dry.

After, he lifted his left hand to the sky -- his skin now appearing as a haphazard canvas for Hello Kitty with plasters slopped over every cut.

“How does it look?”

Junmyeon laughed.

“I think I’ve used them all,” hummed Chanyeol as he victoriously took out another box -- Transformers-themed -- and ripped the casing. Putting them on was a little more troublesome with his right hand being handicapped due to his undiagnosed trauma injury.

“Let me do that one,” offered Junmyeon, as he ran tender fingers over his friend’s hand, laying out the plasters over every cut and bruise in a much more careful manner. “Bro,” Junmyeon retorted after finishing the last plaster in the box, “How do you still have a hand?”

Chanyeol laughed so hard that the cigarette almost fell out of his lips.

Together, they disposed of their cigarettes and ate their respective ice cream sandwiches. Junmyeon’s was melon-flavoured; Chanyeol had honey-syrup. Across them, the sky was taking on a more persuasive blue hue-- concealed only by a vague grey fog, setting a dizzying but fresh chill over their heads.

The roads were still empty but the increasing gradients of light were slowly restoring the street into a more familiar picture: a road of small-convenience stores, a burger restaurant, an apartment block...
with a laundrette and a pizza place at the bottom. It was serene, how loyal and unchanged the scenery was. The storm had passed and it was as bland and pleasing to the eye as yesterday; just a little chipped in places, a little wet.

Chanyeol licked his plastic cover clean, expressing a contented hum.

“You know? I can’t remember the last time I thought about watching a sunrise.” Junmyeon retorted, leaning back on the cool pavement with his hands, “It happens every fucking day. But I think it’s easy to forget that it doesn’t have to. It’s probably the closest thing we get to a miracle as people, but we ignore it. We ignore it because we think we’re entitled to it. We wake up everyday thinking there’s a tomorrow when there’s never any guarantee that there would be. Not really.”

The plastic was crumpled messily into a ball.

“For me. It’s comforting I think,” mused Chanyeol, “Believing the sun will come up whatever happens. Otherwise… well it’s pretty fucking scary, no?”

Lips pursing together, Chanyeol then rested his tired head on his friend’s shoulder.

“Junmyeon-ah?” he said after a minute of silence.

“Hm.”

“I think I need to go to hospital because I’m beginning to think that my shoulder is going to fall off.” Chanyeol whispered, before adding a softer, “Also I know it’s late… but I love you, bro.”

“Fuck off.” Junmyeon frowned, before his expression was betrayed as he smiled affectionately, “Come on then, let’s go to hospital.” And then he sighed, as he reached across and patted Chanyeol’s head with a hand, “and it’s fine. I love you too, man.”

The pair supported each other as they lifted to their feet. Junmyeon held the duffle in one hand as his other arm wrapped itself around Chanyeol’s waist.

They then limped together to their car, sauntering across gleaming pavements, as behind them the colours in the sky continued to blossom, withdrawing the heaviness of the night, and welcoming the calm hum of the morning.

-//-

Chapter End Notes

*
pcy and guy #2: a history #RIP
junmyeon and chanyeol (1)
junmyeon and chanyeol (2)
who gon' pray for me? take my pain for me?

Chapter Summary

-- tell me who's gon' save me from myself
when this life is all I know
tell me who's gon' save me from this hell
without you, I'm all alone --

--pray for me, the weeknd ft. kendrick lamar

Chapter Notes

*
so this is basically three chapters in one— it is incredibly long so please TT take your
time! this is a chapter focused on processing the consequences of the heist etc... and
there is a lot jd7bd there are mentions of blood/injury, heavy dialogue, non-sexy shower
scenes, bro-duets, boxerpcy... enjoy!!

*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-//-

PRESENT DAY

-//-

Conscious that turning up to a city hospital with tattered clothes that reeked of smoke, freshly
splashed with the blood of a dozen men, might constitute as a poor idea, Chanyeol decided to spend
a little time cleaning up at Junmyeon’s house before seeking medical help.

By now, the pain he was feeling was beyond incredible; he would have laughed had he not felt like
crying a little.

He managed to hold it together somehow. Alone in Junmyeon’s bathroom, shower running in the
background as he stood there — a tower of bloody flesh caged in by the white tiles.

Mist had stuck to the cabinet mirror, obscuring his face, presenting the illusion of a robust silhouette.
The man resisted wiping across it with his thumb as he rinsed the steely taste of blood out of his
mouth, probing his cheeks crudely with his fingers.

Stepping into the running water, Chanyeol shut his eyes as he settled in the embrace of the heat. He
breathed through the nourishing sensations at a slow pace, bowing his head as he allowed the water
to access the array of new bruises that decorated his body. So colourful were they, that he thought his
chest and forearms could pass off as a canvas for Hyewon’s paints. All the colours; all the veins; swirled together in vivid reds and yellows.

He opened his eyes, peering at the drain where the clear water had transformed into a lucid pink.

It bubbled and spun on the metal.

When Chanyeol lifted his head, the hot water was suddenly rain water-- and it was cold. Rain was dripping from the showerhead and the glass had blown away to reveal an endless scenic expanse. His clothes were stuck to him, fleshy and heavy, and his chest was throbbing like he had taken a bowling ball right to the middle. Across him was Kyungsoo and he wasn’t wet; he was completely dry. He was in his burgundy suit and they were so close, Chanyeol could touch him with his damp fingertips. But he didn’t.


Kyungsoo was smiling; no grimacing; now crying. He was hysterical -- but all his words were consumed by the rush of the water.

Chanyeol couldn’t hold out to him. Not when he was holding a gun to his head.

*I’m not scared. Don’t be scared, Kyungsoo.*

The weight of the gun was so light. Did they make handguns this light? It was barely touching his temple; the contact, deceptive and tender, a reaper’s kiss.

A spark of lightning. Kyungsoo screamed and reached out for him.

*Bang!*

Chanyeol stiffened, startled as he pressed a hand against the cubicle wall to steady himself.

Junmyeon was hollering against the door.

“Chanyeol! Chanyeol! You’re okay in there?”

“I’m good,” he called out, peering down at the water which now ran clear, “I’ll be out in a second.”

Expelling a deep breath, Chanyeol switched the water off and remained there for a few more minutes, dripping but clean.

The blood on his hands as faint as faded watercolour.
Hospitals: not his cup of coffee. From as far as he could remember, Chanyeol noticed within his patient-self the qualities that healthcare professionals must dread to care for. Patient-Chanyeol was dismissive, impatient, meddlesome, borderline *dickhead-*ed, and he viewed all levels of injury with an air of morbid indifference that even a cartel executioner would find him annoying.

Despite many instances of fickle wondering, he couldn’t exactly pin down how this rooted dislike for hospitals must have started. As far as Chanyeol knew, he probably slipped out of the womb, garbling curses to his obstetrician. Dig a little deeper, and he reckoned that the unnatural intrusion into his physical space probably wasn’t all that welcome; neither was the fact that he’d spent a considerable amount of his high school years being dragged, moody and beaten, to the hospital by his worried mother.

And so, he’d eventually come to associate its long hollow corridors and spotless walls with the disingenuousness of his childhood. After all, it was clear that no amount of *Disney* stickers and half-hearted advising from Dr. Good-Guy-Gong was going to stop the seniors on the hockey team from picking on him; nor would make him feel less shitty about himself. But still he found himself at the waiting room with his sniffling mother, month after month, silent and increasingly furious.

Today, he was far calmer, courtesy of the eventfulness of his night.

After being submitted to undergo a clinical assessment which consisted of rating everything as a relative 8.5 on a pain scale out of 10, Chanyeol finally found himself a signature away from freedom on an emergency room hospital bed, strapped in a supportive shoulder sling. The rest of his injuries: a pair of severe rib fractures (the rest less so), a littering of fractured knuckles, ligament tears, a bruised tibia and a rather hideous left orbital fracture -- were to be treated with the usual holy host of painkillers, rest and ice.

So, in conclusion, Chanyeol could practically leave; providing that the pimply-baby doctor across him deemed it so.

Unfortunately, Mr. Just-Graduated seemed bafflingly keen to impress. Chanyeol was willing to humor him, deciding he didn’t feel like making any more grown men cry today. It was a new day after all.

“So. You’re telling me that all of… this….” The junior doctor arched an eyebrow, as he gestured towards the sorry sight across him with a hand, before flipping his clipboard and reading out the notes, “was caused by a… *violent altercation with a neighbour that remains a bit… shitty… but largely resolved.*”

Chanyeol nodded as he mouthed along the words which he’d filled out himself on the form. “Perfect.”

“Mr. Park, your shoulder trauma is consistent with a close-range ballistic injury.” The doctor frowned, “If it’s that serious, as a medical professional, I would advise--”
This was the point where Chanyeol’s gracious offering of patience ran its course.

“Is that all signed? All my drugs?” The taller man held up the paper beside him which the strict-faced nurse had delivered earlier.

“Medication.” The doctor corrected as he nodded, “And yes.”

“Cool. I’m going to be going.” Chanyeol tapped his sling with a happy smile, “3-4 weeks you said, yeah? I’ll make sure to do just that-- and you don’t have to worry about me doc. I’ll take care of myself just fine.”

Baby Doctor appeared unconvinced but it was evident that no amount of caring and compassionate advice was going to stop him from walking straight out of the door.

Exhaling a long breath, delighted to finally escape the confines of the ward, Chanyeol walked up to Junmyeon who was half-asleep in the emergency room waiting room.

“Bro, let’s go.” He gave his feet a light tap with his own.

“All done?” Junmyeon said with a yawn, blinking at the sling carrying the man’s poorly right arm, “Don’t they have to keep you in for observation or something? You banged your head pretty bad a couple of times.”

“Eh, I can still add and subtract. I’m sure it’s all fine.”

Junmyeon snorted.

They wandered out into the sunlight together. Maintaining their synchrony, the pair lifted their gazes to regard the blue sky, their expressions immediately mixed. On one hand, they felt half-happy, for who would be unhappy at the presence of a beautiful day -- but they also felt half bitter, for it was almost as if the violent storm which had crashed through the city the previous night had been a momentary blip. Forgotten and insignificant.

“Where to now?” Junmyeon asked, as they turned to each other.

“North West.” Chanyeol affirmed, a soft smile appearing on his lips as he relaxed his free hand which had balled into a fist, “Let’s take Hyewon home.”
The sheer weight of the realisation that he was going to see his niece—and take her home only fully dawned on Chanyeol as they pulled up to Baekhyun’s home. Stepping out, with the sunlight more stunning now than ever, he found himself gripped with a sudden urgency as he pushed the car door open and stumbled across the pavement.

The door to the house opened.

Hyewon walked ahead and met him halfway with her arms held out wide. No words were exchanged. She wrapped herself tightly around his waist, wary of his sling, as she buried her face into the material of his hoodie. “Hey, kid—hey.” Chanyeol lowered himself down carefully before pressing a long kiss to her forehead, “I missed you.”

“You d--didn’t answer your phone,” Hyewon murmured, “I was worried.”

Chanyeol was beginning to feel the warmth of the sunlight on his cheeks. He shared a smile, the deep ache resting at the back of his eyes easing as he patted the top of her head.

“Sorry, kid. I got slightly caught up with stuff last night. But I’m here now and we’re going home.” He kissed her head once more, before glancing up as Baekhyun approached, holding with him all of Hyewon’s things.

“Rough night, huh?” Baekhyun said, before giving Hyewon’s shoulder a light pat, “I hope your stay was comfortable here, Hyewon.”

“It was. Thank you so much.” Hyewon returned as she regarded him, one arm remaining tucked around her uncle’s middle as she also gave Baekhyun—and his mother who stood watching from the doorway—a gracious wave.

“Thanks man.” Chanyeol smiled, extending, and shaking Baekhyun’s hand firmly, “I appreciate it. Can’t tell you how much.”

As Hyewon walked back to the car, Chanyeol circled around as Baekhyun called out to him.

“Hey Chanyeol?” Baekhyun asked, “Have you heard from Kyungsoo yet?”

The question startled the taller man. He hadn’t heard Kyungsoo’s name in a few hours. It sounded strange and misplaced, pronounced in the open like that.

“Not yet.” Chanyeol responded, “He’s probably just hiding out with his lawyer. I’m sure he’ll send out a signal soon.”

“I heard that they got the diamond back though.” Baekhyun pressed his lips together, fingers fidgeting before he rested it, entwined, behind his back, “I’m guessing that was you. So, in lieu of everyone, thanks. Thanks for… whatever it was that had to happen to restore balance.”

Balance.

It was the right word to use and Chanyeol knew it because he felt it there and then. He was on the
mend; his niece was back in his care; and they would return to their home in the suburbs together. The perilous tilt which his own axis had taken during the past week was finally steadying and soon it would secure its original position. Balanced.

They were back at the start. This was probably the last time he would meet Byun Baekhyun and that was all fine.

In fact, it was probably a relief for the both of them.

“Thank you.” Chanyeol smiled as he pulled at the car door handle, “We’ll be going. Thanks again.”

They returned home in the leafy suburbs where very little had changed. Even the upside down For Sale sign by the apartment block on the top of the road remained dumbly unfixed. It had been a month since it was whipped into the wrong position by the northern winds and still it stood — testament to the unyielding laziness of the corporate residents on their streets.

The house itself grew noticeably dusty without Chanyeol’s rigorous cleaning routine. After an unhappy assessment of the surface of the living room tabletop, and the breakfast counter, Chanyeol devoted his first hour homebound with a cloth in his free hand, tending to his beloved furniture. His companions succumbed and helped him along. Hyewon swept the wooden floors and changed the bed sheets. Junmyeon -- who hated house chores -- donated his culinary skills and made lunch.

They completed their clean-up whilst being serenaded by all-too familiar songs playing on the music channel: 90’s Happy Hour. Hyewon knew most of the hits; for Chanyeol had educated her well, as a direct result of Junmyeon having educated her uncle well.

Whilst the three jammed quite happily to Ricky Martin’s Livin’ La Vida Loca, there was no doubting the minor drop in atmosphere during the airplay of a Houston-ballad. Junmyeon’s favourite. Chanyeol’s least. The one from the film with Whitney and the hunky guard.

“Hey, you okay?” Chanyeol asked, observing the slight faraway look in Junmyeon’s eyes as the song faded.

Junmyeon nodded, one hand still gripping a soup ladle.

“Cool— because our theme song is coming up. Hey Hyewon, watch this -- Junmyeon and I can sing this word for word.”

Chanyeol stretched out to him in a feigned pining gesture, rambling with shocking muscle memory
the opening lines to Lionel Richie’s *Endless Love*. It had been one of their favourites in the van to sing as their voices went well with duets. And duets were nearly always emotive, boombox-in-the-street, love songs.

This was such a favourite of theirs that Chanyeol could clearly recall the last time they had attempted it. January. Five years ago. It was during a large-scale mid-town raid whereby their unit of two had finished first, presenting them with a good 20 minutes on their own alone in the van waiting for the others. This meant a joint karaoke session with Junmyeon’s mixtapes. Of course.

Why discuss their personal problems when they could just sing love songs (platonically) to each other?

“What the fuck out of my face.” Junmyeon frowned, puffy cheeks turning pink as he turned to the teenager, “Don’t listen to him, Hyewon. He’s a little concussed.”

“Swear jar.” Hyewon said before grinning as she watched her uncle sway his lone hand, singing passionately to the figures on the television. He looked *very* concussed actually. “But I’ll let you off if you sing too. It’s really sad watching him sing both parts on his own.”

Junmyeon groaned as he beckoned Chanyeol back.

“Fine.”

It was no secret that Kim Junmyeon liked to sing -- and Hyewon knew, being his loyal Twitter mutual -- so he was bound to surrender eventually. Admittedly, she had underestimated just how well their voices fitted; and how deeply they would delve into the song. By the latter third of the ballad, neither seemed to recall that this was an exercise intended to *amuse* for they almost seemed -- Sad.

Unbeknown to Hyewon, of course, the sentimental nature of the lyrics would reach out to the two men in their own way. For Chanyeol, the proclamation of an endless love would send his thoughts right back into the arms of his currently AWOL ex-love -- whilst for Junmyeon, the song became a hymn of devotion dedicated to his *van*. His lucky van. His favourite one. And then, maybe by association, there was a little affection spared for the young man whom may have perished with it.

The song ended with the two grown men basically hand-in-hand. Both looking a little unhappier than when they started.

“I am going to go and give you both space.” Hyewon announced, as she scooped up her rucksack into her arms, uncertain how exactly to process *that* display.

This was a feeling shared by her uncle and his best friend. But the despondency would be short-lasting. Behind them, the television had already started playing the next song -- the 90s classic Boyz II Men’s *I’ll Make Love To You*. And this one, this one was the one. In fact, Chanyeol was certain that at one point, him and Junmyeon had drunkenly pledged that this would be the song they would take to a talent show if they were ever forced into entering one.
The notion of ‘Criminals Got Talent’ didn’t quite exist -- but there were times in the year when the bars in the city threw shindigs of a similar theme. And the pissed armed robbers had convinced themselves, point-blank, that they would win anything (and score anyone) by their joined rendition of this amazing sexy hymn.

“God, I’m glad she left before this because this? I know we can sing.” Chanyeol murmured, as the two exchanged a short and meaningful glance.

“Close your eyes, make a wish and blow out the candlelight,” Junmyeon hummed along, as they naturally melted into the melody and the lyrics with as much vigour and energy as the previous song. Maybe more vigour. More energy. And a sprinkling of gratuitous passion in the form of occasionally suggestive hand gestures.

As Hyewon unfortunately discovered, after returning downstairs to get a drink. Hands squishing against her cheeks to stifle her embarrassment, she watched in half-amazement as the pair of grown men passionately dissolved into their rendition, soup ladle and remotes now pseudo-mics, hitting every note with skilled finesse.

The last word was held together; and then they laughed and faced each other for a cool and comfortable hi-five.

“Still got it, bro.”

“You fucking got that right.”

Hyewon watched them fondly, shaking her head as she took her juice, citing there and then that they were officially home.

And this was about as typical a day as she would expect from her tall Uncle and his best friend.

By the time lunch finished, Chanyeol could barely keep both eyes open. He was escorted by his niece to his bedroom which she had neatly tidied, wary of her uncle’s peeve of messy sheets. Chanyeol tried his best to remain partially-conscious, if only to responsibly deliver his niece some instructions. “Junmyeon--” Yawn, “is going to stay here the whole day… so… any… tell him… problems.” The words were mere glimpses of thoughts he was having as he landed on the bed and curled up in familiar blankets, a warm smile appearing on his lips as he nestled his head into his pillow.

He drew a satisfied breath. “Sleep tight, Uncle Chanyeollie.” Hyewon murmured as she stepped out of the room.

And then Chanyeol slept. Lights out entirely.
He was out for almost eight hours and when he woke up the sun had disappeared and his room was pitch black dark. The nap he took wasn’t the pleasant replenishing sort. Not the type where you wake up energised, hopping on both feet, ready to kick the ass out of the rest of the day. No; the rest he took was a combination of his body finally surrendering to the blind abyss after seven days of extreme stress, and ten or so hours of even greater stress. He didn’t particularly feel well-rested though. If anything, without the stress to overwhelm his brain and cushion it from the agony of his limbs, all Chanyeol felt now was a thorough aching.

Groaning from the sensations, Chanyeol smoothed a shaky hand over his chest, before he succumbed to the thirst which had woken him up in the first place. He walked across the corridor and down the stairs, rubbing his eyes.

It was halfway down when his brain finally attended to the sound of voices.

“See, Hyewonnie? This is why you have to fry the tofu first…”

“Okay, Grandma.”

Approaching the source of the sound, the kitchen, at a slightly faster pace, Chanyeol was met with the sight of his mother surveying the cooker, an array of all the pots and pans in their cupboard spread across her, bubbling and sizzling. Hyewon was obediently posted beside her, humming as she stirred -- whilst his ex-co-brother in law, Yixing, was sliding across the table, placing down plates, as Junmyeon was huddled over the worktop, presumably chopping greens.

He walked in and the busy image froze as they all looked up at him.

Against the intensity of the lights, the scene had a dream-like quality to it, leading Chanyeol to momentarily wonder if he’d died in his sleep -- and if this was some sort of calming transition that preceded his subsequent descent into hell.

“Chanyeollie.”

But the innate effect of his mother’s caring voice pulled him right back into earth. She dropped everything, wiping her fingers on her apron as she moved around the table and pulled him down to her height.

“Hi Mom.” She smelled sweet; her clothes carrying the mixture of scents from the herbs she was cooking with.

“Chanyeollie,” she repeated, as he rested his head wearily on her shoulder, “Hyewon said you weren’t well. Hmm? What’s been happening with you? It’s boxing, is it?”

“Yeah.” His chest tightened as he frowned, “Boxing.”

“Oh, you shouldn’t be fighting like that anymore.” She glanced back as she sighed, “I even asked Yixing to come, in case you needed someone to take a look at you.”

“No, I’m okay.” Chanyeol nodded, offering the older man a grateful smile.

His mother embraced him fully. Chanyeol became so overwhelmed by the sudden comfort that his eyes misted up and he allowed himself to unwind, letting her pepper him with kisses as she nestled
his cheeks between her hands and murmured things like “Come here, my poor baby” and “There’s my handsome noodle”. They were nonsensical mutters that he’d hated as a child; and would’ve equally mortified him as a fully grown twenty-six year old man, had he not been craving the love and warmth that only a mother could give.

Wiping the tears from his eyes, Chanyeol sat at the head of the table, blinking heavily as everyone took their seats and plates of fresh and steaming food was presented across him. A polite exchange of gratitude was shared as they all reached for the dishes, a natural hum of light conversation unfolding across the table. A series of harmless “how are you’s?” and “oh I heard’s” which Chanyeol found utterly invigorating in his beaten state.

And it was there, with those he loved most, that Chanyeol had the best and most delicious meal he’d had in a long time.

Naturally, still concerned with her son, his mother offered to remain at their house for a few days and watch over him and Hyewon. Chanyeol was only too willing to agree, overpowered by the pleasant sensation of a full stomach and the motherly attention. He also knew that he was in no shape to take care of Hyewon properly and he appreciated that she would be well tended to whilst he recovered.

He spent most of the next few days asleep.

During the times he wasn’t, he busied himself by flicking through the TV channels. For the first two days following the theatre debacle, the local news covered the fire with pictures of charred debris, and police tape waving in the wind, alongside confused crowds expressing their grief for the loss of the old derelict building.

**THEATRE FIRE:** Police reports cite GAS LEAK as the primary cause of fire which took over 4 hours for firefighters to manage...

Gas leak: which was the vanilla word for *cover-up* under the good criminal’s handbook.

Chanyeol wouldn’t be surprised if he searched up the articles and found the words *Dolos Inc.* associated with one of the press releases. This was the type of event he imagined her to be closely controlling— each twitch of her fingertips guiding the crests and troughs of the media attention like an orchestra conductor.

Chanyeol’s eyes drooped, the faint silhouettes of the police officers consumed by black as his eyes
And then in the distance—

*Tomorrow, there is excitement surrounding the school visits which will be followed by the official presentation of the state jewels…*

He jolted awake at the noise beside him. Hyewon was there having just arrived from school. She was staring at the screen, a curiously fond smile on her lips at the images of the jewels which were being kept locked and safe at city hall.

*Allegedly.*

“Pretty, huh?” Chanyeol said as he smiled at his niece.

“I had to write a report on it,” affirmed Hyewon as she stretched her arms and recalled the title, “*The impact of stolen artefacts on modern political unity.*”

“Yaaaaaawn.” Chanyeol teased, as he beckoned for the remote, “C’mon, go get changed and we can watch *Conflicto de amor.*”

Hyewon grinned as she walked out of the room and disappeared up the stairs.

When she returned, Chanyeol had fallen asleep. Predictably so. She switched the television off and went in search of her Grandma who was strictly examining the wall of post-its across the kitchen.

“This one says… Kyungsoo.” Mrs. Park declared, a finger landing on one of the most recent addendums to the multi-coloured wall, “Did he come by, Hyewonnie?”

Hyewon’s eyes were wide as she considered the question before nodding slowly.

“For boxing, I suppose,” her Grandmother hummed, as a smile crossed her face and she beckoned Hyewon over, “Anyway. Now come here, you must be hungry! I’ll go get your Uncle. Is he sleeping again-- *Chanyeollieeee!***

Eventually, on the fifth day, his mother had to leave on other family business -- and Chanyeol was conscious enough to reassure her that he could tend for himself and Hyewon again.
He did more than that actually. The extended period of rest he was able to accumulate through the week meant that he now was in the mindstate to be productive. He managed to order new tools to update the house security system, call up all his clients and reassure them that he wasn’t dead -- and finally have a mandatory debrief with Junmyeon who had been dying to have a conversation with him, without the danger of Mrs. Park overhearing.

They stood in the kitchen having morning coffee.

Chanyeol was idly watching the muted TV screen whilst Junmyeon fiddled with his car keys, spinning them around the kitchen worktop.

“Dunno when I can take another job again.” Junmyeon muttered, “Still can’t get the smell of smoke out of my hair. How about you? How are you holding up?”

Chanyeol rested his hand on the kitchen counter. “Kyungsoo hasn’t called.” He murmured, confident and firm, as if that had been the question posed.

“Not asking about him am I?” Junmyeon said coldly, “I’m asking about how you’re holding up. How’s the shoulder? Meds doing much?”

For a second, Chanyeol felt irritated. He had no interest in talking about himself. He was fine -- obviously. After all, all he had done the past few days was indulge shamelessly on his mother’s cooking and relax willingly to the point that he felt near-dead.

On the other hand, he couldn’t say that Kyungsoo was going through a similar round of aftercare -- which was bugging him to no end. He wanted to know that he was okay. Simple as that. And the issue had grown beyond a simple elephant in the room. It was a million elephants -- and Chanyeol felt like he was being squeezed in the middle, dangerously close to being trampled into putty.

Especially in the forced silence he was being forced to comply with.

But he couldn’t bring himself to snap at Junmyeon right now.

“I’m okay.” Chanyeol murmured, eyes lowered to the floor as he clutched his sling, “Sleeping helps I think.”

Junmyeon watched him. And then he rolled his eyes as he spoke, pinching the metal keys between his fingers until it hurt.

“Got tipped off yesterday that everyone’s AWOL right now.” He muttered, leaning back against his seat, “Most of the kingpins in the city have left the country. The rest, probably going out in the next few days. Everyone’s tetchy after the fire. All the work’s on hold. There’s shipment delays. All the clients are on amber. Maybe… that’s all there to it.”

Chanyeol scoffed as he shook his head. He had been here before. They both knew it. Dangling the tiniest piece of hope in front of his eyes wasn’t going to mask the fact that Kyungsoo had vanished, yet again, and there was no guarantee that he would see him.

At least the last time, Chanyeol got a courtesy phone call to warn him not to wait around.

“On the plus side.” Junmyeon shrugged, determined not to leave Chanyeol in a bad mood, “The bars are full with mafia kids. Daddy’s away. Kids get to play. It’s a riot. We’re planning to go get hammered tonight if you’re game.”

“Even Minseok?” Chanyeol chuckled, “Didn’t he just get his kidney stones out?”
Indeed, that was the long-awaited update on Minseok and his tragic injury from the night. It turned out that the immense stress of the shooting had triggered a bizarre physical phenomenon in which an otherwise happy kidney stone ended up romping through his lower tracts that very evening. This subsequently required a benign surgical procedure -- which only served to distress the baby-faced man further due to his low pain tolerance.

“Yeah,” Junmyeon laughed loudly, “Come on, man. It might take your mind off things. You don’t have to drink. Just come see the team. Bangs has been asking about you non-stop. Cheer you up, huh?”

“Sure, I’ll see.”

“Yeah, you should ask for permission from the boss-woman first.” Junmyeon grinned as he downed his coffee cup.

Chanyeol scoffed.

“Who? From my Mom?”

“No. Your niece, obviously.”

The thought brought a gleam to Chanyeol’s dull eyes.

“That’s true.”

“How is she?” Junmyeon tilted his head as he inspected the post-it wall, full of Hyewon’s scribbles, “Settling in with you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Chanyeol nodded as he lowered his cup to the counter, “It’s just back to normal isn’t it? She hasn’t asked about anything so…”

“Fuck. Imagine what she would say if she found out her uncle beat up an entire cartel with his bare hands, huh?”

Chanyeol considered the question as he smiled thoughtfully.

“Don’t do it again, ever. That’s what she’d say.”

“Amen to that,” Junmyeon echoed as he raised his coffee cup, accomplishing a fake toast.
The prospect of enlightening answers would finally present itself to Chanyeol at lunchtime that same day.

Alone and fidgeting with the security system he was busy plugging apart, Chanyeol heard his home phone ringing. He picked it up, clearing his throat and readying his paper voice for a client, only to be muted by an abrupt and unhappy huff from the opposing line:

“Uh, your order is ready for pick-up.”

“Excuse me?” Chanyeol thumbed through the post-it notes by the phone, eyes narrowing, “What order? Who is this?”

“An order of six seafood dumplings and Char siu bao.”

“This is a mistake. I didn’t order…”

“From Mr. Feng’s Chinatown Dumplings…”

The name felt to him like an echo; something from a daydream he’d forgotten. The shock of the event wrestled Chanyeol with so much force that he found his legs wobbling. This was not a coincidence; it couldn’t be a coincidence.

“I’ll be right there. Give me…” He was half-gasping, suddenly stricken, forgetting all that he had planned for the day -- the week --

He couldn’t drive.

Great.

“Thirty-five minutes.”

“Excuse me?”

“Okay bye!”

Chanyeol pulled on a pair of his best public-acceptable sweatpants and darted out of the house, shoving a pair of sunglasses over his eyes as he sprinted madly to the bus stop.

Unsurprisingly, the restaurant was empty. Even the elderly man who always sat at the back counting coins was missing. And he was always there. Chanyeol used to joke around with Kyungsoo that he
was a ghost that time forgot. However, it somehow made sense that there would be fewer patrons around -- if there were truly less criminals still wandering the city.

He walked to the front counter, a little manic, as he beamed at the girl behind it.

“Hi,” She wasn’t quite as happy to see him. He’d only seen her once or twice -- presuming her to be the youngest of Mr. Feng’s relatives, “I’m here to pick up my order.”

“Name.” was the unimpressed demand, eyes suspended on the set of orders across her.

“Uh. Park… Park Chanyeol.”

The hesitation on the name probably made him seem strange. She arched a brow before she pulled off a receipt from the clipboard neatly placed by the countertop. The coldness in her disposition seemed dented by something as she smiled at him. Forced -- but a smile nonetheless.

“Park Chanyeol? Your order was… well, it’s cold now. But.” Her demeanour had entirely changed by the time she beckoned for him to wait at the restaurant area, “We’ll remake it for you. Just wait, okay?”

Chanyeol offered his agreements, but not before he found himself asking a polite,

“Where’s Mr. Feng by the way?” He bit his bottom lip slightly, hiding the vaguest sign of a grin, “Away on business?”

And just like that, the coldness was back. She looked ready to throttle him.

“Yes. Business.” was the affirmation.

Plastic bag in hand, Chanyeol made the trip from Chinatown with a shakiness he couldn’t ease. The adrenaline was circulating through him at 100% efficiency and it was harmonising nicely with all the anxieties he had about his AWOL-ex. He couldn’t hope because that would be irresponsible -- but he couldn’t really deny that this was exactly the sort of thing Kyungsoo would pull.

Sat on the subway seat, the man in the empty carriage found himself smirking, then laughing. He must’ve looked half-crazed, sat there, pondering distantly on how much this was going to hurt whether he was or wasn’t there.

That was a certainty: it was going to hurt. All of it. Like a bitch.
Chanyeol walked to the garage den and paused across the large grey metal door. He lifted a fist and spoke, knocking three times as he did so.

“Hey. Kyungsoo is this you? I’m knocking to warn you that I’m about to come in. I brought your food along too. Took a while since I can’t drive right now. On the other hand, if you’re not there, well then. Fuck it. I’m talking to a door, right?”

*Please be here. Fuck.*

With a moderate struggle, he clipped the locks open and pulled it up.

The rise of the door was painfully slow.

He expected the worst; *nothing*; hence why at the first sign of shoes, the plastic bag slipped rightly from his hand.

“Hey.”

“Asshole.”

Chanyeol lurched forwards, practically crashing into the smaller man as he embraced him with his free arm, exhaling a long breath as he squeezed him tightly.

“You - *asshole!*” The greeting was yelled as Chanyeol found all his misgivings dispelling with the scent of Kyungsoo’s hair; the familiar warmth of his skin; and the texture of the fancy fabric of his camel brown jacket against his grip.

“I knew you’d come,” managed Kyungsoo, wrapping his own arms around him in greeting, “I didn’t know how else to get you here.”

“Calling me? Texting me? Snapchating me?” Chanyeol cried, aghast, “There’s a *million* ways to do this now, Kyungsoo. You have *no* excuse to go cold on me.”

“I’m sorry.”

The garage was forgotten temporarily. They could have been anywhere and this would have been the exact image. The relief that came with the premise of this indispensable reunion was too powerful.

Kyungsoo eventually leaned back and reached for Chanyeol’s sunglasses, pulling them away delicately. He was studying him -- no doubt mapping all the scratches and bumps. Fortunately, much of the facial swelling had depleted, but the bruises were still fresh.

Chanyeol soon found the tautness of his expression thawing at the sensation of Kyungsoo’s
fingertips brushing over his face. The gesture was so breathlessly considerate, ousting the need for any soothing words. “I...” His thumb brushed the corner of Chanyeol’s sore left eye, the touch as tender as a breeze, “I’m sorry, Chanyeol.”

“It’s fine,” Chanyeol allowed his hand to rest against the other’s back, comfortably toying with the jacket fabric, as he then shifted tact, “Well no-- it’s not. It hurts Kyungsoo. It hurts so bad...”

He was whining for humor. Lowkey baiting for kisses.

“Shut up.” Kyungsoo murmured, smiling warmly as he reached up and squished Chanyeol’s cheeks together, gently, as the other cringed.

Eventually, at some way between the tender caresses, their gazes found each other. Chanyeol’s eyes skimmed over the healing cuts on Kyungsoo’s face -- a pale imitation of his own, but he found himself gripped with the desperation to kiss each one. Had he two hands in operation, he probably would’ve done exactly that. He could picture the poignant moment so clearly: how he would take Kyungsoo’s tiny face into his own hands and lock their lips together in a move so emphatically romantic that it would’ve stopped time.

Like it did in Junmyeon’s favourite flicks.

Alas Chanyeol didn’t have two hands. And conveniently, it also turned out that the face he wanted so fiercely to kiss would end up pulling one of the most unforgivable king-of-the-bastards-level moves he’d ever experienced in his life, essentially demolishing any elements of romance which they may have had going for them.

It began with--

“Here’s your cut.”

The white envelope appeared out of nowhere and was tapped against his chest as Kyungsoo stepped out of his embrace.

“It’s not enough... for what you’ve done for me but I hope as monetary compensation it’s enough. The rest will also receive theirs later this week.”

Chanyeol stared at the item, completely frozen. After a moment, his fingers folded over it, shaky, as he lifted his gaze from the simple white of the paper to address the weary darkness of Kyungsoo’s eyes. The smaller man’s eyes then shifted away.

The sense of understanding that followed would hit Chanyeol as catastrophically as a derailing subway train.

“You’re... leaving.” Chanyeol’s poorly hand balled into a hard fist as the other dug bruised fingers into the paper, “You’re leaving aren’t you?”

“Chanyeol,” Kyungsoo managed after a moment, a watery smile on his lips as he rested a single hand on the other’s chest, “As of now, I’m dead.”
An admirable twenty minutes was the exact length of time it took for Chanyeol’s hope for only-Kyungsoo to descend into an even greater yearning for anything— but—Kyungsoo. Despite the solid grounding of his feet, Chanyeol felt like he was falling -- lightheaded, breathless, sickly -- and the envelope secured in his hand was the weight that was dragging him down to his doom faster.

He stared at it numbly as Kyungsoo explained the following: how the theatre fire and the Jung Dynasty had provided the perfect cover for a withdrawal story, how nobody was certain of his whereabouts, how the majority of the underground populace believed him to have fallen prey to the flames, how easy and fitting this all was, how there wasn’t going to be a chance like this again --

Chanyeol broke his silence with the only familiar subject he could breach, barely grasping the rest of the words.

“What about your work? Your job?”

“The Lockerman operations is self-sustaining because of the district hierarchy. I have preparations for Byun Baekhyun to take over in the event of my untimely passing. The crime families will know the history of the Jung Dynasty and believe this story completely. And in the event that they doubt, well, I’ll be away out there somewhere else already.”

“But.” Chanyeol’s eyes narrowed as he swallowed thickly, “How can you just… disappear?”

Kyungsoo missed the point of the question entirely.

“I’ve spent most of my life learning how to hide things away. I think I will be able to hide myself just fine.”

“But you’re not hiding this time. You’re… gone.” This was even harder to say and Chanyeol had to exhale deeper to gauge the strength from somewhere, “You can walk away? Just like that?”

Kyungsoo caressed his forehead, palms sticky with sweat.

“You were there that night, Chanyeol. My life? This life?” He smiled at the word -- life -- as if it was an insult. He might as well have spat it out like a rotten tooth. “You saw, didn’t you? It’s a meaningless… pit. That’s what it is. And you don’t escape it. You live in it, with all the shit that comes with it, and you rot. People like me don’t get a chance like this. If I take it, I can start somewhere else, something else -- and I don’t have to be the Lockerman anymore….”

The final word was mouthed -- an airy gasp -- as Kyungsoo placed his hands over his mouth, tears blinked away as he gave away, perhaps the only real indication that this was more than just another runaway attempt.

But of course, to the man who had been confronted with a similar desertion before, it wasn’t an eventuality that he could take easily.

By then, Chanyeol’s gaze had deviated, fixed again on the envelope which he slapped against the solid strap of his sling.

“You can run away as far away as you want, Kyungsoo. But you will never run away fast enough or far enough. Eventually, your past will find you-- pry you open -- and fuck with your head again. Trust me, I know. And you know! You fucking know this!”

“Chanyeol.”
Trembling, Kyungsoo bowed his head forwards as Chanyeol approached, close and cruel, until he was virtually hissing every word in his ear.

“Ha! But the fun part is that your little business partners will probably do that literally right? Pry you open? Fuck with your head? If they’re feeling nice?” The edge in Chanyeol’s voice expanded as he spoke louder until the impact of his words strangled the air in the room, “Are you crazy? Do you know how batshit you sound right now?”

Kyungsoo’s head remained lowered.

“I take a crossing ferry leaving the city tomorrow,” was his cold response.

“Fuck.”

Chanyeol shot his gaze to the ceiling to quell the burgeoning temptation to slam his good fist against the near wall -- settling instead for crumpling the envelope as violently as he could in his grasp.

Kyungsoo reached forwards, deceitfully calm, as he aimed to hold Chanyeol’s hand.

“Everyone has to leave the city because of the theatre fire.”

“Of course. But you get to pretend-die and leave forever so that’s fun.”

“I… I know that you want to find out about what this means for us.”

“Us?” Laughter. “You’re joking, right?”

Chanyeol jerked his body away from his grasp, thoughts burning with a familiar fire, as he made for the door.

“Chanyeol -- please -- let’s -- “ The garage door was raised, “I left a hotel keycard in your envelope. If you want to talk about it.”

At the offer, and its implications, the fire inside Chanyeol grew cold. He froze in his spot, lips parted, as he turned and glanced at the man behind him with an expression so damaged it took a moment for him to process through the silence.

“You mean if I want to fuck one last time before you go?”

Hurt, his tears fell instantly but he refused to touch them.

Instead, he waved the envelope bitterly across Kyungsoo’s vision before throwing it onto the floor with a loud thud, “I think I’ve got my money’s worth, don’t you? So I’ll pass. Safe travels, Kyungsoo. Thanks for the compensation -- and the sex -- and the broken bones. It has been an absolute -- fucking -- pleasure working with you. Goodbye and good luck!”

The garage door was slammed shut. It hit the concrete so hard that the metal rattled.

Outside in the silence, Chanyeol remained, furious, tears blurring the grey, before he stubbornly wiped them and he walked away.
When Hyewon returned home, Chanyeol was wiping the countertop, an emotive image coupled perfectly by the sad music playing in the background from the radio channel on the television.

“Hey.”

“Hey kid.”

She left to change out of her uniform. When she returned, her uncle was still wiping the same spot, an emptiness in his eyes. After a moment, he sniffled into his sleeve and it was there that Hyewon decided that they’d had enough of the music and turned down the television which was -- naturally -- playing the LeAnn Rimes’ classic *How Do I Live*. She really needed to introduce her Uncle to cheerier stuff.

Settling herself across the counter, Hyewon ripped open a cookie packet and glanced across at Chanyeol whose eyes were now red. She knew that look well.

In fact she had a name for it now. Duo-syllabic. Unique.

*Kyungsoo.*

“Hyewon,” Chanyeol tilted his head at her, squeezing the cloth in his hand as he spoke, “I know that we haven’t had a moment to sit down and talk about… what happened. I know how it all must look to you. You’re not a baby. You can probably guess what’s been going on. But I want you to know that your Uncle is a *good* guy and he is really trying hard. And I’m sorry if it seems like I just fuck-- I mean -- *mess* it all up all the time. But I’m going to try so much harder in the future. Because you come first, okay? I am… not going to mess anything up when it comes to you…I’m going to get you right….”

Chanyeol paused as he wiped his eyes, compelling away a fresh set of tears.

Across him, his niece was holding her cookie. She stared it until her own watery eyes cleared.

“Sh-- Hyewonnie. Kid. I’m sorry. I’m sorry that’s way too heavy. You shouldn’t have to--”

“Dad always said you were a good guy, Uncle Chanyeol.” Hyewon interrupted him as she met his gaze, “And he’s right. You might not see it but I do. And I’m sure you’re making him… really proud.” The smaller girl’s resolve broke slightly, as it did with all thoughts associated with her parents, and soon she was sniffling a little too.

Chanyeol walked over and hugged her as she naturally clung to him.

“Shh,” he soothed, voice hoarse, “It’s okay, Hyewon. It’s okay. He’s proud of you too. And your Mom. You’ve been so brave, kid.”
“So have you.” Hyewon echoed as she smiled up at him.

He returned the smile and in that second, found all the searing antagonism of his day melting away.

Suddenly, nothing else mattered but this: himself and his niece, in their kitchen, safe and sound under a solid roof, with food on the table and two televisions.

*So have you.*

Grounded in the lightness of that moment, Chanyeol found himself struck with a burning insight that was gentler, but comparably more profound, than what he’d felt at the garage den that afternoon. He became overwhelmed with glimpses of his *life*, a series of hazy pictures discernible only with the feelings he’d long acquainted with them. Sadness. Anger. Hurt. Loss. And as they passed across his thoughts, casting their familiar shadows, their hold on him gradually dimmed until all that was left was the clearest image:

The image of the present; of Hyewon holding him tightly. And the strength of the love he felt for her. Somehow, it grew enough to piece his heart back together again. Just enough for him to breathe — and get through the rest of the day. A tonic. Possibly forever.

This was enough, he decided then.

All of *this*.

“Is Kyungsoo okay?” Hyewon murmured as she looked up at him.

“He’s leaving tomorrow.” Chanyeol blurted out, “Probably forever.”

“Then what are you doing here, moping?” Hyewon grinned, “Go say goodbye.”

In a move that caught her uncle completely off-guard, the small girl reached into her back pocket and held up the -- *note* -- the one he’d written for Kyungsoo all those years ago. It had come back around to him somehow, now of all times, to remind him that no matter how far he walked away from his own past, there would always be a path that would lead him back to the man at the post office.

“I found it whilst I was cleaning the other day.”

He took it with trembling hands.

“Hyewon I--”

“I’ll get Uncle Yixing to watch me, okay?”

Running his eyes over the faint words and sensing the lost and hopeful voice behind the scribbles, Chanyeol found himself nodding his head.

“Okay.”
He paid his visit in the evening. Taking a taxi-ride to the location printed on the card, which he retrieved from the garage, Chanyeol found himself at a quiet hotel outside the city. It was snug -- resembling a European bed and breakfast style -- and he entered, bidding the proprietors a polite greeting as he made his way upstairs in search of the specific room number.

The hallways were long and brightly-lit. After a few minutes of aimless sauntering, Chanyeol finally found the right room and he knocked on the door a few times. Softly at first. Considerably louder the next few times. With his efforts blocked by an absent response, the man sent out a warning -- “Kyungsoo, I’m coming in” -- before he swiped his keycard and observed the light by the door as the red disappeared and it flashed a homely green.

He opened the door slowly and stepped inside.

“Kyungsoo?”

The room was neat but basic. A single double bed in the middle. Television. Lamp. Desk. A definite downgrade from the beautiful penthouse Kyungsoo had been occupying. Hearing the rush of water from the adjoining ensuite, Chanyeol figured that he was showering and opted to wait. He took off his shoes and tentatively settled himself on the bed. He waited, content with the quiet assortment of noise from the room, until above it rose something more urgent. The familiar sounds of -- Crying.

Dread coiled in the pit of Chanyeol’s stomach as he stood up and moved towards the ensuite door where the sound was undoubtedly coming from. He knocked again, softer in case he startled him, “Kyungsoo? Kyungsoo?” The lack of response again. Panic struck him across the chest as he stuttered - “I’m… I’m going to come in… I…”

Chanyeol entered and as he moved frantically through the heavy mist, sourced from the hot water, he was presented with the sight of a bare and huddled Kyungsoo in the shower cubicle. The sound of his sobs echoed through the room as his form remained bent, shaking violently, as he furiously scrubbed his left arm with his right.

“Kyungsoo? Hey? Hey.”

Damp hair had almost completely covered his eyes, and he choked out his name, “Chanyeol,” motions never ceasing as he continued to rub against his skin like he was resolving a vicious itch. But he wasn’t -- and the skin was in a poor state. It was flushed red from irritation -- almost bleeding in parts.
“Shit,” Chanyeol heaped one towel over his shoulder, as he took the other in his hand and gingerly pulled the cubicle open, “Let’s turn off the water now, okay? You’ll get cold.”

He was wrong. The water was the opposite; it was scalding hot.

Fortunately, Kyungsoo obliged and turned the dial. Chanyeol awkwardly stepped into the cubicle, socks splashing in the water as he wrapped the towels over Kyungsoo’s back. The taller man quickly wrapped an arm over him, placing his face against the top of his head as Kyungsoo exhaled shakily.

“Blood.” Kyungsoo murmured, leaning against Chanyeol’s form to steady himself, “There was so much… blood. Ch--Chanyeol.”

“It’s gone,” Chanyeol exhaled, eyes fluttering shut, relieved, as he felt Kyungsoo’s hand caress his, “There’s no blood, it’s all g--gone. It’s all… gone.”

“Gone?”

Chanyeol pressed a kiss to a dark bruise on Kyungsoo’s neck as he bowed his head against his.

“Gone.”

They rested together against the bed. Backs strained against the headboard; shoulders touching, legs stretched out across them. Kyungsoo smelled fresh from his shower. He wore a white shirt and boxer shorts -- the only things Chanyeol could fish out of the awkwardly slotted drawers from his hotel room. In the silence, they addressed each other’s fuzzy reflections on the dead television screen. There was barely any light to distinguish them from the shadows from the room, but together, they somehow made a shape on the surface: a steady and solid lump.

Outside came the faint cry of a police vehicle. It was travelling away and as it departed, it abandoned a space that only deepened their quiet.

With practically no warning, Kyungsoo exhaled and rolled over to straddle Chanyeol’s thighs -- an all-too-familiar move which prompted the taller man to smile wearily.

“Heeeey.” Chanyeol rested his hand against Kyungsoo’s waist as he adjusted to the weight, “I’m beginning to think you like sitting on me.”

Kyungsoo smiled in return before straining forwards and cupping Chanyeol’s face between his hands. Silent, he ran warm fingers over the cuts, the swellings, the bruises, in a much closer manner than he had in the afternoon. His fingers shivered with every contact against Chanyeol’s skin -- tentative, guilty, and both were plain in the ache in Kyungsoo’s voice as he spoke.

“I’m sorry he hurt you.” Kyungsoo said, thumbs resting on the curve of his cheekbones.
Chanyeol lifted his hand and glided his own careful fingers over the purplish marks around the other’s neck. Jung Hajoon’s signature. He’d sported his own following their own unhappy interaction five years ago.

“Me too.”

Kyungsoo unbuttoned Chanyeol’s neat dress shirt next, revealing the full extent of his injuries. The obvious bruising to his ribcage -- the older scars from the bullet wounds and surgical procedures. There was no resistance from the other. Chanyeol submitted knowingly to every touch, relishing in the *closeness*.

The intimacy of it all.

“This all must hurt. Even...” Kyungsoo ran a light finger over the faint scarring that spotted the abdominal shot.

“Yeah, but you got one too right?”

Shyly, Kyungsoo pulled up his shirt, nodding down at the scarring around his kidney. They tossed that over for a few seconds, comparing scars, even discussing tattoos. Chanyeol hadn’t been allowed one as an armed robber -- to limit the physical identifiers that may botch a job -- but he’d accidentally got one after a drunk dare with Junmyeon at 23 and now he sported a rather large one over his back. It was a bird of sorts -- to this day, Chanyeol wasn’t sure what type exactly -- and the pain had been so immense that night that he’d sobered up at the first scrape of the needle.

Not sober enough to make it *smaller*.

However, it had turned out nice so he kept it.

“You didn’t get one yet?” Chanyeol asked, “Saving it up for something special, huh?”

Kyungsoo shrugged.

“You should get one here that reads...”

Chanyeol traced his index finger across his collarbone as he murmured,

“*Asshole*.”

“Only if you’ll get one too.” Kyungsoo mirrored the action, tracing a finger across the other’s collarbone as he looked up at him.

There, Chanyeol spied a *mist* in his eyes; betrayed to the open by the lamplight; and whether it had come from tears or thought, he found that he couldn’t care less for in that moment, it occurred to Chanyeol that Kyungsoo was --

“Thank you for everything, Chanyeol.” Kyungsoo murmured.

*Beautiful.*

Long and steady fingertips consumed the distance between them, as Chanyeol gently held his face up to him, forcing their gazes to cross as he delivered his response,

“You’re welcome. Kyungsoo.”

A moment of stillness followed; the axis between them now wavering, *steadying*. 
But then Kyungsoo pulled off the trick of the night and kissed him. He locked their lips together with fierce intent, enclosing Chanyeol’s neck in his arms as he weighed his body against him. The impact was hard and it was felt. Chanyeol closed his eyes and resigned, letting himself be kissed. Breathless. Within seconds, the sensations were overlapping frenziedly with one another: the tongue dividing his lips, the long fingers riding his hair, the smooth glide of heat against his jeans, the taste of toothpaste and caffeine, the familiar pinch of teeth as his lips froze frustratingly over his, settling a foreign heat in his mouth as Kyungsoo exhaled into him.

The simple sensation was so absolute that Chanyeol was left momentarily light-headed.

“Kiss me, please.” Kyungsoo’s tone was almost pleading as he spoke against his lips, forcing them together, “Chanyeol.”

He exhaled back into him, swallowing, as his fist unfurled and he stroked Kyungsoo’s cheek lightly.

“Let’s talk first.” Chanyeol whispered, smiling faintly as he added, “I’ll kiss you goodbye after, yeah?”

They disentangled; and the room fell into an even deeper silence than before. Chanyeol expressed a comment about hunger and he trudged out of the room, managing to negotiate two caramel bars out of the lone vending machine in the hall.

When he re-entered the room, Kyungsoo had collapsed on his back, head hanging slightly over the bottom of the bed. Chanyeol chose to plant himself on the carpeted floor just by him, reclining his back against the mattress. He stretched his legs out as he tore the first bar open with his teeth. His shadow appeared shrunken, all hunched up, against the wall.

Kyungsoo watched the projection, in its upside-down form, with a sad smile.

He broke the silence, just as the other man was crushing the plastic in his free hand.

“It’s been days and I still can’t stop thinking about it.” Kyungsoo’s eyes stared at the ceiling, recalling the many nights he’d spent in the same position, doused in sweat and sick -- using the familiar patterns he’d traced on the surface as a source of calm, “I can remember every moment of that night so clearly that it’s almost like a vision. And sometimes, I feel like it’s going to happen again and I’ll have to watch him...”

Kyungsoo inhaled, stiffening, as he focused his eyes and searched for the friendly circles and rectangles he’d somehow found in the disorder of the ceiling designs, “The part that runs through my mind most is when he asked you to… you shouldn’t have… Chanyeol… you shouldn’t have even considered it… but you did and it’s all I keep seeing. You’re all I keep seeing.”
For Chanyeol, who was posted on the floor staring at a blank wall, the sound of the rain was back because the memories were as clear to him as they were to Kyungsoo. He was holding the hand-gun to his head and there was a blade to Kyungsoo’s throat now. He was screaming but he could only hear a single voice above the storm -- as clear and terrifying as a curse --

‘Please. Kyungsoo, please god. I need you - you can’t’

His fingers curled into fists. The cool crackle of the plastic returned him to the room.

The silent hotel room -- occupied by two but haunted by a chorus of invisible voices that were slowly beginning to whisper their secrets through the cracks. If Chanyeol closed his eyes, he was sure that he would hear them all now; in fact Kyungsoo probably could already. The voices of their past selves, pleading for an audience, delivering promises they would now be forced to deny.

The rain was back. But this time Chanyeol was alone with his gun.

“There was no good outcome.” Chanyeol spoke just as the image was vanishing again, the blackness receding into the dull sepia of the wall, “Someone wasn’t going to make it. And I actually remember thinking… Imagine. If all of this had happened five years ago. Then there would be no question So I thought. Fuck it. I’ll do it for him. Him. Me. From five years ago, because he’s still in me and he really loved you. He loved you so much he got me into this mess in the first place because he would never let anything bad happen to you. And he would’ve wanted you to see that he cared… especially if that was the last thing you saw.”

The circles and rectangles were dissolving as tears filled Kyungsoo’s eyes. Instinctively, he shut them -- and it was there that he felt hands ghosting over his face-- wiping the tears away -- familiar calloused fingertips tracing an arch over his cheeks. The smell of diesel and ink on his sleeve as he pressed warm lips to the soft spot beneath his ear.

Kyungsoo exhaled deeply and the sensations vanished. It was with an aching chest that he answered,

“I saw. I really loved him too.”

Chanyeol expressed a tired smile.

“I dunno how much you remember but for a time we were a pretty happy couple, Kyungsoo. Happier than any couple I’ve seen since. I spent so many years, growing up, thinking I wasn’t deserving of anything close to what we had. I don’t think you have any idea how whole you made me feel. How happy I was to have you.” He managed a smile somehow, as his memories faded into one entirely void of happiness, “When you called me that day, and left, I felt like I lost everything and I blamed myself for it because just like with everyone else, I figured I’d lost with you too. So you can see right? Why I’d think on that night that taking a bullet for you was… nothing. Because I’ve gone through years of feeling like I didn’t fight hard enough….”
His jaw clenched hard.

“... but when you told me that you were going to leave again, the bubble burst. I remembered what it was like to be alone and I was... angry. But after some thinking, I realise now that it’s okay because after what we just went through, I feel like we don’t owe each other anything anymore.” He paused, as he looked at him, preserving his smile, “I did what I could. For... us now. Just like I did then. And I deserve to go forward absolutely certain that I did what I could to keep you. And I... deserve that too. That love. One day. Even if it has to come from somewhere else. I know that I have the right to take it because I can love someone back and I can be happy... again.”

His lover’s gaze was committed to him, motionless but cloudy. Chanyeol’s thoughts shifted then of the faceless few he’d encountered over the years; how frequently, particularly when in his drunken state, he’d imagined the lips he kissed and the hands he held to be his. It had been comforting to return to the arms of an old lover, to revel in the joys of his past, to believe that this was where he was entitled to be.

For it didn’t feel like much of a prison, confined within the embrace of his happiest memories, alongside the man he loved and the priceless hours they spent together.

But they were his ghosts.

Not anymore though.

“I have to try and and live fully now. And you need to, as well. You deserve it just as much as me. And if disappearing is going to give that to you, then go. But don’t do it because you’re scared and you think running away will solve everything. You can’t live like that. You know you can’t. You’ve tried it before and all it’s brought you is a ticket back here.... And I care about you, Kyungsoo. I really do. I care about you so much, hell, I probably still love you... but we have to find a way forwards now...because I won’t go through this again. I’m not the same. I can’t hurt the people that love me anymore...”

Chanyeol’s head tilted upwards, pooling the tears on the surface of his eyes. He resisted -- but they would fall, commanded by the way his head bowed forwards as Kyungsoo’s arms slid comfortably over his shoulders. Chanyeol conceded to the gestures freely, shutting his eyes as he leaned against Kyungsoo’s arm.

Kyungsoo pressed soft whispers to his ear, shivering.

“I’m scared. I’ve never stopped being scared. That’s the big secret of how I carry it all. I... don’t. Because I was never built to be strong enough for all of it. Fear helps. Fear keeps you alive. Being scared kept me alive.” He waved his hand over Chanyeol’s chest thoughtfully as he murmured, “But I... wasn’t scared with you. With you, I was everything but... I wasn’t scared.”
The past was running through Kyungsoo’s head now, all the feelings he’d left lingering bleeding rightly into the present. The blood on his hands; now the same hands which his lover had held. The pain in his heart; living in harmony with the love that ran alongside it. The hopes whispered into pillows; strengthened by the regrets he’d tearfully screamed into them --

Kyungsoo rested his head against him, “Is that what you mean by living?”

Chanyeol buried a light kiss against his arm.

“It can be. Or more. If that’s something you want, you don’t have to disappear to find it. You can have that here with the city that you know. The friends that you have.” Chanyeol’s fingers entwined with his, as he pressed a long and tender kiss to his sore knuckles. The man on the floor paused then before saying something he imagined would hurt him but needed to be said --

“I just don’t want to see you give up again. I know that’s what you’re doing because… well, you did it to me.”

It did hurt him.

A soft sob escaped Kyungsoo’s lips as he buried his face into Chanyeol’s hair.

Sensing him cry, Chanyeol lowered his gaze sadly as he squeezed his hand, before kissing it again.

“It’s your choice. I know everything is hurting you. And I won’t keep you if that’s not what you want.”

“I didn’t give up--”

“You did,” Chanyeol choked fiercely, “And that’s okay now. I understand why. But it’s going to hurt you more if you go tomorrow. So I want you to really think about it. What do you want?” He squeezed his lover’s hand tightly, eliciting a cry as he shook his own head, “What do you want, Kyungsoo?”

“I w--want to live. I want you.”

The answer came spluttering out of nowhere, as messy and heartfelt as any confession Chanyeol could pull out of his memories.
Its weight would linger between them untouched for a few seconds before --

“Well. I’m all yours,” was the complementary surrender, as Chanyeol kept their hands locked, “I’m here aren’t I? I’ve been here the whole time. I’m yours. Just yours-- god...”

“It’s enough.” A hard kiss was pressed to his temple, as Kyungsoo squeezed him tightly, “I’m here too. I’m yours…”

And out of his own relief, Chanyeol bowed his own head forwards and finally cried.

He cried until his chest was empty and his lungs were scorching and it was Kyungsoo who was left rocking him delicately from side-to-side, arms still secured tightly around him as he planted trails of kisses all along his hairline.

Kyungsoo was whispering to him now. His voice cracking with the weight of every word; every promise.

“I’m sorry… I’m sorry I made you feel those things… I love you…. I wish I knew then…. You did it right…. You were so good to me…. We did our best…. We were only young…. We didn’t know… I love you.... I’m going to try harder… I’m not going to run… I’m going to love you …. We’re going to do better…. We’re going to be happy…. We’re going to live…. We’re going to live, trouble…. You and me....”

Eventually Chanyeol stilled, his sharp breaths receding to a calm lull. Kyungsoo reached forwards and waited until he wiped his eyes before retrieving his shaking hand and squeezing it affectionately within his own.

Very little was said in the immediate aftermath. The pair collapsed on the surface of the bed and after a short exchange of chaste kisses, they slept together under thick blankets and the remedial cover of darkness.

Morning came. Kyungsoo’s ferry left the port at dawn. But he remained in the city, settled in the arms of his lover, at peace.
“I should go home and pick up my niece.” Chanyeol murmured, at some point when they’d both established that they were awake.

They had been laying restlessly against each other, reduced to communicating through tangled limbs and hums, for at least an hour. Hungry and still a nudge sleepy.

“Okay,”

“Come with me.” Chanyeol continued, as he brushed his lips tenderly against Kyungsoo’s shoulder, “Come home with me, Kyungsoo.”

The man in his embrace smiled.

“Let’s go.”

-//-

ONE MONTH LATER

-//-
The day had come. The big fat ‘x’ on his calendar was today and he was buzzing.

His shoulder sling was finally off. Yay.

Chanyeol decided immediately that he would take a solo trip and celebrate right away now that his driving privileges had been restored.

“Where are you going?” Hyewon asked as she was dropped off for dance practice.

Only five minutes late this week. New record.

“Gym.” Chanyeol grinned at her as he blew her a kiss through the car window, “Alright then kid. Break their legs!”

“Still not a dance term, Uncle Chanyeol.” Hyewon huffed as she waved him off with a final goodbye, “See you in two hours.”

“Love youuuu kid!”

“Whatever,” was the embarrassed huff from his niece as he continued to wave.

‘A fighter takes a punch and hits back with three punches.’ His trainer jabbed a finger at the picture on the wall where a portrait of the Panamanian boxer, Roberto Duran, was hung, gathering dust alongside the portraits of other champions which had been neatly lined there to inspire his trainees.

Unfortunately, his current trainee, a young fresh-faced Park Chanyeol, wasn’t the easily inspired sort of boy. In fact, he appeared to be a rather difficult person in most aspects. A presumption presented most clearly during the teacher’s first interaction with the giant boy which had been when his boss -- Pip -- had first dragged him through the doors of the gym, fingers pinched tightly around his earlobe, scolding him loudly for getting into another fight despite the curfew he’d imposed on the youngest of his team.
‘You better learn how to fight properly if you’re goin’ to be a little disobedient bitch-boy…’

The strict-faced teacher watched his student as he rubbed the boxing gloves against the side of his head insolently, swaying side-to-side. Bored.

‘Why three?’ Chanyeol asked, smirking, as he met his trainer’s eyes, ‘Why only three?’

His teacher beckoned him over into the ring.

‘Because.’

Pip had told him to watch this one; and he knew why. He could tell a brawler from a mile away. And not everyone could teach that type of boxer.

‘If it takes more than three to knock your enemy out, then you’re a shitty fighter.’

Chanyeol smiled, biting down on a cut lip as he followed him in, slamming the gloves together like he’d seen on TV.

‘And you’re not going to be shitty are you?’

The boy scoffed.

‘Fuck no.’

‘Then get bloody.’ The teacher slammed a hand against the punching bag hard enough for it to sway, ‘And do it in three.’

The gym was empty. Kangmin, Chanyeol’s beloved first-teacher, had retired and now played chess in the park on Mondays. The place was ran by his nephew who hadn’t broken a sweat in his life and hated fighting with a passion.

Fortunately Chanyeol had his own key.

It was the first place he’d decided to visit after getting his shoulder sling off because he missed it. With routined care, Chanyeol slammed all the curtains shut, wiped down the equipment, changed into basic gear and spent a good hour striking the heavy bags and leather speed balls with an acute and well-practiced rhythm --
He boxed well in the dark. It was how Kangmin had trained him. Even with one eye bleeding or cloaked in a terrifying dim, Chanyeol had lost count of the amount of people he’d knocked out cold with his right hook. He was the best student Kangmin had ever had and through his job people became well aware of it.

Here, with only a single sliver of light from the corner of the room, Chanyeol slammed a fist against the wavering leather bag, all 70 pounds conceding to the impact -- a onetwothree -- as he delivered the series of punches with cruel efficiency. He took a step back, allowing the huge weighty shadow to plunge forwards, as he overthrew it with a cross that convulsed its metal restraints.

There was another reason why Chanyeol had felt the need to box.

Because he was pissed off.

It had been three weeks since his ex-boss Pip turned up at his door asking if he wanted to have dinner.

The bag was relentless and swung back hard.

Chanyeol punched harder and this time the bag’s metal chain screamed as it scraped against the plasterboard.

If one wanted to picture how exactly Chanyeol’s reunion with Pip went, then the previous image was probably a pretty accurate description.
Oh, it was *way* too early for this.

‘Ow--! Chanyeol! *Kid!*’

Pip was on the grass on his knees, clutching his face, having just taken a cross right to the nose.

‘*Go.* You hear me? Get the fuck out before you wake everyone up….’

‘*Boy,*’ Pip glanced in horror at the blood all over his hands as he hovered one over his nose, ‘I heard about the theatre….’

‘I wasn’t there.’ Shaking his left hand with a wince, Chanyeol lowered himself and grabbed Pip’s hair with vicious curled fingers, ‘*I’m out,* Pip. *Go.*’

The blood was now everywhere, thanks to Pip’s clumsy fingers. Chanyeol rolled his eyes. After a sigh, he resigned, offering the man a hand as he helped him up.

‘Can’t be out if you’re doing Lockerman business.’

‘There’s no business.’

‘What about just doing?’

The next punch was aimed at the jaw. Crisp. *Perfect.* But it never reached its target. Pip stumbled back so much from the fear of getting hit again that Chanyeol found himself reaching out to steady him before groaning disgustedly.

‘Leave my street or I will kill you, Pip. I swear to God.’

‘I’m just w-warning ya, boy.’ Wiping the blood over his lips and jaw, Pip presented his face as one for the nightmares as he shook Chanyeol off and straightened his jacket collar, ‘The streets are quiet. But once everyone comes home, people are going to *talk.*’

Stood in his yard, barefoot, Chanyeol took the warning with a deceptively still fist.

‘There’s blood on his hands and yours. And all over the ash.’ Pip sniffed the cool air with a cold smile, ‘I thought I taught you how to fight clean, huh?’

‘Don’t flatter yourself, you bastard.’ Chanyeol barked, before smiling as he shook his head and waved the man off, ‘Now thanks for the…. visit. As I said, get off my grass.’

Pip bowed his head, as smug as ever, even when he was attempting politeness.

‘My door is always open to you, boy.’

‘Shut it on your way out, will you?’
The punching bag stilled as Chanyeol stopped and exhaled a deep breath.

With beads of sweat rolling down his face, he reached across and held it steady, glancing up into the dark room thoughtfully.

After making a quick assessment of the house locks, Chanyeol walked back into his bedroom, carrying with him the thoughts of his morning punch-up and the smell of Pip’s cologne. He’d cleaned up his fist, somewhat pleased he’d been tame enough for it not to mark.

‘Who was that?’

A tired Kyungsoo was sat up in his bed, rubbing puffy eyes as he reached for his glasses on the bedside table.

‘Nobody.’ Chanyeol muttered, as he wiped freshly cleaned hands against his pyjama bottom, ‘Go back to sleep.’

‘It didn’t sound like nobody.’

The taller man climbed back into the sheets, feigning a yawn as he closed his eyes and collapsed into a pillow. He’d almost forgotten he had a roommate now. One that liked to talk and know stuff.

Kyungsoo placed a hand on his arm and planted a kiss on his sore shoulder.

‘You smell like blood.’

‘Don’t I always?’

‘Don’t joke.’

Chanyeol lifted an eyelid and regarded the worry lines which crossed Kyungsoo’s face.

‘What did he want Chanyeol?’

‘He wants to employ me.’
Kyungsoo swallowed. ‘And what did you say?’

‘I told him I was busy.’

The smaller man fell back onto his side, wrapping a gentle arm over him, allowing his fingers to reach up and run through Chanyeol’s dark hair soothingly.

‘It’s already starting, isn’t it?’ Kyungsoo’s voice was soft, as their gazes met, ‘All the trouble.’

Chanyeol grinned, dark eyes glinting against the first break of morning light through the curtains.

‘Baby, I am trouble.’ He murmured, almost whining, ‘Remember?’

‘You are.’ Kyungsoo hummed, as his fingers then slid down to pull against the fabric of Chanyeol’s shirt, paying particular attention to the damp splash of red on his collar, ‘... I hope you didn’t hit him that hard.’

‘He’s lucky I couldn’t hit with my right.’

Chanyeol flexed his right fist wearily, ‘Three weeks from now, I’ll have this off. I dare him to try and turn up again.’

‘It’s not him,’ Kyungsoo shook his head, ‘It’s not him that we should be worrying about.’

Chanyeol pouted his lips.

‘I’m not worried.’

Kyungsoo smiled before kissing him lightly on the head.

‘You worry me.’

A month had passed since the theatre burned down; since Kyungsoo skipped on his ferry and decided to live at home with him and Hyewon.

Three weeks since Pip decided to chance it and had his nose smushed on Chanyeol’s lawn.

Four hours since Chanyeol removed his sling and used his restored right hand to destroy Junmyeon in the new secret level of The Galaxy Wars: Conflict of a Thousand Sons.
Tomorrow, the streets would be full; with everyone finally coming out of their mountain retreats and returning home.

Kyungsoo included. His post-office uniform was all ready and ironed hanging in Chanyeol’s closet.

So what?

As what one had come to expect from him, Chanyeol really didn’t care.

Twisting the cap off his water bottle and guzzling down the lukewarm liquid, Chanyeol shook his head, wiping the sweat from his arms, as he clapped his gloves together and started again -- onetwothree, onetwothree, onetwothree -- with the punching bag creaking in complaint back and forth against him.

When he came home tonight, he would have a niece -- a boyfriend -- and a penultimate episode of a telenovela waiting for him. Oh— and there was a great likelihood, Kyungsoo-permitting, that he was going to get laid without worrying about soiling his sling.

Tomorrow could be the delayed Mayan apocalypse for all he cared.

-/-

Chapter End Notes

*sighs at pcy* still livin in yolo days
hokay dokes so this chapter managed to surpass the impossible by being the hardest one ever to finish. the hotel room debacle was harder to write than the break up scene of chapter 7– i had about 4 different endings in the end and at one point i basically spaced
and just stared at my screen for 10 mins

to conclude, i’m proud of sias pcy for getting to a place where he thinks he can love
again; and i’m hopeful that he will help sias ksoo get there too.

but it deffo ended up being way more emotional than planned!!! so im sorry to self and
to u!! ok so everything from this point should be established chansoo so let’s tie all
those loose ends up ;-; not long to go ;-) our aim now is to get ksoo out!!! so pcy can
also be out!!! is it possible? we will find out! lols

be well my lovely exo-ls! and happy february! thank you as always for your kind
thoughts and for reading! c:
and a lust for life keeps us alive

Chapter Summary

my boyfriend's back; and he's cooler than ever
there's no more night; blue skies forever
i told you twice; in our love letter
there's no stopping now; green lights forever
-- lust for life, lana del rey ft. the weeknd

Chapter Notes

a/n: ok so this is a long one as per norm - but important note as to not get confused with the times, the opening scene (i.e. the hole) takes place SIX months after the previous chapter (so 7 months after the theatre fire). so that means that the build up to that i.e the next scene, practically picks up from the end of the previous chapter ! hopefully that’s clear

Speaking of the hole this is officially titled as the hole: PART 1 bc i couldn’t fit everything into this chapter without going crazy… hence the phantom extra chapter (sorry :( i promise this story is ending lololol). but yes, the hole? very important --

also i’ll warn, for the first time in 100k+ :o, for actual sexual content loool. as will become despairingly obvious i don’t write sex scenes at all-- but i wanted to challenge myself and it was probably in vain aahah regardless! okay! enjoy! (extra warning: crime chansoo are very cute today)

*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-The Hole: Present Day-

In many ways, this complication of theirs was always going to end up with one person six feet underground.

“Kyungsoo!”

Chanyeol was beyond furious. He was kicking against the walls of the dirt, scuffing his shoes on the
mount, yelling and yelling, puffs of warm air escaping from his lips into the cold fog.

“Kyungsoo! What the fuck! Get me out!”

Kyungsoo gulped as he surveyed him from above, a steady -- almost curious -- look in his eyes, observing the depth of the hole and wondering even now if this would be enough to contain him. There was no doubting that his man had a penchant for escaping even the seemingly impossible. Hence why he’d asked his grave digger to accommodate for Chanyeol’s unholy luck and height.

“Hey! Asshole!”

A sprinkle of dirt was thrown at him and the smaller man swiped it off with a sigh.

“Ch--Chanyeol!” Kyungsoo sighed loudly as he lifted to his feet, towering over the man even further, “I’m… I’m sorry that it had to come to this--”

“Sorry? Sorry? I’ll show you--” Chanyeol attempted to climb up but the effort was in vain. The ditch was too deep and the dirt was purposefully slippy and dry, “Fuck!”

“Please hear me out,” Kyungsoo pleaded, clasping gloved hands together, “There’s a reason why you’re here.”

“There better be!” Circling on the spot, Chanyeol raised his gaze again, “Why? So you can bury me alive? Is that it?”

Kyungsoo swallowed thickly as he rested his gaze on the man’s face before shrugging,

“Yes.” He admitted, “If that’s what it will take….”

-//-

SIX MONTHS BEFORE: THE HOLE

-//-

A legendary 160 episodes have passed and the day had finally come for the final episode of Conflicto de amor. Only five minutes have passed and an incredible amount of unresolved shit was hitting the fan already.

“She’s going to say it.” Chanyeol held the popcorn bowl on his lap as Hyewon fished from it, eating
“She wouldn’t.” Hyewon gasped, “Would she?”

They fell quiet as the credits petered away.

The scene opens. An embittered Rosa Fernandez -- hunky Julio’s ex-sidepiece and the established telenovela antagonist -- enters the scene, dressed in a demure periwinkle blue dress. She walks into Julio’s lounge where he is happily admiring his present for his future bride, Alma. The present is a beautiful necklace he had acquired from his aunt. An important family heirloom fit for his important bride.

She approaches him, her heels scratching the stone floor. “Julio!” she yells and he turns.

“Rosa!” His mouth falls; his sculpted jaw shaping the syllables like a holy prayer.

“Julio,” her voice is softer as she nears him, placing a gentle hand on her belly, “Estoy embarazada… Julio…”

Dramatic music plays instantly. All sharp strings and cracking percussion. This is paired with an outrageous succession of close-ups at Rosa’s crocodile tears and Julio’s overwhelming horror.

The subtitles flashed the translation in big white letters:

*I’M PREGNANT*

The seasoned telenovela fans on the sofa gasped in unison. A littering of popcorn was thrown at the screen as the pair heckled the scene with a series of, “Mentiras! Mentiras! Boo!” which translated to *Lies! Lies!*

Behind in the kitchen, Kyungsoo could faintly hear the festivities. He found himself smiling thoughtfully, the gesture prompted by nothing in particular -- a mild amusement perhaps at the pair who had been so consumed about this finale that they had talked of nothing else for hours.

Would Julio marry Alma? Would Rosa admit that her baby was Arturo’s? Would the bakery business collapse after Alma’s Tío made deals with the shady Ricardo?
The smile remained as he stirred the hot tea in his cup. He was just aiming for the door when Junmyeon walked through and beckoned for him, shutting the door behind him with his foot.

The abruptness of the gesture, alongside the premise of being alone with undoubtedly his biggest critic, would have troubled Kyungsoo -- had he not already endured an entire month of being cold-shouldered by his boyfriend’s closest friend.

By now, he felt like they had an established an air of cold civility between them. Something silent and symbiotic. We both love him-- so we have to learn to live with each other. And they had with some success.

Was this the day where it would all finally come to blow?

“I needed to breathe. Sorry. If I hear them yell Te amo Julio one more time, I’m going to lose my mind,” was Junmyeon’s opening gripe as he reached for the refrigerator and obtained a beer.

Kyungsoo acknowledged the words with a small smile before he stepped towards the door again.

“Wait, Kyungsoo? Can you… stay a minute?”

His agitation was back. There had been a balance in their blatant disregard of each other. Kyungsoo had become used to it -- around the same time Chanyeol had. However if he had to tamper with it, he didn’t want to do so negatively. So if Junmyeon wanted a minute -- Kyungsoo was willing to offer him twice that.

“Sure.”

“So.” Junmyeon was leaning against the counter, arms folded firmly over his chest. The beer momentarily forgotten on the countertop. It was the sort of stance one associated with defense or self-restraint. “It’s been a month, yeah? And it’s -- well it’s back to business now. My inbox is full up. Everything’s back online. That means you’re back in too.”

“Yes.” Nod. “That’s right.”

“But he,” a thumb poked out and jerked in the direction of the living room, “is not. Do you see the complication?”

Kyungsoo blinked: indicative of surprise when really he did know. The complication had hovered over them with every day that passed. Hence why Kyungsoo had already predicted the vicious accusations to come: so it’s time to give up -- time to give in -- leave him alone -- leave all of us! You’re no good!

His left eye twitched nervously. Somehow, despite all his imaginings, he still felt unprepared to hear it out loud. Even from Junmyeon.

Fortunately his nature meant that he had crafted a well-meaning response.

“We have discussed it. Chanyeol and I. I-- I won’t be living here whilst I’m employed.” The mug was cooling in his grasp. Kyungsoo presumed all the heat had now ferried over to him, considering the sudden sheen of sweat on his brow, “If you want to talk about it more, you can with him. It doesn’t have to be me--”

“No, no. That’s not what I’m getting at.” Junmyeon sighed, as he waved a dismissive hand, “Okay, let’s cut the crap then shall we? All I’m asking you is… is this thing between you and him, real?

Once you go back to your job and he goes back to his. Are you solid? He’s babbling to me everyday
that you’re his… boyfriend. So are you? Are you his boyfriend? Are you dating? Are you in a relationship?"

Each question was a series of hard attacks: punch-punch-punch -- not like the playful ones he threw at Chanyeol when they sat together on the sofa playing his video games -- but resembled the hard crosses that people supplied during debates to corner and render an opponent senseless.

He did feel a little cornered. Insecure at least. It had been a month since he’d quietly invaded the Park family home and very few questions had been directly addressed by those who lived with him. Hyewon and Chanyeol had simply accepted him into their lives as he was: no labels, no expectations and no established move-out date.

Parting from the obvious one -- which was tomorrow. A check-out date he shared with every high ranking criminal in the city.

Junmyeon was right to question him.

Kyungsoo didn’t struggle to answer though. Although he had come to the house unlabelled, one was quickly attached to him by a mushy and adoring Chanyeol one particularly tender and long make-out session.

“Yes, yes. We’re dating. I’m his boyfriend and I’m going to keep dating him…” Kyungsoo trailed, assessing the other man’s expression closely, “for the foreseeable future.”

Junmyeon’s arms relaxed and returned to his side as he laughed.

“Calm down, Darcy. I’m not going to punch you. I just wanted to know, okay? You know what Chanyeol’s like. He’ll keep you here forever without asking you outright where you stand.”

Kyungsoo’s shoulders lowered as he quietly exhaled.

“.... it’s important to set boundaries and expectations you know? That’s what movies have taught me.” Junmyeon continued, growing thoughtful as he mumbled, “I’m not in a committed relationship myself but if I was…”

This was the point where Kyungsoo’s breath formed into a laugh.

“I’m sorry,” a faint pink brushed his cheeks as he met Junmyeon’s eyes, “Chanyeol… he told me about your Jongdae issue.”

The aforementioned Jongdae issue referred to the issue of Junmyeon’s puzzling feelings towards the city’s most elusive techie. Ramen had been the center of the problem. It turned out that the pair had eaten out together at least five times the past three weeks. Despite Chanyeol’s persistence that planning meals out and paying for each other’s ramen bowls constituted as natural dating behaviour, Junmyeon was resolutely against it.

Kim Junmyeon did not date.
“It’s not an issue.” Junmyeon scoffed, “It’s only an issue if I’m bothered by it.”

“That’s fair.”

“And this-- between you two? It’s also not an issue if it’s kept that way.”

Taking his beer from the countertop, Junmyeon extended Kyungsoo a hand to shake.

“... so let’s keep it that way, yeah?”

Kyungsoo eyed him, smiling comfortably before taking the hand and shaking it firmly.

Later that night, Kyungsoo found himself privately reflecting on the conversation. He pictured their handshake and the silent oath he must have officially pledged to uphold by taking it.

To tend and care for the heart of the giant man currently on the bed beside him, humming, as he scrolled through his phone to read online comments about the Conflict de amor finale.

As what had become routine, Kyungsoo had an arm over him. He drummed his fingers affectionately on Chanyeol’s shoulder as his thoughts wandered to that of tomorrow. His first official day back as the Lockerman. He would mark his first day by attending his monthly poker game with the Southern union. Arguably, it would be the most important meeting he would have regarding the theatre fire -- with many of the crime families represented and in attendance.

The premise of an invitation suggested that he had nothing to be particularly concerned about.

But his memories of the night remained raw and unpleasant. To probe at such tender wounds risked his condition; his healing.

So yes, he was afraid. However, he wasn’t alone now and that was something.

“I’ll miss having you as a roommate.” Chanyeol mumbled, eyes still fixed on his screen, “Or like a… bedmate, really.”

The tightness in his chest fleeted away. He pinched Chanyeol’s sleeve playfully.

“I’m sure I’ll still be able to share your bed. Sometimes.”

“Sometimes,” huffed Chanyeol, as he patted Kyungsoo’s thigh with his free hand, “You’re nervous about tomorrow, aren’t you?”
A little.”

“Don’t be. They’re like your fathers, aren’t they? You’ll play them like a fiddle. The Lockerman is back. That’s all they want.”

The Lockerman. Kyungsoo flinched visibly at the name. It had been weeks since he’d heard it and now it was back. He couldn’t say he missed it. The Lockerman title had been so intimately woven with a past which had caused him nothing but injury that Kyungsoo was glad to have been freed from it. Even for a short time.

Left to just be Kyungsoo, here, where he was warm and safe and he had a Chanyeol to hold.

Resting his head against his lover’s, Kyungsoo’s dark eyes absently followed Chanyeol’s screen. There were pictures of the big Conflicto de amor wedding -- which finally happened after persevering through some dramatic and outrageous revelations. Chanyeol had practically wept through the ceremony with his niece somehow holding it back with better luck.

“Julio’s hot.” Chanyeol pouted sadly at the screen, “Hyewon is a closeted Julio admirer. She’s the girl who cried Jaime but we all know… sorry are you getting jealous? Is that why you’ve gone quiet?”

Lovingly stretching out his arms to pull Kyungsoo down to him, Chanyeol expressed a low chuckle as his smaller boyfriend glided down the bed in a smooth motion, casually rolling on top of him as he proclaimed a melodramatic,

“No es justo!” It’s not fair, “Me amas, Chanyeol!” You love me!

“Ahhh!” The taller man pulled his limbs in, expecting to be attacked -- or worse, tickled as he responded with a breathy, “No te amo!” I don’t love you.

The tickling predictably followed. Chanyeol’s laughter had become one of Kyungsoo’s renewed addictions. This was the easiest way to score a hit. Even if he was technically ticklish himself -- and was opening himself up for a future revenge hit.

“Estoy embarazada!” Kyungsoo mimicked Rosa’s big reveal as he pinched the side of Chanyeol’s hips, laughing, as the man beneath hastily pushed against his shoulders, groaning in between his own fits of laughter, “You’re-- you’re the father!” The spanish escaped him for a moment, “Eres el… el padre!”

“M--Mentiras!”

“No!”

Chest still rumbling with laughs, Chanyeol switched tact and pulled the man in instead. The switch was surprising enough that Kyungsoo fell easily, face landing high on his chest. The position was familiar to the pair -- enough that Kyungsoo naturally found himself burying the rest of his laughs into the hem of Chanyeol’s collar, as Chanyeol wrapped large and comforting arms around him.

“I’ve loved having you here.”

The admission was made even more tender by the way his heartbeat serenaded it, pressed against Kyungsoo’s keen ear.

“I love you, Kyungsoo.”
You do. Nobody says it like you do. Kyungsoo must have heard it from him a hundred times already but there were times, like this one, when he felt as powerless as when he’d heard it first. Admittedly, it was easy for Kyungsoo to be swept off his feet -- when he was so willing to soar.

“I love you too.”

Chanyeol’s heartbeat picked up, echoing his.

Kyungsoo was certain now that this was all he had ever craved from love; a simple and natural belonging. It was an uncomplicated element -- trapped within one of the most perplexing states of the human condition. This granted it an air of obscurity; a rarity; and Kyungsoo had been lucky to find the impossible in him now.

Just as he had then.

“How can I love you so much? It’s only been a month.” Chanyeol whined, squishing him tighter.

His lover could only offer a smile.

“Let’s keep it going, trouble.” Kyungsoo kissed his chest gently, “Let’s love more.”

“So you all better be ready to buy-in.”

A round of quiet hearty laughter followed. The scene permeated with the same familiar actions and actors, a still image trapped in a running monthly exhibit. There was the sharp clinking of glasses; the smell of salty and dried seafood snacks; and a permanent fog of heavy cigarette smoke hanging over the same ageing men.

The monthly poker game at The Lily Flower proceeded in its usual half-serious, half-drunken but privately competitive manner. The table was completely full and Kyungsoo showed no visible distinction of his growing inner stress as money was waved alongside the whole spectrum of city gossip, with many harbouring stories of their month-long holiday away from the city. Whilst some chose to explore further shores, such as Mr. Partis whom had spent his month lazing in hot baths in Northern Europe; others like Mr. Huang used the time productively by growing his business links with wealthy American mobsters in the midwest.

Kyungsoo was noticeably quieter than usual. His intention had been to recede within the group but there was no escaping the questions.

His inquisition would be conducted by Mr. Feng, whom was silently aided by Liu Jun whose own
sons had been present in the Elysium Amphitheatre to conduct the subsequent evacuation after hearing that *something had fucked up*.

“....you should have informed us, of all this Jung business.” Mr. Feng told him after Kyungsoo gave a light and direct coverage of his side of the story: how a representative of his old den, Jung Hajoon of the Jung Dynasty, had orchestrated a *complication* that required an -- unorthodox resolution.

Unsurprisingly, the section where he lightly referred to how his operation team had single handedly slaughtered the outlander-Jung group particularly amused Liu Jun.

“It was chaos which we could have done without, son. We would have easily resolved this matter as a union.” Mr. Feng said.

“I was unsure who to trust.” Kyungsoo admitted, fully apologetic.

Well. ¾ at least. There was still no trusting even those whom had fathered him as a boy. There hadn’t been ever since Jung Hyeonho had broken his heart.

Liu Jun reached across and squeezed his shoulder firmly.

“You truly are one of us, aren’t you?”

Mr. Feng offered a warm smile.

“Regardless, Kyungsoo, it is settled. All matters pertaining to that evening is… gone.”

*Gone.* To them perhaps.

With balled fists, Kyungsoo paraded his apologies obediently across all the men in the room. He delivered his reparations through a series of bows and softly spoken words in various languages. He received simple but knowing gestures in response: a pat on the back, a squeeze around the neck, and then finally, he found himself across Mr. Huang -- who with his newfound riches now had the largest territorial power over the city.

With the nature of the Lockerman business, it was now understood by everyone that Mr. Huang would officially take the position of his most profitable and significant client.

He was a quiet and austere man. Parallels had been drawn between them -- their forbidding nature, the great care in their workmanship, the *trust* which their rigorous service was able to build between the paranoid and paltry. Great success was being envisioned for their partnership.

“You will be an even busier man now, Kyungsoo. There are many orders which must be organised quickly for the end of the year. I trust I can leave my business with you?”

The words were strangled in Kyungsoo’s throat but he forced them out.

“Of course.”

He kept the cigarette between his lips, a sickly scratch beginning to gnaw at the back of his throat.

“There’s a good man.” Mr. Huang smiled, showing no sign of *good*, “We are very lucky to have someone like you in our city.”
Two hours of idle drinking passed.

Kyungsoo held himself together until he recognised that the amount of people in the room had considerably thinned. And then he excused himself and walked steadily into the bathroom. Once inside, he wrapped his arms over his stomach, just managing to hold down the urge to *retch* as he fell into a pathetic slump within a cubicle.

The thickness of the cigarette smoke lingered around him -- alongside the bitter taste of his forged apologies. Together, they had been spinning circles around him for hours: stifling his senses little by little until he felt the room grow small and the sickness grow bigger.

Kyungsoo counted his breaths with slow concentration, clutching his stomach, as he imagined the impossible knot within it untangling.

The only tonic for it was the audio message. The one which Chanyeol had left him that morning after he departed the house. He had listened to it before getting his new suit fitted; and he would listen to it again now, as a wretched man seeking some semblance of comfort within the filthy cubicle walls.

> *hey, so i know you’re probably shitting your pants about this poker game. but just think, once it’s over then it’s over right? you can try and think about all the stuff you’ve got to look forward to aside from your job. i’m about to pick hyewon up and she’s taking me to get an on trend haircut so… i’ll be sexier than ever, that’s great right? you can have dinner with us too if you’re free. not just tonight. anytime…..’*

Tears burned the back of Kyungsoo’s eyes as he pulled his glasses off and frantically wiped them away.

Chanyeol’s voice continued to soothe him through the artificial gloss of the phone screen. His warm voice brushed lightly by the connection static -- a reminder that he wasn’t *there* and yet he was all at the same time.

> *‘... you’re going to be fine, alright? because you’re good at your job…. i know it sucks. i want you here too. but i’m here for you. if you can wait it out then so will i. .... i love you. i love you. call me when you can yeah? bye!’*

Clasping the phone between his hands, Kyungsoo exhaled and halted his count. He then retrieved his burner phone from his back pocket and hastily pressed a number.

> “Hey.”

> “How was the vacation?”
Baekhyun’s voice dripped with relief.

“Same old. Are you free to meet?”

“You must be joking. I’m drowning in it. We have to meet today.”

Kyungsoo’s finger swiped over Chanyeol’s message affectionately before he added a firm,

“Let’s meet then. And let everyone know… that I’m back.”

Back as the Lockerman, Kyungsoo moved into an apartment complex conveniently located on the same subway line nearest to Chanyeol’s home. The place was small and furnished humbly with the basic essentials: bed, desk, rice cooker, lamp etc. On his first night, Kyungsoo did his best to commit to its immediate upkeep. The significance of cleanliness was something he had re-learned from Chanyeol.

He dusted all the furniture down and steam-cleaned the kitchen and work surfaces. He then mapped the neighbourhood, purchased groceries from the 24hour mart, and noted the hours whereby the local laundrette was open.

“You lonely yet?”

Kyungsoo sat cross-legged on his bed. There were no curtains over his window so the clear skies meant he could clearly observe the host of distant stars and the mysterious half moon. His eyes remained on the heavens, extending his hand across him and catching the cold moonlight fleetingly on his palm.

“I am. You?”

Chanyeol had called him. Kyungsoo would have called him first but he’d been uncertain if Chanyeol had been sleeping.

“A little. How did the game go?”

Kyungsoo folded his palm into a fist and cast a glance over the other side of the bed. Back in Chanyeol’s place they had naturally accommodated a space for each other. All couples seemed to do it. There was no grand discussion; just an acceptance that everything led to established patterns and a lot of divvying had to happen.

Taking the phone, Kyungsoo fell back on the bed, rolling over to regard the empty side. It was strange sleeping on this bed. It wasn’t comfortable like Chanyeol’s bed – but he wasn’t certain if that was just because it was Chanyeol-less.

“It was okay. It’s just business as usual.” He replied.
“Awesome. We got away with it then, yeah?”

Kyungsoo’s fingers extended across to touch the empty side of the mattress.

“Yeah.” He paused, “and I don’t think I’ll be able to see you this week.”

A pause followed; lengthier in Kyungsoo’s mind when he coupled it with the sad sight of the half-vacant bed.

“Oh-- okay. Well it doesn’t matter. I’m always a call away.”

“That’s true.”

The moonlight didn’t reach Chanyeol’s side. Kyungsoo momentarily considered moving the bed.

“Want to see my haircut?”

“Oh?”

Something occurred then. A shrill ringing which caught Kyungsoo completely by surprise. He swore loudly, almost dropping the phone before he realised that it was the source. Out of panic, he swiped the screen clean -- and the screen blurred --

Connecting…

At the sight of Chanyeol’s face appearing, Kyungsoo’s eyes widened more.

“Wo-- oh?” He blinked, and tapped on the screen with a finger.

“Kyunsoo, move back. All I can see is your hairline.”

Obviously still a little confused, Kyungsoo obliged. He extended the phone across him and found his expression softening as the man in the screen beamed in greeting. It wasn’t supposed to be as magical as it was but Kyungsoo’s involvement with communicative technology was obviously highly moderated. This meant that he really shouldn’t be doing any of this -- but there was not a time yet when he didn’t want to see Chanyeol.

“I forgot to teach you how to do this. Can’t get this on the burners you own. See-- we can see each other now…”

Chanyeol was on the living room couch. The lighting was poor and his eyes were puffy which suggested he had been either napping or playing video games with Junmyeon. His fingers were running through his hair proudly as he babbled on, unable to stop,

“…. Hyewon says it’s called comma hair because it looks like a comma? They got rid of so much hair. But I think I look handsome. I do, right?”

“Yeah.”

He always looked handsome. Great teeth, a strong cheekbone structure and a scattering of dimples practically handed him the title on a platter.
But Chanyeol gushed over it anyway.

Kyungsoo let him, half-heartedly listening to his tender mumbles as he placed the phone on the empty side and propped it up against the pillow. He then settled on his own and watched it closely. At least this way, it was a little like they were in bed together.

“Let’s sleep, Chanyeol. I’m tired.”

“Okay.”

Chanyeol moved down into the couch and yawned. It was probably fake—considering how awake his eyes looked from the screen.

Kyungsoo tapped against the screen lightly. Affectionately. He imagined they were his dimples and he was prodding them just as he had during the evenings they’d shared the past four weeks.

“Night night, trouble.”

“Night night.”

“Should I turn… it off?” Kyungsoo asked after a moment, unsure what to do next as he continued to stare at it.

“If you want.”

“Um. I don’t really want to.”

“That’s okay too.”

“I’ll let you do it.”

And then he rolled over, away from the light, faintly registering the sounds of Chanyeol on the couch -- shuffling -- probably preparing to engage in another video game war with his best friend. It was a familiar noise and he slept quickly.

Two busy weeks passed before Kyungsoo was able to pay a proper visit to Chanyeol’s house for dinner. The interaction was short and involved being a pedestrian to his boyfriend and his niece’s antics. He watched, a clueless bystander, as they debated with each other over movie trivia -- ... ‘the Ghostbusters would be nothing without Venkman!’ ‘Venkman is a creep and practically disposable -- unlike Dr. Spengler!’

After revealing that he had never seen the movies, and therefore had no opinion on it, Kyungsoo found himself dragged into a spontaneous movie session.

Junmyeon was buzzed in and he came running along with his DVDs, having spent much of the day mooning by himself.
As much as Kyungsoo had wanted to engage, the weight of his unrelenting schedule took hold and he found himself drifting off mid-movie -- still uncertain which Ghostbuster was which and why the ghosts looked so peculiar.

“Hey,” Chanyeol whispered. Kyungsoo’s head was reclined comfortably on Chanyeol’s shoulder. He was already snoring softly. “Kyungsoo? You want to go to bed?”

A faint nod was expressed.

“Want me to carry you up?”

A series of whispered ‘boos’ followed from the pair settled on the floor with Chanyeol getting predictably peppered with handfuls of popcorn.

Chanyeol frowned, mouthing a string of comical threats as the man beside him lifted a tired eyelid.

“I can’t stay.....” Kyungsoo rubbed his eyes, “Got to get up early.”

“I’ll drive you back then. Come on.” Chanyeol offered him a smile as the movie was paused -- and he turned to the pair on the floor, “Alright. The drive might be some time. So take care of her yeah?”

“I will.” Junmyeon and Hyewon muttered in unison as the movie was played and they continued to watch the screen.

The drive took a lengthy hour and thirty minutes with traffic around the new bypass causing delays. Kyungsoo slept for most of it, his sleep only disturbed by the car skimming the occasional steep slope. When they reached the complex, he invited Chanyeol inside, a little drowsy but pleased that having him here wasn’t just a dream he’d had in a subway cart.

“It’s kinda dark, Kyungsoo.” Chanyeol commented, as he stepped in after removing his shoes.

There was a single lamp in the bedroom. The central lights seemed somewhat dimmer than even those that they had in saunas to calm people down.

“You’re okay here?” Chanyeol extended a hand, trying to estimate the exact make of the bulbs, “I can get you better lights if you want.”

“I’m not here much. Just to sleep. I’m very busy in the day.” Kyungsoo shrugged, “I’ll be okay.”

He yawned loudly, rubbing his palms against his cheeks before he approached Chanyeol and pulled him into a tight and coveted embrace.

Chanyeol couldn’t stay long because of the long drive -- and it was a work night. They bid each other a quick farewell: an affectionate tangle of syllables and even softer kisses. No promises were
made of when they would see each other again. Just that they would.

It was only when Chanyeol left and Kyungsoo detected the familiar grumble of the car deserting the parking space that he felt himself sink into an overwhelming loneliness. One that would linger over him and keep him up for many more nights.

The entirety of the next few months — the summer — swept by Kyungsoo in a quick and manic blur, only slowing down during the late phone calls he had in the evening and the occasional free time he was able to share with Chanyeol.

Occasionally, when he was hovering blankly in a huge empty factory space, or coughing through black smoke on the back of a bus through the provinces, Kyungsoo found himself lost in his thoughts -- all his memories of the summer playing out in succession, swinging from good to bad, loneliness to love, leaving him suspended in a persistently empty state for nothing stayed long enough for him to grasp.

He felt alone though. There was no doubting that.

“Do you miss me, Kyungsoo?”

Kyungsoo narrowed his eyes at Chanyeol’s face on the screen. He was drunk. Yixing had Hyewon and this was the routine whenever he was alone at the house. There was too much beer; he always bought too much and therefore felt responsible for draining it all in the quiet hours.

This was not the same routine for Kyungsoo who was currently stood by the window sill, tending to a newly purchased ZZ plant. He had seen it on a supermarket shelf. According to the sign it didn’t need much care and required only minimal light to flourish. It was perfect.

‘You always ask me that.’

The moon was high tonight. Its light was captured in fragments by the glaze of the leaves.
“I like hearing you say you miss me. Cause I d--do.”

‘I miss you too.’ Kyungsoo curled his lips, glancing down at the dirt on his hand before casting a look at the screen.

Chanyeol had pulled his hood over his eyes. He had called because he had been worried after Kyungsoo fell off the grid for two days. It had been last minute—prompted by long negotiations with some new city players. Something about borders. Switching deliveries. It was all resolved now. Kyungsoo had called him the moment he could knowing that his silence would trigger panic.

But instead he caught him drunk and lethargic. Their conversations had been half rambly, half silent. But neither of them had the heart to hang up. They only had these calls now after all.

‘Do you want to name my plant?’ Kyungsoo turned the camera to it, ‘I got it today.’

“Jimi.” It was likely to be a musician name.

‘Okay.’ Kyungsoo could hear sniffling from the other end of the line, ‘Jimi. This is our Jimi, Chanyeol. So you have to remind me to water him.’

The sniffling stopped as Chanyeol laughed.

“Okay.”

Now for the bad part.

‘Chanyeol, I’m going off grid again… probably until the end of the week. I’ll be okay. So don’t worry this time.’

“I know. Thanks for telling me.”

Kyungsoo watched the thoughtful expression on drunken Chanyeol’s face as he processed it. He was undoubtedly sad. But he had been sad ever since the conversation began.

Something wasn’t right and it pestered Kyungsoo long after the conversation concluded with Chanyeol falling asleep on his bed first.

Of course, he wouldn’t let the question pass and Kyungsoo found out later, through directly asking Junmyeong, that that week had been particularly difficult for Chanyeol because it had contained his father’s death anniversary date.

‘You were upset then. You should have said something.’

The matter came up in a later conversation between them. It had haunted Kyungsoo how Chanyeol
had absented to mention something so significant to him.

“You wouldn’t have been able to do anything. Don’t worry about it.”

But he didn’t push it hard -- determined not to let the precious time they had to talk to each other become wrapped up in anything dismal.

He had enough of that in his every day work life.

So he focused on the now; the short and precious time they were able to share.

Compared to Kyungsoo who was calling, alone and cross-legged in a truck which would shortly be making the long trek to a Chinese distribution centre, Chanyeol was in his kitchen making dinner. He was dressed down completely, mismatched shirt and sweatpants, with thick dark hair all bouncy and stuck out to match.

The heat was spinning up from the cooker. It made the image fuzzy.

“How’s Jimi?” It had been a month since they had christened the plant. Chanyeol hadn’t forgotten to ask about it. They had seen each other twice since then. The second time Chanyeol was able to water him at his apartment.

‘Growing well.’ Kyungsoo smiled, ‘I think you’ll be able to see him soon.”

“Yes?” His eyes brightened as he turned to the screen. Kyungsoo greeted the image by tapping against it affectionately, imagining that it was the real thing -- not just a cold glass sheet. “You can still make Hyewon’s dance recital right?”

Glancing up at the dark factory roof, Kyungsoo made a calculated sweep of his schedule. He had allocated time for it specifically: Next friday. 7pm.

‘I should be okay.’

“Great.”

‘I’m really excited to see it.’ Kyungsoo admitted sheepishly, having never attended an amateur recital of any sort before.

“Yeah, she’s practicing hard. That’s why I’m stuffing her with carbs.” Chanyeol responded, tone thoughtful before he shouted out a distant, “Hyewon! Get down here now! I’m not messing around-- I’ll take that phone off you!”
The opportunity to attend the recital wouldn’t arrive on that Friday. Kyungsoo had been ready: but the Lockerman put work first.

Whilst the Park family were all settling down in their seats in the theatre, dressed in their Sunday best, dance school pamphlets all held on their laps -- Kyungsoo was alone in a laboratory facility’s waiting room. 14 miles away. West. He was also dressed in his best, for he had wanted to look his best for the recital, but now his efforts would be expended for a different cause.

Jongin appeared, jogging down the hallway.

‘...Sorry again, Kyungsoo. I know it’s last-minute but if you don’t come, he will have a…’ Jongin mouthed the words fucking meltdown as he stepped into the conference room.

He typed the message in before he entered. Guilt pricked the back of his eyes, burdening him with an instant and heavy headache.

    to: pcyy_
    There was an emergency
    I can’t make it
    I’m sorry

Three hours of austere negotiation passed and Kyungsoo allowed Jongin to drive him home. He was serenaded by two videos he’d been sent by Chanyeol-- alongside the words it’s okay. Smiley face. Heart.

    >> play

The first video was a thirty second snippet of Hyewon’s performance. She was in a group but elegantly completed her solo piece in the middle to It’s a Hard Knock Life from Annie with a practiced smile on her face.

    >> play

The second was a shaky candid filmed by an incredibly proud uncle.

    “...and the best tap dancer award of the class goes to… Park Hyewon-- wooo!” Hyewon appears in a pretty black dress, tapping her shoes against the floor as she beams at the camera, “Honestly kid,” Chanyeol’s hand appears as they hi-five, “You rocked it. Not to be biased… but everyone else really sucked.”
Someone leans across and embraces Hyewon tightly. “Uncle Yixing and I are going to buy you the biggest ice cream float this city has to offer…”

“That’s right,” Yixing’s voice is soft as he laughs.

The camera then lowers to regard Chanyeol's shiny black shoes. He begins to imitate tapping motions, “Hyewon, how does it go? Show me?”

Hyewon slides across and hums as she begins to tap in rhythm. They run through the harmony together before she reaches across and wraps her arms around him. “Did you hear me cheering kid? I cheered so loudly for you…”

“Yeah… it was really embarrassing.”

Chanyeol laughs.

The phone call that followed was a little difficult. Kyungsoo, weary from the stressful negotiations and fiercely disappointed for his absence, found himself in tears.

‘Sorry I couldn’t c--come.’

“Honestly, Kyungsoo it's fine. I’m sure it won’t be the last recital I’m forced to go to…no, no don’t be upset. Come on. You can make it up to her yeah? There will be other times. I know my Mom was there but she understands…. Hey. Hey? Do you want me to drive over? Are you home? I'll get my car keys -- shit -- Kyungsoo don’t cry…. I'm here, I'm right here… you're stressed out…really stressed out… I’ll stay up as long as you want me to…”

They talked until well into the night. The gentle reassurances did their best and eventually Kyungsoo’s tired eyes began to drift shut. He glimpsed the cold glow of the screen in his dreams.

“I love you, Kyungsoo. I miss you.”

When he woke up the next morning he assessed the time the call ended and found that it had ended shortly after he fell asleep.
His finger hovered over the call button but he found the strength to resist.

Behind him, his work phone was screaming.

On the fourth month-anniversary of their relationship, Kyungsoo spent his first free weekend at Chanyeol’s home. Baekhyun’s workload at the Herald had lightened which meant that the Lockerman was able to delegate the heft of the week’s tasks to him.

The green light for the free weekend had been tentative up until he found himself on the subway to Chanyeol’s address. This gave them no warning to have anything immense planned: aside from the usual mix of cooking food together and enough passionate fucking to last them another short period of abstinence.

During the Saturday, they had achieved neither. They spent the day with Hyewon shopping. It was Kyungsoo’s way of making up for missing her show -- and the many other showcases she had involved herself during the summer. To her uncle’s disappointment, she had been frugal with her choices and opted for a few tiny skincare products and a cheap new raincoat for the pending autumn.

‘Your Uncle Kyungsoo is rich, Hyewonnie,’ Chanyeol teased her, ‘Go ask him for something cool--like a VR headset.’

‘That’s what you want. Not me.’ Hyewon huffed, ‘Go ask him for it.’

Kyungsoo watched them argue with each other with soft eyes. There was nothing that could beat being here and not being reduced to a miniature square on a screen.

He had missed them so much.

They walked down the shopping district until the sun began to set -- with the long day made endurable by the various snack and coffee stops they made. They completed it with him and Chanyeol, hand-in-hand, and Chanyeol’s free hand firmly placed on Hyewon’s shoulder as she strolled on his left.

‘Do you two have pictures together?’ Hyewon asked out of the blue, as they were making their way past the exhibition pieces for the Festival of Light which was due to start in the week. There were many people already snapping away with their phones. ‘Can I take one of you two?’

Kyungsoo was in in the middle of poking one of the pieces -- a huge metal ball which shifted its gradients depending on the motions of the foot traffic -- when the suggestion was proposed.

‘I know you’re kinda weird about photos and stuff. So I’ll tell her to shut it if you don’t want one.’ Chanyeol trailed.
In the distance, Hyewon who had donned her mint green raincoat had already raised her phone, zooming excitedly with her fingers.

‘Um. It’s okay. We can take some.’

‘Yeah?’

Chanyeol’s eyes gleamed; almost resembling the festival piece as he stepped across and beckoned Kyungsoo to come closer, ‘C’mon then.’

Lowering his black mask and unhooking it from his face, the smaller man stepped awkwardly to his boyfriend’s side. After a moment of stillness, he glanced up at Chanyeol who was already flashing the signature ‘V’ to Hyewon, who he imagined would be rolling her eyes.

‘Should I do that too?’ Kyungsoo asked, tossing his hair consciously, ‘There’s nothing on my face right?’

‘I dunno, do what feels comfy.’ Chanyeol narrowed his eyes before swiping at Kyungsoo’s bottom lip with his thumb, ‘There’s some fluff.’

Lifting his fingers to shape a ‘V’, Kyungsoo did his best to imitate the gesture exactly but found that it only served to amuse the other. Far too much.

‘What’s funny?’ Kyungsoo frowned as Chanyeol leaned on his shoulder, laughing cheerily, ‘What should I do instead?’

He then reached across and pinched Chanyeol’s right ear until the laughs dissolved into a whine.

‘Ow, ow.’

‘Stop laughing at me then.’

They smiled at each other naturally.

Kyungsoo was just readying to press a soothing kiss to Chanyeol’s cheek when Hyewon returned to them, deadpan, extending her phone to her uncle.

‘Hey. I thought you were going to take our picture!’ Chanyeol accused.

‘I did.’ Hyewon smiled, sliding quickly through the set of pictures, ‘You two are almost insta-worthy. I didn’t even need you to pose.’

The photographs depicted a series of insignificant moments. Against the beautiful colours of the festival piece between them, the pair engaged in their short and understated conversation -- all lithe touches, fingers touching lips, deep gazes, soft smiles, and laughs. They were almost burst photos but each one told a story -- that of the subtle intimacy Kyungsoo only shared with Chanyeol which away from the pressure of the harrowing camera lens, was precisely captured -- by the girl whom perhaps had become most moved by it.
Unable to keep any personal material on his own devices, Kyungsoo had Chanyeol print out his favourite one: when Chanyeol had tilted his head at him, finger pressed against his lip, grinning as he naturally leaned forwards as if to bump their heads together. He kept it by his window sill -- by Jimi the plant -- and by the moon when she appeared.

Another long month passed. Chanyeol and Hyewon went on vacation with Yixing to Bali for two weeks. Kyungsoo became overwhelmed with handling the transatlantic work organised by Mr. Huang. Fortunately, he was able to see Baekhyun who became his confidante and sole spiritual dumping ground throughout it.

‘So, you and Chanyeol still going strong?’

Swallowing down the last mouthful of noodle soup, Kyungsoo cast a glance at the abandoned work folder between them before nodding his head.

‘You’re probably at your busiest, right now--’

‘We’re making it work.’ Kyungsoo admitted, gaze thoughtful.

‘I admire it.’ Baekhyun said, ‘But…’

The words were trailed as their bill was served. Baekhyun never returned to it but Kyungsoo could hazard a guess at what he would say; at the question he would ask.

*Can it last much longer?*

*Will it survive all of this?*

He asked this question himself during the next time he saw Chanyeol. They had planned to meet immediately on his return from vacation -- but Hyewon fell ill and he was unable to leave her side.

After a few postponements, they persisted and when the premise of a free evening came up, they seized the opportunity with almost feverish determination. Chanyeol arrived, armed with exotic sweets and stories and beautifully tanned, and Kyungsoo welcomed him into his apartment by
sinking to his knees and taking his lover’s dick into his mouth.

Such was true romance.

Unfortunately, his enthusiasm and flare for oral sex aside, Kyungsoo found himself unable to escape the questions which had been plaguing him for days. Even here; mouth full, knees scuffed. Chanyeol’s low sighs of pleasure -- mingled easily with his doubts -- the satisfying upstroke of his own heartbeat -- dampened quickly by the existing ache in his heart. Each thrust and tug by Chanyeol’s large hand was met with a needy return—

Is this enough for you?

Foolishly, he had underestimated how the sheer volume of thoughts meant that he would completely fall away from the task at hand.

So when Chanyeol came in his mouth, Kyungsoo damn near choked.

‘Oi-- Kyungsoo!’ Chanyeol was staring down at him in panic, ‘You okay?’

Kyungsoo consciously swallowed as he pulled the flaccid cock out of his mouth, a look of distaste on his face at the remote sensation of burning in his throat.

‘Well, that was…something.’ Chanyeol admitted, exhaling, as he leaned forwards and swiped the corner of Kyungsoo’s lip, ‘If I’d known you were daydreaming, I wouldn’t have… sorry.’

‘I wasn’t daydreaming.’ Kyungsoo murmured, still managing a smile. He felt a little embarrassed; but even that was submerged in the anxieties he was carrying. ‘But I’m going to clean my mouth out. It hurts.’

‘That’s probably good right? Means you haven’t had a dick in there recently…’ Chanyeol teased, tucking himself back into his trousers.

‘Haha.’

Leaning comfortably against Kyungsoo’s windowsill, Chanyeol observed Jimi-the-plant with proud eyes. He was growing even nicely than when he saw him last. The man then planted a finger against the laminated picture which Kyungsoo had pinned neatly to the window.

It was the same one he was using as a wallpaper on his phone. Him and Hyewon had agreed between them that it was the cutest.

Kyungsoo re-entered the room, one hand running through dark hair as he moved and tended to Chanyeol’s back with a hand. His palm moved in smooth circles around the spot, crumpling the shirt fabric as Chanyeol mumbled,

‘You seem upset. I’m sorry if I— uh…’
‘No it’s not that.’ Kyungsoo chuckled, as he shook his head, ‘Just…. I am finding it hard to keep my mind here. It’s become so used to being faraway from you that it still associates you with a phone call.’

‘That’s a little sad.’ Chanyeol hummed as he pecked Kyungsoo’s forehead with a kiss, ‘well… I’m here now.’

‘I know. I’ve really missed you.’

They kissed each other chastely. Kyungsoo excused himself and after a quick swig of water returned to the bedroom. He had expected Chanyeol to still be mooning over their plant—but instead he was suspiciously perusing Kyungsoo’s drawers, pulling out one of his silk blue neckties.

‘Hey Kyungsoo,’ hummed the taller man, smiling brightly, ‘You up for a game?’

As a pair, they were viciously competitive but the point of this was beyond Kyungsoo’s comprehension.

Fully expecting the game to be sexual, a thrum of anticipation had beat low in Kyungsoo as Chanyeol neatly wrapped the tie over his eyes, serving as a blindfold. However, it would shortly diminish at the revelation that the game was—practically hide and seek. All he had to do was locate Chanyeol in the bedroom -- a room which had been his principal residence for months. There was not an explicit hint of eroticism; but again, he liked to compete. With Chanyeol most of all.

The lights were switched off.

‘Find me, Kyungsoo. Go.’

The faint sound of footsteps followed.

Kyungsoo couldn’t deny the unsteady wobble in his legs and the sudden pulsing of his heart as he took his first steps away from the doorway. There was something naturally unsettling about the dark -- and it lent familiar places a quiet strangeness that tickled fear into even the most confident. Even now, as Kyungsoo navigated blindly and found himself bumping into the bed, he knew it was the bed but a part of him couldn’t be sure.

In the dark, it could be anything.

Despite this, Kyungsoo performed his search carefully, finding himself completely immersed in the challenge. With each brush of his hand, he would proclaim the object he identified, ‘Television. Desk. Sheets. Wall.’ And with that, he slowly began to build a picture of where he was as he stripped away the mask of the darkness and narrowed down his field.

When he finally reached the back wall, his hands instantly pressed against soft flesh—prompting a
restrained laugh—


Laughter.

‘I win.’ His hands reached to remove the tie only for Chanyeol’s hands to stop him,

‘Wait. Not yet. It’s my turn to find you.’

The words were mysterious and Kyungsoo sensed his earlier thrill return as he found himself carefully guided across the room by Chanyeol’s close hand.

He felt his right hand lift as Chanyeol planted it on a surface.

‘Where are we?’ Chanyeol asked.

Kyungsoo’s fingers tapped against the cool moist glass.

‘By my window.’

‘Yes, but which window?’ Strong arms encircled his shoulders. Kyungsoo’s lips broke out into a smile, exhaling into the gesture as he sensed Chanyeol rest his chin on his shoulder, ‘Where are we? You can take us absolutely anywhere. Warm. Cold. Anywhere you want to go.’

It took a second for Kyungsoo to catch the play. In the darkness where everything looked the same he could paint whatever picture he liked. An opportunity to convert what he feared -- into something he could admire.

Chanyeol busied himself by showering Kyungsoo with stray touches -- kisses on his earlobe and the exposed curve of his neck. His lips were warm and wet; and beneath it, Kyungsoo’s skin shivered with so much tacit wanting that he had to bite down on his lips to repress a sigh.

‘Warm,’ breathed Kyungsoo, not wanting to submit yet, just wanting to play, ‘Somewhere like… Capri.’

He had seen it as a destination posted on a large subway ad that day. Sun loungers and people eating fresh barbecued seafood on the sand. He had stared at it until the train passed and covered it entirely.

‘We’re at a window in our hotel in Capri.’ Chanyeol whispered, voice low and calm, ‘There’s a blue sea, birds, a golden beach…’

Just as in the photograph.

‘Hm.’

‘And us two, by our window.’

His arms fell away. Kyungsoo felt his breath hitch at the sudden sensation of his trousers being pulled down. His fingers slipped from the glass and he placed them flat against the window sill. The anticipation was back; now he could only hear white noise.

‘Keep going,’ hummed Chanyeol from behind, ‘What else is there?’

The promise was already there. Kyungsoo wanted to be touched. The sound of a bottlecap opening
brought relief.

‘It’s sunset,’ Kyungsoo narrated, achingly still, as he felt the top of Chanyeol’s head tickle the back of his neck as he lowered himself, ‘and...we’ve been fucking all day.’

The sound of Chanyeol’s familiar laugh would have elicited his own -- was he not occupied with the feeling of his underwear being pulled down by invisible hands. Suddenly, the sensations were a little thicker now: his bare ass in the air, his cock growing heavy and hard, the sheen of moisture on his palms—

‘Capri is gorgeous this time of year,’ a single lubed finger entered him slow and long and careful— ‘Been planning this since forever haven’t we?’

The darkness was slipping. Kyungsoo’s eyes clamped shut as he focused on the sunset— not the wetness and leaking, but the cold faux marble that his toes were curling on instead of carpet—and the warm draught on his arm, not from his own laboured panting as he was bent over, taking in another and another, but by the caress of summer sunlight.

‘One more...’

The enduring sting was from his own neglect. But Kyungsoo trusted him. Even here by the window in Capri.

‘We’re right by the water. Can you hear the waves?’

Kyungsoo breathed through the intensity of Chanyeol’s fingers fucking him open, slow and deep. Try as he might to imagine the seawater, or the fresh lemon groves, the images dissolved, weak and wanting, to the mercy of his lover’s practiced touches. His body submitted to him greedily. It was too dark to be proud. You win. Now fuck me properly.

But the fingers were soon gone, leaving Kyungsoo feeling pleasured yet hollow. Capri was slipping fast from his fingertips. Stealing the sunlight and the sea.

‘Still here, with me?’

The sound of his voice brought him back a cool breeze. Heat resettling on his cheeks.

‘Yeah.’

An arm was secured around him. Kyungsoo felt soft and billowy. The crackle of plastic ripping.

Chanyeol sunk into him almost instantly after and Kyungsoo moaned, bending, grasping at nothing — sheets — curtains — as he bowed his head, seething around the inches until he was in and whole. The darkness flashed away; as he found himself returning to Capri with each measured thrust, slowly, a jolt of warm sun blinding his eyes among glimpses of a crashing blue, then fast.

Sweat blossomed on his skin as he dug his foot down and moved his hips back and down with practiced ease. His thoughts clouded with a slow heat; the pleasure spreading its heavy tendrils everywhere, licking, teasing, from cock to fingers, as he carried a groaning Chanyeol with him. It was a pretty feeling.

Kyungsoo was smiling with his mouth open.

The angle was shifted. Kyungsoo was pulled up, starkly upright with most of his weight now against Chanyeol’s larger form. They shivered together; and they fucked faster. Kyungsoo could see the
beach again from here: the water, the birds. The sun was flooding his face. He was in tears. Gasping for air.

‘I’m fucking you at our window in Capri, baby—’ a gentle heat teased his ear, as two fingers brushed his open mouth, ‘...you can take us anywhere and we’ll—do it good like this, every time.’

Kyungsoo responded by licking his thick fingers, tasting the calloused tips with his tongue.

Chanyeol groaned, heavy with want, the sound grounding the sensations— pulling Kyungsoo back from the fantasy and into the indulgent stretch as his lover bucked in and out of him. The soft bumps of their heads; the hairs tickling his skin; the smell of seawater was tainted with sex and suddenly he didn’t care whether they were in Capri or by the muggy window in his apartment, all he knew was that he was being phenomenally fucked by the man he loved most.

Kyungsoo moaned freely as he sank back into Chanyeol, balancing on his steady arms as they drowned together. I’m fucking you back, baby. Can you hear the waves?

The rhythm stuttered, the noises peaking, as suddenly he was down and the carpet was back. Kyungsoo’s toes brushed against it as he felt Chanyeol’s lips press a long harsh kiss against his back. Something was mumbled punctuated with a few clumsy and slow thrusts.

Kyungsoo stroked himself, quickly releasing all over his shirt, as he felt Chanyeol stiffen behind him, knocking their bodies deep together one final time as he came, shuddering, with a rough and tired groan.

Kyungsoo pulled the blindfold away and found himself face-to-face with the moon in the distance. He wiped away his tears and the sweat from his temples as he fully settled his feet in the carpet.

He raised an arm and placed a comforting palm on Chanyeol’s weary head.

‘Let’s go somewhere warm together, next time,’ murmured Kyungsoo, as he turned and embraced him tightly, legs a little shaky.

His fingertips clung to his lover’s back as he breathed through the ensuing ache, focusing now on the way Chanyeol hugged him back -- twice as hard.

Chanyeol didn’t answer his offer but he kissed Kyungsoo so much that night that even his lips didn’t elude the morning-after pain.

Chanyeol’s contained silence would linger in Kyungsoo’s mind for a while.
There had been an implied sadness within it. A private admission -- that perhaps the closest that they would ever truly get to Capri were in the whispers they told each other in the dark. And with that, they’d be able to reach all the corners of the world if they wanted.

But none of it would be real; even if they themselves were.

When Kyungsoo realised that, something changed within him. Suddenly, he wasn’t sitting in his work vehicles and meetings seeking the opportunity to survive a tomorrow -- no he became reacquainted with an ongoing purpose that he had forgotten in the intensity of his first few months.

He needed to find a way out.

And so, even in his aloneness, and the harsh challenges posed by his summer, Kyungsoo finally found his purpose amidst the senseless humdrum of his operations.

The memories he had forged with his Trouble serving as the primary distinction between the Lockerman and him.

A union he now had every intention of severing.

---

ONE MONTH BEFORE: THE HOLE

-//-

A breakthrough came on the day Kyungsoo finally freed some time to have brunch with Jongin -- who had been insisting for weeks for a catch up. They had their food in the East where the air was saturated with the fresh scent of exotic fruits and green juice.

Jongin was sporting a deeper bronze from his most recent trip to the Cayman Islands. He spoke happily of his business holiday -- a trip which comprised of swimming with turtles and sponsoring the care of exotic baby birds and, of course, organising the tax paperwork for the Shanghai-based diplomat he owed a favour to.

They sat together in matching white polos and long black trousers. Jongin in a pale grey jumper -- Kyungsoo in black. The expensive breakfast set was across them: Jongin’s favourite pastries, tea, coffee, and eggs made three different ways.

“Honestly, Kyungsoo. You should get out there,” Jongin sighed, stretching out as he glanced wearily
at the grey skies above them, “Life is too short for people to spend their sexually-active years under grey clouds. It is downright… well, criminal. Especially for someone of your wealth.”

Kyungsoo smiled as he sipped his tea. He looked up too. It was getting colder again -- the changing of seasons descending on them without a peep of warning.

“I would take an out of this life any day, Jongin.”

“Oh?” Jongin’s tone was lazy but there was an increment of intent behind it as his eyebrow raised, “Have you ever thought of asking for one? You wouldn’t be the first you know.”

Kyungsoo’s gaze turned to him interestedly.

“What do you mean?”

“I was having drinks with someone from the-- ah, Rubies I think. Cambodians. Lovely folks. Anyway, I was told of a big shipping maestro who gave up their position for marriage and kids. Wanted out. Asked for one. Got a deal.”

Jongin sipped his drink. Kyungsoo tried to rack his memories for anything in that which struck a bell but there was nothing.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Jongin smiled, clasping his hands together, “I mean- they died shortly after going out. Possibly because he had a lot of enemies and was using the marriage as a front to get away from said enemies. But! You’re well-liked aren’t you? You’re just going to need an… exceptional circumstance.” He extracted the word out usefully, proud of himself as he then supplied a disappointed, “Shame you’re single… and childless.”

Kyungsoo pursed his lips together, eyeing his lawyer closely.

“Jongin. I’m not single.” He corrected, wondering then how offended his boyfriend would be -- had he been present, “....I’ve been dating Chanyeol for the past six months.”

If there had been any coffee in Jongin’s mouth, he would’ve certainly spat it out considering the sheer shock on his face at the revelation.

“What? That’s still going on? That’s great!” Jongin beamed, his disappointment utterly forgotten, “Well. Why don’t you go for it? Here’s what you do. You cite exceptional circumstances. And then you show them the big guns.”

“Arms?” Kyungsoo questioned.

“No…. money of course! And lots of it! If you want an out and you don’t want to die for it, you’re definitely going to have to pay for it. There’s nothing in the city that can’t be bought by money. You know that!”

Kyungsoo blinked. He did know that.

It all seemed so obvious hearing it from Jongin. However, that was just a lawyer’s touch. This had to be more complicated especially when one accounted for how the unions and the crime families worked -- and how Kyungsoo’s relationship with them was unique from the rest of his clients.

“I might try that then…. ” Kyungsoo thought aloud. “Tell them I’m marrying Chanyeol…” Wow—
“and offer up my fortune?”

Jongin shrugged, “It’s worth a try right? And look. I am speaking to you here, as a friend. Of course I don’t want to lose you as a client but you’ve been in the business a long time. And look at you Kyungsoo. You’re sexy but miserable! And if drugs, money, booze and sex dungeons, are not going to make you happy then you really can’t do this for the long term…”

Kyungsoo laughed.

“That’s true.”

“So you and Rocky, it’s the real deal then?” Jongin grinned, seeming more like a friend as he pressed on the matter with enlightened eyes, “Well, if you ever want to tie the knot for real. I am actually a legal civil officiant and I would be honoured to give you two this overrated public-friendly blessing of love whenever.”

Kyungsoo laughed again. Just the prospect of it was amusing.

“Jongin are you okay?” he asked then as he reached across and patted the man’s restless hand, “You’re cheerier than usual.”

“I just like you very much, Kyungsoo. Seeing you reminds me of the time I brought the Ocean Diamond to a police station and everyone blew their loads at my feet.” The lawyer exhaled then, perfect smile widening, as he took Kyungsoo’s hand and waved it between them, “I am also still… very very jetlagged. So I will 100% forget about this brunch once I go back to my hotel and sleep for the next 40 hours… so please feel free to debrief me when we meet again, okay? Schedule me in, Kyungsoo. I am here for you, my friend.”

Kyungsoo acted on impulse and by the end of the week found himself at his favourite dumpling place, taste-testing the new chef’s offerings, with Mr. Feng across him. He spoke candidly between bites -- polite enough to not cause offense but direct enough not to betray how seriously he was taking this possibility. *I want to leave. You have to let me.*

He had chosen Mr. Feng because he had always admired the older man’s calm demeanour— his permissive way of thinking around problems -- and also Kyungsoo just really liked dumplings.

“…. It is rare for those born into criminality to want to leave it. I suppose it is because this is the life we have always known, yes? There is no comfort in the outside world when one has seen the ugly underbelly of it. But you cite… an exceptional circumstance. A *marriage*?”

Mr. Feng was a family man. They all were. This was why their society all clung to the word *family* with an almost savage desperation -- for they all used it frequently as an excuse, a promise, an *adage* powerful enough that it could weaken a hit and lower a gun. It was just a word -- a trio of meaningless syllables -- but in this world, it was endowed with a stronger essence of loyalty and belonging.

Something which as Kyungsoo had admitted, he’d already found in Chanyeol.
“A marriage… with the tall man?”

“Yes.” Kyungsoo answered, despite having his future fake-husband having no idea yet. He would catch him up on it-- one day.

“With the tall man.” Mr. Feng smiled, aged eyes brightening, “He’s very strong. And he buys a lot of dumplings for you… but you are the Locker Man, Kyungsoo. No matter how large the title becomes, it is your face that they will see. It is your presence that continues to dictate its success.”

The name caused him to flinch but Kyungsoo held it firm as he murmured his response.

“I promise you a smooth transition,” he affirmed, gaze steadying, “Byun Baekhyun, my successor knows this world inside-out. He will tend to it. There will be no other drastic changes aside from my departure. I will even attend poker…”

Mr. Feng laughed. Kyungsoo remained still as his fingers fidgeted with the chopstick, rolling it absently between his fingertips.

“Sir, I don’t have an heir to pass my business off to. I can’t run it forever either. But I am ensuring now that there will be someone at the helm that will take this work further. And he has a spectacular mind…”

“It is not about minds. It is about trust.”

“Then trust me.” Kyungsoo’s eyes grew steely and cold -- something his companion found particularly engrossing, “Everything I know, I learned from you all. I have spent all my years serving you, growing your businesses alongside mine. I have given up everything and I am thankful and glad for everything I’ve achieved. But I will give up everything and more-- if I am trusted this one final time.”

Silence overcame them. The plates were exchanged. Kyungsoo’s gaze sunk across the table as Mr. Feng eventually spoke.

“You were offered to join many families over the years, Kyungsoo. But you never wanted to commit. You wanted Lockerman to be yours. Only yours. If you fall, it falls.” Mr. Feng tilted his head questioningly, “You must really feel something for the Tall man yes?”

He wouldn’t cry. Kyungsoo refused but he felt the threat prick the corner of his eyes as he nodded faintly.

Mr. Feng stood up and reached across, patting his head.

“Thank you for talking this matter over with me. I will get back to you in time.”

“Thank you sir.”

“Such a good and polite boy, you are. Kyungsoo.” Mr. Feng smiled sadly, “But there is a price to pay for every wish. Whether or not it comes true.”

Kyungsoo nodded his head -- this is priceless; he is priceless -- as he grabbed the elderly man’s hands and bowed before escorting him to the back of the restaurant where they delivered their joined verdict to the trial chef.

You’re successful. Good job.
“Your proclamation is creating quite a stir, Kyungsoo.”

Mr. Partis was resting against his Kawasaki motor, glancing down at the Lockerman who was on the pavement, counting with his fingers, murmurs on his lips, thoughts buzzing with that of his recent transatlantic accounts --

‘...If Puerto Rico was nine hours behind then he would have to organise the shipment team by the 16:15 transfer window (local time) to get the order ready for the Xiamen-bound ships...’

He completed the note on his phone before glancing politely at his elder.

“Sorry, Mr. Partis?”

They had ran into each other by accident. Mr. Partis had been on his way to drop off a package at the post-office when he had spied Kyungsoo walking out of a midtown Mexican place in his familiar camel jacket.

“You. Leaving.” Mr. Partis shrugged his shoulders, “The sentiment is cloudy right now. We love you too much to agree. We respect you too much to ignore you. Why are you making our life so fucking difficult all of a sudden, boy?”

“I just really want to settle down.” Kyungsoo stated, echoing the answer he had given to the many representatives whom had come to approach the subject with him, “It will be handled by more capable hands. You can trust me on that.”

“And if not, huh? What if the hands fuck it up?”

“I’ll cut them off.” Kyungsoo stood up and brushed his coat down as he shot the older man a warm smile, “I’ll cut them off in front of you all and buy you rounds after.”

Mr. Partis laughed loudly.

“Ah, Kyungsoo.” The gangster reached across and tossed Kyungsoo’s hair fondly, “Why didn’t my useless wife give birth to you instead, huh?”
The price tag for Kyungsoo’s *out* would be delivered in a single sweep of words at the next poker meeting in front of a smaller room -- just those whom had been particularly instrumental in the decision:

100 Million USD.

100% assets, all kinds accepted-- but 50% delivered directly in cash. A whopping number attached with a gratingly close deadline. Apparently it was the best they could do: and in their view, the offer achieved the balance of rightfully acknowledging his request whilst reprising the group consensus that they had no desire for him to abandon his post.

So if Kyungsoo was going to play this hard, then they would make it harder.

Ten times harder.

“Ten days,” Mr. Huang gave him a smile, shaking his hand, “If you cannot get back to us, then there will be no more talk of this.”

“Understood.”

Kyungsoo left the room, glancing down at his hand in awe. The number was big; but the weight of its potential rewards was bigger.

The premise of a rightful escape from this hell just ten days away.

Naturally, his first destination of choice was Chanyeol’s home. He dropped him a quick message and drove over, practically hopping into his arms as he celebrated the happy news.

“100 million dollars and I’m free!”

“Kyungsoo, what the f--? Huh? I’m not awake yet...”

Admittedly, these were happy news which had been cautiously drifting in his mind for weeks -- private and locked away -- only to be revealed to his boyfriend now when he can be sure that there
was a cause to celebrate.

Unsurprisingly, this meant that Chanyeol was beyond overwhelmed.

“How much?” Chanyeol gawked, almost spluttering out his water, as he stared at Kyungsoo’s flushed face from across the kitchen, “What?”

“100 million USD,” repeated Kyungsoo, already on his phone as he arranged the afternoon meeting with his second accountant, “It was estimated from my annual cash flow and existing personal reserves. Afterwards, I’ll probably have to siphon out another 60 to 75 million USD out of any remaining fixed assets. I have properties tied up in South America that will require a fuckton of legal work and they won’t comply for the deadline…”

Kyungsoo was counting on his hands again but he found himself incapable of focusing, too giddy and excited at the prospect that this was really finally happening.

His boyfriend was still gulping the number down: 100 Million USD. That was a hell of a lot of -- cookies.

Chanyeol moved around and decided he would make a few espresso shots for himself.

“Lockerman is worth that much?” he mused, blinking -- as he found himself imagining what 100 million dollars worth of espresso would look like. A tidal wave of coffee?

“Yes. Probably more. But I’m not allowed to take any money from Lockerman for this. I have to take the financial hit from my own fortune.”

“But why so much?” Chanyeol muttered, “I thought they were your dads, for fuck’s sake. This is a little excessive right?”

He couldn’t understand. Kyungsoo approached him, smiling as he handed him the box of coffee pods from across the room,

“It’s big enough to ensure that I take enough of a financial hit not to start a new rival operation, also to cover the potential costs of a transition. And… most importantly, they are petty old men and they’re unhappy with me so they want me to beg and fail.”

“Wow.”

The coffee machine began to hum. Kyungsoo embraced him tightly from behind. It was only then that it occurred to him that he hadn’t seen him for almost two weeks. This prompted him to embrace him tighter, nestling his cheek against the comfortable fuzz of Chanyeol’s thick shirt.

“The money is no problem. It’s the timing.” Kyungsoo began, “Ten days is a short time to liquidate 50 million. I need cash reserves-- and criminals in our city tend not to keep any. I would know because I would most likely be keeping them.. My own reserve isn’t near enough.”

“Let me help you though,” hummed Chanyeol, as he prepared the coffee, “Let’s do this together yeah?”

Kyungsoo nodded as he felt a hand squeeze his.

“Don’t you dare shut me out, Kyungsoo.”

“I won’t.” Kyungsoo hummed, as his back pocket then began to vibrate, “That must be him--”
“Who?”

Kyungsoo stepped back and reached for the phone, reading the screen excitedly. “The art dealer. I’m selling off all my collections in a flash transaction. He’ll pay well. Better than the dealers here but I need to organise his flight from Saudi Arabia.”

“Why?” Chanyeol turned and watched him type in a message, “He’s an old friend of yours?”

“We have a… past.” Kyungsoo narrowed his eyes at the screen before lifting his gaze to Chanyeol, “A sexual past. You’re not going to be weird about that, are you? I really am only meeting with him again for the money…”

Chanyeol’s brain was too sleepy to process that admission so he shrugged it off.

“Of course not,” he waved it off, planting the cup on his lips, as Kyungsoo grinned and raised the phone to his ear, “Get that money… I’ll be with you all the way.”

Suddenly everything was falling into place and Kyungsoo thought that nothing could possibly go wrong.

Across the city, two men collapsed on their backs against a dry patch of ground, doused in dirt and sweat. They had been digging senselessly for two whole hours. For a midday bonus; even this was pushing it a little.

“I fucking hate digging. If Baekhyun makes me do another 373, I’m going to jump into the ditch myself.” The second man grumbled, taking out a cigarette and clumsily lighting it between his lips.

373; item withdrawal/recovery

“I’ll jump with ya.” The first man agreed, wiping his runny nose as he sat back up, shooting a glare at the three huge warehouse boxes they’d just bungled from a deep hole in the ground.

“I’ll confirm this site,” the second man muttered, taking out his phone, relaxing with each draw of the nicotine.
“God, what the fuck are in those boxes?” The first man muttered, approaching one and giving it a light kick. They hadn’t been particularly heavy. The digging had been the worst part. He kicked it again, a little harder, and inside the items jingled. “Sounds like Christmas decorations.”

The second man surveilled the other with a contrite expression. His co-worker was new; a fresh babe to the Lockerman operations. He would learn soon enough that there was next to zero chance of finding tinsel in any of the boxes they exhumed from the ground.

“If it’s in a hole, it tends to either be dead bodies or something weird. Robotic sex doll parts or some shit.” The second man replied, offering his colleague a pat on the back before gesturing towards the boxes, “Now grab one. I’d rather not find out which category these belong to….”

They drove off, boxes and shovels safely stacked inside, abandoning the deep hole by the quiet side of the long outer-city highway.

---

Chapter End Notes

* i’m sorry u had to see that @ jimi - okay, the hole: part 2 coming up! Thank you for reading-- I’ll keep writing for us in the mean time-- not long now! thank you as always from me! be well lovely EXO-L!
let's get lost forever (are you hearing me?)

Chapter Summary

only time will tell if we were strong enough
but now we're older, i am certain of this love
straight through the mist would you want to walk with me
now that we're here, i promise I will never leave
-- *last of the true believers*, jessie ware

Chapter Notes

*///*

FOUR DAYS BEFORE: THE HOLE

*///*

>> call
>> bunny
>>> connecting

“.... Chanyeol? Yeah, sorry bro. Signal here is shit. I’m standing on a fucking tree stump.”

“Bro, it’s cool.”

“Alright. Where were we?”

Gliding a careful finger across the painting’s glossy wooden frame, Chanyeol wiped the surface tentatively with his own homemade cleaning mixture: a dilute combination of white vinegar and a
few drops of wood oil. He did so whilst his other hand held the mobile close to his ear, running through his tale of woe with Junmyeon.

There was no need to guess about what; or rather whom.

“.... I’m not being a terrible person right? For wanting to help? I told him right at the start not to shut me out and guess what he’s doing? Yeah, ever since that day, all I’ve got are three words. Four if I’m lucky. He’s not even around long enough for me to complain at him. He just goes-- goes and has meals with his art dealer. You’d think one look at the paintings would be enough but apparently that’s not how it works…”

“You sure you’re not just pissed ‘cause he’s hanging out with an ex?”

Chanyeol scoffed as he inserted a Q-tip into the narrow crevices of the frame, examining it closely as he swiped the faint layer of house dust away.

“Come on man. You know I’m not the type.” His eyebrows furrowed, “But yeah, I suppose I’m a bit pissed off. I’ve had -- what? One dinner with Kyungsoo this month? Suddenly, he comes along and gets the full three meals a day with him?”

“Sure that’s all he’s getting?”

“Ha.” Chanyeol bit down on his lip, frowning as he wiped with a tad more pace.

“Bro, I’m joking. Don’t get messed up on this. Trust your gut.”

The frown on Chanyeol’s face was justly preserved as he considered exactly what his gut was telling him. It was a puzzling mess. Whilst on one hand, he fully asserted his trust in his boyfriend and was convinced that he could pull the impossible off -- there remained a part of him, the shadow, who remembered clearly what it was like being left in the dark and how that ended up with him clinging onto a heart that resembled old roadkill. He would not be that guy again.

“I dunno man,” the tall man sighed, as he reached out and wiped the top of the frame dry, “Maybe this is the life I’ve got coming for me. Once Kyungsoo’s out, he’s going to see his freedom as the opportunity to go flying off to all his international millionaire friends. He’ll think got my whole life ahead of me now! Why stay with my boyfriend who can’t even go out on weeknights because he has a teenage dependant?”

With a loud huff, Chanyeol’s gaze moved aside and regarded the the Botticelli painting. He had moved it from the garage around the first time Kyungsoo had moved in, aware that his boyfriend had been fond of it.

An audible sigh was heard on the line. “... If you think that, then I’ve been reading you and Kyungsoo really wrong for the past few months.”

“Yeah, I know.” Chanyeol stepped back, drawing a deep inhale as he viewed and appreciated the painting in its full scope. Whilst he remained completely stumped by the value behind artistic works and what exactly made them so profound and collection-worthy, Chanyeol had long associated this piece with Kyungsoo and he couldn’t deny the significance that came with that.

They had kissed in front of this painting. That kiss; the one that had started this all.

There was no better reminder, in many ways, of just how far they have come as lovers.

“Well, whatever happens bro. I’ll be here for you. You know that.”
“Thanks, man. I really miss you. How’s your family?”

Junmyeon had taken a pseudo sabbatical of sorts and was currently in the mountains visiting his family to celebrate a few momentous occasions: a graduation, a new baby nephew, a grandparent’s birthday. “How’s Jongdae enjoying himself?”

Oh yes. He was conducting this important family trip -- with Jongdae. His friend. According to Junmyeon, Jongdae had expressed interest in coming with him and spending some free time unwinding outdoors.

Although Chanyeol had wanted to tease him about it, he became overwhelmed with a far more amusing -- and undeniable -- sense of jealousy. He recalled how he had playfully griped at Junmyeon about his and Jongdae’s budding “friendship” -- you better not be replacing me! -- and the response he had received was a hard flick around the earlobe and a mushy kiss on the forehead.

‘Don’t be jealous you sappy shit, you know I love you most…’

Chanyeol did know and he made a mental note to make sure Jongdae knew it too.

Dabbing the rest of the frame dry, Chanyeol found himself smiling naturally as he listened to his best friend narrate his country experiences. He imagined what it must be like up there in the open mountain ranges: cooler, fresher, cleaner and tranquil. Certainly a pleasant contrast to what he’d had to endure here in the city with the pollutants and fumes.

“The family’s good! Got a new baby nephew. He’s huge. And Jongdae’s enjoying himself. We’ve been teaching him how to fish and shoot. Can’t do any of it right. It’s so hilarious…”

“Aw, give them my love. Got to go pick up Hyewon. I’m late already. Alright I’ll see you soon, okay? Keep your phone on man. I need you to get me through this.”

“Will do.”

Chanyeol packed up his cleaning utensils.

“Love you, bro.”

“Love you too. Be back soon.”
A half hour after a grumpy Hyewon was picked up by her uncle -- she was subsequently dumped on her own after Chanyeol was whisked away on a sudden work emergency. It was an electronic malfunction at Mrs. Lee’s four bedroomed bungalow in the North West. She was off on vacation. He had to come because the alarms were going haywire -- possibly due to a fallen gazebo tripping a motion alarm.

He had insisted that he could see to it in the morning -- but Chanyeol was a sucker for his client list comprised of ladies who reminded him of his beloved mother and other close relatives. And so when they asked and begged and called him by the various nicknames they’d attached to him, Chanyeol was powerless to refuse them.

Thus, a flustered Chanyeol found himself darting from the house and into his car, phone pressed to his ear to drop a quick message to Hyewon’s usual babysitter -- not Uncle Yixing for he was on shift, but the young Miss Seunghee.

Chanyeol liked Seunghee because she was pretty -- and he was determined that Hyewon was in dire need of an older sister-figure in her life. The reality was very different. During the occasional afternoons that Seunghee watched over her, they barely interacted with Hyewon choosing to idly daydream in her room, whilst Miss Seunghee perched herself on the Park family couch filming vlogs about the environmental damage caused by heartless meat-eaters.

Her implacable passion for subjects that didn’t reflect Hyewon’s interests, added to the teenager’s belief that she was too old for a babysitter, meant that when Seunghee didn’t arrive at the time she had intended to -- Hyewon felt little urge to inform her already-very-panicked uncle.

Instead, she spent a good portion of an hour sat cross-legged across the painting in the upstairs hallway, completing a new sketch of it. For months, Hyewon had composed a small project for herself whereby she took tiny frames of the complex and utterly engrossing piece of (allegedly knock-off) art and interpreted it in her own way. Today, her attention was staked in sketching the beautiful clean horizon that spanned the whole picture, hosting the bright stars and the illusory moon.

Her peaceful session was disturbed by the striking sound of the doorbell. After letting the bell ring a handful more times, Hyewon trudged down the steps, sketchbook in hand and flung it open after realising who it was through the pinhole secured at the top.

“Uncle Kyungsoo!”

She had started calling all the older men around her uncles after being tweaked in the ear by her grandmother for being too informal around her Uncle Chanyeol’s friend, Junmyeon-- now christened as her Uncle Junmyeon.

“Oh, hi Hyewon,” Kyungsoo greeted her with his usual refined smile, “Is your uncle home? I’m supposed to see him but I can’t…”

“He isn’t. Work emergency.” Hyewon replied.

“Oh?”

“Please come in!”

She practically pulled him in, ecstatic to see him especially with her sketchbook at hand. For the past few months, Uncle Kyungsoo had been the only figure in her close circles who had been supportive of her hobby. He had expressed a strong appreciation of all types of visual art and had been a pleasant contrast to her Uncle Chanyeol whose most constructive critique of one of her paintings was
that it looked like something they’d hang at a cafe.

“Is anyone here, Hyewon?” Kyungsoo asked, visually more serious now as he assessed the situation, “Are you alone?”

“I’m alone. Miss Seunghee’s late.” Hyewon sighed as she picked her sketchbook up and flicked it open to the page she had been working on, “Look! What I’ve been drawing this afternoon!”

“But… your uncle hates you being alone here. Is there anyone else we can get?—Oh, and this is great! You’re on the sky already? I thought you weren’t going to attempt it until Christmas!”

Hyewon beamed at him, delighted that he would remember such a detail.

“I thought I’d try it… and um, there really isn’t anyone. But I think I’ll be okay here. So don’t worry.”

“No, I don’t feel comfortable with that.” Kyungsoo pursed his lips together, before casting a quick glance at his watch, “I really have to go through…”

And then Hyewon came up with a brilliant compromise.

“Just take me with you!”

“Oh,” Kyungsoo chuckled softly, shaking his head, “Now that, I know your uncle won’t like.”

But the idea was perfect. She couldn’t think of any better opportunity to get better acquainted with the mysterious man who had, for months, rooted himself within the confines of her family.

Hyewon was quick to jump into the act, proclaiming a desperate, “Pleeeease! Please Uncle Kyungsoo! I can’t stay here on my own! I’m scared of ghosts! I’m going to be terrified when it gets dark! Uncle Chanyeol says he won’t be back until late!”

“Oh god.” Kyungsoo exhaled deeply, as he nodded in defeat, “Alright then. Just grab a coat, okay? It’s really cold.”

“So, all I want you to do is sit here. And it will be twenty five minutes, tops. Okay, Hyewon? No talking to anyone. No leaving this room.”

Hyewon had been taken to the city’s National Portrait Museum. She knew it well because she had been there twice before on a trip with her father -- and a short school trip with her art class. Strangely, she had been taken to an upstairs floor which was intended to be a free museum space for exhibitions. Before she could investigate it all further, she was dumped in the security closet which--
for even stranger reasons was empty.

It wouldn’t take long for her to emerge from the room and snoop. She had been dumped one too many times today.

And this was how she would eventually find herself sat on a bench right at the top of the huge exhibit room, gazing down at the most diverse collection of art. There was no order in the way that they were arranged, nor any set furnishings which would suggest that this was an exhibition.

The room comprised of a small hub of activity, both people and art: there were paintings on makeshift stands, a host of sculptures in the middle with some still shyly tucked under thick sheeting, large religious articles from temples to churches, a pair of tapestries that were being carefully assessed by figures with opaque gloves.

Kyungsoo took a seat beside her shortly after he politely asked for her to occupy the bench and let those who were working complete their tasks.

“Are you an art dealer?” Hyewon asked him outright as he glanced at her, seeming stressed, but maintaining his composure when their eyes met.

“No,” Kyungsoo responded, “Just a collector.”

Hyewon remembered what her Uncle had told her the first time he had moved in. No personal questions to Uncle Kyungsoo. So she had naturally assumed that he worked for the government -- or something similar.

This strange sight only served to deepen the air of mystery Kyungsoo carried around himself -- and once again led Hyewon to question what it was that connected him to her artistically-deaf tall Uncle.

The subject of questions were then shifted, after Hyewon decided not to risk intruding on matters he had no interest in discussing.

“Are you going to move back in with us again soon?” She had noticed he had been sleeping over again.

“Um, maybe.” Kyungsoo expressed a small smile, “Why? Has your uncle said something to you?”

“No.” Hyewon smiled back, “But I’m sure he’d like you to. He… misses you.”

Hyewon absented to mention that she thought that her Uncle missed his boyfriend -- a lot. She wondered if he even had the remotest inkling of how devoted her Uncle Chanyeol was to him. It frightened her in many ways -- the power he held over him, silent and overriding. How one phone call from Kyungsoo could shift her uncle’s mood from sad to sunny, or the other way around. The latter transition being the one that always worried her.

She watched him more closely now, as his expression once again retreated to a plane she wasn’t yet old enough or equipped enough to read. Her own thoughts however, were loud and clear, even on the expression on her face as her lips firmly curled.

*If you hurt him I’ll twist your arm.*

“I miss him more.” Kyungsoo answered, wistful, as he met the younger Park’s gaze.

“You should tell him more.” Hyewon suggested, completely serious, processing the images which his words spurred on -- of her Uncle’s sad (and loud) phonecalls with Junmyeon during their gaming
sessions at night when Hyewon was poring over plant anatomy in the kitchen. Even from those simple moments of observation alone, she was able to glean how Uncle Chanyeol loved him so much; and it was dejecting to know that by being away, Kyungsoo wouldn’t appreciate the breadth of it.

The humdrum way in which their relationship influenced his uncle’s everyday thoughts and feelings.

“I do. A lot.” Kyungsoo murmured eventually, watching her, “You should remind him when he forgets. Because he does, right?”

“I think he does.” Hyewon answered, pricked by an unexplainable sadness as Kyungsoo nodded his head as if he shared and felt it too.

“He’s like that. He’s always been like that. We both need to try harder at a lot of things. Me especially. But we are still together and happy, Hyewon. You don’t need to worry.”

“Thanks.” Hyewon smiled, “That’s good to know. I… like you two together.”

“Oh?” Kyungsoo’s eyes lit up, “Really?”

“Yeah,” muttered Hyewon, a little shy as she fiddled with the hem of her jacket, “I like knowing my uncle won’t be lonely.”

“He’s not. He won’t be.” Kyungsoo affirmed, voice heavy with emotion as he smiled at her, “Not whilst we are taking care of him.”

Kyungsoo returned to the Park residence later that afternoon with Hyewon. Together, they had devised a short and non-art related story of how he had ended up taking Hyewon to the mall for a short walkabout due to the absent Seunghee. Kyungsoo hadn’t wanted to lie to Chanyeol but Hyewon had insisted, having drafted an entire excuse in her mind the moment they commenced their drive home.

Unsurprisingly, her uncle consumed the tale with wide-eyed belief, just delighted at the prospect of seeing his two favourite people together after all the unnecessary commotion of his work emergency.

Their evening as a three was as peaceful as any on the mountains. Hyewon continued her drawings of the painting, headphones over her ears playing the most recent podcast of a book she was meant to be reading -- whilst downstairs, Chanyeol enjoyed Kyungsoo pampering him with some much-needed attention. “Ah, you need to cut your hair again,” Kyungsoo muttered, tugging lightly at his fringe as Chanyeol whined, locked in his arms, “Every time I see you, you’re a little…”

“Handsomer?”

“Skinnier.” Kyungsoo rested a finger on his lip, as Chanyeol attempted to kiss him, “Stop stress-boxing.”
“Then stop stressing me out,” Chanyeol teased as he captured his boyfriend’s soft lips in a quick kiss.

“How was today?” he asked after, never skipping the opportunity to inquire about Kyungsoo’s 100 Million USD quest, “Did it get anywhere with the art dealer?”

Kyungsoo continued to thread his fingers through Chanyeol’s hair, finding the gesture calming. The stress he harboured inside was undeniable in the inconvenienced way he exhaled as he spoke.

“He finally got to value them all. So he says he’ll get back to me with a number by tomorrow… and his name is Sehun. You don’t have to call him the art dealer every time.”

Chanyeol scrunched up his nose in response before his lips broke out into the same comfortable smile. He kissed Kyungsoo again, soothed by the way the smaller man submitted to his touches as he asked,

“Anything else I should know about? Anything I can help with?”

Kyungsoo returned the smile as he retreated and pressed his own lips to his boyfriend’s temple.

“No. I’m okay. It’s hell. But there’s progress.”

Silence followed. Kyungsoo oblivious; and Chanyeol disappointed by the same offhanded rejection of his offer of support.

He succumbed to the weariness eventually, tucking Kyungsoo into his arms for a hug as he murmured,

“Time for bed. Let’s set down early tonight.” He reckoned it was a smart plan because they were both clearly drained -- and Hyewon also had maths as her first class which meant she would absolutely do the utmost to ensure that she was late.

Brat.

“No, you go.” Kyungsoo smiled, brushing Chanyeol’s fringe back as he disentangled himself from the embrace, “I need to stay up because I have trucks in shipment and I need to know they get into the city okay.”

“Oh.”

Chanyeol acknowledged the answer with a sigh as he stood up and nodded. Defeated.

“Good night then.”

“Night,” and then Kyungsoo raised his voice, leaning slightly out to shout through the door, “Hyewon, good night!”

From above came a simple,

“I’m not going to bed yet!”

Chanyeol rolled his eyes before exchanging a warm smile with Kyungsoo who chuckled knowingly.

“You want her? I’ll give you money.”

“Don’t let her hear you, she’ll write you into her school projects again,” warned Kyungsoo, referring to the many times Chanyeol had featured in Hyewon’s creative writing pieces as the giant godzilla
man who caused havoc in the cities.

The tired uncle rubbed his eyes and nodded, defeated again.

“That’s a good point.”

Overwrought with unspoken worries, perhaps even restless dreams, Chanyeol returned downstairs later in the night in search of company. What he found, to his grand dismay, was a comfortably dozing Kyungsoo, curled up on the largest couch, his burner phone tucked close to his chest.

It was typical.

Chanyeol rolled his eyes as he pulled the blanket he’d given to him earlier in the night higher to cover his entire body. The taller man then perched himself on the rug across the couch. He leaned forwards, resting his chin on the edge, eyes weary but tender.

“You’re such an idiot, Kyungsoo,” he whispered, affectionate, as he admired Kyungsoo’s tightly pressed lips and thick eyelashes, the roundness of his cheeks, and his mellow expression, “Do I have to do everything for you? Put you to sleep? Wake you up? Keep you up?”

“It’s because you love me,” hummed Kyungsoo, eyes still shut, startling the man who blinked -- almost slipping on the floor as he momentarily flinched.

“No I don’t anymore.” Chanyeol frowned, taking a second to re-compose, “I quit. You’re too much work.”

Kyungsoo pouted, still somehow maintaining the picture of a dozing figure.

“That won’t work on me.” Chanyeol insisted, as his thoughts betrayed him with images of caressing those lips with his own -- “Maybe a little.”

The pout curved into a full smile.

Chanyeol brushed his boyfriend’s forehead with a gentle hand.

“Just go to bed with me, Kyungsoo.” *Please.*

“Mmkay,” Kyungsoo yawned, as he extended out of his arms, and wrapped them around Chanyeol’s broad shoulders, “Carry me up.”

Whilst Chanyeol felt the natural exasperation associated with being presented with any situation that echoed a 2000s romantic-comedy, he found himself *utterly* bowled over by the heart-breaking *cuteness* presented by a sleepy and overtired Kyungsoo. He rarely saw this side of Kyungsoo because the man never slept -- and when he did, Chanyeol always slept and lazed more.

“C’mon, boyfriend.” Kyungsoo hummed into his cheek as Chanyeol attempted to maneuver into a steady position whilst on the floor.
“You’re doing this for me in the future,” muttered Chanyeol as he revelled in the softness and warmth of his lover as he wrapped his own larger arms around him.

It was during the peak of this mushy and sentimental tangle when Kyungsoo was chuckling quietly, and Chanyeol was strategizing the move out loud, that the private hush of the living room was rattled by the piercing sound of a buzz-like ringtone.

Kyungsoo woke up immediately, scampering for the burner phone which had fallen to the floor.

“Hello? Sehun?” he fumbled, as Chanyeol found himself waved away by the sudden surge of activity in the room, “Oh hi. Yeah I’m awake. I was monitoring the -- so they’re there? Okay great. You want to meet up? I can do it now. Alright I’ll see you. Yeah! Yeah I’ll have breakfast too…”

Chanyeol retreated quickly from the room, weighed down by a sudden stroke of fatigue. Silent, the tall man deserted his post with the bashful sound of Kyungsoo’s whispered laughter echoing in his ears.

-//-

THREE DAYS BEFORE: THE HOLE

-//-

“I’ll need more than that, Sehun.”

Kyungsoo hated playing with food but there was a part of him which was tempted to swipe a crescent from the gleaming soft yolk in the middle of his breakfast egg. He was restless and he wanted to be occupied with something.

Across him, his companion, sat the junior art dealer Oh Sehun. Their history was brief but extensive, as what one would expect from Kyungsoo’s short string of relationships. A cool but uninvolved love affair had ensued between them -- sexual, but companionable. They enjoyed each other’s company. Kyungsoo enjoyed being surrounded by the unconventional and Sehun was exactly that. He was also very beautiful; and Kyungsoo liked that too. Oh, and they bonded over their mutual love of good cuisine.

The only son of a wealthy socialite and a renowned twice-divorced Ottoman era historian, the young Mr. Oh had ran into the Lockerman whilst he had been abroad diversifying his business and escaping from his past. His character was an attractive blend of contrasts: strict and polished at first handshake, charming and seductive at first drinks, and sweet and gentle at first touch. Well-educated and poetic in nature, Sehun was thoughtful, well-mannered, and there was an astronomical sense of care in his gaze which Kyungsoo found unique and appealing.

They had parted on good terms but this time Kyungsoo needed him and the Sehun across him, the older and more experienced Oh Sehun, was driving an obnoxiously hard bargain.
“Twenty-five million is a lot at short notice.” Sehun noted, having never taken his eyes off his companion since the breakfast began.

“You have more.” Kyungsoo stated simply, “I have a Cezanne which can fetch three times what you’re offering me.”

“The time frame is limiting me.” Sehun shrugged, “Not my generosity.”

“Then let your generosity find a way.” Kyungsoo said, echoing the smile which appeared on Sehun’s lips as he glanced down and finally made a start on his morning order of breakfast noodles.

“I’ve missed you, Kyungsoo.” Sehun stated with a smile after a few beats of silence, “Two and a half years have passed and you’re still stubborn.”

“How else do you think I run a business in a city like this?” Kyungsoo laughed.

Sehun acknowledged the reply with his own chuckle. The notoriety of this city was no question; neither was of the reputation attached to the powerful man across him.

“A business you are giving up.” Sehun murmured, before he leaned across and said, “I’ll see what I can do…. do you have dinner plans? I am staying at the Four Seasons and I hear it has a fantastic new sushi chef. I am craving sushi as it’s my jet-lag food.”

Kyungsoo looked at him, thoughtful before he shook his head. “I can’t do dinner. I promised to see my boyfriend tonight.” He had texted Chanyeol about it after recalling how he had abruptly left him in the morning. Kyungsoo knew he had some making up to do after the message was sent back with no heart emoji.

“Fiancé, you mean.” Sehun raised an eyebrow.

“Yes.” Kyungsoo nodded, cheeks presenting a light pink. It was an unavoidable response considering that that was a blatant lie. However, he was generally a comfortable liar; this was honestly something else.

“Never did I think that I would see the day.” Sehun mused with a chuckle, “My Kyungsoo -- a committed and married man!”

“Well, you must have at one point.” Kyungsoo blurted out.

Sehun laughed suddenly as his eyes flashed with joy.

“If that’s a reference to my proposal, then you’re right. I did! I must have -- for a time imagined you committed and married…to me of all people!”

Now that bombshell constituted as the type of key fact that belonged right at the top of a factfile summarising the year Kyungsoo sexed it up with a cute younger guy.

Oh Sehun, freshly graduated at the time, had pulled out his grandmother’s diamond jade engagement ring and proclaimed his interest in committing forever to the young man whom to him had encapsulated all he would ever dream of in a life partner. Kyungsoo was kind and knowledgeable, warm and funny, loved food and fucking, and all the other great things that made life worth living.

To his dismay, he was turned down politely.
And after making love one final time, they bid each other goodbye on the warm shores of Paraguay.

“So he’s the different love of a different time then?”

“Hm?” Kyungsoo asked.

Sehun smiled keenly.

“That was how you had phrased my rejection from my memory. This is a commitment for a different love of a different time. I remember it. It was a very pretty sentence. I never understood it. It sounds like you’re talking about the future but your tone always pointed to the past….” Sehun nodded his head, “He must be quite a man. To have become your past, present and future huh?”

“He is.” Kyungsoo smiled, his devotion undeniable as his brain withdrew to its usual set of sincere responses when his boyfriend was in discussion, “He’s a great man with a good soul.”

The aforestated great man with a good soul meanwhile would find himself in a less than great and good situation later that same afternoon.

Driving down the quicker route around the river from the grubby shithole that was Earl St., Chanyeol found himself halting his car right by the abandoned set of dilapidated manufacturing factories. He glanced through the dash mirror at the black Prius which had been running circles around him all day. The ridiculousness had started early—straight after he drove back into the city centre following dropping Hyewon off at school.

Admittedly, he’d been more patient than usual. He had a rather poor track record when it came to his calm handling of stalkers after all.

Rubbing his right knuckles against his left palm, the tall man abandoned his work car, face sullen and surly. He stepped out around the same time that the man in black sat in the passenger seat of the Prius of interest departed his own vehicle.

“Hey,” The man was shorter than Chanyeol. Skinny. Easy. “I think there’s been a mis—”

Cold air ran through Chanyeol’s hair as he approached him, showing no interest in conversing, as he snatched the stranger’s collar tight with a single swipe of his fingers,

“Why are you following me?” Chanyeol demanded, staring directly into the younger man’s eyes as they widened, “Who the fuck are you?”

“We’re freelance,” was the man’s pathetic response, “Just following instructions.”
Chanyeol became so deafened with the pent up frustration he had been holding in that he missed the car door opening just by him. And so, when a stranger’s hand landed on Chanyeol’s shoulder, as an extension of peace and calm, the boxer missed the point entirely and responded with full dependency on his gut.

Thus, with a single pivot of his shoes against the concrete, Chanyeol’s left elbow knocked into the chest of the man stood behind him as he released the other man’s collar, fingers curling into a tight and hard fist as he turned and—

thwack!

What followed was the usual: fist meeting face, face meeting fist, fist meeting fist, body meeting car, knees hitting floor -- and a six foot man sensing at one point that he may have overreacted and should learn how to ask questions before throwing a straight punch.

“Ow.”

“Keep still.” Kyungsoo cleaned the cut around Chanyeol’s swollen lip with a swab of antiseptic, having just finished bundling his right hand into a cautionary bandage. Chanyeol was quiet, busied with his sole task of pressing an ice pack to his left cheek -- the only noticeable injury from the brief punch-up.

In the tense quiet, he recalled how he’d kneed the bigger man in the face by accident -- and how his random outburst of an apology after seeing how the other’s jaw had clicked had proven to be the trigger that awkwardly stunted the fight mid-punch.

Chanyeol smiled at the memory, dimples deepening.

“Chanyeol, this isn’t funny.”

Kyungsoo had been in the middle of a call with Baekhyun when he was informed by an unimpressed Sehun of what his fiance had been up to with his associates that afternoon.

He had come to the Park family home shaking -- worried and upset; and Kyungsoo’s dismay only multiplied after he’d found a happy Chanyeol in the house, swollen-lipped, humming Aerosmith as he cooked three packets of ramen over the stove.

“Who says it is?” Chanyeol mumbled, glancing longingly at the ramen bowl which had grown cold in the time Kyungsoo had been attending to him.
He turned his attention and observed Kyungsoo up close. There were deep grey circles under his eyes, almost bruise-like in depth, concealed only by the round glasses which hung slightly loose over his nose. His gaze trembled with unshared thoughts, complimenting an almost mean line resting across his lips. And for the first time in a long time, Chanyeol didn’t feel like kissing him even at this distance.

“It was their fault for following me. You know I don’t go for that shit.” Chanyeol spat, still bitter about the situation -- especially after finding out who had sent the men, “If they wanted to stalk me then they should do it properly. I found out halfway through the morning. If you’re performing clandestine surveillance and you’re getting found out, you stop. It’s the first rule!”

“Sehun was vetting.” Kyungsoo murmured with a sigh, “We all do it.”

“Yeah well, it’s Earl St. So of course I wouldn’t be up for any funny business.”

Kyungsoo stiffened at the mention of the location as Chanyeol visibly gulped, eyes wide. The smaller man’s hand lowered as his gaze was hoisted up to meet Chanyeol’s.

“What were you doing in Earl St.?” Earl St. The garbage can of the South East. Home of the 24-hour donut place, the street with the highest murder rate in the city, and -- the seedy shithole which housed Pip and his merry army of Pips, the street term for armed robbers.

“I was… buying donuts.” Chanyeol joked.

“Please tell me you didn’t go see him.” Kyungsoo stepped back, overcome with an immediate wave of sickness as Chanyeol failed to answer properly, choosing to direct his shaky eyes to the ceiling as he lowered the ice pack to the dinner table.

Kyungsoo’s hands balled into fists.

“Chanyeol,” he implored.

“He’s got a big gig in two weeks.” Chanyeol sighed, expelling the words like he was unloading a heavy weight, “He can get me a retainer. If I staff the meetings for him, he’ll give me 200k upfront.”

The meeting had been inspired that same morning after Kyungsoo had left to meet Sehun and Chanyeol had been deserted to stew alone, with headphones on, listening to the global online radio. There had been a pressing news story featured about a botched robbery of a Spanish bank. The armed robbers had miscalculated their entry and tripped the security services off -- a circumstance made possible after the bank had (irresponsibly) failed to update their security information on the central system. A fortunate circumstance because this meant that the robbers’ intel was outdated.

The estimated amount that could’ve been stolen? Approximately 15 million euros worth.
“What I would do with that money!” cried the radio jockey, cackling as Chanyeol stared at his ceiling, heavy-hearted, as he threw his baseball in the air.

Once.

Twice.

Thrice.

With very little after thought, Chanyeol looked for Pip at Earl St. later that afternoon. He had spotted his copper-coloured car outside an Indian restaurant with a wonky sign. He followed him inside.

‘Boy.’ Pip opened his arms, smearing his lips against a napkin, as he greeted him, ‘I suppose you have finally come to beg for forgiveness. You caught me at a good time. Alone.’

‘I need work.’ Chanyeol said, icily direct, pockets in hand as the words were dragged out of him.

Pip glanced at him, laughed, before digging into his biryani.

‘I should have you shot after what you did to my nose.’ Pip muttered.

Chanyeol made a finger gun and shot at the man across him. Pip raised an eyebrow, muttered a set of private curses before laughing.

‘I can bring the real deal if you give me a job. The biggest one you got.’ Chanyeol forced a smile, taking a spoon and digging into the food across him as Pip lowered his own fork, ‘Highest offer you got going. I want in.’

‘You’re brave, boy.’ Pip smiled, yellow-teeth flashing against the artificial hue of the restaurant light, ‘You’re being real brave.’

‘You love it.’ Chanyeol grinned, utterly at-ease, the pull of the elements -- of this side of him -- as enticing and natural as any of the other vices that had dug their claws into him over the years.

Now unlike Pip, and the other Pips -- Kyungsoo appeared considerably less keen to hear about Chanyeol making a return to his old haunt.

Their conversation continued on with such a tremendous level of tension that it soon escalated into an exhaustive shouting match between the two. Kyungsoo was on the one side, absolutely jarring in his hatred of Pip and Chanyeol’s renewed connection with him -- “You can’t work for him! You told me yourself! He’s a parasite!” whilst Chanyeol resided on the other side, increasingly frustrated, and absolutely convinced of the merits behind his morally questionable decision.
The yelling continued until they had dragged the conversation right into the living room as if the air in the kitchen had grown too toxic. Fortunately, Hyewon was at Yixing’s so they could be as angry and cuss-y as their hearts desired.

“You really think a job worth that much would be just like that? You didn’t even take jobs as big as that when you were a robber, Chanyeol! It’s a death trap!”

Chanyeol watched the man across him fidget with his fingers, squeezing, tangling them in the air as he paced the room frantically.

“Focus on the money, Kyungsoo,” Chanyeol lowered his voice, hoping to quell the temptation to snap again, “That’s 200k you don’t even need to think about-- you can stress about Sehun less if we think of other ways to raise--”

“Sehun? Sehun? He won’t even speak to me after you punched his guy!” Kyungsoo sighed, as he quickly returned to the subject he was more concerned with, “Chanyeol! Call him! Tell him that you won’t do it!”

“No!” Chanyeol defended, breathing heavy, “Why should I? I can do it… so why not?”

Silence fell between them. Kyungsoo was trembling violently.

“You said you wouldn’t.” Kyungsoo murmured, voice hoarse as his fists uncurled, “You said no more because of Hy--”

“Don’t finish.” Chanyeol stated, raising a finger in warning, “She is not in this.”

“Neither am I,” cried Kyungsoo, “Don’t make this about me, Chanyeol. I’m telling you that I don’t want you to do it.”

Chanyeol threw his hands up in defeat.

“Then I take responsibility, okay?”

Kyungsoo’s lips parted -- shaping a word -- a desperate plea -- before his phone began to ring. It continued to do so, ringringring, and as it shrieked high and free above the sounds of their breathing, and their anger, Chanyeol felt like the sound was suffocating them whole.

“You going to answer it?” Chanyeol smiled coldly, as Kyungsoo refrained from reaching into his pocket to retrieve it, letting the sound heighten, swallowing up any remaining amity in the room-- “Loverboy needs a date to dinner? Why don’t you go all night? He might fork out another few million over a midnight snack.”

Kyungsoo’s eyes grew cold as he stiffened.

“Fuck you, Chanyeol.”

Chanyeol rolled his tongue in his mouth, the faintest smirk on his lips as he walked across the living room and collapsed on the sofa.

Kyungsoo’s eyes followed him, despite his gaze being directed to the floor. He sensed the other’s pain; the burden which hung on his shoulders and weighed down on his chest. It made his own heart ache.

“This isn’t about Sehun.” Kyungsoo began after a moment, catching the way Chanyeol’s hands were
shaking, “This isn’t about the money. Don’t do this. Chanyeol, we’re so close—”

“Close to what?” Chanyeol snapped, large eyes on him, “I’m tired, Kyungsoo! I’m tired of trying to do anything right with you! Do what you want. Whatever you need to do. I won’t say another fucking word. I’m done. So give me a break, okay?”

He then buried his head into his shaking hands. Kyungsoo felt overwhelming sick all of a sudden—as if the air in the room had been knocked out by that one final outburst.

“W--What do you mean done?” Kyungsoo managed, swallowing thickly.

“What do you think it means!” Chanyeol exclaimed.

Kyungsoo stared at the floor blankly-- and then eventually made his way out of the house without pronouncing another word, a wave of cold tears stinging his eyes as he shut the door behind him.

Realising he couldn’t remain in the house without feeling overwhelmed with the savage itch to break something, Chanyeol sought solace in the only other person he would’ve wanted to hold him -- aside from Junmyeon.

>> call
>>> mom ❤
>>>> leave voicemail

‘mom i’m staying over tonight? is... is that okay? i just need to rest my head. I’m a bit stressed from work and i didn’t want to go bother yixing tonight. i’ll see you in a bit. love you.’

>> call
>>> bunny
>>>>> leave voicemail

‘bro... i think i... i fucked up i think. i... had a really bad bust-up with kyungsoo just now and i’m so
As Chanyeol processed the aftermath of what was probably their most heated altercation after many months of dating, Kyungsoo completed his own soul-searching in a hotel room at the Four Seasons Hotel.

Having missed the offered sushi dinner, the Lockerman skipped straight to drinks with the handsome art dealer who had listened intently to Kyungsoo’s contrite explanation of the day, tossing questions and tales over a bottle of expensive scotch.

Kyungsoo explained how Chanyeol’s growing distress with the situation had triggered him to respond -- poorly to the vetting pair, and it was magnified by his limited knowledge of the Lockerman operations. He’s a good guy. He’s just struggling to cope with it all too.

And it was through this ability to process his story and its meaning more carefully, that Kyungsoo found himself gauging a far more enlightened insight into his boyfriend’s actions. Thus, through even the bitter intoxication of the liquor, he suddenly began to see where Chanyeol was coming from; his motivations for why he may have done what he did.

Slowly, he began to recognise how all the things Chanyeol had been trying to say to him were always so easily lost -- because Chanyeol’s love was different: he was no poet. He didn’t have the emotional vocabulary to say what he felt; so instead, all his love, all his devotion, was poured senselessly into his actions. The phonecalls; the late-night conversations; the robberies. He had been sending him message after message since this all began and by committing to a job he would have never wanted to do, Chanyeol sent Kyungsoo the largest and most obvious message of all.

I’ll do anything for you.

And then, with a shaky breath, Kyungsoo found himself hit by a strong wave of love for his man which wrenched deep into his heart, firm and rooted, as he looked up at the man across him with a look of contrasting confusion.

Why was he here?

“This is y--your fault!” a drunken Kyungsoo accused, completely disregarding his purpose of being here. He simply jabbed his cup, liquid still swirling inside, towards Sehun, as he slurred, “You’re… why we fought! Why didn’t you tell me that you were vetting him? He went through... s--so much a-
Flashes of their argument entered Kyungsoo’s head, clearer now in the narrowed focus of his inebriated brain. And in this, his scope of vision stretched beyond the horror of his own thoughts and actions but towards Chanyeol and the look of complete hopelessness on his face.

God, Kyungsoo thought, feeling utterly hopeless himself as the emotions began to stack, one over the other, faster than his sluggish brain could read them with only love reigning high and mighty above all -- *I love him too. I love him so much. I love him more than anything*--

“He’s trying to l--love me right and I won’t let him,” Kyungsoo murmured, nodding his head, as if conversing with himself, “Because I’m scared of letting him down... again.”

“Again?” Sehun inquired, watching him closely.

“Again.” Kyungsoo said, draining his glass.

He then slammed it against the table causing the wood to rattle and Sehun’s eyes to widen. “Now you,” Kyungsoo stood up and rubbed against his eyes, “Stay away… from him! And *me*. If you won’t negotiate like a real man, then leave my city. I won’t give him up a-again! Not f-for anything!”

With a dramatic huff, the drunken and renewed-in love-man took a brave step forwards, and naturally tripped, falling back into his chair, settling into a sad slump.

Sehun waited a moment before he sighed and reached for his phone, dialling for his assistant.

“Can you go through the directory for me?” he asked her, as he drained his glass, “Great. So the name is Park Chanyeol. I need him for…. an emergency collection.”

A restless Chanyeol would find himself driving right back into the city centre after receiving a call from Sehun’s strict-faced PA. Barely intelligible, the drunken Kyungsoo was strapped into the passenger seat of his car by him, Sehun and the kind valet of the Four Seasons. Puffing out a deep sigh of relief, Chanyeol shut the door, affording him and Sehun a brief moment to be acquainted.

He eyed the man across him, gaze narrowed. Broad. Beautiful. Could probably be rendered silent through a headlock and an uppercut to the jaw.

Chanyeol’s gaze flickered, brain sighing at the man’s proportions.

He had a great jaw.

“I’m sorry about what happened this afternoon.” Sehun nodded, unyieldingly polite as he took
Chanyeol’s hand and shook it, “They should not have struck you.”

“It’s cool, man. I started it.” Chanyeol shrugged, falling back to earth somewhat, as he shook the beautiful man’s hand in return.

Whilst some remnant of his bitter argument with Kyungsoo, and his harboured doubts about the young man remained at the front of his mind, Chanyeol couldn’t help but evade them all in the stifling chill of the evening air.

The brief time to recover away from the heat of his own house had been enough to silence what had been an unbearably loud and busy time in his mind. Now he found it easier to focus on the present. Kyungsoo was safe in his car; and he could now rest knowing that he could probably knock his ex-out with a single blow to his flawless face.

“Congratulations on your engagement, by the way.”

Chanyeol was holding on to the door of the driver’s side when he heard it. He looked up and looked at Sehun who was smiling amiably, hand half-raised in farewell.

“I hope you and Kyungsoo are very happy.” Sehun said, “And when he is ready, I’ll be happy to resume negotiations tomorrow.”

“Oh I will let him know. Thanks. See ya.”

Engagement?

The word was as meaningless as most things he’d heard ever since his and Kyungsoo’s fight. By now, Chanyeol was at a complete emotional surrender. He just wanted to sleep and let his heart and head recover. And now he probably would, knowing that he was going to have Kyungsoo with him.

Shaking the memory off, Chanyeol settled that he probably even heard it wrong. He was that far gone.

Clipping his seatbelt in and resuming the engine, Chanyeol’s eyes softened at the sight of Kyungsoo staring at him from the passenger seat. His eyes were tinged red and fatigued against the faint light emitted from the line of bulbs hovering over the hotel driveway; but his lips were smiling and sincere as he murmured,

“Chanyeol? You came for me?”

It was unexplainably charming. Chanyeol didn’t know why his heart ached hearing Kyungsoo say his name this way -- looking at him in the way that he was -- but he knew immediately that at that second that they were okay. Despite all that had been said, and all that had happened -- he was still here, Kyungsoo was still there, and they would be going home together.

All his anger had come and gone; and his heart? His love? It had survived it all.

“Course I did,” Chanyeol cooed at him, smiling back.

“I’m sorry.” Kyungsoo responded as he pressed his lips to Chanyeol’s shoulder, nestling his face against the material of his jacket.

“Me too.” The final remnants of heaviness in Chanyeol’s chest dispersed as he kissed the top of Kyungsoo’s head -- once, twice -- “I’m sorry.”
“I love you, trouble,” the whisper felt beautifully loud in the privacy of his car and Chanyeol felt chills shoot down his arm as Kyungsoo reached across and kissed him hard on the lips.

He tasted like alcohol; but his lips were warm and Chanyeol missed them.

“I love you too.” The driver echoed, letting their foreheads touch as he reached for the steering wheel, “Let’s go to bed, okay?”

“Okay.”

Chanyeol drove him and Kyungsoo back to his mother’s townhouse in the East where he had promised he would stay the night. The pair stayed together in the ground floor guest bedroom, arms wrapped tightly around each other, finally securing a good night sleep for the first time since the ordeal of the 100 Million USD began.

-TWO DAYS BEFORE: THE HOLE-

Hungover and still receiving disconnected glimpses from the busy events of the day before, the last thing Kyungsoo needed was to wander first thing into an unfamiliar kitchen and right into a humming and busy Mrs. Park.

Had he been a little more conscious, he would have noticed the post-it note pinned to the bedside table whereby Chanyeol had warned him about his brief trip to the market to pick up his mother’s morning orders -- but he’d missed it, and was therefore now faced with this thoroughly overwhelming surprise.

“You must be Kyungsoo!” Mrs. Park greeted him cheerily, her warm features -- even more radiant against the sullenness of his own emotional state.

Kyungsoo stared blankly, growing more and more horrified, as he recognised then how he must have appeared. Hungover. Confused. Scotch-drenched. Dressed sloppily in sweatpants that pooled to the floor and a large red jumper that was obviously her son’s.

Whilst he’d always intended to meet Chanyeol’s mother, this would’ve been the direct opposite of how he would’ve envisioned their first meeting to be.

“Good morning, Mrs. Park.” Kyungsoo managed, clearing out his throat, as she motioned him over with a cup of water.

“Here. Have a drink. Do you need an aspirin?”
“Yes, please.” He waited until she offered him the aspirin before sipping the water. After taking both, Kyungsoo immediately felt better -- although the fact that her eyes didn’t deviate from him returned the sense of horror quickly.

“Thank you.” He replied, eyes low as he regarded his bare feet insecurely, face flushing as he willed for Chanyeol to emerge from somewhere and save him.

Mrs. Park pressed her lips together, still smiling as she said, “You’re welcome. Chanyeollie’s gone to get some things I need to make lunch later. I still have some breakfast leftover. Come sit down and eat..”

Kyungsoo wanted to decline but he knew that it would be impolite and gauged the woman’s reception as he nodded with feigned enthusiasm -- “Please, if it wouldn’t be burdensome”. She appeared more than pleased and readied his plate.

The kitchen fell into a comfortable quiet as she prepared his meal.

Keen to distract himself, Kyungsoo found himself gazing intensely at a large framed portrait hanging at the corner of the kitchen. It was an enlarged photograph of two boys: an older boy, no older than eleven and a tiny chubby pointy-eared baby in his arms.

Now that he thought about it, there were actually photographs everywhere -- and it was easy to miss them because of the sheer beauty of the house.

“Chanyeollie wasn’t even walking yet when that was taken.” Mrs. Park stated, as she grinned at Kyungsoo excitedly, “Would you like to see some more? How about you take your breakfast to the living room and we can look over some together?”

In the gap that stretched between Chanyeol and his return from his market visit, Mrs. Park introduced Kyungsoo to a host of Chanyeols which he never thought he would meet. A baby Chanyeol -- a Chanyeol with missing front teeth -- a Chanyeol holding ferrets, snakes, a baby monkey at the local zoo -- a Chanyeol at his middle school graduation -- a Chanyeol playing baseball, basketball, football --

Mrs. Park took him on his boyfriend’s life journey with an indisputable sense of motherly pride. Kyungsoo found the entire exercise overwhelming: for here, he was being presented with the key remnants of a Chanyeol that he knew little about. It was almost as if he was seeing the early drafts -- the blueprints -- that would come to create the man he would eventually fall in love with. He also felt honoured to be in Mrs. Park’s company; to be with someone who loved and adored Chanyeol just like he did. At one point she spoke of his smile and his ears being his most special and striking features.

Kyungsoo smiled and agreed.
She appeared to enjoy it too, her sunny nature only faltering at the photographs that featured those whom had passed: particularly Chanyeol’s older brother whom was frequently in photographs with his arm secured protectively around his younger brother.

“——They got along so well. You would not have met closer brothers when they were growing up. Chanho wanted a younger brother so when Chanyeol came along they became best friends... “ Mrs. Park paused as she lingered on a picture in an album which depicted a Chanyeol, that resembled the one he had met five or so years ago, holding onto a little girl whom he assumed was a younger Hyewon, “It was very difficult for him when Chanyeol moved out.”

The disownment.

A topic Chanyeol never discussed. Out of all the shadowy characters of Chanyeol’s past, Kyungsoo had always presumed that this period had been the darkest and deepest for him. It was the one that he had turned completely away from everyone— hinted only in jokes, even though it was clear that even the humor wasn’t enough to remove the continued heat of the sting.

“Chanyeol never talks about it either,” murmured Kyungsoo.

“He wouldn’t have. It was... probably one of the worst things any of us have ever had to go through.” Mrs. Park then explained the event in short succinct detail: the minor misdemeanour which a young Chanyeol had been apprehended by the police for, the great lengths which his father went through to erase the criminal record in fear that his son’s future and his family’s reputation would suffer -- “That was the last after a string of many. Chanyeol was given an ultimatum by his father. Stay and behave -- or leave forever.”

Mrs. Park brushed a gentle finger over her son’s face, lips relaxing into a worn and thoughtful line.

*He took the news calmly. But she saw it; how her son’s heart had diminished in his chest as his own father turned his back on him.*

‘Chanyeol-- understand, please. If you just reason with your Dad-- ‘ She was holding onto him as he clambered down the steps, two at a time, growing more hysterical as her youngest son flung the front door open, ‘Your b--brother is coming, p-please p-please wait for him--’

Sun blinded her eyes as Chanyeol turned and embraced her tightly. She began to sob.

‘Mom, I’m going now.’

‘No, Chanyeollie, no, no.’ She was mumbling, too horrified to cry, wanting only to scream - ‘Daddy’s just mad-- don’t go, don’t--’

*He kissed her head and then pushed her away.*

The saddest smile appeared on her lips before she took the pictures of her sons and pressed them to her lips. And then she spoke, her voice melodic and *motherly*— a tone which was a stranger to a motherless child like Kyungsoo but completely enchanting.

“When you become a parent, you are trapped in a constant state of insecurity about the way you raise your children. *Am I doing enough for them? Am I equipping them for the challenges of the world*
ahead? But there’s a danger of getting stuck in the loop and forgetting that at the end of the day, it’s not about you. It’s about them.”

She wiped a stray tear as she met Kyungsoo’s eyes, gesturing towards the sea of photographs of them --

“My Chanyeol, he smiled through every photo because ever since he was a baby we told him that he had the most beautiful smile. But even the most beautiful things will show cracks one day. When he stopped smiling, we told him to smile more. When he cried, screamed, and swore, we told him he would find his smile again tomorrow…. of course, I see now that instead of reminding him about his smile, and how beautiful it was, I should have tried harder to understand why it was broken; and what was breaking him.”

She sighed; the sound, chest-deep.

“He’s a good and loving boy. He always has been. But he’s become very good at hiding his pain. So it’s important to be patient with him.” She nodded, smiling again as she reached for Kyungssoo’s hand and patted it delicately, “Although, I think you make him very happy, from what I hear from my granddaughter.”

Kyungssoo nodded his head, thoroughly affected -- but also enlightened by the weight of anticipation contained in Mrs. Park’s gaze.

“I hope so.” He exhaled then, feeling tears swell in the corner of his eyes as he added, “We take care of each other.”

This delighted her.

Mrs. Park’s eyes lit up as she squeezed his hand firmly and supplied, “Relationships are all about caring and acceptance. It is about seeing the weaknesses in other people and acknowledging that they are a part of them and deserve just as much love, if not more.” She nodded before smiling fondly at the descending emotion on the young man’s face—

“It’s also about opening your heart fully to someone, and accepting love in return, despite your fears and doubts. To love? To really love? You have to be incredibly brave. But I can guarantee you that there is very little else out there that makes a life worth living.”

Kyungssoo stared at her, tears rolling onto his cheeks. He quickly hid them, wiping them with his sleeve.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you, Kyungssoo!” She reached forwards and embraced him tightly, “There, there. You can’t cry, you sweet boy. When he gets home, he will blame me!”

“I’m sorry. You speak beautifully.” Kyungssoo hiccupped, “and you’re very kind. I’m grateful to be here with you.”

“Aw,” Mrs. Park smiled as she held him in an embrace, “I’m grateful to be here with you too. I can see how much you love my Chanyeollie and that gives me a lot of peace of mind. Keep taking care of each other okay? Take care of each other and you two will be absolutely fine...”
Chanyeol walked into the pair still happily chatting away in the ocean of old family photographs and albums when he returned, frozen cold and icy-nosed from his trip to the market.

“Aw, Mom.” Chanyeol rolled his eyes to the ceiling, “I told you not to get the baby pics out-- it’s so cliche. Kyungsoo would find that stuff really boring.” He mouthed a quick apology to Kyungsoo who was smiling with far more mirth than when he’d left him.

“No, it was fine. I enjoyed hearing about you.” Kyungsoo reassured him.

“No?” The tall man narrowed his eyes at his mother suspiciously, “What did you tell him?”

Mrs. Park chuckled as she beckoned him over, exhaling comfortingly as Chanyeol planted a hand on her shoulder.

“I told him about the best bits of course. Your imaginary friend Loey! Your mathletics trophies! The modelling contests at middle school--”

Chanyeol groaned loudly.

“Mom, oh my god.”

>> call
>>> bunny
>>>> leave voicemail

‘hey man, sorry about all that stuff from yesterday. got your message… yeah, i’m okay. me and kyungsoo are okay now. we talked it out. mom met him. she says he looks like her crush from grade school-- which is kinda weird but whatever. she liked him. anyway you can probably cancel the making him eat his own shit part of your return home… we are okay. we are gonna be okay. okay. no more meltdowns until you get back. kyungsoo and i are going back to my house now - so leave me a message there if it’s easier. okay I love you bro! keep safe!’
Little snowflakes were dancing across the television screen as part of the weather report. The first snow of winter was being predicted for the city at some point this week.

Kyungsoo idly watched the weatherman’s lips chatter, as his mind tuned into Chanyeol and his brief description of the expensive job Pip had signed him up to.

In summary, it was a shipment interception in a busy port in Taipei. Operation crew of four. Although Pip was reluctant to divulge the nature of the shipment, the extremely high price-tag attached would suggest the usual set of expensive corruptible paraphernalia: firearms, narcotics, or some form of illegal aid to be trafficked across the rural East.

“I know people in that port. Do you want me to ask around?”

Chanyeol’s head was on his lap. He was on his phone playing a game.

“Um. I’ll let you know after I go to the first meet up. Day after tomorrow.” Chanyeol answered.

Kyungsoo glanced down then, observing the familiar features of Chanyeol’s face in intimate detail. He found himself smiling sadly, recalling how he’d held him like this -- five years ago -- in the hours that preceded and followed his armed robbery jobs. Back then they had simply allowed each other to carry out their respective work. Rarely did it enter in Kyungsoo’s mind that there was every danger that each time Chanyeol said goodbye -- could easily be his last.

It was completely different now. The idea of Chanyeol being faced with any level of risk completely bowled him over; but he didn’t want to fight again.

“It’s okay as long as Junmyeon’s with you,” hummed Kyungsoo, skimming through Chanyeol’s hair with his fingers.

“Oh, he’s not with me. Junmyeon doesn’t do international jobs,” Chanyeol answered casually, “I dunno who the fuck Pip is sending.”

“Oh?”

Kyungsoo’s eyes regarded the screen across him as his left eye twitched, echoing the key switch which was suddenly flipped in his thoughts.

*Never mind.*

It was settled there and then: a dazzlingly clear and loud conclusion brought on by Kyungsoo’s love towards his boyfriend— and his mistrust of anyone that wasn’t Junmyeon when it came to his boyfriend’s work.

There was no way in hell that Chanyeol was going to do this job.

Pip would have to pry him from Kyungsoo’s dead body.
But how could Kyungsoo prevent him? As what had become clear to practically everyone who had ever encountered Park Chanyeol, he was impossible to drag into anything without using the power of a fist.

The television remained on in the background as the pair across grew sleepier and sleepier. Chanyeol was first to succumb, still on Kyungsoo’s lap. In contrast, Kyungsoo remained somewhat awake, kept afloat by his thoughts of the day, and it was as he listened to the faint words of the animal documentary playing on the screen that he would be hit with an epiphany --

‘... these elaborate burrows allow the mob of meerkats a way to protect themselves from their predators. They create their own individual system of tunnels as the most convenient forms of escape or safe houses to run to at the first sign of danger...’

Almost trance-like in appearance, Kyungsoo sat up and watched the tiny brown meerkats leap into the various craters on the desert floor, successfully concealing themselves from the starving hyena.

The image was locked to the front of his brain as he glanced down at Chanyeol’s sleeping face and he smiled affectionately.

Thumbing his forehead with a delicate hand, he then found himself gripped with one clear and glaring thought:

*I need a hole.*

-//-

**ONE DAY BEFORE: THE HOLE**

-//-
‘hey, just leaving a message to say i’m sorry i had to leave so early. i have quite a lot of work to catch up with. you and hyewon should wrap up today, it’s really cold…. okay i love you, bye chanyeol. i’ll try and get home in time for dinner…’

Sat poised in his choice barbershop, Kyungsoo lowered the phone as he flicked dully through his online directory on a tablet. He dialled another number, and pressed the phone to his ear again -- “So what was in there?” Marked 1505. What is that? Miscellania? “Nothing radioactive, right?” … No, no. I think it was just ores. I’ll double check.

Kyungsoo’s finger regarded the coordinates before sliding his finger across the screen.

>> 54.101712, -125.310607

>>> site OCCUPIED

>>>> code: NA12121212

“Yeah. It was just a bunch of shitty rocks. Anyway, what do you need a hole for?” His colleague inquired.

“Guess.”

Soft laughter ran across the line.

“Alright. I won’t ask. I’ll send a message along. What did you need again? Netting-- tarpaulin--”

Greeting his barber with a polite smile, Kyungsoo tilted his head, responding to their gestures as he spoke,

“A few electric blankets too. Think it might get chilly if I leave them overnight.”

“Fucking hell, Kyungsoo.”
Meanwhile, a well-rested Chanyeol was spending his day on a large client account.

It was the most labour-heavy part of his work: a full site installment. They generally took the whole day— but now all that work was doubled because he was charged with equipping a huge empty mansion and its various rooms. Admittedly, he had no reason to complain as not only was the job paying well, it was a pleasing testament to his growing network of clients -- with widows and trophy husbands and wives recommending his good workmanship all over the place, citing that everyone should hire Park Chanyeol because he was the most handsome security man in the city!

Not even his words; but Chanyeol would agree.

Finally on his lunch break, Chanyeol sat on the large hammock which surveyed the endless acres of lush green garden. He swayed, breathing the cool winter air with a smile.

He could have continued admiring the view -- but instead he chose to scan through his phone, starting on all the messages he had planned to send during the day. The first would naturally go to his favourite set of people.

> 

CHAT NAME: uncle chanyeol is a belieber

>> MEMBERS: pcyy_, hyewon234, jm1991, zhangyixing

12:20 | pcyy_
yo fam have we decided on what we're doing for my bday its coming up can we all get schedules out pls so i know when to organise somethin thnx x

12:21| read by hyewon234

12:25 | pcyy_
kid ur lunch doesn't start till 1230 >:( pay attention

12:27 | pcyy_
also thoughts on adding ksoo to this chat let me know
cos i think i should

12:27 | read by hyewon234

12:28 | pcyy_
>:(

12:30 | hyewon234
can we go do something big for ur bday this yr
also yes to unc ksoo
Puppiesdancing.gif

14:30 | zhangyixing sent an attachment
SHEEP.ward.schedule.docx

14:30 | zhangyixing
ahhh your bday ~~~ what to get our best chanyeollie
attached my schedule this month :)
and yeah go for it add kyungsoo

14:50 | pcyy_
big?? u dont want to go bowling with your uncles again hyewonnie
u chicken ? Lol
and ty yixing angel :) !
ill ask ksoo later

14:53 | pcyy_
also for my bday present im 100% sure my junmyeon is going to get me the rolex i want
so dont get me that ok
be awkward to get too many of those Lol TT ;)

14:55 | hyewon234
NO BOWLING

By mid-afternoon, ¾ of the house was done. Chanyeol had found navigating the huge house rather lonesome so he chose to take some calls during the quiet hours to entertain himself -- from his
lonesome mother, to a whining Hyewon getting ready for a long tennis practice, and even Minseok who he’d wanted to catch up with for weeks.

“Woah, bro is it true you’re back on a job?"

“Yeah,” Chanyeol answered, speaking through a bluetooth headset in his ear, as he tweaked a camera in place within the first garage of three. “But don’t tell Junmyeon okay? He’s going to be so angry.”

Minseok cackled loudly.

“Are you joking? Everyone’s already talking about it. The moment he gets a signal on that mountain. You’re actually dead dude.”

“Ahh… Minseok-ah, help me.” Chanyeol sighed dramatically as he wiped the dark screen with a cloth, removing a pencil from his ear as he marked its side with a number for reference, “I’m too young and sexy to die.”

More laughter rang on the end of the line.

“Bitch, you’re deader than dead.”

Chanyeol bit his tongue, smiling playfully. “Please remember to play Back in Black at my funeral.”

“Course man, I got you.”

He shouldn’t have been so cocky.

Chanyeol finally closed his long work day with Junmyeon’s unsteady and crackly voicemail on hand. He stared at the notification on his phone, overwhelmed with a lingering feeling of dread at what would meet him as he raised the device to his ear and prepared for the worst.

What he received was inadmissibly bad -- especially when one considered that the poor signal on the mountains meant that a lot of the voice was omitted and lost in white noise.

>>> 1 new voicemail

>>> play voicemail

>>>> from bunny

Hitting his head against the hard surface of his steering wheel, Chanyeol sighed before glancing down at his phone and deciding that he would cheer himself up by sending his boyfriend a message. He had tried to hold back the temptation the whole day, knowing Kyungsoo was busy.

But it was nice to know that the other person he loved most in the world -- probably wasn’t as pissed off with him.

**to: ks**

hey? want me to save you some dinner?
Let me know
Hope ur day was good
:) ❤

He received a prompt (and happily welcomed) reply.

**to: pcyy_**

i’m at your house now and making dinner
See you soon
❤

Having accomplished his tasks for the day, Kyungsoo left his work and decided to spend the rest of the day in the familiar security of Chanyeol’s house.

It was empty with Hyewon at her after-school club and Chanyeol still at work.

Kyungsoo was in a pleasant mood and opted to make dinner for the pair -- even finding motivation to assist in the stringent cleaning chores which had been marked as _incomplete_ in the house’s post-it wall. Kyungsoo had started his work in Chanyeol’s bedroom -- and it was during his quiet ruffling and tidying of the various apparatus of the room that he would find himself reunited with an old and significant article associated with their relationship.

It had been folded neatly on top of Chanyeol’s bedside drawer. _His_ side -- so he’d never had the opportunity to rummage through it himself.

Kyungsoo’s eyes rested on the words scribbled across the paper, tears suddenly clouding his eyes at
the familiar voice which entered his thoughts as he read them --

*Hey. If we’re still together, and we haven’t yet--*

The tears cleared as the man softly blinked them away. It was as he was looking up through the bedroom’s open door that he found himself face-to-face with the painting across the hallway.

Against the sunset, the colours looked exquisite, capturing an almost artificial shine which accentuated its various elements.

Kyungsoo held the letter tight with both hands as he approached the painting, breathing deeply, eyes lifting to regard the infinite expanse of heaven and stars within the frame.

And then he *smiled*, reaching out with one hand and hovering his fingers over the huge and beautiful moon, as tears fell freely from his eyes, catching on the white page.

---

**THREE HOURS BEFORE: THE HOLE**

---

“*Boy!*” Pip greeted him through the phone after three rings.

Chanyeol waved at Hyewon from his car as she ran up to Yixing’s house for the night. He had been lucky that his first meeting with Pip had fallen on a day whereby Yixing was attending to his niece as this meant he didn’t have to wreck himself seeking an excuse.

“Pip,” he re-entered the car, greeting the man back, “Got the meeting place?”

“What’s wrong with Earl St.?”

Chanyeol smirked as he started his engine.

“Uh, I don’t want to smell like shit all day?”

“You fucker.” Pip sighed loudly, muttering blurry curses, before adding, “Lucky for you, I have a plan B. I’ll send it over to you now, your royal highness.”

“Taaaaaa!”
Chanyeol then drove back home, mind now completely free to commence his preparations.

Here he was again, he thought with a heavier heart than he would’ve wanted: back into the *shithole* he jumps.

Admittedly, saying it like that didn’t leave him with the most motivated feeling at the pit of his stomach. So, Chanyeol tried to view it from a different perspective--

Here he was, doing the *most* to make sure his boyfriend gets a second chance at life.

*Better.*

---

**ONE ½ HOURS BEFORE: THE HOLE**

---

Kyungsoo was nervous.

He watched as Chanyeol sat at the dinner table, stress-snacking, as he scribbled down on a notebook all the information Pip had sent over. 200k meant that Chanyeol had committed himself to practically running all of the detail blocking required of the job -- as he had done years ago.

Seeing him locked in this state brought such clear memories to Kyungsoo that he found himself picturing that they were back in the garage den again -- working separately but still working alongside each other, in between clumsy and overly-touchy makeout sessions.

He left him to it, keen not to get in the way, allowing his own sense of anticipation to expand until his own time to act came.

*Showtime.*

Sending off a quick message for his colleague to prepare, Kyungsoo walked into the kitchen and stated a calm,

“Chanyeol, can you drive me to my meeting place?”

He had told him that he was supposed to spend his evening negotiating a large cash transfer today. It was only a partial lie; as that would place take tomorrow.

Chanyeol looked up instantly and smiled, eyes curving as he brushed crumbs away from his lap and his lips.

“Yeah, course!”
Kyungsoo smiled back, heart *tightening* at how endearing he looked.

“Thanks. Let’s go now. And wrap up warm okay?”

They drove over, barely speaking as Chanyeol’s loud music smothered the car.

By the time they reached the coordinates, the sun had set meaning that the outdoor temperatures had dropped considerably. The dark was unforgiving but the moon was already up, eager to guide beyond her company of a thin spattering of stars and clouds.

“We’re here.”

They emerged from the car.

It was an obscure location. The side of an empty highway. Chanyeol rarely passed through it as it was part of the North West district which meant it comprised mainly of suburbs and smaller outer rural communities.

Kyungsoo moved across from the car and towards the empty field with the high untended grass and ivy, spotting the *hole* with no problem. He hovered over it, pleased to see that it had been prepared as he’d asked.

Chanyeol walked closely behind him.

“So?” He asked Kyungsoo, lips trembling from the cold, “Is this supposed to be your meeting point?”

And then he moved aside and stood beside the smaller man.

“That’s a big hole.” Chanyeol observed, blinking at the sign of dark material inside -- most likely tarpaulin. “This one of yours then?” He was left to assume that it was a Lockerman site.

“It is.”

Kyungsoo glanced up at him then, gaze trembling as he said a loud and empathic,

“I *really* love you, Chanyeol.”

Chanyeol arched an eyebrow and smiled at him
Would this be the last smile Chanyeol ever gave him?

Because seconds after, Kyungsoo mercilessly pushed him in.

All it had taken was a sturdy kick at the back of his shins and a shove from behind and the long-limbed man toppled right into the elevated tarpaulin and netting.

And by committing his light act of attempted murder, Kyungsoo had done what he’d set out to do.

Now his Chanyeol was in a hole.

And just like the meerkats; he could now be safe and secure away from his predators.

-//- 

THE HOLE: PRESENT DAY 

-//- 

Unfortunately despite being conducted with the best of intentions, the sudden action brought the loving couple to a winter impasse of sorts.

Chanyeol was deservedly raging and spent a good few minutes expelling his fury in all sorts of dramatic physical and verbal gestures whilst Kyungsoo watched him dumbly from above, in complete disbelief that this part of his plan had actually worked. Considering how firmly toned and well-built his man was, he never thought it could be as easy as that.

“Really? You’re going to bury me! Great! Just great!” Chanyeol kicked against stray stones inside the dark hole, still yelling, “This makes total SENSE!”

Something clicked in Kyungsoo then as he groaned loudly and began to shout back--

“I didn’t come here to BURY you! I came here to talk to you. Because I don’t know if you’ve picked up on this, Chanyeol but you are practically impossible to talk to when you’re angry. So I thought if I started the conversation with you angry then maybe, you can spend the rest of the time calming down and listening? How about that?”

Chanyeol stared at him, breathing deeply. When he spoke next, he appeared considerably calmer but there was no doubting how solidly he had balled his fists.
“It’s fucking cold in here, Kyungsoo. So I’ll humour you. Go on and make your point quick before we all get frostbite.”

Kyungsoo crossed his arms.

“I put you in the hole because I didn’t want you to go to the meet-up.”

This prompted the taller man to groan, throwing his hands up in the air as he was reminded of this commitment -- “and you are not leaving the hole until you promise me that you’re not going to go. To this job. And to any job associated with robberies or Pip. Ever.”

Chanyeol laughed, crossing his own arms. “So what? You got Jongin behind you? Got an injunction I need to sign? For god’s sake Kyungsoo, this is… ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous?” Kyungsoo laughed in return, big puffs of air escaping his lips as he threw his head back. “You know what’s ridiculous? You! You’re ridiculous! Do you have any idea how hard these past few days have been on me? 100 Million US dollars! I am giving up my fortune -- my life -- and all you’ve done is give me headache, after headache, after headache!”

“So you are going to bury me,” Chanyeol muttered.

The man above continued to laugh as he pressed on, “--and I even told everyone that I was engaged to you! Mr. Ridiculous! In fact, that’s the only reason why I was given this opportunity in the first place!”

This was where the conversation wavered -- the bravado receding, with something more serious to succeed it.

“What?” Chanyeol choked.

Kyungsoo smiled, face hurting from the laughing as he continued, “That’s right! Since the very beginning, trouble! I used a fake marriage as my cause for leaving. Everyone knew. Except you. This entire time everyone thought that we were going to marry each other-- except you, my -alleged future husband, and you want to know why?”

A glaze came over Kyungsoo’s eyes.

“It wasn’t because I was intending to bury you in a hole! It was because I was afraid of admitting that I wanted it to be true!”

Kyungsoo drew a strong breath as the man in the hole watched his lips shape every word, utterly transfixed.

“Because I could have easily lived through the rest of my life alone, Chanyeol! I could have died as the Lockerman because for a long time, it was all I had. I never needed to fight this fight… but here I am! And I realise now that I’m not just here for my future -- and my happiness anymore. By letting go of everything I’ve built, and giving up on Lockerman, I’m here fighting for my future with you.”

A tremble in his voice appeared -- one which Kyungsoo cleared through a single abrupt laugh as he yelled with even more force into the empty darkness, seizing the words right out of the tight hold where they had been gnawing on his heart—

“... and I want a future with you! I want every part of it, Chanyeol! I want to attend every recital, every dinner, every telenovela screening, every holiday, every birthday… I want to see you travel the world, watch you live out your dreams, and help you make new ones, new ones you can share with
me… I want to be there for you when you’re sick, care for you when you’re hurt, hold you when you need me,” Kyungsoo’s voice lowered, as he exhaled shakily,

“I want to be brave, Chanyeol! I want to take the chance with you because you have all the love that I will ever need… And sure, people have told me that I’m making a mistake and everyone out there probably thinks that we’re going to fail… but I know you, Chanyeol! I know you and me-- and I know that we are going to do right by each other whatever happens.”

Kyungsoo laughed; sobbed.

“Chanyeol, we can really do this. If you want this still, we can make this forever…”

A short spell of silence followed. Kyungsoo’s head bowed forwards to face the floor as his hands raised to hold his face.

“Kyungsoo?” Chanyeol called out, completely stunted, as he reached out a hand to wave at the man above, “W--What?”

Frustrated, Kyungsoo raised his face to the sky and shouted out,

“Call Pip and tell him to fuck off! Tell him it’s off and it’s off forever because you can’t do any more jobs! You can’t because you trust your… your fiancé that he can get this 100 Million USD for you both and you won’t ever let him go through the possibility of burying you….”

Chanyeol’s lips mouthed fucking hell as he quickly retrieved his burner phone from his back pocket, typed in the message, and crushed the device with two hard stomps of his boot against the dirt.

“Done!” he called out furiously, “It’s done, Kyungsoo!”

His heart was beating fast.

“Let me out, goddamn it!”

A long ladder was lowered in by shaky hands.

Kyungsoo held out a hand and pulled Chanyeol up.

Back together, the pair glanced at each other -- one a shaky mess, and the other a taller and shakier mess. It was freezing cold now; and Chanyeol quickly responded to it by pulling Kyungsoo into an embrace and resting his head comfortably and deeply against the other’s shoulder.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” Kyungsoo murmured in Chanyeol’s ear after a moment, cold lips brushing against his earlobe.
“About?”

“That I want to marry you.”

He heard Chanyeol exhale shakily, clearly struggling to process the weight of the words.

“Wait,” Kyungsoo held his face and pulled him back, “Wait a second.”

Chanyeol stepped back and watched with a thoroughly bewildered expression as Do Kyungsoo -- the notorious Lockerman himself -- sunk to one knee in front of him.

He visibly gasped.

“Oh sh--shit!”

Kyungsoo held onto his hand, laughing fondly as he produced a box -- which was considerably larger than a box for a ring.

He opened it and revealed a stunning gold Rolex perched prettily in the middle.

(There was no denying that at the sight of his most coveted birthday gift in person, an emotionally shaken Chanyeol almost came in his pants; but that was a secondary physical response to the second gasp which slipped from his lips.)

“Is this okay for now? I… I didn’t have time to get a ring prepared. I will but this was a present I already had so I thought it would be nice to give it to you now.”

Chanyeol’s head was screaming now but he managed a deceivingly calm,

“Sure.”

And at that, Kyungsoo showed no further reason to delay and simply posed the question,

“Will you marry me, Park Chanyeol?”
Above them, a noticeable rift formed in the clouds, invisible even to the moon as the first snow of winter finally began to fall -- piercing through the cold fog as the initial flurry swirled in a light and steady dance, welcoming itself into the city.

It fell, a light dusting on cars; buildings; workers on their way home --

And finally, onto a pair of men, by the side of a huge hole, across an abandoned highway.

Chanyeol continued to stare at Kyungsoo, silent as he watched the snowflakes falling onto Kyungsoo’s face, and onto his gloved hands,

“Chanyeol?” Kyungsoo urged, grinning up at him, shaking the box which held the watch, “Say you’ll marry me, please.”

He squeezed his hand tightly.

This triggered an immediate response as Chanyeol then dropped to his knees, startling even his lover, as he scooped Kyungsoo’s face into his hands and then embraced him tightly, securely, wrapping his arms fully around him, as tears -- joyous as they were -- fell onto his cheeks, warm and mingling with the cold snow,

“I’ll marry you, Do Kyungsoo.” He told him, holding him as Kyungsoo buried his face into his shoulder, “Course I will.”

Kyungsoo smiled softly, before leaning back and clipping the luxurious watch around Chanyeol’s wrist. He had been holding on to it since the beginning of the month when Chanyeol started the daily countdown to his birthday to irritate his niece.

Chanyeol stared at it, overwhelmed, as he realised that it could’ve been practically anything else and he would’ve loved it just as much. It could’ve been a gummy ring; a valueless old stick twisted in a circular bracelet; even nothing but air.

The promise that Kyungsoo would have him forever?

He had wanted that for much longer; and now he had it— had him.

Watching his boyfriend-turned-fiancé gawp blankly at the beautiful item around his wrist, Kyungsoo smiled.

“You like it?” He asked softly, teasingly, as Chanyeol looked up at him and quickly held the smaller man’s shoulders, showing no mercy as he began to shake him, hollering loudly into the fog,
“I can’t -- believe -- you -- shoved -- me -- in -- a -- hole -- and -- proposed!”" Kyungsoo allowed him, laughing loudly, as he struggled to balance,

“I h--ad to! You wouldn’t have listened to me!”

“Kyungsoo! You’re impossible!” Chanyeol was grinning, *whining* -- the sort of response he showed whenever he lost in board games as a result of being hoodwinked.

“Come here!” Chanyeol then crushed their lips together, finally, kissing, the snow still falling and layering all over their hair, collars, lips and noses, as they held each other -- the contact only broken by Chanyeol *laughing* as he pushed himself back and landed with a hard thud on his back on the ground.

He stretched out his arms and shouted out a frustrated, “AHHH!” throwing playful punches in the air.

The snow was falling onto his face, icy and speckled, but he didn’t care. He stared right at the heavens, at the *stars*, and at the bottomless black of the sky as he yelled out, hysterically happy, throwing out the punches to the sky.

“Yeeeee! You hear that motherfuckers? I’m going to marry my true love and…. I got a Rolex! Thank you, universe and your respective gods! You actually did good for me this time! You gave me something I wanted! I’m so thankful! Thank you, thank you, thank you! I’m going to be good from now on! Starting today! Ahhhhhhh!”

His fists were balled, but instead of punches, he then clutched them to his chest, feeling so powerfully full with emotion, as he shut his eyes feigning a childhood’s birthday wish--

“I am going to be the best husband ever! I promise! I will never let you down! I am going to love him forever and ever!”

It was so sickeningly sweet— and pathetic.

But what else could he do? When he had just received all that he had ever wanted in the world?

If he had confetti cannons in his car, Chanyeol was certain that he would have dragged them out by now.

Kyungsoo who was leaning on his palms, observing the display, laughing -- *crying* — crawled towards his form, through the dirt and grass, and wrapped himself comfortably into Chanyeol’s arms, completely content. When he opened his eyes again, he found his gaze moving to the familiar moon and he found himself smiling even wider.

A moment’s peace passed as Chanyeol stopped yelling and recuperated his voice.

“They need to celebrate, Kyungsoo. I’m losing my… mind.” Chanyeol murmured, still smiling broadly, face wet with tears and snow as Kyungsoo looked up at him --

“I heard… that the Four Seasons has a fantastic new sushi chef.” Kyungsoo suggested, as he caught sight of the splendid shine in his lover’s eyes, “We can always… get dinner somewhere?”
Wasn’t this what people did?

“Uh, sure! Let’s do that. It’s cold!”

“Okay.”

Chanyeol stood up first and held out a hand to pull Kyungsoo up.

“Let’s go back to the car.”

Kyungsoo nodded and wrapped an arm around Chanyeol’s waist as they traipsed through the path together.

And then they went to have a nice sushi dinner at the Four Seasons.

At least, they probably would have, had Kyungsoo not had the ingenious idea of warming his hands up by sticking them deep into Chanyeol’s trousers as they walked -- meaning by the time they reached his car, the pair found themselves miraculously hit with the same idea intended to pass the time and warm themselves up— as the car engine awoke from the cold.

A mutual idea which survived even the session of maddeningly long foreplay with dozens of layers of clothing have to be burrowed through because they had dressed responsibly for the occasion.

“You’re really going to fuck me with your beanie on?”

“I’m going to marry you, Chanyeol— you’re going to have to take me whichever way.”

“Fuck. Marriage talk is so sexy. We should have roleplayed as committed husbands.”

“Now we don’t have to.”

“Fuuuuck.”

And a delighted—if not slightly hypothermic— Chanyeol would be happy to report that car sex this time around was not as awful as he remembered it.

-//-
* [resurrects from the void]

I am back guys! With a 2-part finale. I will say no more except as expected, this update is long-- and separated into four-mini parts in order to be more digestible. Both parts will be posted at the same time c: so no waiting (just an extra phantom chapter but if you have been following sias, you will be… very used to those.)

Each part is divided by some classic 90s bops that I was unable to use as title headings but if sias had a soundtrack, would certainly form a significant part of it!

Please enjoy! There is a lot of pov! sias -Chanyeol from these 2 updates so expect a lot of irresponsibility and tasteless humor. Okay! Let’s go! Thank you for reading! Be well lovely EXO-L!

* 

-//-

**PRESENT DAY:**

-//-

-//-

**part i: back at one**

>> brian mcknight

-//-

Foamy bubbles dripped from Kyungsoo’s fingers as he lifted his hand from the warm bathwater. He narrowed his eyes until his vision reduced his limb into a puzzling shape; and it remained there until his arm got cold.

And then, he exhaled -- his limb slipping back as he took Chanyeol’s hand and tightly entwined their fingers together.

The pair had taken a bath together shortly after returning home. Kyungsoo had fully intended to shower, never one to find solace in smelling like the bizarre combination of dust and sex -- but after Chanyeol expressed his intention to treat himself and try the bath for a change, the smaller man found himself incapable of missing out. And it was a pleasant change. The water was pleasantly warm, Chanyeol’s soap selection was fragrant, and here, sat secured between his lover’s legs, Kyungsoo’s senses floated happily with the staggering intimacy between them.
It was the right way to celebrate an engagement as special as theirs.

One that was secret: not even a secret yet, but a secret in its infancy. Sure, between them, the volume of Kyungsoo’s proposal was like a shattering shout but in reality, it was a tender whisper that only they had heard.

“You must be thinking hard. Your head is all warm,” teased Kyungsoo, as he reached and caressed the top of Chanyeol’s head which had leaned across and pressed itself against the warm skin of his shoulder.

With a hum, his fingers ran through Chanyeol’s dark hair, massaging practiced circles into his scalp as the taller man sighed softly.

“What are you thinking about?” Kyungsoo murmured.

His lover’s voice was weary as he answered.

“You.”

“Is that so? All good things?”

Chanyeol responded by wrapping his large and heavy arms around him -- softening Kyungsoo’s expression by planting a line of loud and dramatic kisses spanning his neck and cheek. The raw marks he’d mercilessly scattered over the same column of flesh from earlier in the night -- soothed now by less frantic touches.

“What is it?” Kyungsoo hummed, tossing Chanyeol’s hair encouragingly, “Tell me.”

“It’s nothing,” Chanyeol squeezed him tighter, burrowing his face against his until their cheeks were clasped tight, “I just thought about you and everyday suburbia. Can Do Kyungsoo really cut it, huh?”

Kyungsoo laughed, as Chanyeol began to kiss him, pathetically affectionate as he punctuated the actions with breathy words,

“... going to the supermarkets... every... Sunday... picking up... bratty niece... cooking... family....meals.....”

“That’s easy,” Kyungsoo told him, turning his head to the side as to enable their gazes to meet, “I reckon it will be harder for you. Think you can really be a good boy from now on?”

A crease crossed Chanyeol’s brow as he scoffed.

“Nobody said anything about that.”

Without pause, Kyungsoo dipped his fingers into the water and splashed it at Chanyeol’s face -- as the other man groaned and cradled his forehead with a wet hand.

The sounds of their joined laughter bounced across the tiles of the room. This was followed by the slight rush of water spilling out of the tub as Kyungsoo shifted his position and found himself hovering familiarly over Chanyeol’s lap.

Then: a harrowing stillness; even the homely drips of the water onto the warm tiles appeared to suspend.

Chanyeol gazed up at him, his eyes glittery, wide, and young. His lips were shaped and parted, almost as if something had stunned him. Maybe something had. The breaking of contact perhaps; the
slightest space suddenly finding room between them. Kyungsoo reached across and swept his dark hair away from his face with a gentle hand.

Time moved again; the foamy water dripped from tiles, from flesh, from the fiberglass tub.

“Face it, you wouldn’t love me half as much if I dotted my i’s and crossed my T’s.” Chanyeol’s lips shaped into a smirk, baring teeth as he planted his hands over Kyungsoo’s hips, “But I’ll be good for you if that’s what you want.”

“Don’t even bother lying. You’re not good at it.” Kyungsoo accused as Chanyeol laughed, pulling his smaller lover closer and closer, eliminating the distance, the separation, until his breath was ghosting over skin, fingertips driving onto bare ass cheeks, eyes locking unsparingly onto his.

“I love trouble, Kyungsoo.” Chanyeol whispered, smiling wickedly at him, “and so do you.”

Kyungsoo’s skin flushed a treasonous red as he shook his head and held Chanyeol’s jaw with a hand, extending distance, creating space, as he edged it away from him. There was no easing the other’s resolve. Chanyeol’s fingertips burrowed into his skin deeper, his gaze only growing more intense -- as Kyungsoo’s thumb swiped the beads of water against the other’s jawline, grazing against the stubble, expression unyieldingly cold.

And then he smiled a wonderfully happy smile as he murmured, “I do.”

Once dried and dressed, the nightly evening phone call with Sehun followed. Chanyeol sat with his shoulders bent against his bed’s headboard, watching with amusement as Kyungsoo sat cross-legged across him, rubbing his eyes endearingly to ward away the imminent threat of sleep. He was negotiating the price on a few of the pieces but it was obvious that he wouldn’t be able to sustain his attention for much longer.

The lemony scent of shampoo in his hair was practically a continuous hit of sleeping pills.

“Sure,” yawn, “That sounds good-- could you push it up to 15?”
His voice faded as Chanyeol’s eyes locked onto the Botticelli painting which stood, a colourful oasis, beyond the ajar bedroom door. He stared at the visible corner for a long while, recalling the last time he’d cleaned it. What a pain in the ass it had been.

And then, with barely any secondary thought, Chanyeol reached across and retrieved the phone startling Kyungsoo into an awakened state.

“Hey Sehun? It’s Park Chanyeol. Sup. Alright, so I have a painting for you to look at,” he stumbled off the bed, quickly stumbling to the direction of the door, “I’ll send over a pic if you’re interested?”

“Sure?”

Chanyeol had viewed his intention of selling off the one priceless thing he owned as a great accomplishment. Admittedly, a late one.

His fiance? Not so forgiving.

“We’re not selling her.”

“Her? It’s a painting.”

Kyungsoo shook his head resolutely. Chanyeol placed his hands on Kyungsoo’s shoulder and leaned on him with a loud sigh,

“I’m calling Sehun.” Kyungsoo muttered, shaking him off.

“I’m selling it. It’s going to be sold.”

“She’s not.”

Kyungsoo stomped back into the bedroom with a frown. In contrast, Chanyeol smiled sadly and stood at the doorway, resting his arm against the top of the frame and leaning against it,

“Oi, Kyungsoo,” he called out, “we’ve been engaged for what-- five hours and you’re already going to start an argument with me?”

Kyungsoo was fidgeting. A typical stress habit. He expelled his nervous energy by fluffing out their pillows which he bashed together with noticeable impact, his thick eyebrows furrowing with effort.

“Kyungsoo. Kyungsoo. Kyungsoo. Ah… is this how you’re going to be?”

Chanyeol groaned loudly in frustration, swaying on the spot. His lips parted to start another string of fruitless calls when Kyungsoo finally let the pillows fall as he raised his gaze to him.

“If you sell it, I’m going to argue with you all night.”
Chanyeol smiled broadly.

“Don’t smile like that,” Kyungsoo lifted a finger, showing only the faintest hint of amusement in the corner of his lips as they curved, “I’m serious.”

God almighty, Chanyeol thought then-- his ass was truly whipped. His heart was beating; this was definitely a rush. The constant push and pull he had with Kyungsoo was already a sexy riot for him on a normal day. But now that they were emotionally pledged to each other for eternity?

Yes.

“Fine,” the taller man feigned defeat as he let his arms fall, choosing instead to mimic his partner with the same raised finger, “How about we play for it?”

The finger was shaped into a balled fist.

Kyungsoo understood immediately and they approached each other.

“Rock…”

“Paper…”

“Scissors!”

Chanyeol’s eyes were fixed on Kyungsoo as unfurled one finger before snapping it back into a tight fist. Rock.

At the sight of Kyungsoo drawing scissors, Chanyeol yelled out in victory, almost shrieking, as he collapsed onto his knees and held onto Kyungsoo’s arm.

“Ugh!”

“Yes!”

Kyungsoo pushed against his head gently which prompted Chanyeol to cling tighter.

“Go away, I’m not happy.”

His tone was stern enough to calm the excited man down a little. Chanyeol acknowledged the obvious upset on his expression and sighed loudly, returning to his feet as he embraced him. Surprisingly, the action was not rejected -- possibly as a result of Kyungsoo being quite sleepy -- and Chanyeol expressed his relief by pressing a kiss to his hair.

“You know that we need all the help and money that we can get, yeah?” the taller man mused, as he caressed the other’s back with a gentle hand.

“I know.”

“So don’t be mad.” Chanyeol adjusted Kyungsoo’s round glasses adoringly, half-cooing at his unhappy expression, “I’m doing this out of love.”

The hurt in his tone was glaring. Chanyeol, who again, had no fucking idea what the hoolah was about art -- still had some understanding about the source of this upset and why the portrait had grown to become so sentimental.

Clearly, something about the naked men and blots of the blue skies and hellfire reminded Kyungsoo
of good and meaningful memories — and naturally he had entwined them close with the details of
the painting. It was always hard to let go of those things -- and he’d known too, considering how
he’d held on to the painting despite the shocking weight of the grudge he’d felt for Kyungsoo during
their five year hiatus.

“We’ll get another painting.” Chanyeol compromised with a nod, “We can kiss and dance across it
or whatever… so you can form another emotional bond. We can even make a sex painting if you
want. You heard about that--? We can buy a big canvas, couple of body-safe paint cans--”

Kyungsoo reached up and flicked his ear before kissing him hard on the forehead.

The snowfall didn’t cease. By the next morning, the city bathed in white, to the point of incongruity,
was all the news would play.

Chanyeol leaned backwards against his worktop watching the weather, bowl of cereal in hand.
Hyewon was across the breakfast table. She had been dropped off by Yixing early because her
school day had been cancelled. She was on her phone scrolling furiously, smiling to herself on
occasion, as she shovelled cereal into her mouth. Apparently, Yixing had switched his oatmeal to an
even more organic type which meant she needed a second breakfast just to mitigate the taste.

“So, how did your big work case go?” Hyewon asked as she placed her phone on the table, sighing
as the battery drained.

“What big work case?”

“The one that would take all-night. That’s why you dropped me off early remember?”

Chanyeol momentarily froze. He had been living so contentedly in the haze of his post-engagement
that he’d forgotten that up till now, he hadn’t actually told anyone. Fortunately, the topic had come
into discussion the night before when Kyungsoo had advised him to keep it to himself until the funds
were resolved.

This prevented him from blurtting it out like an obnoxious you’ve been punk’d-esque catchphrase.

But this was Hyewon. After Junmyeon, she was the next most important person in his life and he
hated the idea of keeping secrets from her. More secrets. Because there was plenty that he had
purposefully isolated from her line of vision already. The equivalent of 100,000+ in words, most
likely.
“You’re being weird,” Hyewon frowned, her eyes narrowing in speculation, “Something happened, didn’t it? What? Was it with Uncle Kyungsoo? Did you two have a fight?”

Chanyeol blushed. “No.”

“You’re lying,” Hyewon gasped, saying the word like a curse.

The prospect of telling Hyewon grew too overwhelming at that point. Before he’d even really realised it, Chanyeol found himself blurting out an awkward,

“Just got a bad stomach ache. Excuse your uncle, yeah?”

The tall man darted upstairs and entered the bathroom where Kyungsoo was towelling his hair after his morning shower. By the time he reached him, Chanyeol was a red-faced, teary-eyed, puffing mess-- resembling someone who’d had a nasty reaction to an irritant.

The bathroom door was slammed shut.

“Oh!” Kyungsoo reached forwards with a hand, “Are you okay? What’s up?”

“Kyungsoo,” Chanyeol whispered, clearly panicked, “I almost told… Hyewon. She is really tough. I won’t be able to keep it in for long if she asks me again…”

The sight of the tall man shooting the room a suspicious glance as if his hushed confession could escape its walls prompted Kyungsoo to laugh. He planted a hand on Chanyeol’s arm and squeezed it out of reassurance.

“Yes, I figured that. You’ve done well to get this far. But I really don’t think we can tell her yet though.”

Chanyeol huffed, squeezing his bottom lip indignantly with his teeth.

“Well Junmyeon’s back tomorrow. Can I at least tell him?”

The prospect of telling the hitman was a little more viable. He would be far less likely to care whichever way their engagement went: to success or to failure.

“Can you last that long?” Kyungsoo teased.

“Yeah,” was Chanyeol’s unsteady answer as he inhaled a long breath, “So long as I can tell someone then I’ll be okay.”

“Do you think he’ll be okay with it?”

The thought was an amusing one and Chanyeol took a moment to ponder. The possibility of a rejection wasn’t new; but it certainly wasn’t something he would associate with Junmyeon who was the most accepting of all his many decisions, questionable or otherwise, over their many years of friendship.

“He will be,” Chanyeol affirmed as he patted Kyungsoo’s hand, “He will be because I love you... so so... so much--”

“Ah, so cheesy. Just say you’re excited to show off your Rolex and stop lying.” Kyungsoo muttered, towelling his hair as Chanyeol laughed loudly, totally in agreement.
The weather gods had shown mercy to the city and finally stopped the snowfall. The fresh layers were thick and hard, preserved by the cold temperatures, but there was a perseverance in the city spirit which meant all schools and workplaces were being forced to open.

Chanyeol had dropped Hyewon off at her school with plenty of instructions on how to avoid injury--and concurrently, if she was to be injured, the best way in which to play it and trigger a strong legal challenge.

“If I slip and hit my head on the ice, I’m holding you responsible!” Hyewon barked, crossing her arms across her chest as she frowned at her uncle through the dash mirror.

“Alright. But… if you come out of your coma as a mathematics genius. I will sell our story rights to a TV station.”

“Ugh! You’re the worst!”

“Say that again and I’ll make you take the bus the rest of the way!”

In between that, Kyungsoo was in the passenger seat beside him, sighing and shooting daggers each time he talked back to his tiny niece.

After dropping Hyewon off, the pair aimed straight for Junmyeon’s house.

Chanyeol stood behind Kyungsoo at the doorstep. The doorbell was rung twice and an entire minute passed with no answer.

“Are you sure he’s home?” Kyungsoo asked.

“He’s just putting on pants,” Chanyeol reassured him, certain that Junmyeon had hopped into bed the moment he drove home.

Eventually the door opened. Junmyeon appeared in a dressing gown, face rumpled up in an irritated expression, thick hair tossed in all directions, understandably murderous as a hand was stuffed in his gown pocket. It was highly probable that he was holding a pocket knife. Strangely, he also looked like someone who hadn’t seen the sun in a while despite spending most of his past week basking free high up in the mountains.

Kyungsoo greeted the sleepy grumpy man behind the door with a polite smile.

“Hi Jun--ohhhh!”

His welcome was startled by the sudden blast of snow that Junmyeon received right to the face from
the man who had been excited to see him most.

“WELCOME HOME JUNMYEON-AH!”

The response was instantaneous.

Chanyeol ran away screaming right across the front yard as Junmyeon darted after him in his dressing gown, barefoot against the snow, as he tackled Chanyeol easily into a slump onto the ground and forced snow into his mouth—

“You giant piece of shit! You think that’s funny? MY NEIGHBOUR HAS 100 CATS THAT’S PISSED ALL OVER MY LAWN SO GET READY TO EAT PISS SNOW.-“

“NOOOO!”

“EAT IT!”

The sounds of their laughter rang impactfully across the empty and quiet neighbourhood.

“Junmyeon-ah! Stop!” Chanyeol protested as he rolled across the ground, trembling with laughter as Junmyeon pinned him down, savagely smushing clumps of snow into his face, chanting *piss snow!* *Piss snow! Piss snow!*

Kyungsoo watched them, a playful smile on his lips, uncertain if he should intercept. After a few seconds, he recognised that what he really felt was *cold* so he opted to step inside and wait for them there.

But he wouldn’t be afforded such an easy luxury. One step in and Kyungsoo stiffened at the sensation of being hit by a snowball right at the back of his neck. It melted; his skin bristled. In the background he heard Chanyeol’s victorious cry.

He closed his eyes, inhaled deep and stepped with both feet inside.

*Slam.*

At the second snowball, Kyungsoo abandoned all consequence and thought as he came running out of the door, bending down to gather snow in the process as he hailed it ruthlessly in Chanyeol’s direction.

“Get ready to eat more piss-snow!” Kyungsoo barked as he leapt against Chanyeol, who was laughing, trying his best to hide behind Junmyeon who was still pushing him forwards into the grass,

“Noooo! Don’t gang up on me!”

“Junmyeon, aren’t you cold?” Kyungsoo asked as he took a handful of snow and stuffed it mindlessly down the back of his fiance’s jacket.

“Nah, I’m not a little prissy, like piss-snow here.” Junmyeon grinned.

“Ah, you two are fucking mean.” Chanyeol whined.

“Piss snow! Piss snow! Piss snow!” The two chanted together as Chanyeol eventually surrendered eating a few mouthfuls of snow* in the process.

*author does not recommend this
Thoroughly frozen, the three were warmed up at Junmyeon’s dinner table by the homeowner’s fancy coffee machine. It amused Kyungsoo seeing how perfectly at-home Chanyeol was-- to the point that he seemed to move in perfectly animated gestures. He knew where the slippers were, the gaps in the closet where he could slot his trainers, the buttons for drinks without looking, the keys for the biscuit cupboard which Junmyeon kept locked up to maintain his strict diet.

The house itself was neat but bare. The main centerpiece being the very, very large 64” 4K television which loomed over a couch for one. It was even more obvious to Kyungsoo now that Junmyeon wasn’t the sort that liked to invite a lot of people over.

“So,” Junmyeon sipped his drink, “What’s all this about then? You wouldn’t come here together if you didn’t have anything to tell me. Is it bad? Is it good? Should I make popcorn? A consolatory brunch?”

Chanyeol and Kyungsoo exchanged a short glance, showing the lightest sense of nerve, equivalent perhaps to a pair of synchronised divers about to take the plunge. They were hovering over the edge of the platform now, a countdown playing loud in their heads with their voices blending together, a one, two, three --

*Jump!*

“Kyungsoo and I are engaged.”

A long tense moment passed, not quite silence, more like a crackle, before it hit Junmyeon through the sudden change in his expression.

The pair of lovers took a deep breath-- hitting the water after several impressive flips. Score unknown.

“What?” Junmyeon gasped, eyes wide as he lowered his cup to the counter, “I... how? I swear you two were--”

“It happened a few days ago. You’re the first to know.” Chanyeol affirmed, choosing to take the lead as he locked eyes with his best friend.

Junmyeon was flustered. Possibly the most flustered either of them had ever seen. He spoke fast: questions, exclamations, swears, all linking arms and creating a chaotic rhythm of questioning.

“But marriage? *Fuck* What brought this on? It’s so quick! Why, the rush? I mean you can’t be pregnant!” The hitman paused then, expression suddenly more serious, “Neither of you are dying right?”

“Junmyeon-ah,” Chanyeol frowned, sighing, before making a show of tapping Kyungsoo’s hand, “We are just... really in love.”

“Fuck off.”

Junmyeon then waved his hand over his lips, expressing a silent apology as he continued,
“... I mean obviously I’m really happy for you.” He managed a smile -- a smile Kyungsoo echoed. Happy was a good word. Happy was the equivalent of a 10 -- or whatever the score was in diving. And he did look happy -- the shock was wearing off and his eyes looked comparably tender. It was the happiest that Kyungsoo had ever seen him.

“Aw, thanks man.” Chanyeol smiled as he squeezed Kyungsoo’s hand victoriously.

“Yeah wow. So do you have… a ring or something? What goes with these things nowadays? How did it happen? How did you ask him?”

Junmyeon posed the question directly at Chanyeol -- as if he had been the one to ask. This greatly amused the pair.

“We don’t have a ring yet. And uh, it happened when Kyungsoo shoved me in a hole--”

“Nope,” Junmyeon slammed his hand against the table as he shook his head, “Hard pass on the precise details.”

“--no, Junmyeon-ah.” Chanyeol laughed, “It was Kyungsoo who asked me.”

Kyungsoo suddenly found the need to nod and reaffirm. “Yeah, I asked him. I didn’t have a ring yet. Sorry. It was quite short-notice.”

“He got me a Rolex.” Chanyeol said proudly before showing the item off with a flourish of his sleeve, “Clock me and weep, Kim Junmyeon.”

“Fuck off.” Junmyeon echoed, face more amazed now as he looked at them more wholly, linking their joined image with the glowing item around Chanyeol’s wrist, “You two are serious. This actually happened-- wow! Wow!”

“It did,” Kyungsoo said.

“We’re getting married!” Chanyeol piped up excitedly, “We’re going to have a wedding and a wedding cake and all that shit. You’ll be my best man. Obviously...”

And it was then, just as all their eyes were sparkling with the delightful images that the reality of an engagement finally presented, Junmyeon finally seemed to crack beneath the emotions of it all. Just as they had only a few nights ago.

Kyungsoo felt his heart squeeze at the sight of Junmyeon wiping his eyes with his sleeve.

“Junmyeon, are you okay?” he asked.

“Bro,” Chanyeol said softly, looking very, very close to tears himself, “Come on. I’ll still hang with you all the time.”

“I’m not crying for you, ballsack.” Junmyeon sniffed, “I’m crying for Kyungsoo who has to be stuck with you for the rest of eternity. Nobody... deserves ... that ...”

“I love you too, bro.” Chanyeol hummed, wiping his eyes as he translated the other’s vicious jab to an expression of love and adoration.

This was Junmyeon after all. The meaner he was; the deeper the love.

After taking a moment (and a handful of tissues) to compose himself, Junmyeon cleared his throat with a gruff sound and approached the table. He then beckoned for their hands which he shook in
tandem by taking them into his own. He finally offered his congratulations, eyes glazed with unmistakable delight.

“Congratulations. Really. I wish you all the blessings in the world.”

Chanyeol raised immediately from the table and hugged him tightly, eyes still puffy and full.

“Thanks. I missed you so much, man.”

“Me too.”

The hug was a long hug. Kyungsoo watched them, not even in disbelief anymore at just how much the two loved each other. It was so heartwarming. He probably could’ve shed a little of the waterworks too. He had always found their friendship touching.

“Want to try on my Rolex?” Chanyeol then asked, as he showed off the item proudly to the other.

“Fuck yeah!” Junmyeon piped up before frowning at his junior, “You better make sure that he’s getting something epic too—“

Chanyeol smirked.

“Definitely. Constantly.”

Kyungsoo choked on his drink with a splutter— just as Junmyeon flicked Chanyeol on the forehead with his fingers.

“Try that one more time, piss snow.”

“Fine!”

Junmyeon held his own meeting with Kyungsoo not much later -- after lunch -- during a convenient time whereby Chanyeol busied himself with a work call upstairs.

“Kyungsoo,” Junmyeon beckoned him into the living room, “I have a bag under the table which you need to take into Chanyeol’s car without him seeing.”

“Huh?”

“The bag,” Junmyeon waved a hand at the dark tablecloth which concealed a duffel stuffed neatly under the coffee table, “It has… a contribution. I hope it helps you. With the whole 50 million thing.”

Too dazed to question the other further, Kyungsoo reached for the bag and pulled open the zip. He gasped at the sight of the large collection of notes in side, all neatly rolled up in colorful elastic bands.

“Junmyeon,” he murmured, eyes stretched wide, “How did you get this?”
“I keep most of my savings at my parents’ farm.” Junmyeon explained, shrugging his shoulders as he leaned comfortably against his couch, casually stretching an arm, “It’s the best I can do. There should be around 700k in there.”

The amount prompted Kyungsoo to gasp again, his chest feeling unexplainably tight as he lowered the bag to the floor and shook his head.

“Junmyeon.” Kyungsoo felt dizzy, “I can’t take this. It’s too much.”

“You’re taking it,” was Junmyeon’s stern reply, “and I’m saying that as a threat.”

“It’s too much.”

“I would’ve given more but I have a family to support.” Junmyeon nodded his head, folding his hands together as he gestured upstairs with his head, “If you don’t want to accept it, then accept it on his behalf. There, it’s easier isn’t it?”

It was.

“I’ll pay you back everything.” Kyungsoo said after a moment of thought, of reflection -- recalling only this morning how he’d spotted Chanyeol running through his own accounts, searching for ways to squeeze more money out of anything in his possession. “As soon as all of this is over--”

Junmyeon raised a hand to hush him.

“Just get it done first, yeah? We can sort out a repayment plan after.”

Kyungsoo nodded slowly, gaze low. A question entered his head.

“Can I ask why? Why don’t you want to tell Chanyeol?”

“Because I don’t want him to suspect - even for a second - that I may care about him,” Junmyeon answered as he then smiled broadly, “and he hates asking for help like this. I can’t have him feeling like he’s indebted to me anymore than he already does. He wants me to be his best man and that’s it. I want him to keep thinking like that.”

Kyungsoo lowered the bag to the floor. He was shaking with emotion. The gravity of the gesture was so powerful that it felt like it was still surging through him in waves, like a series of aftershocks. Junmyeon’s love was so understated, so pure, and he wondered if this was the true identity of the burden that Chanyeol supposedly felt. It was not from the material help that Junmyeon gave but the unreserved loyalty he showed through them.

To love, for the sake of loving - was the best love that one could give. And it was demonstrated in exemplary fashion here, by a gun-loving, boyband-obsessed, hitman in his late-twenties. Great things. Surprising packages.

Kyungsoo spoke with the most sincere smile on his lips.

“I know we aren’t there yet in terms of our friendship. Junmyeon. But I can’t tell you how much I value your existence in Chanyeol’s life… and mine. All the good you have done. I know it will come back to you in double.”

A smile appeared on Junmyeon’s face as he nodded his head in gratitude.

“Thanks. I appreciate that a lot.”
The knowledge that their secret was now officially a secret brought Chanyeol and Kyungsoo such a sense of overwhelming comfort and purpose that it consumed the days until the 50 million ten-day deadline with a solid fever. They kept themselves busy through it -- with Chanyeol running through his list of contacts and selling off all that he could just so he could contribute numbers to Kyungsoo’s running total.

“Bye bye… garage porn den!”

“Bye bye… my collection of vintage car and electronic computer parts!”

“Bye bye my list of private cheat codes for *The Galaxy Wars: Conflict of a Thousand Sons*!”

“Bye bye… Hyewon!”

Well. Chanyeol joked anyway.

“Why did you sell the painting?” Hyewon sighed, staring at the empty space of wall across her as her uncle patted her head lightly, “Are we broke? Should I ask Gran for money on your behalf?”

“No, we’re not broke!” Chanyeol stuttered, “Just spring cleaning, you know?”

“Liar,” Hyewon narrowed her eyes again, “You better tell me what it is soon or I’ll tell Gran that you’re selling all our stuff to buy yourself a stupid Rolex…”

“Oh my god Hyewon, I would never!”

“Yes you would!”

*Yes he would.*

Kyungsoo on the other hand was tasked with the far larger and more significant transactions. He dealt in the millions-- the tens of millions-- with all of his arbitrations conducted from Chanyeol’s house which he’d moved into with a small suitcase of clothes and his beloved plant, Jimi.

On the day that Sehun finally moved the bulk of his payment into the city, Kyungsoo stood in the
warehouse with his colleague, Byun Baekhyun, and watched as the money was piled up high. It was a frightening sight: the large ordered stacks, a solid intimidating bulk. Kyungsoo occasionally brushed a hand over the paper to reassure himself that it was all real.

Everything was counted precisely. Each note was a measure of his many sacrifices and he would ensure it was treated as such.

“So this is the price of freedom?” his colleague mused as the set of women across him moved in synchrony, counting each note as they were bound together.

“Some of it.” Kyungsoo said, before placing a hand on his colleague’s arm, “Will you be okay?”

The collection of the money constituted as the penultimate step before the official handover. The reality was dawning on them fast. Lockerman was rapidly slipping from Kyungsoo’s grasp. It wasn’t easy for either of them.

“If you really trust me, then you don’t need to ask that.” Baekhyun retorted.

Kyungsoo smiled gingerly. “It’s just business, Baekhyun.” His fingers reached upwards and brushed delicately against his friend’s cheek, “Please take care. Always. Exert distance. Don’t fall for the trap of thinking any of this should be more than just about money.”

“Like you?” Baekhyun inquired, “Was it ever more than just about money for you?”

It was a hard question but one Kyungsoo had an answer for.

“I started this and worked hard on it because I wanted something that was mine. Something that nobody could take away from me. It wasn’t about power or money. It was about having a purpose.” Kyungsoo’s gaze sized the huge warehouse with its harrowing grey roof and old peeling walls, and he smiled, “I know what it’s like to live on nothing. So when I had everything, I didn’t really feel any different.”

“I liked that about you. Everyone did.” Baekhyun chuckled, “That’s why everyone trusted you right? Because they never felt like you wanted anything from them.”

“You’ll have to play like that too,” Kyungsoo said, “If you want them to really accept you.”

The distant whirring of the counting machines overtook their conversation as Kyungsoo’s hand retreated and he was able to admire his long-time friend. He thought about Junmyeon and Chanyeol; and how in many ways, Baekhyun was the closest he had to something similar. Their friendship was like a beautiful fruit that always seemed to ripen irrespective of the desolation and harshness of their environment. Perhaps it was this; more than anything; that Kyungsoo would mourn most.

“The second they accept the money, I’ll be completely cut off.” Kyungsoo admitted.

“When?”

“As soon as tomorrow evening. So it would be best for me to keep my distance from Lockerman for a while after that.”

“Well then,” Baekhyun planted his hands on Kyungsoo’s shoulders as he smiled brightly, “Be reassured that your house will be tended to properly. All the flowers watered… all the bills paid. We’ll be just fine. So focus on yourself. You deserve so much more than this life was able to give you. It’s time for you to see that.”
“I’ll be here-- if there’s ever any problems.” Kyungsoo felt his eyes grow watery as he reached and embraced his friend, “Baekhyun, I worry about you--”

“There’s no need,” Baekhyun soothed him, “Take your freedom and let go. I can do this.”

“Thank you. Forever. For your friendship.”

“You’re welcome,” Baekhyun smiled, as he held his face up to him, “Now live well.”

“I will. I will. I promise.”

The key hours preceding the deadline bled into the next with an unsettling slowness.

Kyungsoo received the final count in his storage warehouse at 3:55am in the morning of deadline day.

*Target: acquired.*

He sat up in bed instantly, hands trembling, eyes focused on the line of syllables as his teardrops splashed against the screen, quickly blurring the colours. Wiping one eye, he lowered the device to the sheets and reached for Chanyeol carelessly in the dark, his fingers grasping pyjama fabric as they trailed up to hold flesh. His chest felt unbelievably tight, and he laboured through a loud breath as he lowered himself to the bed, clutching the phone to his chest as he squeezed against the other man.

Their noses touched. He was *shaking.*

“Hm?”

A hand lifted in the dark. A flutter of eyelashes.

“Kyungsoo?” was the sleepy mumble, “you— you— okay?”

“Chanyeol,” a tired voice choked out, “It’s *done.* We have 50.”

“What?” Their noses bumped. Kyungsoo felt the heat of Chanyeol’s breath on his skin as he gasped, “Really? What?”

Kyungsoo’s cheeks were wet. His pulse was pounding in his ears as he raised the phone to the ceiling and illuminated the room.

“I got the message just now. Look at it.”
“Woah, Kyungsoo.” Chanyeol turned to him immediately, puffy-faced, lips shaped into a perfect ‘o’ as he whispered a delighted, “So… that’s it then, yeah? You got your…”

The phone was lowered, bathing the room in darkness again. Kyungsoo didn’t answer with only his increasingly rapid and deep breaths audible.

“You must be tired,” whispered Chanyeol once he was calm enough, “We’ll talk about it in the morning?”

They didn’t dare let go of each other.

When Kyungsoo woke up, barely three hours later, he checked the message again and found himself prompted forth with the same threat of emotion. But instead of crying, he laughed. The sound was so startling that it woke Chanyeol up who straightened up from bed with his fists out as if half-trapped in an unspoken nightmare.

“Oi!” he called out, eyes still half-shut.

“It’s just me, trouble.” Kyungsoo teased, before grabbing Chanyeol’s cheeks with his hands and kissing him instantly.

“Mmm-orning,” Chanyeol hummed, as his large hands raised to hold Kyungsoo’s face to his, allowing their lips to touch, the distance so close that it was slightly dizzying to the eyes, “Congratulations.”

“It really happened. It wasn’t a dream.” Kyungsoo commented, as he smiled watching Chanyeol’s eyes finally open — the softness of his gaze so heartwarming against the darkness of his features.

“So, you’re all mine then?” Chanyeol murmured, “No more sharing you with underground gangsters?”

Kyungsoo’s fingers rested against his dark hair, as he pressed a kiss to the top of it.

“All yours,” he echoed with a smile, “I’m really poor now though.”

“Ah, it’s okay. Your future husband is a businessman. He’ll make it work.”

Kyungsoo laughed as he pulled Chanyeol across into an embrace, resting his lips close to the other’s ear as he rocked them from side-to-side.

“We sound disgusting already,” cooed Kyungsoo, “Future husband.”
“Future husband is too tiring for the tongue.” Chanyeol whispered playfully as he embraced him back, “Let’s just marry.”

Kyungsoo narrowed his eyes, a smile appearing on his lips, intrigued.

“Hm? When were you thinking?”

“My birthday.”

Kyungsoo’s eyes narrowed further. “But that’s in six days.”

“I would’ve suggested earlier but I have shifts booked.”

“Are you actually serious?”

Chanyeol nodded his head.

“Why not? If we marry on my birthday, then that saves us remembering our future anniversaries right?”

It was a valid reason. And something Kyungsoo had to say he found somewhat attractive.

“Well, don’t you want a big wedding?” he asked, keen to seem partial for now.

“All I want for our wedding is you, my family, my friends, booze and a cheesecake.” Chanyeol narrated, “I am a simple man.”

There was something reassuring about it. About all of it. About the fact that Chanyeol had pictured it all-- planned it all -- and it only served to fuel Kyungsoo’s excitement as he nodded knowing that he had no intention of planning a big or extravagant affair either.

“Okay then.” he began, “Let’s do it.”

“Yeah?”

They separated from their embrace until they were face-to-face.

The room was silent. Kyungsoo wished there was a way he could’ve captured Chanyeol’s expression. How handsome he looked; how happy. His warm eyes were thoroughly alight; alive; and as audience to its wonderful shimmer, it's impassioned focus, Kyungsoo felt rewarded. Loved.

“I want you to look at me like this.” Kyungsoo said, as he tilted his head at him and smiled softly, “I’ll marry you in six days if you promise that this is how I’ll see you.”

Chanyeol smiled brightly.

“I promise.”

Light was seeping through their room, bringing with it the rising recognition that the next day had come-- a day where Kyungsoo wasn’t going to be The Lockerman. The start of a series -- a multitude -- a lifetime of days where he would just be Kyungsoo.

He had left behind a fog only to enter another. He had never imagined he would have any of these things and now he had them, what could he do? There was worry blooming in his chest, nourished by the light in Chanyeol’s eyes, the sunlight, his own light that was still flickering, a tiny faint gleam lost in a fog. A light that was running away from ghosts. Past phantoms.
“Kyungsoo.”

Chanyeol brushed Kyungsoo’s tears away with a thumb as he shuffled closer to him: as promised, with the same smile, the same look.

“Well, isn’t this it!” Kyungsoo placed his hand over his lover’s as he squeezed it amply, “After everything. Do I really get you?”

Chanyeol smiled as he nodded.

“I’m just part of it. You get a new lease of life. You can do things you want to do— including sharing a life with yours truly where all I’ll ever need you to be is how you are, right now, on this bed, with me.”

Kyungsoo sighed, with affection, taking Chanyeol’s hand and pressing it graciously to his lips.

To love, for the sake of loving - was the best love that one could give.

And here, Kyungsoo was a fortunate and overwhelmed recipient.

“Let’s go for it then,” he said after a moment’s composure, “Six days.”

Chanyeol grinned, clasping Kyungsoo’s cheek in delight. “Really? Yeeeee!”

“Nos vamos a casar!” Kyungsoo taunted him, laughing at the immediate brightness in the other’s expression, “We’re going to get married!”

“We really are,” murmured Chanyeol, expression softening as he kissed Kyungsoo lovingly, just as the strands of morning light cast its welcoming light on their heads.

The next person to be told in person -- of the engagement and now wedding -- was Hyewon.

She had taken the news over her morning cereal with her uncles in their pyjamas, stood side-by-side against the countertop, holding matching coffee mugs.

“So that’s what all this has been about?” she quipped, processing the news before abandoning her breakfast and moving over to the other side and motioning them into a quick embrace, "Congratulations! Ahhh! I’m so happy for you!”

“Really?” Chanyeol grinned, “No wise-ass comment?”

“Are you sure you want him?” Hyewon asked Kyungsoo directly.

“Are you sure you want her?” Chanyeol taunted back.

The teenager rolled her eyes before breaking out into an elated expression as she then admitted how
she’d had an inkling about this whole thing after Junmyeon posted a recent mysterious Twitter status.

@jm1991
maybe
ture love really can conquer all
#FridayFeeling #Wow

@hyewon234
@jm1991 are u okay !!!!!!!

@jm1991
@hyewon234 this isn’t bout me
loll

@hyewon234
@jm1991 oh????? (¬_¬)

“.... I am so happy for you both though! I can’t wait to wedding plan!” Hyewon grinned, clapping her hands together in obvious excitement.

“Ah,” The couple then shared a worried glance, as Kyungsoo informed her, “There won’t be much time for that I’m afraid.”

“Why?”

“We’re having the wedding pretty soon, kid.” Chanyeol affirmed, clearing his throat lightly.

Hyewon raised a suspicious eyebrow.

“How soon?”

> 

CHAT NAME: uncle chanyeol is abeliever
>> MEMBERS: pcyy_, hyewon234, jm1991, zhangyixing

10:20 | hyewon234
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

10:21| CHAT NAME changed to uncle chanyeol is going to be a MARRIED believer

10:22 | pcyy_
omg
kid aren’t u at school

10:22 | hyewon234 has added do_kyungsoo to chat

10:22 | hyewon234
this is officially a wedding planning chat
we only have six days
(´д´)
10:23 | pcyy_
dont b worried
ksoo and i got this

10:24 | do_kyungsoo
hi :) 
lol chanyeol you are a belieber? 
Awww cute

10:24 | hyewon234
@zhangyixing
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

10:25 | pcyy_
wow

10:30 | zhangyixing
WEDDING PLANNING/ 
SIX DAYS?
WOW
WOW
WOW
BEST NEWS EVER CONGRATULATIONS GUYS!

10:30 | pcyy_
Tyvm :D

10:30| do_kyungsoo
Thank you!

10:31 | hyewon234
(/^▽^)/
uncle xing can you come over later!!!!

10:33 | zhangyixing
Yes i will straight after work
So excited
I'll bring food
Also does this mean you'll get married on chanyeollies bday??
wow!
So lovely ~~~ ;'

10:35 | pcyy_
:D
I'll invite mum as well
make it a thing

10:36 | hyewon234
she's actually going to cry
omg
i think i might

10:37 | pcyy_
Hahahahaahahahahahahaha
U r so soft hyewonnie
Hhahaahaha
Lame lol

10:38 | hyewon234
∧( < )⟩
hate you!!!!!!!!!

10:40 | zhangyixing
lov u both
kyungsoo too
will see you guys later ~~~ <3

10:41 | do_kyungsoo
Have a good day at work yixing ;)
Hyewon i’ve taken your uncle’s phone now so he shouldn’t disturb you anymore)

10:44 | hyewon234
thank you
it’s about time

12:00| jm1991
THE WEDDING IS WHAT NOW??????????????????????????????????????????????

That night, the wedding in six days’ time was declared: celebrated over the most delicious vegan takeaway dinner any of the attendants had ever had.

The small and exclusive guest list was finalised, which was predictably composed of all the supporting characters in the lengthy venture since Kyungsoo first fell for Chanyeol again as a small dumpling-deprived man locked against his will in a police interrogation room.
Even the person to officiate their wedding was contacted that very evening. It was fair to say that he was ecstatic about the whole thing, having opted to run through his own connections and find some way to accommodate the date, venue and paperwork as they continued their conversation.

“Jongin, honestly you don’t have to work so hard tonight-- it’s going to be a really simple wed--”

“Kyungsoo. Do you have any idea who you are? You? You’re DO KYUNGSOO. You do not wait in line for anything. Let alone your own wedding-- have you and Chanyeol considered orchestral accompaniments? I know a divine cellist in the Imperial Opera House--”

Kyungsoo watched as Chanyeol laughed quietly, mouthing the word cellist mockingly as he rolled onto the bed.

“Jongin,” coaxed Kyungsoo, as he lightly slapped Chanyeol’s thigh, urging him to be quiet, “All I need is you to be there. That’s it.”

“And I will be! Of course! As your lawyer and friend! And from my memory, I’m responsible for this whole thing. It was me that called Chanyeol that day yes? I am so glad it all ended well. I’d hate to be blamed if it went cockeyed. But it didn’t! Hooray! And I would be so honoured to marry you off...”

“Thank you so much.”

“It’s nothing.”

The phone call ended.

Kyungsoo crawled into bed, head landing on Chanyeol’s shoulder as he held him.

“It’s really happening, trouble.”

“It’s the home straight,” affirmed Chanyeol imitating a fast run as he lightly punched the air across him, shouting out in a booming voice, “Park Chanyeol and Do Kyungsoo are going to take this! They have worked their asses of for miles but they are almost there! The crowd is right behind them! Everyone is cheering for them! Aaaaaaaaaaaah! Can they do it? Can they do it?--”

-///-

part ii: bills, bills, bills

>> destiny’s child

-///-

In life, there was no such thing as a loose end.

One way or another, irrespective of how politely you apologise, or compensate your actions in the form of free work and special advice -- whatever you commit to pay, you will have to pay eventually. Even when it was the last thing you needed or wanted because you were knee-deep into preparing for a last-minute wedding.

A wedding which happened to be your own.

Chanyeol would face the prospect of paying his dues when he found himself answering a doorbell
call. Once opened, there was no figure in sight behind the door-- only a mysteriously abandoned envelope.

One he knew very well.

“So, who was at the door?” Kyungsoo asked as he scrolled through his phone, chatting to Jongin. Chanyeol was sweating a little. It was winter.

“Ah? It was the wrong address.” He lied.

“Are you lying?”

“Nope.” He lied again.

“I guess it’s wedding related. So I’ll let it pass. I’ll go heat something up for lunch.” Kyungsoo raised from his chair and walked from the living room and into the kitchen.

Fuck!

Alone, the tall man quickly reached for the white envelope in his back-pocket. It was an A5 sized envelope with a single black square card inside containing an address to JANG’S MULTIPURPOSE GARAGE in Earl St.

It was the equivalent of a Willy Wonka ticket except instead of a trip to the chocolate factory it was a dirty garage. Fortunately all the threat of unnecessary murder was still included.

Long extravagant anecdote, short: Pip was inviting him.

Chanyeol was 0.0001% away from telling Kyungsoo but he still lied. Why? Why did he lie when he knew he was so bad at it?

The main reason was that it was his natural go-to. He couldn’t provide a solid answer so he delivered a solid lie. Second, Kyungsoo had been having such a good time being Lockerman-free. This was the last thing he needed when wedding planning was enchanting him as much as it had. Only earlier, did he wake Chanyeol up, thoroughly in love (and concurrently horny) after spending his early morning watching emotional wedding videos online.

Chanyeol did not have the heart to spoil his good mood.

But -- he really should tell him.

He felt his palms grow sweaty. Should he toss a coin?

“Kyungsoo,” he called out but it was mouthed— strangled to a crisp squeak, almost as if a part of his core had suffered the biological equivalent of a power cut.
So he grabbed his jacket. If his instincts were telling him to wait and keep lying - then it was probably for a good reason. There was no reason to delay the call however. He didn’t have enough time. He was busy enough.

“Kyungsoo, I’m going to get some stuff from the grocer’s. I’ll be back in a bit yeah?”

The lie slipped out easily. Typical.

“Oh— do you want me to heat your food when you get back?”

“Sure!”

“And remember to call the school about Hyewon’s tennis kit!”

Oh yes. The tennis kit that had gone missing. The tennis kit that Hyewon had almost used as an excuse to skip class and watch *27 Dresses* with Kyungsoo (and Junmyeon) that morning.

“That tennis kit,” Chanyeol said, fitting sloppily into his shoes, “Got it!”

He then stepped out of the door, grabbing the baseball bat he kept in his cupboard under the stairs for precaution.

Chanyeol had been in Jang’s Multipurpose Garage many times when he was working for Pip. Sometimes, he went there for chores; sometimes for chores; and sometimes, for actual chores because Pip needed a lightbulb change. So, he didn’t feel the same trepidation that others might feel when attending to a place that was obviously unruly, grimy and perilous.

Pip even manned the garage with the same gangsters. And Chanyeol knew all of them by name, nickname *and* religious denomination.

“C’mon Pip— I’m broke. I don’t have that cash.” Chanyeol whined as he stood in the middle of the room with Pip across him and around them, a semi-circle of his men.

By now, Chanyeol had figured out exactly the men he would take on if it got dirty. Clue: it was anyone below 5’8.

“Then you should’ve thought twice about playing me, boy.” Pip leered, his mouth reeking of tobacco and something stewed, “I had a lot going for that Taipei gig. And you— you little bullshitter — bailed out.”

Chanyeol sighed. “I sent you all the work after. If your boys could read, then they could’ve probably —”

A harsh smack around the back of the knees with an unidentified wooden item would send Chanyeol stumbling.
“Oww! Shit!”

“Don’t talk about my boys, boy.” Pip glared down at him with a smirk, “You know, I still remember the day I picked you up from that alley, blood running down your face, snivelling like a little girl. I always liked you the most out of all the useless street scum I plucked off the street. If I’d had any inkling you were just another one of those prissies who took it up the ass then I would’ve probably thought twice…”

Chanyeol spat on the floor.

What was the point in being a height-ist? What was the point in waiting until it got dirty? Why didn’t he just go for the biggest pile of shit in the room?

“You motherfu—“

“Ah,” A boot was pressed hard on his cheek prompting Chanyeol to scowl, “This is your third strike, boy. I want my money by the end of the week. 50k. If I don’t— well, you know the drill don’t you?”

An ominous vision was cast as Pip grinned.

“I’ll have to take from you, what you do have.”

Hyewon’s tennis racket (yes, from that tennis kit) landed in front of him.

“So, Uncle Chanyeol. Lilac or Tuscan sun?”

Hyewon grinned at him holding up two phones which showcased two different colours of dress. Chanyeol looked at her blankly— like she was speaking a whole new language.

“You’re so useless,” she sighed at him before leaning back and waving at Kyungsoo, “Uncle Kyungsoo!”

After quickly excusing himself, Chanyeol stumbled upstairs and hogged down a couple of painkillers. His head was bursting— tiny fractures of light blurring his vision. One quick splash of cold water against the face later, Chanyeol mumbled a few ego-boosting adages before he turned, flushed suddenly, at the sight of Kyungsoo at the doorway with his arms strictly folded.

“Bedroom. Now.”

Never had Chanyeol heard those two words in a sentence and felt the direct opposite of an erection.
There was certainly a first time for everything.

They landed on the bed and Chanyeol spilled his story like a sweaty ex-mafia snitch grasping to the police.

To present it would only accentuate how pathetic he sounded; how guilty.

He talked openly about the warning he’d received-- of the meeting at Earl St. -- of the hard smack to the knees which meant Kyungsoo wouldn’t be able to sit on his lap for a few days. He just managed to avoid from talking about Hyewon’s broken racket, letting that distressing segment of the story ebb away into incoherent mumbles.

“Is that everything?” Kyungsoo pressed, watching his eyes as they lay, nose-to-nose on their bed.

“Yes.” Chanyeol lied.

Kyungsoo reached across and pinched his ear, prompting the other to groan.

“Try again.”

“... he did-- he may have threatened me, yes.”

“He’s dead.” Kyungsoo’s hand fell as he sat up on the bed and reached for his phone.

Chanyeol was quick to knock it out of his hand with a swipe. “Hey, you know you can’t do that! It’s part of the agreement remember? Your fingerprints can’t be found anywhere near this.”

Kyungsoo’s eyes were dull with unmistakable fury as he barked,

“So what do you think I should do then, huh? Stand by and let him smack my fiance around?”

The threat, heavy as it was, vanished with the emergence of Chanyeol’s warm dimpled smile.

“Don’t you dare… don’t smile. I swear,” Kyungsoo warned, raising a finger.

Chanyeol exhaled through puffed cheeks.

“You said fiance so sexy just now--”

“Ah, so annoying.”

At the sight of his fiance so flustered, Chanyeol expressed another long breath and reached across, pressing his lips to the other man’s shoulder in a reassuring manner. It was one of the many ploys Chanyeol had casually manoeuvred Kyungsoo into learning-- the soft touches, the delicate kisses, all adding up to a certain play which could get Chanyeol out of any sort of trouble.
It was an important milestone to recognise for any budding husband slash partner.

“It will all be fine,” Chanyeol said, brushing his lips against the other’s cheek (ploy #15, a definite winner), “I’ll find the money.”

“How?” Kyungsoo turned to him with pouted lips (unbeknownst to a cocky Chanyeol, one of the many ploys Kyungsoo had already implanted in him-- six months before), “Do you think he’ll take shares in a new casino complex in the Philippines? Maybe a property in Antigua?”

“I dunno,” Chanyeol shrugged, “But I’d take those, yeah.”

“Focus up.”

Chanyeol stared at his lips. So cute. Sexy. He sighed deeply in defeat-- in focus.

“Fine. I’ll sort it with him. You know what he’s like with me. There’s no need to worry, okay?” he leaned in to kiss him -- only for Kyungsoo to flinch away, “I don’t want you to think about it. Kyungsoo. Don’t be like this.”

“Let’s... cancel the wedding,” Kyungsoo suggested.

Now hearing that, for Chanyeol, from him, was the equivalent of a momentary emotional collapse. Of course, the context meant all the difference-- but still, the taller’s large heart squeezed tight, his heartbeat raced, his skin inundated with goosebumps as he immediately shook his head,

“No,” was his strict answer, “No fucking way.”

“Chanyeol,” Kyungsoo soothed, applying his own ploy (#2) as he gently caressed the other’s clothed thigh, “We can wait--”

“I’ll sort it okay? And we’ll have our wedding. Both can happen. There’s no need to give just because my asshole ex-boss wants attention.” Chanyeol forced a smile, expelling a breath, “We’ve waited long enough for this.”

Kyungsoo laughed lightly.

“It’s not even been a week.”

“It’s already too long for me.”

Chanyeol fluttered his lashes (#ploy 4) before he pressed his palm against his lips and held it up for a hi-five (#ploy 1).

“Trust me on this. Please?”

Kyungsoo stared at the hand intently. He considered his options and came to a rightful conclusion.

“I want you to tell me everything that happens. No more sneaking around.”

“Sure.” Chanyeol then recalled the tennis racket and added in, “But I will need you out of the house. Just for Hyewon’s sake. You can stay with Yixing in the meantime.”

Kyungsoo’s eyes rolled as Chanyeol laughed, keeping his hand up as he shook his head innocently.

“... I’ll get Junmyeon here. Nothing will happen. But. I just have to be sure. Plus, if I see him on my grass, I will probably kill him. I can’t have Hyewon around for that.”
“Fine,” Kyungsoo showed his surrender by meeting Chanyeol’s offered hand with his own, “Nothing. Make sure nothing happens. And if anything does, I better be the first to hear about it.”

The promise was forged. Both were somewhat satisfied.

“Stay strong, trouble.” Kyungsoo held his cheeks, teasingly, “Don’t get scared. Men like Pip. They’re not even worth the dirt on your shoes.”

“Psh, me?” Chanyeol scoffed, “Scared? When have I ever been scared?”

Later that night, at a notorious (and well-reviewed) place of ramen consumption.

“Bro, I’m shitting my pants.”

Junmyeon glanced up from his bowl of udon. He had just finished a long and taxing job which involved the manhandling of several jelly-legged mid-level executives from the new retail park opening in the East. This meant that he was particularly sensitive to any talk of bodily fluids tonight.

“Well you better stop whilst I’m eating.” Junmyeon said with a grunt.

“No, Junmyeon-ah,” Chanyeol whined, rubbing his temples through his beanie, “It’s Kyungsoo. He’s talking about cancelling the wedding? I can’t handle that! If I don’t get my wedding with him, I might actually die--”

The rest of the babbles were tuned out by the hitman. Watching Chanyeol’s lips move idly, he amused himself by thinking about how his entire tirade would sound like in the tone of Cher Horowitz from Clueless. Or for the sake of contrast, Heimdall from Thor.

“Okay, firstly.” He intervened eventually, having amused himself plenty, “Chanyeol. Bro. You gotta try and tone down the needy thing you have going. Secondly, doesn’t it worry you that you’re more bothered about your wedding-- which is guaranteed to happen-- than the fact that Pip just served you the death sentence?” Junmyeon sighed, as he dabbed his lips roughly with a napkin, “He’s got some muscle down Earl St. now. You know that right? Real muscle.”

Chanyeol sighed loudly again, fingers clamping around his ears.

“Ah, who the hell cares about Pip. He’s all talk.”

“No, bro. I think he’s serious. He’s really pissed with you.” Junmyeon insisted, having followed the very aggravated whispers through the grapevine, “It doesn’t help that the Taipei job got jacked either. He lost serious numbers that night.”
“Yeah, well? What can I do?” Chanyeol sighed, slapping his forehead. This was all his fault. Why did he get involved with this again? If it wasn’t for this, he could be picking out cake layer flavours with Kyungsoo instead of wondering how he could raise tens of thousands in the space of a few days. He knew it would be messy but he still took a sip of the poisoned chalice.

Like a true idiot.


“Ugh, fuck off.” Chanyeol said before sighing as Junmyeon smirked.

“I dunno, man. What do you want to do?”

Chanyeol mumbled something before raising his gaze to his closest friend with possibly the neediest look of the evening. “Junmyeon-ah. Don’t judge. But maybe I should consider the only other option available for someone like me and--”

“Beg like a little bitch.” Junmyeon guessed.

“--sell my ripped body.”

There was a charged silence.

“You?” Junmyeon shook with laughter as he spluttered over his bowl, hollering, “For 50K-- 50 KFC fillets, maybe!”

Chanyeol scowled as he kicked against Junmyeon’s foot from under the table.

“I am not begging Pip.” He frowned.

Junmyeon rolled his eyes daringly. “Then have fun trying to flog your floppy twig body to the desperate.”

Chanyeol snorted, throwing his arms happily up behind him, as he smiled,

“Bro. Come on. Everyone knows that there’s no need to flog the body when you were bleeeessed,” He clasped his hands over his lips, before gesturing south, “with that holy d--”

“Aaaaaah- enough!” Junmyeon waved it off, just managing to quash the need to reach across and hit Chanyeol’s beanie-head with the drinks menu, “Enough, I’ll help you find the money okay? Or whatever you want to do. I’m done. I’m done.”

A victorious expression came across Chanyeol’s face as he reached over the table and began to tease Junmyeon with a host of kisses on the head as the other continued to mumble, eyes squeezed shut in pain, chopsticks gratingly digging through the noodles,

“After your wedding, I’m going to go and find a normal best friend who I don’t want to strangle on a daily basis-- fuck’s sake, Chanyeol. I’m going to age early because of you…”

“Noooo you’re not because I love youuuuu!” Chanyeol sang.

Junmyeon’s eyes were dark.

“I’m going to stab you. Chanyeol. If you don’t sit down. That’s a promise.”
Part of the deal of allowing Chanyeol to run rampant with resolving the outstanding Pip issue was that Junmyeon would have to room with him. Kyungsoo was tasked with staying with Yixing and Hyewon with the full autonomy of planning the tiny wedding details with Jongin -- the lawyer and now, shockingly, a pseudo-wedding planner considering the sheer commitment he showed to the event.

Moments after Kyungsoo and Hyewon departed the following day, Junmyeon stepped into Chanyeol’s house dragging a large trolley of gaming equipment, snacks, and a copiously stocked box of their favourite mid-range beer.

They played for a little while but primarily got pissed. Afterwards, the pair stayed in the living room splayed freely on the floor after moving the coffee table out of the way. The rug was incredibly soft. Chanyeol was sure that Junmyeon had bought it for him in fact-- because he’d figured that his best friend needed somewhere comfortable to sit on when playing games, fixing or building some electronic gadget, or even just so he could rest somewhere whenever him and Hyewon completed her homework.

Although Chanyeol liked this use best. It was now a place that him and his best friend could ride out their imminent hangovers together. And that was beautiful.

“Bro, we should’ve gone ...hard after we got your money.” Junmyeon said with a slight hiccup.

“It’s cool, man. I’ve thought about it... it... and I’ve decided to just tell him to go f—fuck himself.”

“Chanyeol. That’s risky.” Junmyeon sighed, rubbing his eyes, “Surely there’s something we can do...”

Chanyeol shook his head firmly, having come to his dramatic conclusion after seeing the look the Kyungsoo gave him before he left the house. It had been a look of faith. Kyungsoo had been right. Men like Pip? Why should Chanyeol feel indebted to assholes like him?

“Nah, man. I’m not doing... doing it. I’m getting married in less than 2 days. This is not my priority. I see it now. Why... why should I c--care? Why does Pip’s word m--matter? I don’t owe him shit. He botched up the job. Not me.”

“True,” Junmyeon nodded, “and you... you didn’t even sign anything..”

“Exactly!” Chanyeol nodded his head as his eyes drooped, the remnants of the alcohol still fizzing on his tongue, “I want... to think... about my wedding... and Kyungs--soo. Only. Now.”

Conversation shifted to that matter soon enough.

Junmyeon turned his head towards him, tired eyes blinking curiously.

“Chanyeol. Have you been to a wedding before?”

“Just for my brother,” confirmed Chanyeol with a nod as he rolled over and took another can,
opening it and smiling privately at the subsequent hiss.

“What was it like?” Junmyeon asked.

“It was okay. Nothing... super cool or anything.”

Admittedly, Chanyeol had only been a teenager at the time and his memories of the day were somewhat blurred by the discomfort of being strapped into an oversized suit. The only other resounding memory was being hit in the back of the head for wolf-whistling after the exchange of rings and kisses.

There was no doubting however how he’d initially hated it-- the idea of giving his brother away in that capacity. For the few weeks that preceded the event, it felt like everyone had been excited aside from him. However, he eventually acceded to the reality himself after seeing how happy his brother was.

This was a definition of love which a much younger Chanyeol had realised then. The unconditional practice of being happy for someone - because they were - even if you, yourself, felt like absolute shit.

His brother’s voice crept into his head then -- deep and tinted with the same playfulness and spirit as his own.

They were in his room, preparing to leave for the venue. Chanyeol was scratching his sleeves and dramatically huffing. His brother was brushing down his own blazer with nervous excitement.

‘Chanyeollie, when you find the one you’ll understand. That’s why I wanted to get married. So that Mum and Dad can be here for us. It’s a day to spend with your family and friends. It’s a celebration. When was the last time we had one of those?’

‘Just admit that your wife is pregnant and I’ll get over it.’

‘Brat.’ Chanho said with a laugh, ‘I... really love her, okay?’

‘Yeah. Whatever you say. Okay.’ Chanyeol taunted, rolling his eyes as he folded his arms over his chest.

His older brother approached and beckoned him up. Chanyeol obliged but not without a heated stomp of the foot. Kindly, his brother began to arrange the creases on his outfit, on his tie, his expression never faltering. If anything, it was softening.

‘Promise me you’ll get married one day too, yeah? You won’t mope around on your own when you’re older? Because your brother can’t be there for you forever…’

‘Ah, you’ll always be there for me.’ Chanyeol snorted, ‘Don’t say weird things.’

‘Just promise.’ Chanho insisted with a smile, tousling his brother’s hair adoringly, ‘Promise me that you’ll grow up and try your best to live happily. You’ll find someone. You’ll marry them and love them. No more loneliness. No more troubles.’

‘Alright, alright.’ The two then shook hands, ‘I promise.’
The memory was swept away with a single shaky inhale of breath.

“Oi? Bro? Are you crying?” Junmyeon demanded, rolling onto his side and gazing at the man across him with worried eyes.

Chanyeol’s cheeks were wet. He immediately hid his face against his sleeve, as his free hand gave his gushing cheeks a light slap.

“Just drunk.”

Junmyeon shrugged as he took a large gulp of his own drink and revealed,

“I’ve never been to a wedding, you know.”

The temptation to make a joke about Junmyeon being friendless danced on the tip of Chanyeol’s tongue but his brother’s memory was enough to humble him. He resisted it, expressing a smile instead.

“Ah really? So we’ll make it special for you then.”

“You ass,” Junmyeon muttered, shaking his head as he jabbed an accusing finger at him, “It’s already special because it’s yours.”

The words were enough to tease at Chanyeol’s tearducts again. And as much as he resented the onset of emotions which was charging through him, the tall man was glad that he could at least blame alcohol for the ridiculously loving statement he would say next.

“Junmyeon-ah,” Chanyeol began as he lowered his empty drink to the carpet, “Chanho, my older brother, can’t be here for my wedding. But. I’m glad that I have another that will be there and give me away. Thank you for caring for me and keeping me company all these years.”

Junmyeon shook his head in response.

“It’s nothing, bro.”

“No, bro. It’s everything.”

A minute later and the pair were crawling across the carpet, crying, as they embraced each other hard.
On the day before his birthday, Chanyeol put his plan of offloading The Pip Problem into action. And he did so: with a simple drive to Earl St., dressed in black, bat-less, fresh out of the ring, equipped with a speech memorised.

Pip watched him from his seat in the Italian restaurant. Around his neck was a napkin stained red from the spaghetti alla puttanesca sauce.

“Did you seriously come here to tell me that you don’t have my money, boy?” Pip asked, twirling a line of spaghetti in his fork as he stared at Chanyeol with an amused smile.

“Yes,” Chanyeol nodded, “I don’t have your money because I don’t owe you shit. So leave me alone and let’s break up civilly…. if you dare come to my house, I’ll kill you. If you dare come for my family, I’ll kill you. I won’t think twice. So consider this your warning.”

The expression on the older man’s face didn’t shift. Instead, he slurped the spaghetti through his lips sloppily and then nodded his head.

“Alright,” he affirmed, “I hear you. Loud and clear.”

“Good,” Chanyeol felt his jaw lock as he reached across and plucked an olive from Pip’s plate. It was a blatant reminder of how it had been like when Chanyeol was just his errand boy; how he used to steal from Pip’s plate just for the sake of taunting him. “This is goodbye then.”

The meeting was definitely easier than he’d pictured-- possibly aided by the fact that he’d caught Pip on one of his casual breaks which meant he didn’t have the wall of testosterone around him to do his bidding.

He informed Kyungsoo and Junmyeon that the matter was resolved and then he drove back into the city with every intention of going on business as usual.

Thoughtful, Chanyeol switched on the radio.

‘... yesterday, a body was found in a townhouse in a wealthy Eastern suburb. No further information has been released by the police however it was revealed that this discovery may be linked to a mysterious missing person’s case from over a decade ago... ’

The dial was turned. Free Fix Radio 134.0 FM: Classic Rock Hits

Nodding along to the guitar solo happily, Chanyeol departed his old haunt with a contented heart, hoping dearly that nothing would ever lead him back to its roads ever again.

Parting from the donut place of course; it was 24/7.
The rest of his day was spent completing chores. A multitude of compelling tasks which included shopping for groceries for the small wedding reception, signing off on the wedding rings of choice, picking up the matching suits he’d purposed for him and his smaller best man.

In the evening he returned home to Junmyeon on his last day of bachelorhood, truthfully too exhausted to fully grasp the weight of his upcoming nuptials until he found himself unable to sleep.

“Junmyeon-ah, drink with me.” Chanyeol whined into Junmyeon’s ear as the man dozed on the sofa.

“No, go to bed. You need rest.” Junmyeon frowned.

The taller man sighed deeply, rubbing his eyes.

“I miss Kyungsoo.”

“Go jack off then. Leave me alone.”

The suggestion was a valid one. But it wouldn’t be enough for the density of thoughts which was hovering over his head; yet to be fully clarified.

The sleepless man did what he always liked to do whenever he needed to think and took a drive into the city -- where the streets were empty because of the freezing temperatures. He parked his car in the safest mid-price parking lot he could find and beelined for a 24-hour restaurant he planned to mope in until he got sleepy.

Chanyeol walked idly along the icy streets, gloved hands stuffed in thick pockets, labouring through each breath as his shoulders huddled close for warmth. He kept his gaze low, scanning the glaze of the ice mindlessly and only looked up at the sudden shower of bright light.

When he lifted his head, he almost stumbled back at the sight of the long shopping street ahead of him. He’d walked that far?

Above him, a host of beautiful silver and golden Christmas lights were poised. Chanyeol addressed them with a smile as he continued to walk, counting the snowflakes and admiring how they glittered against the distant sky which was unforgivingly black.

Beside him stood the city’s largest department store which had notoriously extravagant window displays especially this time of year. The sight of them was purposefully assaulting to the eyes -- but for Chanyeol who had spent most of his day in a sullen thoughtless fog, seeing the blank-faced mannequins dressed in their various apparel amused him.

He walked across, eyeing each window-display in turn, casting his assessment at a slow pace like a keen inspector.

Each large square window was a presentation of a life -- a story -- that was wildly distinct from his own reality. And each one was starkly different from its neighbour -- so glancing at it in turn made it
seem like he was peering through windows of different dimensions. Worlds that were certainly extravagant but frozen. It was a funny balance: the stillness of the mannequins against the vibrancy of everything else; the clothes, the furniture, the set wallpapers.

So engrossed was the future groom that he found himself thinking dreamily of the different lives he must live across the many other dimensions. Lives that could have easily been depicted through these windows.

For example, the first window -- with the hulking large mannequin in huge hiking boots and holding a fishing rod. In the background, a realistic portrait of an icy mountain range and large salt lakes.

This was a life he could’ve had with Junmyeon. And in this dimension, whereby Kyungsoo never returned-- he was left to live a life with his best friend and most trusted confidante in a pseudo-partnership that was never quite romantic, but never quite platonic either. They would spend their times, when not raising Park Hyewon and their many small fluffy pets, hiking the mountains or jetting off to faraway countries to buy rare merchandise for their favourite games and movies.

The next window was equally as wonderful. Accentuated by exotic flowers and a beach-side cabin, the center was occupied by a mannequin resting happily in a hammock with a coconut drink in one hand as another floated in a false ocean in a bubblegum pink flamingo dingy.

Yixing would have this one. In this life, Chanyeol finally confessed to his long-time crush and out of mostly pity, Dr. Yixing acknowledged his feelings and allowed him further into his life. Hyewon cursed them out for being the world’s most predictable storyline but as a trio, they enjoyed many months away somewhere sunny and free. Chanyeol and Yixing would finally get to touch each other’s abs and... everyone was happy.

The window beside that was perhaps the most heartwarming. Across an artificial fireplace, it was of a home, not dissimilar to the style that Chanyeol had, but it had a family too. There was a large plush dog curled up on the couch, a television, and a couple stood at the back dressed in matching pyjamas with their arms around each other.

On the floor was a small child mannequin with their arms up holding a train-set.

This was a life that Chanyeol could’ve chosen with -- a faceless person. Perhaps. Someone who wanted a life like this. Someone who had always craved the nuclear normalcy of a family that wore matching pyjamas and sat by electric fireplaces and gifted their children outdated toys.

Chanyeol stared at the child and smiled, peering down and resisting the urge to tap against the glass.

In this life, what would he have named them? After Junmyeon probably.

That was a promise he’d definitely made after a drunken dare gone wrong.

Moving along, the next window was pitch black and against it, Chanyeol didn’t see his face only the
outline of his shadow.

He recognised that this was a life too. Not the nicest.

It was there that his phone began to vibrate.

“Hello?” he called out, voice soft, mists escaping his lips in curls as he glanced away from the window and moved across the street.

“It’s midnight.” Kyungsoo’s voice was tired but it sounded wonderful to the ears. “Happy birthday, Chanyeol.”

Oh yes he’d almost forgotten. Glancing around as a distant church bell chimed midnight, Chanyeol laughed, feeling a sudden easing in the tightness of his heart at the sound of Kyungsoo’s voice. The cold made his cheeks ache but he smiled through it, clutching the phone close as he murmured,

“Thank you.”

“Are you outside? How come?”

“I’m lonely.”

“Come over then.”

Chanyeol smiled. “I shouldn’t. Junmyeon and I have an ongoing bet that I wouldn’t be able to stay away. Can’t lose now.”

The sound of Kyungsoo’s deep laughter prompted the taller man to smile as he paused.

“Kyungsoo. Can you sing me a birthday song?”

“What?”

Chanyeol lowered his voice teasingly.

“Come on. I dare you.”

The song began shortly after. A little breathy -- but perfectly in tune. Not that it mattered. Nothing really mattered. There he was, quietly dreaming about other lives in other dimensions when this dimension existed and here -- he had a Kyungsoo, a Kyungsoo who he would marry, and a Kyungsoo who would sing him a birthday song at midnight.

He could’ve been happy in any of those other lives but he was also very happy here.

And at that recognition, Chanyeol wasn’t sure he’d ever felt as lucky or as happy as this.

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, Happy birthday, my Chanyeol- Happy birthday to you, Woo!”

Love was not encompassing of a word to describe what Chanyeol felt for Kyungsoo at this point as he reached the other end of the street practically in tears. He clapped his hand against the phone, laughing warmly into the icy chill.

“Wow. Beautiful. Thank you. I’ll make a wish now.”
“Alright.”

A smile crossed Chanyeol’s face as he glanced up at the sky.

It was grey and cloudy. The tall man then rolled his eyes.

Fuck you stars; so as a compromise, he wished on the moon.

-- to the moon. so it’s my birthday
and i wish that kyungsoo and i find our peace.
i hope we are happy for a long time.

“Done.” Chanyeol lowered his eyes again and pocketed his hands.

“Are we really going to get married tomorrow?”

“If by that you mean today, then yes we are.”

“Then don’t stay out, Chanyeol.”

With his phone pressed to his ear, Chanyeol turned away from the web of streets across him and found himself returning to the window display with the family and the dog, listening to Kyungsoo’s worried murmurs, “’-- you’ll get cold if you stay out, then you might get sick. I don’t want you to drink either especially if you’re alone. It’s dark anyway. You shouldn’t be out so late…”

For a moment, even in the distance, Chanyeol swore that the scene in the window snapped into life: the dog was barking, its tail carelessly whipping the air, the train-set was being whooshed back and forth with small moving hands, and the large sofa sighed as the pair of faceless figures lounged upon it, both in matching pyjamas because one wanted to be an asshole and irritate the other.

‘I know you’re not listening… ahh… so annoying.’

“I am listening,” cooed Chanyeol as he sighed outwardly, “Fine I’ll drive home and get some sleep.”

He could hear the satisfied huff in his tone.

“I’ll see you tomorrow then. Rest a lot.”

“Yes, I’ll see you tomorrow.” Chanyeol confirmed as he turned back.

But the phone call didn’t end; not yet. Chanyeol held on - and Kyungsoo did too.

It was the latter who spoke first.
“I can’t wait for it.”

“Yeah, it’s going to be an epic day.”

“Not just the day. All of it.”

“Me too.”

“I love you. Good night.”

“I love you too, good night.”

>> calling if chanyeol doesn’t answer
>>> caller unavailable
>>>> please hold to leave a voicemail

‘hey kyungsoo, is chanyeol with you?
i… i don’t really know how best to put this…
i think it’s better if you call me okay?
call me please…

The next morning. On the concluding day of the intense six-day wedding prep.

On the wedding day itself.

Kyungsoo would wake up to the crushing news that Chanyeol was nowhere to be found.

-//-
Present Day:

-part iii: take my breath away-

>> berlin

The tale of Chanyeol’s birthday slash wedding day nightmare began as all birthday slash wedding day nightmares began.

With an unwelcomed and ambiguous text message at a rather horrifying time of day.

Come outside.

Perhaps there was a part of him -- the alert and instinctual survivalist -- whom had sensed some trouble in the horizon because Chanyeol had stepped out of his house, bat gripped tightly in his right hand despite his half-awake state.

However, he would be no match against the silent assault of two larger men and the slip of a familiar bag over his head. His energy had been so depleted by that point that he couldn’t even manage a scream.
By the time he had fully recognised the gravity of the danger, the bag was pulled off his head and he was breaking out into cold sweats.

The room reeked of old wood and gas. With a scowl, Chanyeol shied away from the bright white light that burned the top of his head, focusing his dizzied gaze onto his feet which were restrained tightly by thick construction rope. The same material tended for his wrists which were already itching.

“Did you really think you’d get away from me that easily, boy?” came the familiar drawl from Pip. He was somewhere.

Deprived of coffee and sleep, Chanyeol emitted a low groan. “Pip. It’s my birthday… and my wedding day. Couldn’t you have waited until tomorrow?”

“Is it now?” Pip came into view, a hideous blur, the light just accentuating the tough wrenched lines of his face and his yellowing skin. “To die on your birthday. Almost poetic, isn’t it? I suppose it saves a little space on the plaque. Birth and died on this day. Kinda thoughtful, eh?”

That was one way to describe it.

“When’s your birthday again, Pip-o?” Chanyeol seethed, managing a smirk as he tilted his head at him, “Maybe I can make corresponding arrangements.”

“Ah, you know, boy?” A hard thumb crushed his jawline, purposely rough, prompting Chanyeol to cry out, “For someone in your position, you talk an awful lot out of your ass.”

“Well, you are what you eat.”

Chanyeol laughed breathily. Painfully.

Naturally, Pip laughed with him. Those jokes were his favourite. He reached across and gave Chanyeol’s hair a loving toss and tug.

“See,” he hollered viciously at his men, “See! See this? This is comedy. What’s up with you lot? You’re all dead inside. And this is why I liked him the most out of the lot of you! And this is also why, I’m going to really, really regret burying you, boy.”

Chanyeol looked up at him, perhaps finally realising now that Pip was meaning business.

“Please don’t,” was his pathetic attempt at begging because it was against every instinct he had to beg from the literal human embodiment of a burning pile of dog shit.

“Beg, puppy, beg.” Pip cooed, patting the top of Chanyeol’s head with a smile, “I thought you were going to kill me, so thought I’d get in there first. I’m not that dumb.”

Chanyeol shut his eyes as he bit his tongue.
He mustn’t talk back.

If he wanted to live; he had to keep his propensity for shit-talking under control.

Pip walked away, tripping on the flat factory surface in the process.

Chanyeol’s leg shook as he bit down on his tongue harder.

*Yep.*

*I’m going to die.*

As with every six-foot future groom in distress, a rescue party was certainly on the way.

A competent one consisting of the future groom’s indescribably handsome, ride-or-die -- and his future groom.

Trembling, Kyungsoo stayed in the passenger seat as Jongdae and Junmyeon exchanged words at the front of the van. There were details tossed, of potential locations that Pip frequented -- specific hubs in Earl St. -- alongside the key evidence comprising of Chanyeol’s phone records and the electronic trace of the mysterious text which he had received.

Jongdae had been working non-stop for an hour. He was still in his pyjamas.

“Kyungsoo, don’t worry. We got it!” Jongdae told him, offering him a thumbs up, “I’ll see you at the wedding later, yeah!”

If it had been anyone else, perhaps, there would be a lingering sense that the wedding should be rightly postponed in order to accommodate for this intense and unpredictable string of events. However, as seasoned criminals, very little would serve to startle the resolve of those in the rescue party. They had lived through other stressful events within tight and unforgiving time frames.

“Thanks,” Kyungsoo managed, offering his friend a gracious nod.

“Yes, try this one,” Jongdae instructed as he planted a finger on a specific list of coordinates, “That’s the one. I’m 99% sure.” As the hitman marked the paper, Jongdae then reached across and pecked Junmyeon’s cheek with a soft kiss.

And then he left the van, waving goodbye at them cheerily.
Kyungsoo glanced at the figure and then at the driver and then repeated the action a few times, feeling bowled over.

“Alright, let’s go get your man…” Junmyeon began.

“--did you two just--”

“It’s a twenty minute drive. Hopefully he’s not annoying them too much.”

“--Jongdae and you--”

“God, he’s probably just talking out his ass. Stupid... he better keep his mouth shut…”

Recognising that this was not a matter that Junmyeon wanted to discuss, Kyungsoo chose not to delve further, focusing fully on Chanyeol’s disappearance. All his excitement for the day had come crashing down on him after he’d received Junmyeon’s voicemail. He immediately thought about their phone call last night-- and how much he’d wished he’d stayed at home and watched over him -- why did he ever believe him when he said it was fine?

With Chanyeol, everything was always fine until it wasn’t.

It was why he would’ve never been a seasoned criminal. His level of idle optimism was practically an approaching death sentence.

“I really hope he’s okay,” sighed Kyungsoo, “I’m so worried…”

“Chanyeol’s going to be fine. He just needs to hold out. We’re almost there.”

Kyungsoo inhaled sharply and nodded. Chanyeol was a survivor - he always had been. But that wouldn’t stop Kyungsoo from feeling nauseated by the possibilities that something had gone wrong. This was hell; not knowing was perdition.

“I’d hold your hand if I could,” Junmyeon began awkwardly, “But personally, I don’t think we’re there yet.”

“I agree. That would be weird for me too,” Kyungsoo answered.

So in acknowledging this, they drove in a comfortable silence.

And it was comfortable for a little while -- even though the premise of being here in this van with Junmyeon rescuing Chanyeol on their wedding day was so ridiculous that it was becoming physically hard to fathom.

This was it, Kyungsoo thought with genuine fervour as he gazed at the picture of Chanyeol on his phone and pressed it lightly to his lips.

Today would be the last day he ever let Park Chanyeol out of his sight.
For someone who was about to die, Chanyeol genuinely thought he was having too much fun.

This was probably because in contrast to the many other times he had been tied up, he was actually finding this circumstance comparably pleasant. He hadn’t suffered any beatings, the knots around his wrists weren’t unbearably painful, and he knew most of the men in the room. In fact, he was rather enjoying hearing and joining in their banter as they ate their greasy diner breakfasts in front of him.

One of the men-- Big Ben, was his nickname because he was of an enormous size, even taller than Chanyeol himself -- offered him a slice of bacon but Chanyeol declined, stating that he was trying to remain committed to his low-fat food diet in preparation for his wedding.

However, he did scoff down the sliced avocado squares pretty quick. None of Pip’s men liked avocado. Big Ben said it tasted like bathroom mould.

“Hey… hey! What are you guys doing?” cried Pip as he walked back in, having taken his own breakfast inside his office a few kilometres away in the garage, “Are you feeding him?”

Several heads were smacked. Chanyeol watched, as he greedily snuck his tongue out to lick at the sides of his mouth, lapping up any remaining remnants of the fruit.

“God’s sake. What do I have to do to get competent help out here, huh? All of you-- out! I’ll stay with the boy!”

The company of men departed. Chanyeol offered Big Ben a gratuitous smile before he was smacked on the forehead by a fuming Pip.

“You really are something else, aren’t you boy?”

“What do you want from me, Pip?” Chanyeol sighed, shaking his head as it throbbed from the hit, “I’m sorry I couldn’t go to Taipei. I’m sorry I’m too broke and can’t offer you everything…”

“You think I’m a joke, don’t you?” Pip laughed harshly, “Just someone you can turn to and punch about when you need a laugh? No matter how much of a joke I am. It will never amount to the joke that you are. You’re a fucking Eastie pretty boy and that’s what you’ve always been--”

Chanyeol exhaled, the rage welling up in his stomach in waves. *Bite your tongue.*

“… you didn’t know how to do shit when I first picked you up! You would’ve died on the streets! You would’ve right? Because even your fucking parents didn’t want anything to do with you--”

*I tried.*

“Is that so? Huh? You’re lecturing me when everyone in this entire fucking town wonders each day how a dumb shit like you ever managed to live this long!” Chanyeol yelled loudly, eyes flashing as his hands balled into hard fists, “You’re a piece of garbage who recruits kids and beats them! You’re pathetic! I hated you! I hated you when I worked for you and I hate you even more now! You want to kill me and you can’t even kill me right! Because you’re useless and you deserve a --” Pip grabbed
at his throat, the look in his eyes describable only through the word:

_Murderous._

Chanyeol fell quiet.

But behind them came the surprising sound of loud clattering and pained grunts.

Pip’s hand loosened as he turned and the door was broken into by Big Ben slamming and flying through the metal door.

Kyungsoo entered. Recognisable in his all-black, ex-full-time criminal couture.

Now picture this.

All Chanyeol had ever wanted in his life was someone who would love him as he was, who wouldn’t ask for more or less, who would see his cracks and bruises and accept them as a part of him. Someone who made him laugh; gave good head; and indulged in his shitty humour from time-to-time.

And what he got was _that_ -- and more -- in a man who would also choose to turn up to a dilapidated factory on his wedding day, still dressed in a sexy pyjama top, ready to beat up thugs way bigger and rounder than him.

Chanyeol was a lucky, lucky man. And he knew it now more than ever.

When his eyes finally met Kyungsoo’s, Chanyeol was sure they’d shared the same feeling of immeasurable relief.

But it would vanish around the same time that one of Pip’s men grabbed Kyungsoo from behind.

“Kyungsoo!”

Chanyeol struggled violently against his restraints and glanced up at Pip who reached for him, still leering,

“Well, since everyone’s here for the party--”

There, a glint of metal appeared, reflected from the sharp knife the man held threateningly in his hand.

Awakened somehow by Kyungsoo’s appearance and the general sweet clamour of violence, Chanyeol quickly tipped himself backwards away from Pip and after wrenching his teeth tight, he pushed himself up using the balls of his feet and smacked the wooden chair against the ground with so much brute force that it _cracked._

He moaned shamelessly in pain as his back curved against the wooden debris.

When he opened his eyes again, teary, Kyungsoo was back in his line of vision, all in black.
Sexy.

Blame it on Chanyeol’s mild nervous concussion, but his fantasising started again.

This time - accompanied with the right acoustics.

*Watching every motion
In my foolish lover’s game--*

The scene was in extravagant slow-motion. Kyungsoo giving Pip a straight powerful uppercut to the face (as taught by Chanyeol) and clamping the clumsy shaking man into submission with a tight headlock until his face was slightly blue. Beneath his cap, only Kyungsoo’s lips were visible and they were slick, parted and murmuring threats and curses, as he dragged Pip down until his knees were buckling and awkwardly protruding.

*-- take my breath away*

Pip was physically choking. He was spluttering.

It was wonderful.

“*Oi!*”

Chanyeol groaned loudly as someone’s boots gave his back a tentative jab.

“J--Junmyeon?”

“Oh, yeah, hey bro. Sorry.” Junmyeon peered at him, “Also happy birthday.”

There was blood on Junmyeon’s lip. He helped Chanyeol up, even dusting his poor pyjamas down in the process.

The music had faded now and Kyungsoo’s voice was loud and furious against the buzzing in Chanyeol’s ear.

“... you think you can just take him like that? Who the *fuck* do you think you think you are? Do you know what I know? I know everything about you Park Ilbeom. I know about the vaults in the Northern Province. The lovechild from the 36 year old married charity worker… and I know that the triads might want to talk to you about the missing arms cargo from last month--”

It was there that Chanyeol felt the need to step in.

“Kyungsso. He’s unconscious.”

“Oh?”

Kyungsoo glanced down and registered the floppy state of Pip’s limbs and the generous line of drool emerging from the man’s mouth. He murmured, “Woah, excuse me,” before gently and awkwardly lowering him to the floor, “I must have held him too tight.”
After brushing his hands together, Junmyeon crouched and checked for a pulse.

“Yeah, he’s still alive,” Junmyeon muttered, not looking particularly taken by the result.

By that point, Kyungsoo’s arms were firmly around Chanyeol’s as they struggled to remove the rope without hurting him.

“Are you okay? You’re not hurt are you? Good thing we got here just on time, I was so worried we’d get the wrong place,” were Kyungsoo’s concerned murmurs as he held Chanyeol’s cheeks, massaging them lightly, “You’re okay? You’re okay?”

His eyes were gleaming.

“Are you okay?” Chanyeol asked softly, before smiling, totally relieved, “Sorry Kyungsoo. Sorry for scaring you…”

“As long as you’re okay,” Kyungsoo gulped, nodding at Junmyeon who finally found some large shears to cut through the rope, “It’s okay as long as you are.”

Kyungsoo’s lip looked a little bruised -- knuckles definitely a tad sore -- but aside from that, he appeared largely unharmed. Once his hands and feet were free, Chanyeol wasted no time in expressing his relief as he reached across and kissed his lover passionately. He ignored the resounding aches, the sweat on his face, and enveloped him safely in his arms. A black cap was tossed carelessly away -- fingers in hair -- hands on ass -- Kyungsoo’s legs hoisted around his waist--

“God… seeing you…. Punch-up… so hot…. Fuck….” Chanyeol panted hotly.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Spar in the ring with me.”

“I’ll beat you.”

“I’ll let you.”

Kyungsoo laughed into Chanyeol’s collar, kissing into the tender skin and burying his lips comfortably in it.

They remained like that until Junmyeon cleared his throat for what had been the $nth$ time since they started fractionally grinding against each other.

“Yeah, so I’m all for love and shit. But we need to get you two to a wedding?”

“Ah yes.” Chanyeol affirmed.

Kyungsoo was lowered but their hands remained entwined.

Junmyeon watched them, looking moved as he then waved them away with a hand. “I’ll take care of this. You two should get along to get ready before everyone starts to worry.”

Chanyeol nodded as he reached across and embraced Junmyeon tightly. But the other was quick to step away. All fractions of his emotional state gone instantly.

“Bro you still have a boner, no. Go take my van. How do you want me to take care of Pip? Do you want me to take care of Pip-- or--?”
“Give us Pip.” Kyungsoo said, surprising everyone as he glanced around the room, “You take care of the rest. However you see fit.”

“Be nice on Big Ben, yeah?” Chanyeol patted Junmyeon’s shoulder as they walked out, “He fed me avocado.”

Junmyeon scoffed.

“That softie.”

Kyungsoo had a specific plan for where he wanted to get rid of Chanyeol’s ex-employer. A hole plan actually.

By an abandoned highway on the side of the road, a pair of men hovered over one man who was currently pleading for his freedom after waking up in a deep icy hole. It was cold. His snot was freezing on his cheeks; and he was beginning to discover that he had terrible, terrible trypophobia. (A fear of holes.)

“Please! Let me out! I don’t want to die here!”

Pip had been begging for ten straight minutes. Kyungsoo had scheduled for this altercation to last fifteen. They were getting there. He glanced at Chanyeol who was watching the man beneath plead desperately, his expression totally unreadable.

“I’ll leave this on you, trouble,” Kyungsoo whispered as he wrapped his free arm around Chanyeol’s waist, “What do you want to do?”

Irrespective of all that had happened, Kyungsoo knew that some part of Chanyeol had always felt considerate for his old boss. There had been something soft about their relationship -- something that could be traced back to the simple fact that Pip had been there when nobody else was during one of the lowest parts of Chanyeol’s life.

It would be wrong to underestimate such an impactful fact.

It would certainly be his lifeboat now as Chanyeol took the shovel and carted another large mound of dirt inside, prompting the man to cry out further in despair.

“Don’t bother us again. It’s goodbye forever now, Pip.”

“Okay! Okay, boy. I understand!” Pip blurted out, bowing his head.

Chanyeol then offered Kyungsoo a smile.

“I am completely done.”
Pip continued to bow as he clasped his hands together.

“Okay. It’s done. I won’t bother you anymore, boy.”

Kyungsoo then took the shovel and took Chanyeol’s hand. He urged for them to walk away. Chanyeol blinked, appearing slightly confused.

But he kept on walking.

“--no don’t leave!”

Chanyeol glanced back and stuttered, “Kyungsoo we can--”

“No.” Kyungsoo’s expression was firm, “I’ll let him live. I won’t let him out.”

Did Chanyeol feel slightly guilty about that?

Not particularly.

Fair enough.

There was a very cold breeze blowing through the highway. The van door was shut. The pair stared at each other. They looked a state: doused in dirt, sand, and a sprinkling of blood.

But nothing a good shower couldn’t fix.

“I’m exhausted,” huffed Chanyeol, before glancing at the time and laughing, “We have one hour and a half.”

“Can we make it?” Kyungsoo asked as he removed his cap and ran cold fingers through his hair.

Chanyeol calculated it: twenty five minute drive home, twenty minute shower, twenty minutes to get ready, and another thirty minute drive from home to the registry office--

“It’s doable. But we’ll probably have to get married with wet hair.” Chanyeol murmured as he started the ignition.

Kyungsoo gazed out of the window in thought as he spoke.

“How about-- a public bath? We can hire tuxedos from my friend’s shop. Then we’ll probably have enough time to get brunch too.”

And from the East, the registry office wouldn’t be far to drive.
Chanyeol considered the cons and then shrugged it off.

“Sure, let’s do that.”

They commenced the journey back into the city. Kyungsoo pressed his head against Chanyeol’s sleeve.

A few minutes later, Chanyeol would glance at him and stiffen at the sight of his abnormally pallid complexion.

“How’s it going?”

Chanyeol gazed at him, momentarily pulling his eyes from the empty road. He then braked in the middle and let the engine cease to a low breathy rumble.

The road was empty. And aside from their vehicle, it was exceptionally quiet.

Chanyeol reached across and embraced Kyungsoo tightly. He wasn’t sleeping; he was shivering. In a natural cascade of movements, the driver pressed his lips to his lover’s beating temple, caressed the back of his head with his warm hand, offering him a moment to ground himself, to breathe.

“What’s wrong?”

“I could’ve lost you.” Kyungsoo said, eyes full of tears.

“But you didn’t,” hummed Chanyeol, “I’m right here.”

Kyungsoo’s pulse was dizzyingly fast. Chanyeol hushed it with soft kisses.

“I’m sorry… I scared you.”

“I forgive you.”

Their embrace dissolved. Chanyeol moved across in the direction of the passenger’s seat and wrapped an arm over Kyungsoo’s shoulder, letting his hand caress his hair tenderly. The smaller responded to the gesture by crossing his arm and cozily clinging onto the other.

And there, the pair sat together, frozen, almost portrait-like, as they gazed silently at the empty road. There was an empty stretch of horizon across them, coloured only by a faint grey fog haunting the distance, and the bleary promise of a city in the occasional twinkle of golden light.

Kyungsoo shut his eyes and focused on the weight of Chanyeol’s arm around him. The crinkly fabric of his shirt which he held onto; his familiar smell; his deep breaths; the rough fingers in his hair; the overwhelming calmness of his heartbeat.

Suddenly, he wasn’t on a highway anymore.

He was listening to a story and laughing in a tiny caravan bed. There was an arm over him and the room was so dark it was making his eyes hurt. He was laughing so much -- what did he do? he forgot the money inside the vault? -- yes, yes he did. he’s such a dumbass -- there was barely any air in his lungs left as he clutched his stomach and rolled into Chanyeol who laughed right along with him.
The bed was so small. The story was so stupid. They were laughing to the point that they were crying.

At one point, Chanyeol’s arm accidentally knocked into his jaw. Long bony arms immediately came to drape over him in apology. The embrace was too tight. It tickled. He wanted to laugh again but his stomach hurt.

shit this bed is so small. i’m sorry.

The bed was so small.

Chanyeol was so big.

And he loved Chanyeol so, so, so much.

He was back on the highway, smiling with his eyes closed.

“We used to do this a lot. Drive around together.”

Chanyeol’s voice was thick with emotion. Kyungsoo opened his eyes and faithfully followed where it guided him-- away from the caravan now -- back to those nights blanketed in ice and clouds, the scrape of the wheels on the bumpy concrete, the chill against his fingertips as he drummed them dreamily against the passenger window.

“... I must have fallen in love with you just like this. I guess it could have happened before. I can’t really remember when or how. It’s not easy is it? Remembering. A lot of the time it just happens. It wasn’t like I opened my eyes one day and thought yes. This is the guy I want for the rest of my life. It’s less exciting than that. For me, it was more... I could hold him forever like this and... I wanted to... ”

Chanyeol exhaled deeply as he kissed his lover’s head with a sigh, speaking in a low fond whisper.

“Kyungsoo. Our life together isn’t ever going to be normal. Marrying isn’t going to change that. Just like everyone else, we are going to have to carry everything we have ever done and live with it. But I know that I am going to hold you through it, and you’re going to hold me too. And whatever happens to us, know that from now on, every step you take-- I’ll take it with you. We’re both a little chipped in places right now -- and it will hurt for a while -- but we’ll be okay. And out there, right there? Right across. See that?

We are going to build a whole new life. I know you can’t see it yet. It’s a tad foggy right? But if you think about what you want, what you’ve always wanted, it’s right beyond the fog. I promise you. Because we’re going to make it together.”

Kyungsoo nodded in understanding as he reached up and planted a soft kiss on Chanyeol’s moist cheek. All images of the past vanishing at the touch which grounded the present.

“I know you said we weren’t going to do vows. But I memorised one just in case.” Chanyeol said, as
he took Kyungsoo’s hand and squeezed it happily, “I really really am so happy that we’re going to get married today, Kyungsoo.”

Kyungsoo’s heart was beating fast. But it wasn’t out of fear this time.

“Me too.” Kyungsoo kissed him again, clinging onto him tightly, “Happy birthday. And happy wedding day.”

And off they went back into the city, back into the fray, to marry.

Just like that.

-//-

part iv: end of the road

>> boyz II men

-//-

>>open

>>> DOC FILE:

UNCLE CHANYEOL_AND_UNCLE_KYUNGSOO’S WEDDING_UNEDITED_CLIPS.MP4

>>>> play

The camera hovers on the floor for a few seconds, zooming in on a pair of shiny black shoes. And then it lifts, and Hyewon waves at herself across the mirror. She is wearing a long lilac dress with flowers weaved into her dark hair. The latter detail being something her Gran had forced her into.

“Hello! This is the wedding cam for Uncle Chanyeol’s wedding! And also my first try at vlogging. So anyway, let’s go and see if we can find some guests to talk to…”

She circles around and walks immediately into a tall figure. Her camera tilts up and there is a visible gasp heard from the vlogger.

The figure is in a crisp white suit. His tie is Gucci. That, as much Hyewon could be sure of.

“Why hello there!” the voice cheerily retorts, “Aren’t you pretty! You must be Chanyeol’s niece. I’m Kim Jongin. I’m going to be officiating today’s events. And I am also a lawyer. Would you like a business card?”

The camera trembles as Hyewon’s hand reaches for the card.

Jongin chuckles. “I can’t seem to find anyone around! Strange isn’t it? I guess Kyungsoo wouldn’t have too many guests… but Chanyeol’s a party! Anyway, just let me know if you find either of the grooms okay?”

He disappears.

Hyewon turns the camera on herself and huffs.
“To edit later,” she begins, pursing her lips, “But he was the prettiest man I have ever seen... although his card is a tad simple.”

The card is shown to the camera. It was a sharp thick white business card with his name and occupation written neatly in gold alongside a single line of numbers.

KIM JONGIN
LAWYER
+021401994704

>> cut

“So, how do you know the grooms, miss?”

Hyewon angles the camera to follow the cute little puppy sniffing around the small set of chairs as his owner ties silver and golden balloons around the room. “Oh? I’m a friend of your Uncle’s,” Taeyeon beams. She is pretty in pink with her hair braided and curled around the edges. Hyewon zooms on it, mentally noting to remember to ask her Gran about the type of knots she’d used for future reference.

“Do you have a message for them?”

“A message?” Taeyeon pauses, placing herself down on a chair as she smiles happily at the camera, “Just the cliche, I suppose! Live long Barbie-- I mean Chanyeol! Chanyeol! Live well and long with... Kyungsoo! Make sure you... you...”

A man appears then. A smiley man who makes Hyewon’s heart beat a little fast. He has dyed hair. Blonde. So cool.

“Struggling to keep it PG?” Minseok teases Taeyeon who mouths a very obvious swear word. He’s wearing a tux, hair styled up nicely. “Ah, it’s okay. I’m Kim Minseok by the way. You’re Chanyeol’s niece, yeah?”

“Yes. I’m Hyewon. Nice to meet you sir.”

“You too.” Minseok scoops the puppy up from the floor as he places a hand on Taeyeon’s shoulder. “We’ll deliver our message together. Hi Chanyeol! Hi Kyungsoo! Live well together! Be happy! Make sure to gain lots of weight and drink with us from time-to-time. You are very handsome together so don’t stress each other out, hah!”

The pair blow the camera a kiss.

“Here Chewy! He’s Chanyeol’s favourite. Give him a kiss good luck!”

Hyewon laughs as she offers the camera lens and the puppy licks it generously.

>> cut
The next clip opens with Hyewon zooming out of someone’s ear.

“Uncle Yixing, whose plant is that?”

“It’s your Uncle Kyungsoo’s-- what are you doing, Hyewonnie? Hee, are you taking a video? You are such a sweet girl.”

Hyewon grins from behind the camera as she focuses on the plant on Yixing’s lap. It looks small but it has large healthy flowing leaves and her uncle was watching it like a mother.

“I think your Uncle said it’s their lucky charm so I thought I’d bring it along after I saw it at your house.”

Hyewon nods.

“So, when are you going to get married, Uncle Yixing?”

Yixing laughs as he caresses his collar with a chuckle. “Why are you asking me now? Why? You want to marry me off too?”

The camera angle quivers as Hyewon shakes her head vigorously. “Nope!”

Her uncle beams.

“Ah, okay then. No marriage for me for a while. I’ll just care for my baby Hyewon, yes?”

“Not a baby!” Hyewon sighs, as she mutters, “Will edit later-- okay, a message for the happy couple Uncle Yixing!”

The request brings light to Yixing’s eyes.

“Hello my lovely Chanyeollie! Happy wedding day! I’m so happy for you and honoured to be here. This is the same for you, Kyungsoo! I am very glad that you’re in our family and I can’t wait to see more of you... I love you both very much! I can’t wait for later!”

He waves goodbye at the camera.

>> cut

Hyewon tap dances down the corridor, spinning happily.

“I heard my Uncle’s here, so let’s go find him.”

She peeks into the room where the door is wide open. Chanyeol is in the middle of the room on the floor, holding his phone with Junmyeon placed across. It’s obvious that they’re both playing games.
Hyewon leaps across and slams the door open.

“Ha!”

Chanyeol practically flings the phone across the room as his loud voice booms,

“HOLY SHIT HYEWON I’M GOING TO FUCKIN—”

>> cut

“Okay. I’m filming again. No swearing!”

“Alright, alright.”

The three are in an empty office room. Hyewon films her uncle-- gets the trademark V against his cheek-- and the easily irritated camerawoman rightfully moves it to Junmyeon who is combing his hair nicely.

“Okay Uncle Junmyeon. Any kind words for the grooms on their special day?”

Junmyeon scoffs as he stares at the camera intently.

“Come on, Junmyeon-ah,” Chanyeol urges with a loud laugh, “Now’s the time to confess how much you love me. On camera. With a witness.”

Junmyeon shakes his head, muttering, before he urges it to come closer.

“Alright. I’ll confess. Park Chanyeol, my Park Chanyeol... is a hardcore believer. He has all his albums, attended Justin Bieber’s tour—”

“Stop! Stop it!” cries Chanyeol.

Hyewon laughs so hard the camera drops.

>> cut
“Hi I’m Park Hyewon.”

“I’m Byun Baekhyun.”

“I’m Kim Jongdae.”

The three all greet each other politely. Hyewon cups her hand over the camera as in the background she quickly explains how she’s filming a gift for her uncles and if they had anything to say now would be the time.

Baekhyun is dressed nicely. He has kind eyes and they curve as he nods at the camera and politely states,

“Good luck, you two. I am very happy to be here. Be good to each other.”

Jongdae is next. His smile is even brighter. He greets the lens excitedly,

“Chanyeol. Kyungsoo-yah! I am so happy for you two! I wish you all the best for your future together! And I hope you’ll still find the time and play tennis with me.”

Hyewon lowers the camera and thanks them politely.

In the background, Jongdae asks,

“Hyewon, have you seen Junmyeon at all?”

“Yeah, him and my Uncle are playing games in the room at the end.”

“Ahh, okay. Thanks!”

>> cut

The ceremony begins.

Hyewon zooms in on lawyer-Jongin’s face. He’s smiling and exchanging small-talk with Junmyeon. She can’t quite read what they’re saying but she gathers that Junmyeon’s not really following the conversation all that well.

“Hyewonnie, don’t be so obvious with the camera,” her Grandmother sighs.

“Sorry, Grandma.” Hyewon turns to her with the lens and beams, “You’re so pretty though!”

They’re both wearing lilac and wearing flowers. Her Grandmother chuckles, easily flattered, as she waves shyly at the camera,
“Hello! Oh--oh, it’s starting! Quick make sure you capture everything!”

Hyewon focuses in directly on the grooms-- on Baekhyun and Junmyeon who stood behind them-- and then it starts.

Jongin welcomes them.

“Friends, we have joined here today…. ”

There is an opening reading. Everyone is laughing-- but Hyewon doesn’t really get it. Something about post offices.

At some point, the girl grows tired of the talking and the camera slightly lowers.

But then, Jongin’s voice cracks.

It’s during the ring exchange.

The camera shakes as Hyewon sits up and squints, zooming in on the sniffling officiant-- and the shockingly weepy faces of her Uncles.

And suddenly everyone is crying. Behind the lens, a very obvious sniff is heard as Hyewon wipes her eyes and leans into her Grandma who is dabbing her eyes with a napkin.

Chanyeol makes a clear gesture for the officiant to speed read through the rest -- until they arrive at the point in which the marriage is pronounced.

“You may now kiss the groom.”

The camera steadies at the kiss. It’s a quick touch but totally heartwarming. As the company responds with polite applause, Kyungsoo takes Chanyeol’s hand and kisses his knuckles lightly.

Chanyeol says something to Kyungsoo. The other responds by wrapping an arm around Chanyeol’s waist and pinching him, prompting the taller man to stumble and laugh.

Hyewon guesses it’s probably something sappy like ‘I love you.’ without really thinking about it.

>> cut

*the words exchanged were in fact, “i want to fuck you” -- “later” -- “no, now” -- “be quiet” -- “i want tooo” --

The wedding photographs were taken.

The grooms in the middle with the rest of the party around them. Hyewon smartly positions the camera on a window ledge and runs towards the wedding party.

“Okay, we’ll take a formal one first.”

The wedding party adjusts to Jongin’s instruction. He brought an extra special camera for the occasion. Paired with a tripod and everything.

“3...2...1!”

Flash.
“Alright, next ones! Go crazy!” Chanyeol bellows as everyone erupts into soft laughter.

Jongin adjusts the camera and then runs back.

“3...2...1!”

Hyewon does finger guns. Junmyeon stays perfectly still. Jongdae and Baekhyun imitate the ‘V’ pose whilst the rest react to the sudden increase of acoustics and motion in the middle of the cluster after Chanyeol scoops Kyungsoo up bridal style straight from the floor.

“So cute!” Mrs. Park beams.

Hyewon returns to the camera.

As she checks whether it recorded, the camera captures the newly wedded having another private conversation*.

Kyungsoo is smiling as Chanyeol whispers something, waving at something with his hands.

Again, from first glance one would assume that they’re exchanging soft loving words.

>> cut

*the words exchanged were in fact, “this suit is so tight oh my god if i stretch like this it will rip” -- “haha i dare you” --

They are on their way to the reception. Chanyeol, Kyungsoo and Hyewon are in one car. Hyewon is humming in the backseat. The camera is upside down as she rummages through her bag and takes out a large item.

“Uncle Kyungsoo! I want to give you your gift now! I don’t want to show the others…”

She hands over the box wrapped in silver paper to the man at the front seat.

Kyungsoo graciously receives it and opens it up. He then turns back, excited as he cries,

“Wow! You finished it? Wow!”

It was the painting she’d privately made from all the sketches she’d drafted of the painting that disappeared from their home (presumably to pay for the wedding). Her Uncle Chanyeol had technically commissioned her-- but the girl was sure he’d forgotten it now as he’d only said it as a passing suggestion.

Of course, it was nothing like the original but she’d worked hard on it. Especially in capturing the pretty heavens of the painting. The hellfire? It wasn’t really her thing so she skipped it.

“Thanks Hyewon. I love it. Thank you. You’re so nice.”

“Nothing for your Uncle then?” Chanyeol challenges, “I’m a little hurt.”
“I’ll leave you a nice message at the end of this video. How about that?” Hyewon suggests as she focuses the camera on Kyungsoo’s fingers which are delicately tracing the top of the canvas.

“Alright, but I want to cry. So make it good.”

“Fine.” Hyewon promises before she tilts her head, “Uncle Kyungsoo and I prepared something special for you at the reception though… so feel free to be excited about that!”

Chanyeol smiles broadly, glancing back as they hit a red light.

“Really? Wow okay. I will!”

>> cut

Quick shots from the small reception follows.

Gift giving.

Chanyeol and Kyungsoo being offered matching boxing gloves. This amuses Chanyeol the most-- so much so that he practically falls off his chair.

And this repeats and repeats.

Particular gift highlights include a life-sized cut-out of Julio from Conflicto de amor, a 100$ giftcard from The Ramen Place, and an all-inclusive vacation to a European destination of choice (courtesy of the handsome lawyer, Hyewon notes).

Oh and money.

Hyewon loses count of the amount of cheques that her Uncles received.

Some were from names that weren’t even from the wedding party. It was bizarre.

But her Uncles politely insist on not opening those.

>> cut
The reception continues outside. It’s slightly chilly but the evening air is fresh. Hyewon plays with the camera filters and the puppy as it explores the floor around the porch happily.

When she lifts the camera, it glimpses Junmyeon and Jongdae sat together in conversation. They’re smiling brightly, occasionally whispering things to each other.

Jongdae reaches up with a hand and gently adjusts Junmyeon’s fringe. The other moves away shyly.

“Cuuuuute,” Hyewon hums beneath her breath, flushing as she quickly hides the camera away from their view.

>> cut

“Okay, so if you scream… or if you cry. You owe everyone money. Got it?”

“I’m so tired of betting with you all. I always lose.” Chanyeol whines, before he reaches across and shakes Hyewon’s littler hand.

The camera then zooms into her Uncle Chanyeol’s face as he rests uneasily against his chair. Across him, Kyungsoo holds the microphone attached to the karaoke machine nervously.

This was the gift; what she had casually manipulated Kyungsoo into practicing in the few days they had spent together after discovering that he was a decent singer. It was going to be amazing and she was going to capture every second.

Hyewon turns the camera to regard the faces around the room who were absolute in their anticipation. Taeyeon turns to Minseok and whispers something. He nods back.*

“Ready!” she calls out, “Play! Go Uncle Kyungsoo!”

The first notes of the classic ‘Despacito’ featuring his beloved suddenly plays.

Ever the belieber, Chanyeol screams instantly and throws himself to the floor in defeat, knocking the camera cleanly out of Hyewon’s hand.

>> cut

*the words exchanged were -- “i can’t believe i’m going to see the lockerman sing wow” -- “shit i know right” --

The scene opens and it’s a corridor. It’s situated in the townhouse and everyone is sleeping after the long reception. Hyewon is in her pyjamas and she waves at herself at the hall mirror before settling down on the floor.

“So, I guess this is my message!” Hyewon whispers as she turns the camera on herself, “So, I’ll keep it short. Uncle Chanyeol, I remember… when Dad used to make jokes in the house about pairing you off… he really, really wanted you to find someone. I’m sure he’s glad that you did. So thanks, Uncle Kyungsoo for being that someone. I’m really happy for you both and I love you a lot. I can’t wait to see what the future has in store for you guys as a couple. Happy birthday and happy wedding day!”
“Ah, I was wondering where you got to.”

Kyungsoo plodded into the townhouse kitchen, rubbing his eyes tiredly, as he observed Chanyeol stooped over the kitchen worktop wiping dishes. It was deep into the night—technically their wedding night. But nobody really had sex on the wedding night. Ask any responsible married couple; it was a damn myth.

“I couldn’t sleep without cleaning up. I don’t want Mom to worry about it tomorrow.”

“Let me help.”

The pair stood together working in silence. And then Chanyeol chuckled, breaking the quiet.

“Guess what.” He told Kyungsoo.

“What.”

“Junmyeon pulled me aside earlier and admitted that him and Jongdae are… FWBs.”

“Huh?” Kyungsoo wrinkled his nose, “What is that?”

“I dunno. Friends that fuck I suppose.”

Kyungsoo grinned.

“Just like us then.”

“Hey.” Chanyeol bumped against him, “Give our story some credit. We fucked before we were friends.”

Kyungsoo shook his head, smiling. Chanyeol smiled back down at him.

“Hey. Guess what else I got.”

He reached into his dressing gown pocket and produced Hyewon’s camera.
“Let’s film something.”

Too tired to complain, Kyungsoo smiled as Chanyeol fumbled with the device until the tiny red dot flickered in the corner.

“Hello, it’s the newlyweds here, crashing this broadcast. Hyewonnie, you need to be careful of your electronic devices. Hi Kyungsoo! Did you have a good time?”

“I did.”

“Tell us, Mr. Do. What was your favourite part?”

“Honestly?” Kyungsoo glanced at the camera timidly, “When Jongin and Minseok tried to outdance each other. Bootylicious by Destiny’s Child will never be the same for me.”

“Good choice, good choice.”

“How about you Mr. Park?”

Thoughtful, Chanyeol shot a tentative glance at the ceiling, “Can I say when we actually got married or is that cheesy?”

“Boooo.”

Chanyeol laughed as he held his hand, containing his wedding ring to the lens, beckoning for Kyungsoo to do the same. Despite the hand difference, the sight of the matching bands was so satisfying and Kyungsoo reached up on his tiptoes to watch how it was coming across on screen.

“Look! It looks great… I love you very much my brat, Hyewonnie. Thank you for being so diligent today. We are very happy.”

“Thank you, Hyewon.”

“Bye, bye!”

The broadcast was stopped.

Kyungsoo then cradled an arm around Chanyeol’s waist as the other laid a corresponding arm over his shoulder.

They glanced at each other and smiled warmly. Tiredly.

“Want to go for a drive?” Chanyeol asked then, sensing that neither of them were ready for bed yet.

“Yeah, let’s go.”
It was raining.

Kyungsoo listened to the soft taps of the raindrops against the glass window as gentle acoustic music resonated from the car radio. Around them, the life of the city was disappearing behind the sheet of rainfall, all the buildings reduced to one continuous shadowy shape that fenced the entire road like a lonely evening guard.

Occasionally the car would halt to a peaceful stop at a pedestrian crossing or at a red light. The rain would fall violently then, skidding across the metal, demanding entry. In the stillness he could hear the sounds of the city through the rush much closer. Passing music from a neighbouring vehicle. Distant shouting from drunk pedestrians. The familiar grumble of a late subway train.

It was all so terrific and loud. But Kyungsoo found it so soothing because it was home; and here in this car, with him, he was also home.

Tenderly, he grazed his wedding ring with his opposing fingers and smiled up at Chanyeol who was quietly muttering to the words on the radio.

“Hey.” Kyungsoo planted a hand on the other’s thigh knowingly, “I’ve thought about and I think we should have one.”

“One what?”

“What we were talking about earlier.”

Chanyeol’s eyes widened. It had been a discussion they’d had only hours ago as a joke. But now, as a married couple, it didn’t have to stay as such.

“Really?”

“One. Two. Make it three even.”

“Oh my god, Kyungsoo. Really?”

Kyungsoo nodded his head as he sat up and quickly gestured to his wrist.

“I want one here. Then maybe a tattoo on my shoulder. If we match we’ll have to get it in the same place. But I don’t want anything stupid, okay? Because it’s going to hurt wherever I put it.”

The excitement was bubbling up over Chanyeol’s expression. Louder than the rain.

“Alright.” Chanyeol confirmed, “Let’s decide on it over ramen.”

Kyungsoo raised an eyebrow. “Ramen? You’re hungry again?”

“We have a giftcard to spend, remember?” Chanyeol grinned as he took Kyungsoo’s hand and squeezed it tightly, “Now let’s go and plan our future tattoos…”

“And general future,” Kyungsoo intercepted, threading his fingers through his husband’s hair fondly, “I want to talk about it… and think about it… and dream about it tonight.”

“Yeah?” Chanyeol’s excitement dimmed into a sense that was much calmer; brighter as he agreed, “Okay. Let’s go then. Let’s dream together.”
The road across them was dark and shimmery with the passing intensity of the storm. But even then, Kyungsoo finally felt free of the fog. Taking a deep inhale of breath, he squeezed Chanyeol’s hand bravely as he drove them both ahead. Together, they advanced towards the bleak embrace of the rainfall, the stark and familiar city center, all in the hopes of welcoming an intriguing but wonderful new beginning.

Away from the flickering and dying lights of a broken city.

Somewhere bright.

-//-

* 

Chapter End Notes

*

A/N: So I think collectively, I have felt more writing this finale over all the horrible stuff I’ve had to write the past 100k+ as for me it’s the equivalent to watching your two broken favs find solace and love in each other after a very long and stressful TV series. I’ve had this ending in mind for SO long, basically from chapter 4, and I’m so pleased you are reading this bc it probably means you trusted me when I said I was going to end it happy ahhahaha

Okay, so this is going to be understandably long bc I’m very sad this is over ;__; . This story started out as an itch I wanted to get over; and then obviously it became more. I don’t think I can ever express how much I have loved writing this au. All I had at the beginning was 5 chapters. KS beating up a gang and in Chapter 5, pcy gets tied to a bed and he can’t join in… ahhahaha

A lot of the chapters were really long and left me super tired but when I read them over again, I know it was worth the effort because there’s nothing better than reading something and knowing you translated the pictures in your mind as best as you can c’:

I’m also sure this is the chansoo-au-of-the-life for me as a fanfic writer. I could honestly retire and rest my keyboard from this happily lololololif I didn’t have chansoo pirates to reunite !!

So thank you so much for keeping me company all this time and for all the kind words you’ve shared. I don’t write online for any other reason than to shamelessly entertain my lame self and then if someone out there is also entertained, then that’s a pretty amazing bonus …. so thanks for telling me! It means so much c: !

I am particularly calling out those who have read along and have kept me company since the very start. You know who you are and Oh my GOD you have no idea how much I have appreciated knowing you’re there reading TT when you write long fics like this, it’s people like you that really get the writers to the end! So thank you <3333
Anyhow, I'll say this again: This has truly been a labour of love; and I’m sure I'll look back on it even more fondly one day! (Although it is also, lets be honest 50% just a massive loopy dream— and I have LOVED IT ALL.)

So that’s it from me. Be well always my lovely EXO-Ls. Let’s keep supporting EXO and each other. Stay warm and have a lovely and restful week. Until next time! C: thank you thank you thank you!

*

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