keep running (freedom is just around the corner)

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Summary

With people dying all around town Mach & Firestar have to team up together for the greater good. The general hope is that, with exposure, they'll overcome their mutual distaste and catch the bad guy.
Also, they're soulmates.
No big deal.

Notes

Prompt: #170.

wow. this work right here is the toughest thing i ever did. not only because the plot is crazy (super hero, soulmate, enemies to friends to lovers, case fic all wrapped up together), but also the fact that i did most (90%) of it in a week. literally!! i wrote and i revised and i suffered because i just couldnt give up on this. in the end, i hope it's worth my effort.
to the people who made it possible -- some of them literally held my hand:
- faby: you're a queen among women. your cheerleading and unstoppable support can't be measured; you believed in me even when i didn't, and revised more than 17k in a single day. thank you so much for your effort & friendship.
- mariane, sarah, flora & ian: as always, y'all believed that i could do it. and look, i really did!!!! please accept my gratitude. heart emoji
- and, finally, to my entire twitter timeline: there's nothing to say beside we are all in this together.mp3
People say that loving someone is a thing you just know. And maybe it *is* true enough, if you can keep things simple — your mother, your sibling, your best friend, your dog. Even your soulmate, maybe. It’s like a hurricane that is happening only in Jongdae’s brain, because everyone out there in the world is having a nice field trip with this predestined business; everyone is like hey, this is my soulmate (waves the right wrist), and hey, this is my enemy, like, definitely (waves the left wrist). Hey, how about you? Hey, isn’t it nice to *not* have to worry about wasting your breath with someone who will turn out to be the devil? Isn’t it nice to know for certain that you’re meant to have a lovely, fulfilling life with the most *perfect* person to you in the entire world — that between billions of someones, there is one of them that is made for you.

When you have a mark, that is. Not everyone has both of them, or any. Jongdae’s mother only has the enemy one, which is sad, especially because she never even met this terrible-for-you person. Well, that is the other secret: the person who is destined to be your enemy doesn’t exactly is a bad person; the mark just means that they will *really* hate you. Intensely. And maybe you will never meet them! Because soulmates, people do this cruisers where somebody looking for their other half will go and wave their wrists happily (even if there was this time that this lady didn’t found her right name, but the left one. Poor soul), they call private investigators, they do thousands of registrations in government agencies and matchmakers sites alike — they are determined, obviously, because who doesn’t want their happily ever after?

Enemy is harder. Sometimes you just happen all over them, or them all over you; sometimes it’s your coworker, your boss, your aunt. Your classmate, your teacher, your roommate in college (this is, like, the only situation where people will let you change rooms). Sometimes a baby is born with one of his parents name on their wrist; it sucks, because maybe they could have been good to the baby, maybe it just meant that they will have to handle a really intense teenage angst phase, but Child Protection Services always takes the baby away. Because, more often than not, it doesn’t mean that they will grown up to be very angry; it just means that their parents are going to be so, so, _so_ shitty that they can’t help but have that name on their small wrist.

People say loving someone is a thing you just know. No one, though, likes to tell that sometimes the name in your right wrist isn’t the same on the other person’s. Sometimes it means that you can have a nice, polyamorous relationship. Usually, though, it’s just that you really love the person way more than they love you. Which is sad, and groundbreaking, and Jongdae is really sure someone in the world already killed themselves over it. Having to look at the name there, on their body, all the time, forever — it’s just too much to bear. Everyone can understand.

All of it is well documented; you can find answers in a google search. “Dear Yahoo community, my boyfriend has other girl’s name on his wrist. Should I break up with him?” (Answer: run, sister, run). “Dear Yahoo community, I was born without a name, and so was my wife. We married without problems and were very happy. But now she wants to leave me because she said other person has her name. Is it fair?” (Answer: it isn’t fair, but it’s life. You can’t make her stay. Also, the law is on her side. A name is a name). “Dear Yahoo community, I know this girl who is married to this guy. She has a name on her wrist, but it isn’t his. Is it okay?” (Answer: let the girl live her life, Susan).

“Dear Yahoo community”, Jongdae sometimes thinks about typing, “the names on my body are very legible. For it, people usually say that you’re lucky. Well, unfortunately for me, and also for common wisdom, it just happens that the two very legible marks on my body are the same name. Bad luck,
uh?"

(No one has ever asked that. Jongdae is sure, because he spent every single minute of his childhood-slash-early-teenage-years worrying about this. He looked everywhere — every chat room, every book, every government standard site, every pamphlet, every anything. He gave up after a while and went to plan B.

Jongdae was tired of people staring at him during lunch hour, and during classes, and also during church, so his parents felt mercy upon him and they changed cities. He also started to wear this leather bracelets things on his right wrist. This time, he could say the whole thing was private. He thought about covering the left one, but people would found it to be very odd. Why someone would bother to hide the name of their enemy? Like, fuck him/her/them).

People say loving someone is a thing you just know. Well, Jongdae is forced to disagree. He definitely doesn’t know how to feel about this Kim Minseok. He isn’t sure if he even wants to know. The only thing he ever knew about this dude was that his handwriting is really bubble — he must be an agitated or happy person. Is he in the same situation? Does he have Jongdae’s name on both of his wrists? Or is this the kind of scenario where Jongdae is going to love him very much and Minseok will hate him a whole fucking lot?

He ends up avoiding everything Minseok-related. He didn’t take any classes with the four professors named Minseok during college. He never met his two-years-older cousin who has this name. He never talked to waiters whose tag in their clothes said Minseok — Lee, Choi, Cho, Hwang. He made everything in his power to never, ever tell more than five words to anyone who could be a risk. It was a big effort, but he felt that it was well done. He was as safe as he could possibly be.

[He should really have counted secret identities in the mess].

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It as easy as falling asleep.


Jongdae was just trying to have a nice time, walking around with Yixing — who is his best friend since, like, womb —, looking for the perfect place to show off his brand new skate skills. Which, in all honesty, were a little shitty, but not enough to make Yixing lose his awe-eyed expression. They were only seventeen — what is wrong with being young? So they kept walking, deeper and deeper into the forest, looking for the promised land.

Also known as Lighting Corporation’s ruins.

“It’s getting dark”, Yixing said, pointing at the mid-afternoon sky. Jongdae rose a thin eyebrow to him, like, what? Yixing just sighed. “I’m under curfew.”

“It isn’t even four!”

“I’m also grounded.”

“What did you do since yesterday?”

“It’s possible that I broke into my parents wine cellar.”
And you were caught?

Unfortunately, yes.

Jesus fucking Christ.

You shouldn’t say stuff like that. Your parents are catholic.

Uh! And so am I! I have a nice relationship with God.

I’m leaving.

“Yixing!” Jongdae yelled as his best friend left him there to rot. “Can you at least buy me some chips?!”

And that was basically it. Jongdae was alone, mid-afternoon, looking for a lot of plain-dumb ruins, where he would perform some lukewarm skate tricks to zero cheering audience.

He never felt less cool.

What could he do, though, if not keep looking? He would be damned if he didn’t have something amazing to show Yixing the next day. Something that would make him want to sabotage his curfew and spend some quality time with his old, nice best friend. They were tied together forever, the way it is when you know someone since the day you went to the kid park two blocks away from home.

The forest was starting to really get dark when he finally reached the gates of the old factory. There were some lights flashing white and yellow, making the shadows darker. It was, all in all, a very dreadful place that hardly would be appropriate to skate tricks. Jongdae looked at that quiet place and thought well. what a waste. Then he went under a hole in the fence, carefully holding his stripped blue backpack. He was already there; how could he even leave without having how to say, truthful, nothing there, only rodents? Also, all the children in high school were scared of this place. Jongdae would be, like, a hero. He must feed the masses.

His cell phone showed the low battery signal, flashing at the far right end of the notifications bar. Jongdae sighed. “Great”, he told himself. “Just great.”

He approached this big-ass container that was once the principal holding-stuff of the factory. It was big, and imposing, and some of the lights flashed green, not yellow or white like the others. Everything was quiet, even the birds. Even the stupid insects. He went closer, looking for steel stairs. There was this one, but it was made of wood, and each step was rotten. One of the lights stopped, suddenly making all the left side of the thing fall into darkness. It was probably seven or eight PM, and Jongdae’s mother — Ye-eun — would be starting to wonder where he was.

He rose his hand, just a little, and approached the container. It was cold and stiff to the touch. Then he sighed, grabbed his backpack and left the place, using the hole in the fence.

It was as easy as falling asleep.

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Mach, aka Kim Jongdae, was trying to avoid the hurt and possibly death of a young lady in the hands of a burglary. The streets were all desert, because in that part of town you really can’t be too careful; dogs barking in the distance were the only sound besides the desperate pace of someone
running for their life. The autumn weather made the breath of the woman cloud around her face.

Jongdae took her and ran to safety. Like, it was the only thing he could really do — running. He left her in a roof, muttered something about being right back, and went to get her purse from the hands of the criminal in question. It was an easy job; get the purse, wave to the bad guy, ran to where he left the victim to calm down, hand them their stole stuff, take them to their home, fly the scene before the cops can show up. Keep it simple and do it over and over and over again until it loses all the possibly heart implications (the first time he really almost got a stroke).

He was full-vigilante all over the NY state since 2010. One year after the accident with the radioactive shit, he realized he could keep using his, well, ability to skip classes or he could, I mean — give it back to the world, become a hero, eventually join the Heroes League, making something out of that mess. Anything but sitting on his ass all day, eating cheetos, running around to burn that cheeto, lying down staring at the stars on his ceiling for six hours, making a run for some soda without his mom noticing, trying to make peace with the fact that he wasn’t human anymore — not in the strict sense of the world.

He didn’t know how to feel about that.

So, back to business. He shook the hand of the young lady, who was being all grateful — thank you, I really need the money on this purse, I wouldn’t know what to do, I could have been killed, thank you, thank you, thank you —, waved at her while she entered her house, and then disappeared in the night, faster than she could even blink her eyes.

It was easy like that.

When he got to the center of the city, looking for trouble, he saw for the first time in his life the red suit that announced Firestar. He was flying, looking disapprovingly at some guy who was tied up with a rope. The bad guy? Jongdae asked himself. Or the victim?

“This is the ninth time, Roman.” Firestar said, shaking his head. All that floating made him look like a God, or like an angry kitten. “I told you before, you can’t keep living like that.”

“Ah, come on!” Roman said, exasperated. “Just thrown me in the jail like the cops, I hate your moral speech. You can’t go around saying stuff like that! I already have a mom.”

“Good that you spoke about your mom”, Firestar went on with his rant. “I’m thinking you reached the point that you’re going to kill her out of shame.”

“What!”

“Thought we agreed last time. You stop with this bullshit and I won’t have to be here again. Win-win situation.”

“It’s not a win to me.”

“Well, I guess I will have to hand you over to the respectable cops of this town.”

“Ah, come on. They hate me.”

“Then I guess we only have a choice: compromise.”

“Uh! That’s not fair! I’m tired of compromising!”

Jongdae looked at that and thought, well, here I have some fine example of people who go around
“I’m releasing you.” Firestar told him, while unmaking the knots. “But I swear to God we won’t have a tenth time.”

“What do you mean?” Roman said, a lot of exasperation and zero fear. “See you around, dude.”

“Don’t call me dude!” he yelled to the retreating figure of Roman, and then sighed when he left the street. “How many dumb times I will have to bear this…”

Jongdae coughed a little, trying to make himself known. Firestar rolled his eyes, as if saying, what now?

“I think you should have called the cops. You said that it was the ninth time.”

Firestar looked at him, something smug and impatient around the lines of his mouth. “I don’t think I need a kid in leggings trying to teach me how to do this job.”

“Is it a job? Are you being paid for this?”

“I don’t know. Are you?”

“What do you mean?” he coughed. “Who are you?”

“Firestar. And you must be Mach, I assume?”

Jongdae, who was — still is — easily impressed, said, “Yes. You heard of me?”

“No, not really”, Firestar said, looking for all the hell like someone who is enjoying bother Jongdae very much. “Just your name, here and there.”

“Well, I don’t think I ever heard your name.” he answered petulantly, trying to suppress all his lying tell-tales. He was 21, still in college, aiming to go on with his life, saving people on one hand, putting bad guys under the bars on the other.

“That’s rich.” Firestar said, and then he went flying into the distance.

That fucking show off.

Jongdae had this smallest communicator on his left ear. He was helping other League member — Faerie, aka Kim Yerim — with patrol on some Bronx’s shady neighbourhood. The noise he was listening was possibly Faerie kicking someone’s ass, which meant that he didn’t really have to go there and see how she was doing. Also, she was in this ugly shore, which was smelling terribly of fish for about a week now.

“Everything okay?” Jongdae asked after a while. His answer was some grunts and the sound of someone hitting the floor — hard. “Looks like you have everything under control.”

“Can you get down here?” Faerie’s voice was a little breathless, but it could be the wind’s fault. (She
was one of those flying types).

“Is it still smelling?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Ah, come on! I washed my hair yesterday.”

“Get your fucking ass down here.” she said, angrily, and then, like the meanest small person in the world that she was, the communicator line was closed off.

Jongdae sighed three times for good measure and then went there, running fast enough to help Faerie avoid some very unpleasant bullet on the shoulder. She nodded at him, distracted, and kicked some bad guy on the knee. It wasn’t pretty, but it was efficient, which was Faerie in a nutshell.

He ran around the criminals, punching someone here, pushing someone there, making basically a nuisance of himself. People liked to say that Mach was the most annoying hero in the entire League — and, please, they had Rexxar. Even so, he really liked that title. Sounded so much like him.

Faerie floated around the shore, searching for someone who was not unconscious enough that she would probably have to kick again. When she was satisfied with the knowledge that the fight was over and her side was the winner, she touched the ground, looking like a mythological queen with that pastel wings.

“Thank you for all your help.” she said, nicely. “I have everything under control now. Just ring the cops to come get them before they wake.”

Jongdae nodded, because he was, contrary to common belief, very capable to know when he was being dismissed. “Goodbye, Faerie. Take care.”

She smiled. “Yeah, you too.”

Then he left, looking back only one time, smaller than a second, and over just as fast.

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Yixing was leaning against the kitchen table, watching Ye-eun, Jongdae’s mother, try to prepare some american food for the barbecue her husband was aiming to throw. There was this new family in the vicinity, who was probably feeling a little ostracized with the predominantly Asian, living-here-all-my-life neighborhood.

“Are they christians?” Jongdae asked her from the refrigerator door, where he was almost entering into the thing while looking for some lettuce.

“Oh, I don’t know. I think they’re atheists.”

“Oh! Like my mom!” Yixing called, sounding happy.

Ye-eun smiled at him, indulgently. “That’s a really nice thing, sweetie.”

Jongdae’s brother, Jongyul, who was one year older and worked at some fancy law firm, was home for the weekend, and would probably extend it for some week or two. He was sleeping on his childhood bedroom, which was also Jongdae’s childhood bedroom, but Jongyul always had priority. Jongdae settled for rolling his eyes all the time he spent around Jongyul.

“You think it’s gonna go on well?” Jongdae asked his mom, who just shrugged.
“Your dad is trying.” which, in their home, was a code for *it probably is gonna end up a mess.* Yixing, who knew it, just sighed.

“When Jongseok is going to get here?” he asked Jongdae. “Your dad is always late.”

“He better get here really fast.” Ye-eun said, pushing angrily the garlic paste into the bread. “Since it was all his idea.”

“We have to wake up Jongyul very soon.” Jongdae said, bored. “He is going to be terrible. I think you should do it, mom.”

“It’s your job.”

“What! It was my job when both of us lived here! It isn’t so anymore!”

“You’re both here, aren’t you?” she asked, steely. “Then the rules still apply.”

“Ah, *mom.* So unfair.”

“Life isn’t fair.” she said, and waved with the fork at the general vicinity of the stairs. “Go on, then.”

Yixing, the traitor, laughed a little at his despair. His laughter was short-lived, though, because Ye-eun sent him to the grocery store three blocks away to buy some beers.

Jongdae went to the second floor, rehearsing all the mom-is-to-blame discourse he would use on his older brother to avoid him slapping Jongdae on the head — a thing he had been doing since he was five.

He knocked, one, two, three times, and then entered the room. The decoration was very teenage-angst, MCR and some weird ice skaters posters all over one of the walls. Jongdae was responsible for the emo bullshit, but the creepy sports shit was Jongyul’s fault.

“Are you sleeping?” he asked the pile of blankets that were — probably — his brother.

“Go away.” Jongyul answered him.

“Mom wants you to get your ass down there and help her with the barbecue preparations.”

“She already has you and Yixing, doesn’t she?”

“She wants you to go there.”

“Christ almighty.” the pile said. “Fine, get out of here. I will go down in a minute.”

“Are you being serious?” Jongdae wanted to know because Jongyul was acting very suspicious. “Is this just a trick to make me leave?”

A pause followed. “I’m naked in here.” Jongyul said, finally.

“Oh my God!” Jongdae left the room, yelling non-stop. “You’re so disgusting! Oh my god!”

“What was it?” Ye-eun asked, without giving the matter much thought. Her sons had been fighting since birth.

“I hate Jongyul.”
“I’m sure he loves you too, sweetie.” she answered, absent.

“Ugh, mom.”

Yixing, who was already back from his beer trip, laughed openly at Jongdae’s disgusted face. “It is always funny when he comes home.”

“Fucking hate both of you.”

“Jongdae.” Ye-eun said, steely. “Swear jar.”

“Now you decide to hear me.” he muttered, putting two dollars on the stupid jar. There was so much money in there that it could be used to buy fancy china, and Ye-eun had emptied the jar before her sons arrived. Stupid money, Jongdae thought to himself. Stupid brother. I should have stayed at home handling the usual villain shit.

“Did you hear about that hero, what’s his name? Oh, what is it, what is it? Firestar! It’s Firestar. Anyway,” Ye-eun said from above her shoulder. “They say he is really good looking.”

“I guess, yes.” Yixing agreed, thinking it over.

Jongdae looked at the ceiling, praying to God to have mercy and kill him on the spot.

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“I saw Magina last week.” Arsenic, aka Kim Junmyeon, said on the phone. They were talking business for thirty minutes now, and Jongdae loved him, he really did, but he was ready to run to California and fucking kill Junmyeon using only his bare hands.

“Magina? Isn’t she the one that hangs out with Firestar?”

“Yeah, they are friends. Anyway, she was making some spell that looked really difficult and purple, ending her fight, and I just ran into her. She almost cursed me, and I mean it literally. Since I almost let the guy escape, she said, then she was going to turn me into a toad.”

“Harsh.”

“Yeah. I just left quietly before she really turned me into an amphibian.”

“I heard that pigeons are more her style.”

“It isn’t any better.”

“Well, what stopped her?”

“She was with Spirit. He is notorious for his patience.”

Jongdae rolled over, trying to be comfortable on that shitty mattress he bought on sale for $12 (second hand). “What were you doing in her territory anyway.”

“I was just, like, passing through.”

“Do you have a crush on her?”

“I do not have a crush on her.”
“You could have a crush on her. She is pretty. She isn’t very nice, and obviously doesn’t know how to choose her friends, since, like, Firestar, but I guess some people are into very mean, very angry women.”

“I do not have a crush on Magina. She would kill me on spot.”

Jongdae stopped, thinking about sparing his friend from the truth.

Then he realized: *Nah.*

“I think she would kill you slowly.”

“It’s what I gain being straight.”

“Please! If you were queer, you would probably have a crush on someone worse — Revenant, for starts.”

“Isn’t he Firestar’s best friend?”

“Yeah. They are all shitty.”

Junmyeon laughed and allowed, finally, Jongdae to hang up on him.

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One month later — because that was his life and no one else’s — six bodies showed up around the town.

Jongdae looked at the ceiling of his bathroom (infiltration at the edge, yellowish stains closer to the shower space, dubious cables here and there, ready to kill him at the smallest mistake). *Six bodies,* he thinks again. *All murdered.*

The profile was the one that follow: two lawyers — Clemèntine Gagnier, 27, Paul Jones, 45 —, one waitress — Hannah Sawyer, 41 —, one teacher — Leila Khan, 32 —, one low level socialite — Aekyung Hwang, 34 —, and one wild card — Juan Gomez, 31.

They were a weird set, not a single connection whatsoever. A serial killer, maybe. If so, they didn’t seen to have a specific type; all six were the most diverse victims the police had their hands on since David Berkowitz all over 1976-7. It just didn’t sit well with Jongdae; usually he would leave the disturbing, very much human shit to the local law, but he felt uneasy over the body count. Six with the tendency to grow. And all so cleanly murdered — a single bullet in the head.

Was it mercy? Or was it just impatience?

Jongdae rose from the cold floor, tired of self pity and that sickening feeling of doubt. He went to his bedroom, took his Mach suit out of the closet — and, yeah, okay, maybe it was basically made of leggings, but at least he didn’t wear a cape like some heroes he could mention —, and left behind his building to fall into the even colder June night.

He wished that he could just solve things using sheer force of will.

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Jongdae wandered around the warehouse neighborhood — that stupid place where he would always go to lost himself —, trying to have some sort of spontaneous insight on the situation at hand. He
didn’t have a real reason to be there, walking on that specific road, breathing cold air around his own face. There was no clue, no lead, no witnesses. The people who did that could be in town or in the moon, that was how much he knew about them.

It was an ugly night. The stars were hiding, as if afraid of what they could see if they stayed shining there.

(Or like they were a natural phenomenon, and already dead anyway. Corpses weren’t know for their ability to care).

There was a sound, someone muttering angrily. Jongdae thought, here we go; he couldn’t swallow down the excitement, since it could very well be some breakthrough on his (admittedly sloppy) investigation — a motive for people to respect him. Because he was young, or because he was easily impressed, or maybe because of those fucking leggings; Firestar wasn’t the only one who thought that Jongdae wasn’t worth their while.

He moved very slowly, which was a thing he actually knew how to do, no matter what Revenant liked to imply every time they were trapped on the same room. It was probably some kind of sexual innuendo, since Revenant had the amazing maturity of a eleven years-old. Jongdae knew he wasn’t the smartest crayon on the box, but at least he tried to keep it together while he was dealing with other people.

It didn’t have anything to do with the fact that he was very afraid of anything Firestar could say if he found out that Jongdae was really just a kid after all. It had been almost three years since they first met, on that cold — wasn’t it always cold around him? — roof, with Roman there standing as reluctant witness (who couldn’t get out fast enough to avoid hearing everything. He wasn’t happy with Jongdae for saying that he should go to jail, and it’s possible that Roman tried to stab him three times. Firestar, who had a soft spot for strays, didn’t let Jongdae go to the cops. Instead, he fixed him up himself, the literal only three times that they ever stayed close enough to touch without trying to actively murdering each other).

Jongdae wished he knew why Firestar liked everyone but him, actually, but it was an old resentment that he couldn’t deal with at the moment.

He leaned against the closest wall, almost afraid to breath, and carefully moved his head until he could see what was happening. He was ready to call for backup, seeing all that people unconscious or tied up, before his brain processed what was truly happening on that shady corner of the dirtiest neighbourhood in the entire city.

Because it was, of course, Firestar.

“We should stop meeting like this.” he said, sardonically.

Firestar looked at him, angrily, and there was something about him— Jongdae could understand why people would call him angel. His eyes, or it was maybe his mouth, the only thing you could see while he was wearing the mask; he looked like a god you didn’t want to piss off. Something powerful that, while possibly benign, was better to stay clear off.

He almost looked, to Jongdae, like someone who was impossibly alone.

“What are you doing here?”

“Do you realize that I could ask you the same? And it’s looking worse for you.”

“How so?”
“I wasn’t the one who was founded red-handed around a lot of unconscious people.”

“I’m leading an investigation.” Firestar said, full of dignity. Jongdae, though, knew him — not a lot, but enough to know when he was trying to bullshit his way out of a weird situation. The first time he used that voice where Jongdae could hear was when he was almost being thrown out of a cliff by a particularly furious supervillain.

“You’re full of shit.”

“I don’t owe you explanations.”

“I could call the police.”

“And say what?”

“Dubious vigilante kicks a lot of innocent people’s ass and refuses to explain why he would do that. I can already see the headlines.”

“They were hardly innocent!”

“So I guess you wouldn’t have any trouble explaining what I just walked into.”

Firestar sighed, as if Jongdae was the annoying one. Like he wasn’t making everything harder than it should be. Jongdae wished, deeply on his heart, that he could strangle Firestar, bring him back to life, and then drown him. “I don’t know if you were, well, informed —”

“Are you implying that I don’t know shit?”

“Can we not do this right now? I’m just saying that there had been murders around the town. Six—”

“People, yes, with a bullet in the head.”

“Did you know?”

“Hard to avoid noticing when so many bodies turn out with the same MO. I’m glad for your faith on me, though. Honored.”

“You always make everything I say look ugly.” Firestar had the actual nerve to appear to be hurt. What a bloody joke.

“Everything you say to me is ugly. Can we move on?”

“What I’m trying to find out what was happening, and Ky— I mean, Spirt, told me that he heard someone saying that there was going to be a meeting here tonight, and the people involved would be really weird. Which I know that could mean serial killers as well as drug dealers, but I’m running out of options.”


“Can’t you take anything serious?”

“I just thought you wouldn’t want me to acknowledge that you’re desperate! Jesus. You try to do one thing nice to someone and they run wild with it.”

“I hate when you do that.”
“What?”

Firestar just sighed, like Jongdae should fucking know or something. “What were you doing here?”

“Same as you.”

“You got a lead?”

“Nah. Just talking that I heard around the streets.” Which was a big fat sad lie, since he didn’t know anything and was just kind of praying to God. He had a Catholic background — he always became very religious while in need.

“Anything else?”

“I said no, Firestar.”

They stared at the other, like a full of resentment game of chicken. Firestar, to Jongdae’s eternal glory, was the only to look away first. But it didn’t feel like a victory, though. More like losing to someone who didn’t bother to play at all.

Jongdae ran away, which sounds more coward than it really was. He just couldn’t stand the idea of being, for the forever-th time, the one left behind.

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“And then”, Baekhyun said, “she told me that I could get fired for that!”

“I can’t believe.” Jongdae answered him, very flatly.

“That woman is terrible.” Chanyeol said to them, his voice coming from the other side of the room, where he was nursing a glass of wine (Baekhyun decided to stop drinking, and Jongdae stood in solidarity). Everyone with a brain would agree that Baekhyun did deserve the lecture; the fact that he was still employed probably told more about what his boss thought about him than any of his whining. They were newly married, though, and Chanyeol was still a little star-struck. They acted as if agreeing with each other was the only option possible, and Jongdae really hated them both. “She is always angry at him for the smallest things.”

Baekhyun nodded emphatically; Jongdae wished he could roll his eyes without starting a nuclear war.

“Well, maybe.” he told them, as diplomatically as someone who were mediating a discussion between USA and Cuba or something. “But this wasn’t just a small little thing…”

“No harm, no foul.”

“Are you hearing yourself?”

“You say that all the time!”

“Yeah, but I’m, like, a glorified accountant and/or babysitter. You’re a doctor. You could actually kill people.”

“No, I couldn’t.” Baekhyun answered him, full of hurt dignity. Jongdae wasn’t moved. He stood by what he said. “I just sent that kid to the wrong doctor! Who was at the exact same hospital as me, and called me immediately to know what the problem was, since he didn’t see anything wrong with her kidney. He was a little frantic, admittedly, and is angry at me for the moment, but nothing happened!
Why everyone is acting like I tried to murder her?"

"Just because it didn’t happen this time —"

"You two should drink a little.” Chanyeol interrupted them, with the timing of the drunk. “Looking all stressed… It is a dinner party! Since we are all…”

“Adults?” Baekhyun suggested, his argument with Jongdae entirely forgotten for the time being. He was too busy cooing over his husband to notice that Jongdae was still a little upset over the matter, but weren’t he always? It was a solid routine that he wished would go away.

“Yes, that. We have a new home! As a couple. Isn’t it very fancy?"

“The fanciest.”

“It’s really lovely”, Jongdae muttered, “you two are very lovely.”

“You’re such a lightweight…” Baekhyun was saying, and didn’t heard Jongdae at all. It was better that way, he thought. They were always worried about him being “so alone”.

“I’m leaving you to it.”

“What! Help me with him!”

“He’s not my husband, Baekhyun.” he answered, helpfully. “We should only deal with the drunk related to you.”

“And all the times I helped you?”

“You’re a dumbass; not my fault.”

“You suck, Kim Jongdae. You suck so bad.”

He closed the door in the middle of his college best friend’s demands, going down the stairs two steps at the time. The building was a little shitty, the idea of an elevator very far in the memory of people living here. Even so, Baekhyun and Chanyeol were very happy. This was, indeed, the first home they bought as a married couple; as life would probably have it, they will live there a few years, before going to somewhere green and having two kids. Maybe even white fence.

Jongdae, of course, didn’t feel about them, his friends!, something as ugly as jealousy.

He didn’t feel like that at all.

//

Firestar was at the roof of one building six blocks away from Jongdae’s house when he came back from work one day. They were into the second week without seeing each other’s face, which was probably a personal record; the kind of shit that deserved an award. Because no matter what Junmyeon thought, Jongdae didn’t want to see Firestar. Actually, there was nothing as far away from his mind than that particular scenery. Two weeks was glory times. For real. But there it was: Firestar, Jongdae’s personal annoying ghost, ruining everything. Flying around with his very red, very easy to spot red cape.

Didn’t he ever thought that a red suit was a rookie mistake? It was impressive that, for someone who acted like he was so smart, he could really be the dumbest person ever when it struck his fancy.
Jongdae thought to himself, *No. Just keep walking. Don’t move too fast or too slow. Keep walking, and breathing, and looking kind of cool.*

Firestar stared at him, something like hesitant recognition on his face, but Jongdae didn’t let him say anything. His own eyes just passed through him, with the casual indifference of someone who couldn’t care less.

//

They saw each other again a few days later, and Jongdae was curious to found out if Firestar recognized him that day. If he was even going to say anything. It was easy, though, to mistake a person for another; to see someone at daylight and don’t know if they were really the one you saw the night before. At the club, or walking down a street — anywhere. You just couldn’t be sure, and sometimes you didn’t even want to.

Was it indifference or self preservation?

“Mach.” he heard Firestar’s voice before seeing him. It was, of course, the red that gave him away; before, though, the shadows were doing a fine job on keeping him hidden. He had chosen that place because he knew Firestar couldn’t resist giving him a lecture — couldn’t resist showing up. They didn’t really know each other, but they knew enough to play with their small knowledge once in a while.

When they needed to.

“You shouldn’t be here, all by yourself. This area is dangerous! As I’m sure you know. I know that you don’t value your safety, or your responsibility, for all it matter, but even you should know—”

“I was just waiting for you.” he said, smiling at Firestar, the way he always did since that night on that fucking, stupid, dumb roof. “You can cut the yelling before you drag every low-level criminal that is making a life on this area to our location right here.”

He blinked. “Waiting for me?”

“I spoke with the League. They say that it’s small business; that it’s local. That I should look for assistance here in the city, because there’s something major happening here or there in the world, I couldn’t really keep track. I think something were really bothering Arsenic, though, so I just shut my mouth and hang up on him.”

“You hang up on him.”

“Yes.” Jongdae said, popping the p, the way he knew Firestar hated. He couldn’t help himself; he used to want so badly for Firestar to like him. It never happened, though, and even him had the minimal amount of self-respect. Jongdae hadn’t grown out of annoying him, though. He guessed that he just wanted something out of every miserable thought he ever had about Firestar.

“What does it mean, exactly?”

“I think we should work together.”

“Since when do you want anything to do with me?”

Jongdae sighed, exhausted. They hadn’t even started and he already wanted an out. “We can’t let our, well— past?”
“Past.” Firestar muttered to himself, sounding weird. Jongdae didn’t stop, because if he went down that road of overanalyzing the shit Firestar spoke or did then he would never stop.

And this was important. It really was.

More than them, anyway.

“We have to do this. And it’s been almost three weeks; I have nothing, and I know that if you had something then I would’ve already heard about it. It’s not like you didn’t always make sure of that.”

“You think everything is about you —”

“It matters, Firestar.” Jongdae yelled over his angry remarks, as always. Firestar was in love with his own voice, and was capable of going on with his self-righteous rant for at least half an hour if you didn’t stop him. “People are dying, and we don’t know who is going to be the next.”

“Could be anyone.” Firestar whispered, his voice so low that Jongdae almost didn’t believe it was coming from him. Maybe because Firestar was always flying higher than mortals, he spoke firm and certain, like a cartoon’s superhero. Jongdae was always shocked when he saw anything resembling human crossed Firestar’s face. “Could be you.”

“Are you threatening me?” Jongdae asked, half anger, half sheer incredulity. He didn’t know that they were at that stage.

Firestar rolled his eyes, and whatever was happening between them broke like glass. Jongdae wished he could take his words back. “What are you planning to do?”

“I was, uh, hoping that you would know.”

“I can’t read your mind.”

“Not like that, asshole. I just don’t know what to do. You think I would be talking to you if I knew?”

“Maybe we should just hang around the police station for a while. Not that I think they know anything, but anyone who saw anything is going to want to talk to them, not us.”

“It’s probably your fucking cape.”

“You still use the same leggings that you were wearing when we met. Do you even wash this thing?”

“I don’t know, do you wash your collant?”

“Can’t believe we are having this discussion.”

“Change your stupid costume and I will never mention your dark phase again.”

“We should at least put together a plan about this... thing we’ll be doing.”

“What else do we have to say?” Jongdae rolled his eyes like he was saying a solid duh. “We’re going to convince the cops to let us stay there for a while, God knows how, and then when we get more information we can kick some bad guy’s butt and everything will be back at its normal news.”

“I’m just shocked, that’s all.”

“Oh my God, why?”
“You never agree with me.”

“And you’re hurt about it? Can’t believe you’re hurt about it. I don’t agree with you because your ideas usually are too morally high for me, which am nothing but a mortal. Also, I can’t fly, something you keep forgetting or deliberately ignoring.”

“Then is this our plan?”

“Yes, this is our fucking plan.”

“Should I know your name?”

“What.”

“As a form of bonding and also trust.”

“Do you want me to know your name?”

“No really, no.”

“Then we’re game because I prefer to die than tell you mine.”

Firestar blinked, like he couldn’t for all the life of him start to imagine what Jongdae was thinking about. Like his mouth hadn’t just form the words that proved he wasn’t a big fan of that name business either. Jongdae noticed that once in a while he would do something and then Jongdae would follow his cue, for a reason or another; suddenly, though, Firestar would be very confused and leave immediately.

“Should we make a graphic of who is going to be at the station, when it’s going to happen?”

Jongdae groaned. “Why do you keep doing that?”

“Well, you refuse to say your name, I can hardly imagine that you’d want me to see your face.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“I, uh. Like Mondays. And also Tuesdays.”

“Nice. I’ll be there Wednesdays and Thursdays.”

“Friday?”

“I’m going out, usually.”

“Yeah”, Jongdae lied, “me too. So many stuff to do. I have a lot of, like, things. Clubs. You know, friends. As I’m sure you can imagine. Since you have Revenant and all.”

“I guess.”

Jongdae wished the ground would open and swallow him whole. He would be, then, the food to the worms, which was the exact thing he was deserving. “I have to go.”

“Yeah.” Firestar nodded, emphatically, like he couldn’t wait to get the hell out of there. It offended Jongdae a little, seeing him so eager to fly away; unfortunately, he felt the same way, so that was fair.
Sometimes Jongdae would wonder if anything at all that he ever did got a reaction out of Firestar that wasn’t mild annoyance. It could be disappointment, low level unhappiness, frustration. Anything at all, and he wasn’t delusional enough to think that any of those things would be nice.

//

“So”, Jongdae said, trying for casual, “what do you think about cops.”

Yixing blinked at him, like a surprised owl. “I’m one? I usually like them? Not always, though. Yesterday Ramírez stole my fucking donut.”

“I can’t believe you just let these words come out of your mouth.”

“I’m not ashamed of my work”, Yixing said, with dignity, “since I’m serving the good people of this town. What do you do anyway?”

“I’m doing the shit they can’t do for themselves. So, without me, they would all be swimming on debts. I guess that, in the big scheme of things, they think I’m more important than you.”

“What!”

“Enough of this!” Jongdae waved his finger at his best friend’s face. “There’s a reason that I’m asking.”

“Of course there is some ulterior motive—”

“It’s important business. Very important.”

“Oh.” Yixing looked at him weirdly, almost eager; like he was waiting for something that Jongdae couldn’t start to guess. Like this thing on his eyes had been going on forever.

“Oh, yeah. Work stuff. I need to hang out at your precinct for a while and was hoping that the other cops wouldn’t be too weird about it.”

“Why would you do it? You hate the smell of stale coffee.”

“It’s some stuff that I care about.”

“Is it a client? Is it like that time when you got the beating husband arrested after you went after him with a baseball bat—?”

“It’s not like that! I’m not going to hurt anyone!”

“I hope so. I had to do a lot of stuff to convince everyone that all you deserved was some anger management classes.”

“I hate those. They sucked.”

“You could have gone to jail!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“You aren’t even listening to me.”

“Can I stay at your work for, like a few weeks?”
“You never listen to me.”

“Yixing?”

He sighed, going back to his nap on the very comfy table, while he should be eating breakfast. “Yeah, whatever. Try to not get yourself killed. It’s too bothersome having to stop people from beating your sorry ass.”

Jongdae smiled, a little strained. Yixing blinked, something angry around his mouth that was gone in a second. He closed his eyes again, pointedly, and went back to sleep, leaving Jongdae to show himself out — who was trying to bury deep the guilt he knew would stop him for doing what had to be done.

Sometimes he wished that the stupid forest had burn to the ground before he went there.

(This ugly feelings happened, of course, sometimes,

but it wasn’t really always.)

//

Jongdae leaned against the wall, trying to look pretty. Rosa was the gatekeeper of the coffee that day, and she was up to no bullshit. Only cops get free coffee, donuts and the sheer enjoyment of watching people fighting each other in the detention room, especially if they were together. It was your fault; no it was your fault, I should’ve never slept with you; oh, funny, I shouldn’t have HAD A KID WITH YOU, FUCKING ASSHOLE.

(Things usually escalated quickly).

“What do you want.” Rosa’s tone was so flat, it couldn’t really pass as a question.

“I just want coffee, Rosa, is that so bad?”

“Is Officer or Ma’am Officer or Lady Officer to you. I strongly advise you to use the first one.”

Jongdae sighed, long-suffering. “I know for a fact that you were one of the people who got me out of that trouble last year.”

“I did it for the poor young woman you were defending. I don’t like you and won’t give you any coffee.”

“Why not?”

“It’s cops only.”

“So is the free entertainment of the detention room but I have access to it anyway.”

She closed her eyes, taking deep breaths. Her knuckles were going white around her mug, and Jongdae was afraid that it, or her, was going to explode. Can people pop like balloons? Should he Google it?

“Uh, Officer—”

“Who is the piece of shit that is letting a civilian stay around the fucking detention room?”

“Are you going to yell at them?”
“Oh, no.” she smiled, full of menace, “I’m going to end their life.”

“Uh. Well, that sounds nice. I don’t really know who the person is, though.”

“Can you point at them?”

“Through a glass? Like in the movies?”

“No, child.” she rolled her eyes, grabbing his arm and turning him around, so he would face the precinct. “Just point at the guilty one.”

“I don’t know them, Rosa.”

“Officer.”

He nodded. “Officer Rosa.”

“No, just Officer.”

“Officer R—” she squeezed his arm. “Yeah, only Officer sounds amazing, loved it, suits you so well, please let go of my arm?”

“Tell me who it was. Was it Yixing?”

Jongdae snorted. “Right. He didn’t even want me here.”

“Of course he didn’t, he knows you’re clearly up to no good.”

“You’re sounding like a mom…”

“I do have children.”

“No way! How many?”

“Well. Two. Do you want to see a picture?”

“Yeah!”

She put out her phone and opened a soft photo of a small girl and a baby. They were both very cute, and Jongdae told her so, who nodded seriously. “My beautiful girl is Amanda, and the baby is Gabriel. I chose the names, of course. My husband couldn’t suggest anything decent to save his life, poor soul.”

“What were his ideas?”

“White shit like Kayleigh.”

“Ew.”

“Yep. He also said Aileen.”

“Why?”

“He obviously was trying to get revenge on me. I was a moody pregnant woman.”

“You’re always moody, he should know that by now.”
“And that’s exactly what I said.”

Then, as if coming out of nowhere, a voice saying *Ma’am* made itself known. Jongdae almost jumped to the roof, surprised, while Rosa kind of dropped her phone on her shoe. It was alive, no harm done, which was probably the only thing that saved the guy’s life.

“Officer Kim.” she said, coldly. “What are you doing here?”

“I need to talk to you, but I can’t do that with a civilian standing right there.”

“Oh, no worries! I’m almost a honorary cop.”

“No you aren’t.” Rosa and the guy answered him almost in total sync. Jongdae was hurt by their harshness, since he hadn't done anything to deserve it — at least not that week, which was the only thing that mattered. Also, Rosa should know that it was impossible to keep him out of shit. He was always sticking his nose on everyone’s business, like a compulsion. Even before becoming Mach, he would try to mendle on every single problem of every single person under the sun.

“It’s very hurtful. I resent that.”

“I’m sorry.” the guy apologized, if a little annoyed, while Rosa just stood there rolling her eyes, like she was trying to found out if they would really fall off if she did it enough times.

“Get your sorry ass out of here.” she said, simply as that, and even Jongdae could pick his shattered dignity out of the ground and leave a room where people obviously didn’t want him.

He walked around, trying to think of how many hours would count as enough effort. He was bored, and feeling more than a little uncomfortable; if he left early, though, he wouldn’t know how to look Firestar in the eye. Would he understand, this sudden urge to flee? Or would it just make Jongdae look more like a child, more like a *coward* to his eyes?

Yixing, since it was apparently the hurt-Jongdae-day, dragged him into the men’s bathroom, looking like he was close to death. His face was kind of green, and Jongdae feared for a second that he would end this hellish day with puke all over his shoes. “What happened? Are you fine? Are you dying? Oh my fucking God, please tell me you didn’t receive a doctor’s call saying that you only have two weeks to live—”

“Shut the fuck up.” Yixing said, harshly, still trying to catch his breath. Since Yixing weren’t usually rude to him, Jongdae thought wisely that the good move was to stop saying stuff. Whatever it was that got Yixing this worked up deserved his whole attention, and the fact that he was afraid Yixing would maybe punch him in the face if he didn’t keep his quiet also helped a lot. “You have to leave and never come back.”

“*What!* That’s so rude, I did nothing wrong, no matter what Rosa is saying around the place—”

“Rosa isn’t saying anything. You have to leave because of the new Officer.”

“What are you saying, I can’t be easily scared—”

“Oh my God you’re so dumb, how can I be friends with someone this dumb—”

“—I resent that so much, why are you saying stuff like this—”

“The new Officer’s fucking *name* is Kim Minseok.”
“What.”

“Oh, yeah. Kim Minseok.”

“What does he looks like?”

Yixing glared at him, suspiciously. “What the fuck did you do.”

“Because I just met an Officer Kim that I never saw before in my entire life!”

“Did you talk to him?”

“No! I mean, yes! A little, and it was mostly to Rosa, but he talked to me and said that he was sorry!”

“For what? What did he do? Did he touch you?”

“No, just scared me, I don’t think he even noticed my face…”

“Yeah, you have to leave. You’re safe for now but if you start talking to him, and he will be all perfect and also wrong and possibly will hate you deeply and break your heart.”

“Geez, Yixing, you really know how to sugar coat stuff.”

“You said all of this to me yourself. Please leave, Jongdae.” he looked imploring, which wasn’t a good thing to his face, since he was more like a bunny and less like a puppy. “What if it’s actually him?”

“Yeah.” Jongdae murmured, wishing to heaven that he had a better explanation to give Firestar. He couldn’t say sorry, I have a complicated relationship with this soulmate business, so every single time I go close to someone with the name I freak out and run as faster as I can. He couldn’t stop going, either; wouldn’t be very fair.

What a fucking mess.

“Will you go?” Yixing touched his arm, sounded freaked out and sympathetic at the same time. Jongdae felt like he was going to cry, but he had to be tough. He had been doing that cycle his entire life, even if NY wasn’t really full of Minseoks. It was just that, well. The Korean community was unbearably tight.

“Yeah”, he answered his best friend, who crossed running the precinct and would probably endure his colleagues making fun of him for it later, all of this to try and protect Jongdae’s stupid feelings. He hated, hated feeling like a burden. He ran (quite literally) away from it his entire life. “yeah, I’m leaving. Say Rosa goodbye, okay?”

“She doesn’t really like you…”

“We have a special connection.”

“Eh, say to yourself whatever you need to sleep at night.”

“Bye, Yixing.”

He smiled, if little sad around the corners. “Bye, Jongdae.”

And that was that.
The body rested rigid and motionless on the ground. Jongdae knew that he should call Yixing, should call the cops; competent people who could handle this kind of shit. His area of expertise was more like world-threatening disasters, and for the first time he thought that maybe the League was right, maybe he should handle this over to the local authorities. Shit isn’t simple as that, though. Jongdae thought that if he gave up on this, then he would be letting go of everything.

He got his phone out of his pocket, trying to avoid his jeans getting dirty. (Yes, he wasn’t on leggings this time. And it was not to avoid the relentless teasing; he just didn’t have the time to suit up properly. He only grabbed what he could get, his mask and stuff like that. Two women passing by his window were muttering to each other, their heads close and their body ready for a fight; Jongdae wasn’t trying to hear them, because it would be rude, but he gave up on the pretense after the word murder started to be passing around).

He called Firestar, because of course he did. Jongdae can’t help himself — it’s like a terrible compulsion. He is addict to the feeling of being looked down upon. The self-righteousness that colored every word that went out of Firestar’s mouth was as much a turn-on as it was deadass annoying. And if he wasn’t equipped to handle this, then maybe Firestar is. Or maybe he knew someone who could help; only God knows the kind of people he spent his free time with.

Maybe it was Revenant. Or Magina. Did he have any other friends…?

He picks up after five bips. “Someone better be dead. ”

“It is, actually.” Jongdae answered him, feeling a little smug. It wasn’t decent, and he knew it; the corpse was right there, staring with unseeing eyes at the hopeless child whose responsibility to bring his killers to justice fell upon.

“What?”

“It’s Max Dean.”

“Who? What? Do you know this guy?”

“Everyone knows him—“

“Everyone but me, apparently.”

“I guess you just live under a rock. Like Patrick, the star.” Jongdae says, dismissive. It felt good. (It shouldn’t, though. It was a short-lived kind of satisfaction, which died as fast as it appeared). “It’s the museum guy. The sex scandal?”

“Oh. Something about prostitutes, I guess? I remember that.”

“You really don’t know shit, do you? He was caught red-handed trying to pay off a teenager to never speak about him to anyone.”

“He slept with her? How old was she?”

“Fourteen.”

“Jesus fucking Christ. Hope he rots in hell.”

“All of us, buddy. All of us.” Jongdae stared at the body of Max Dean, doesn’t really feeling the
electrical urge caused by the death of someone disgusting. It was just very sad. The killer didn’t bother to close his eyes. “Anyway, will you be here soon? I have to call the cops eventually.”

“How did you know?”

“I can actually do stuff.”

“It’s not what I’m talking about. Why do you always takes my words so personally?”

“Because you’re saying them to me.” he sighs, feeling the tiredness deep on his bones. The two months that had gone by were the longest days of his life, mostly because Firestar was shit at letting other people do anything. He was a control freak and entirely paranoid, and Jongdae’s personality wasn’t the best one possible — he was so weak about critics and mean words. Like a child. “Can we not do this right now, though? I’m trying to not get blood on my clothes, because I would be forced to explain what happened to everyone who knows me in a twelve-block radius.”

“Do you know this many people?”

“Yes.”

“Fine. I will be there in a minute. Where are you?”

“Leave the cape at home.”

“Where the fuck are you?”

“Somewhere that a cape would be frowned upon.”

“Mach.”

“I’m in fucking Manhattan. Get your ass out of your dumb red bed and get down here.”

That’s when he hangs up on Firestar, which was the wise choice to make. If he stayed on that conversation for more than a single minute he would probably say something stupid, like hey, did you know that your voice sounds really nice on the phone?

//

A week later he found the crime was still on the evening’s news. Jongdae was exhausted of seeing Max Dean, 42 years old, slaughtered at his own home during the night. MO was like others six murders, and the press was finally catching up on the possibility that it was a serial killer — a theory that was embraced by the fact that nothing else made the smallest amount sense. The victims weren’t similar on age, or race, or work, or relevance to the tabloids, or even to the court. Anyone could die — and, indeed, died — from low level thugs to socialites; tying it together, not a single little demand.

September 21st also came with the celebration of Jongdae’s 25th birthday. As always, he went back home, which wasn’t such a long way. Yixing attended, as did Jongyul, because he couldn’t run from it, since he was kind of living with their parents. His uncle Dongwoo and his aunt Yejin, from Jongdae’s mother side, were there to give him gifts and happy wishes. They were superstitious, if well meaning, and the number 25 got them nervous. They brought with them Mihee and Minseok, something that Jongdae didn’t know how to feel about. He was avoiding Minseok since he was, like, five. Old habits die hard, or so they say; Jongdae believed that the natural course was to just keep steady and alive until your grave day.
Besides them, Jongdae’s divorced aunt also showed up, flying all the way from Philly. Her son, who wanted very badly to talk about divorce laws with Jongdae, was accompanying his mom. Jongseok’s side of the family were always a little weird; Ye-eun, though, said that she was grateful. If they were more traditional, maybe she wouldn’t see her family as often as she did.

Baekhyun and Chanyeol were there to the fancy dinner too, looking disgustingly in love and fashionably late, as was the usual with them. They flashed their wedding rings into the face of literally anyone willing to look at it.

His friends from the League, though, couldn’t show up to the (very quiet, very small) celebration. Jongdae didn’t tell anyone about his secret life, and wasn’t that eager to know what they would think about the weirdness and the years-long lying. Yeri, Jongin and Junmyeon did send a lot of texts, though.

All in all, it was a quiet affair. Jongdae let their love wash over him, and determinately didn’t think about anything else at all.

(He just wished Firestar would tell him his name).

//

Jongdae — wearing full-on Mach costume — leaned against the same wall he was using to kind of stalk this guy who could or could not be a suspect. He was there at the precinct when the cops went desperately outside of the building, one over the other like small ants, answering a call about some shooter that could be involved on their serial killer case. They couldn’t enter the house, though; at least, not without a warrant — and a small phone call, made for someone who wanted to remain anonymous, wasn’t enough to get them one.

It couldn’t stop Jongdae, though. He left his job early (which was, unfortunately, his real job, since the vigilant business didn’t pay very well) and went home, faster than a blink, to do something useful with his time, a.k.a. being very weird, very creepy around some stranger’s home.

He thought about calling Firestar, but Jongdae couldn’t trust him with leaving that fucking cape at home. It was very red, and could be used to blind someone; everything considered, it wasn’t exactly stakeout material.

The suspect, who was blonde and female, moved around the kitchen, apparently looking for something. Jongdae really hoped that it wasn’t a knife. He could, of course, run away from it (quite literally); he just didn’t feel like trying his luck on that particular day.

Also, he was a little scared. The woman was terrifying.

“What are you doing?” he heard a voice saying less than one foot from him, which almost made his ass connect with the cold hard ground. He was, admittedly, lurking around on a tree, but he didn’t feel like it was enough to someone break his neck.

It was, of course, Firestar, who Jongdae wasn’t still very sure about not being capable of reading minds. It was ridiculous, that was what it was, because every time he thought about his flying ass he would just appear, out of thin air, like a personal haunting ghost.

“What the fuck are you doing here.”

“I left my cape at home.” Firestar told him, helpfully.
“Where did you come from?”

“I never asked, although I do think my mother is British. She’s very white.”

“You’re fucking with me.”

Firestar smiled. “Yeah, a little.”

“Can’t you take anything serious?”

“I don’t know, can you?”

“More than you, clearly.”

He sighed, like Jongdae’s was the one being difficult. It was nothing but a intensely recurring pattern on their tentative working relationship. Firestar would be terrible, and then he would blame Jongdae, like the asshole that he is, and the cycle would begin again like a curse. “What are you doing here?”

“I am, obviously, lurking.” Jongdae told him, with dignity.

“Is it because of that person who called the cops?”

“Did you hear about it too?”

Firestar looked uncomfortable. “Yeah.”

“Do you think it’s her? She looks a little small to be able to contain someone like Jones.”

“Who was the victim number six.” It didn’t really sound like a question.

“Yeah, him. He was built like a wall.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“Well, I was thinking about breaking and entering. It would happen, hopefully, when she went to do whatever on wherever.”

Firestar thought it over, like the piece of shit he was. Jongdae rolled his eyes, making sure that Firestar was watching. It, too, was routine. “It’s a little abstract, but I guess it’s as good as any other plan.”

“What you’re actually saying is that you don’t have anything better.”

He looked wounded. “Of course I do! But yours is more straightforward, and that’s why I’m graciously giving up on my plan.”

“You’re so full of shit.”

“Whatever.”

And then they stayed there on that stupid dumb tree. Both of them trying to look very cool, kind of pretending like the silence didn’t bother them at all. And it was such a childish thing to do; Jongdae knew that. But he couldn’t help himself. Like a lot of things regarding Firestar, it was like a freaking compulsion. He was also afraid to make the first move, to do the wrong thing. He wanted them to be friends so badly; used to hurt a lot. It was probably his self-esteem issues — going after someone who hates him. He also knew that particularly ugly truth. Like all vices, though, he was defenseless
against it.

“So”, Firestar said after a while, looking and sounding like he wanted to be anywhere else in the entire world. “Do you think she is the suspect?”

“We just went over it.”

“Yeah, like. Two hours ago.”

“Still very close on the temporal space, buddy.”

“I’m tired of being quiet, that’s all.”

Yeah, Jongdae could have said, because it isn’t like you’re in love with your goddamn voice or anything. He ended up just shutting his mouth, though; he had a New Year resolution going on saying that he would try to be nicer.

(It was something that was on his horizon since 2007).

“Uh. Do you like dogs?”

Awkward silence followed.

“I think I’m more of a cat person.” Jongdae said after they just sat there uncomfortably for two full minutes. He didn’t know what he was doing. Firestar, for once, looked like he also didn’t have any idea. What the flying fuck.

“Do you have, like. A cat.”

“Eh, yeah. Her name is Alesia.”

“Alesia? Does it mean anything?”

“It’s just the name of my freaking cat, Jesus.”

“Oh my fucking God, why do you always takes everything so personally—”

“Well, as I already stated, you’re saying this shit to me —“

“I’m just asking about your dumb cat—“

“Alesia isn’t DUMB—“

Someone, then, coughed with emphasis, trying to make themselves known. Jongdae looked down, very slowly, like someone would do to a particularly unpredictable snake. There, standing blonde and pretty, was the woman they were just watching, the one that was allegedly watching TV before the whole argument stuff went off.

“I think you’re both vigilantes, uh?”

Firestar looked pale under his mask. “Actually, I do prefer superh—“

“You’re kind of sneaking around on my backyard. I’m sorry, but I don’t think you get to prefer anything.”

Then, like the terrifying creature she was, she grinned. And it wasn’t like a villain. It was more the
way someone would smile when they were trying to look non-threatening. Or trying to be friendlier, who knows. Jongdae thought, then, *Damn. We are the actual assholes here.*

“I’m sorry, ma’am.” he said, uncomfortable. “We were just…”

“Being creepy.”

“Yeah, that.”

“Around a single woman’s home.”

“I do realize it’s bad—“ Firestar started, and only stopped because Jongdae pinched him with every intention of hurting.

“There are no excuses that would justify our behavior. Please accept our apologies.”

She inclined her head to the side, like a puppy. “It’s okay. May I ask what you’re doing here, though?”

“The cops. They, like. Looked really intense about you and your place.” Firestar told her, using a tone that spoke *full disclosure here.*

“Oh. The shooting stuff?”

Jongdae blinked. “Yeah, I guess.”

“It was the neighbor. She hates me, and she just thought that it would be a good way to scare me away. I told them all of this; when they tried to enter my house without my permission, though, I put my foot down and said no thanks, I also have rights, please leave.”

“As you, uh, should.”

“So.” she smiled again. “No thanks, I also have rights, please leave?”

Jongdae nodded, and grabbed Firestar’s arm, who was very ashamed. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Have a nice day, gentlemen.”

“Yes, ma’am. You too.”

And then they left the place, trying for all the life of them to look less like the asshole in costumes they were — accurately — feeling that they were.

This job was *so* fucking shitty.

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Jongdae didn’t really want to keep seeing Firestar’s face after that monumental, impressive fiasco, but they felt like they deserved coffee, so Jongdae went there to buy some. He was the chosen one because he was, if out of his mask, more normal-looking; probably wouldn’t appear like a cruel person just waiting to kill someone. Firestar’s ugly red costume didn’t exactly screamed *criminal,* though; it was more like a disappointed God, since he could fly and do stuff like that. He also particularly liked those really awful moral speeches. They usually started with please come back to the light, leave behind your darkness years, become good and pure and whatever; it would go on forever until the person at least tried to jump out of the building. No one ever fell for it, obviously — for some reason, though, he kept trying.
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Jongdae kind of liked that about him.

He was minding his own business, waiting on the line, when two dudes behind him started to talk about the same soulmates bullshit. He was, admittedly, very traumatized about the whole thing — all the left wrist, right wrist stuff. And, okay, he could recognize that objectively there was no reason to anyone to hate the stupid system. It wasn’t like someone was forcing you to marry a name. But, to Jongdae, it was maybe worse. It was ugly and it was sad, and it wouldn’t be the first time that he would end up crying in a corner with just the idea of other people’s casual happiness.

As selfish, mean or ungrateful that they were, those were his feelings and he was helpless against them.

It was just they took it all like it was granted, without a care and without a thought — and it always made Jongdae so mad.

He got the coffee, thanking the girl behind the corner, whose tag said Linda. She didn’t answer, too busy handling the next custom, and Jongdae sighed; he got her.

Sometimes he wished he could turn people off too.

“Was the line that long?” Firestar asked him, nursing his coffee like he didn’t really want it. Jongdae wished to kill him, as was usual between them. He did say thank you, though, so Jongdae was mostly trying to keep things civil.

“Why? I was back at the normal time. Before even, because of my powers and shit.”

“You look angry, that’s all. I thought that it maybe was because the line was too bad.”

“The line was fine.”

They stood in silence, Jongdae wishing that Firestar could just know when to stop talking. He knew more was coming, though, and he wasn’t disappointed.

“What happened, then?”

Jongdae sighed, long-suffering. “It’s nothing. Just a few dudes talking about soulmate stuff.”

“And why would you be angry about that?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

Firestar looked at him, his eyes and his mouth the only relevant part of his face that Jongdae had ever seen. He thought, here is this man that I adore, and who hates me. He wants to talk to me about soulmates, and the irony couldn’t be greater.

“The names on my wrists are the same.” he told, objectively, like it was the smallest thing on the bigger scheme of his life. Nothing defining at all. He did it well, because he was lying since he was old enough to talk.

“Oh.” Firestar breathed. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“What do you think it means?”
“Means that I’m fucked. Maybe the person that I will love will hate me forever and break my heart or who the fuck knows. We’ll never found out, though, because I’ve been avoiding people with his name like they were the actual plague since I was a barely self-aware baby.”

“His?”

“Yeah, Firestar.” he rolled his eyes. “Gay stuff.”

“Oh, okay.” and then, because Firestar wouldn’t know appropriate if it bit him on the ass, he continued, “What’s the name?”

“That’s a little personal, don’t you think?”

“I could help you to avoid those people.”

“It’s fine.” he said, final. “Everything is fine.”

Firestar stood there, a little wounded, like his half-hearted offer to help on such a messy matter being refused was very offensive and also hurtful. Jongdae, for once, didn’t care; he was the target of that look since that time on the roof, such a long time before this one. Firestar couldn’t guilt him into telling shit anymore; Jongdae had already busted his game. It wasn’t fair that he was the one doing all the talking, while Firestar stood on that particular high ground, never putting himself on any position of vulnerability.

(Firestar was tired of the lies, but he was also terrified of the truth).

“I only have the enemy one.” he said, after a while. “I’m scared of meeting him.”

“It must suck.” Jongdae offered, mostly because he hated the heavy silence.

“It does. It’s disheartening that the one name that you have to look for is of the person who will hate you more than life.”

“You should just ignore it.” he said, even knowing Firestar could never do such a thing. That would look too cowardly, to avoid meeting his personal devil. He shook his head, twice, trying to show Jongdae how much he was against that idea.

Jongdae hated being proved right about sad things.

“I couldn’t.” Firestar smiled, his face moving behind the mask, and then didn’t say anything else at all.

Jongdae nodded, and rose his paper cup on a toast. Hear, hear, to look forward and to avoid like hell at the same damn time.

The days blurred together like a hellish dream. Jongdae tried very hard to stay the fuck away from Firestar when they weren’t physically forced to be on the same space (like those two times some super villain or another got them both), tried to drown his sorrows on dairy-free milk, and worked like a maniac. People asked if he was possessed; he made some ha ha ha. that’s funny to them and went back to punishing himself. It was his favorite hobby — making his own life miserable would, hopefully, stop anyone else of trying.

Firestar, though, was everywhere. His red costume was easy to spot, which usually was enough to
send Jongdae running away in the opposite direction. He was truly exhausted of fighting; it didn’t really mean that they wouldn’t do it again, though — again, and again, and again until the end of the time.

Life became a boring cycle. Its worst part was the feeling of absolute unhappiness that made Jongdae wish for actual death, this one that happened when he was close to sleep, thinking about dead bodies piling under the moon.

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“Do you think we can get away with accusing the police of misogyny?” Jongdae muttered, trying to stay very still. One thin wall away a woman conducted what looked like shady business, but they weren’t eager to make assumptions after their last mess.

“We can try, but nobody will be surprised.”

“Maybe they would act like they were and then get busted. People do say the world is changing.”

“Yeah.” Firestar said to himself, somehow bitter. “Not fast enough.”

They got quiet when the yelling at the neighbor room started to get intense. Jongdae went there, stated that the lady was safe and the ugly guys were lying unconscious — or dead — on the ground and kind of grabbed Firestar by the arm. Two seconds, maybe less, and they were standing in front of a very confused mob boss (maybe), Firestar looking a little unraveled and possibly green.

“What are you doing?” the evil lady looked puzzled about their outfit. The powers didn’t seem to have given them away, which was of a weirdness that made Jongdae pause; Firestar was a bit underground, kind of, but Mach was important.

Even if only by association.

“Did you knocked all of those dudes yourself?” asked Jongdae, who needed to know if she was going to kick his ass too.

“Yeah.” she answered proudly. “I got on a lot of fights when I was a child. Dad, then, put me on a lot of anger management classes… It was only natural that I picked up some martial arts.”

“Oh, yeah.” Firestar agreed, looking only slightly nauseated. “Entirely natural.”

“Who are you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I do mind”, she told them seriously, “since a lady never tells her name.”

“I thought it was her age.” Jongdae whispered to Firestar, who nodded earnestly.

“I will help you both, though, since you look like decent guys, if a little messed up. You two are, like. Strays.”

“Better than some stuff people called recently.”

“Yeah, no shit.” she answered him, patronizing. “My name is Leonor.”

“You look familiar.” Jongdae told her.

“It’s because my dad is Charles Flint.”
“Oh.” he breathed. “Makes sense.”

Firestar, who was clueless, shook his head. “Never heard of him.”

“He is, like. The millionaire? Owns jewels. A lot of jewels.”

“That’s one way to put it.” Leonor nodded, wisely.

Firestar looked him in the eyes, projecting disapproval in metaphorical waves. “It’s so ridiculous to measure people’s importance having money as a rule. We shouldn’t only know the faces of—“

“—the rich people, because it’s very unfair and feeds poverty.” Jongdae completed, flatly. “We know.”

“I didn’t know.” Leonor offered, raising her hand promptly.

“The lady didn’t know, Mach.” Firestar told him, full of dignity. “You shouldn’t have stopped me —“

“—of talking her ears off after you already did it to me? Yeah, my sin. Can we go over what we just walked into here?” he waved at the unconscious guys. “What were you doing, Ms. Flint?”

“Please, call me Leonor.”

“Okay, Leonor. Care to explain?”

“I was conducting a deal.” she answered them, looking to all hell like she was measuring how much trouble she would be going to have kicking their face into the ground. Leonor was in her early-twenties, maybe college age. She was, Jongdae thought, probably visiting her dad. What a weird woman.

“It looked shady.”

“Oh.” she blinked. “Well, I guess it was.”

“What!” Firestar yelled, looking wounded, which was his second favorite expression to guilt trip someone. Jongdae resisted very hard his urge to roll his eyes.

“Don’t be upset! It was just some booker my brother owed money to.”

“His booker and the entire crew. What were you trying to do?”

“Well, scare them, mostly. Michael is useless at this sort of thing.”

“Couldn’t he just pay what he owed?”

“Well, duh.” Leonor said, bored. “But if people started to believe they can threaten us, blackmail us, when will this stop?”

“So the Flints don’t pay their debts.”

She thought that over for a moment. “Yeah, I guess.”

Jongdae sighed, exhausted already. “Miss, can you please state your reason to end up on the police watch list about a serial killer.”
“A serial killer?” Leonor asked, looking genuinely surprised. “I know nothing of that.”

“Anything at all?”

“Well.” she breathed, sounding like it would be dream-like if she wasn’t so direct or impatient. “There is someone.”

“Who?” Firestar asked, eager, trying to keep himself from shaking her into telling the truth. Jongdae grabbed his arm and squeezed, hard. *I’m not letting you fuck this up*, he tried to say. *This is too important to ruin because of your dumb temper.*

“Dad’s friend… Someone called Mason? I guess? They went to college together or something.”

“Why did you think of him, Leonor?” Jongdae asked, trying to look non-threatening, even though he knew that she was stronger and smarter than him, if not faster.

“He’s so weird.” she answered, looking scared for a second before it was gone. “He used to creep me out. And you say I’m on some watch list about a serial killer; it can’t be anyone else but him.”

“This wasn’t specified on the report.” Firestar informed him, as if he didn’t know. “Maybe they don’t found out yet. Did you talk to any cops?”

“No.” Leonor said to him, condescending once again — a very rich girl on a very ugly world. “I hate cops. Also, I can’t talk to them without a lawyer. Dad would throw a fit, and I’m over this phase.”

“You’re still young.”

“You can’t be that older than me. I’m twenty two and you look like a baby.”

Jongdae smiled at her. “Take care, Miss.”

“Leonor!” she yelled after them, who were running (Jongdae) and flying (Firestar), as was usual with them. “Call me Leonor!”

And, just like that, they knew their killer’s first name.

//

Six months went by with only one murder to disturb its peace. It was an antique dealer named Maria Hernández, and she was found dead at the galleria where she worked full time. She had a daughter, Sofia, and a dog, Honey. Maria was only thirty seven years old, and she would never see her child graduating from high school.

It made Jongdae feel sad and responsible. He didn’t tell Firestar about it, though. He was afraid of what he would hear as an answer.

Christmas went on very normal. His entire family plus Yixing were a big crowd in Ye-eun small dinner room, and it was even more uncomfortable when they tried to help her with the food. In the end, everyone ate a lot, laughed, drank beer, exchanged dumb gifs (because his family never ever brought fancy ones in their entire lives) and felt generally happy. Also blessed. Jongdae’s spiritual-oriented aunt, Yejin, went off on a very long rant about their duty as Christians on such a wonderful time. She cried a little at the end, since she had more than four glasses of wine during the meal. Minseok patted his mother on the back, comforting her.

He was so nice — Jongdae wished he could be his soulmate, but only the nice one. He thought that
maybe there were two Kim Minseok (his cousin was a Cho) and they were both connected to him, but different people altogether. It would be easier, and he could laugh about it at their wedding, how painful it was waiting for him, but how it was worth it in the end.

(In all honesty, Jongdae didn’t really believe that anything at all could compensate more than twenty full years of hell).

Minseok’s sister, Mihee, who had just turned 21 and went full-on crazy on the I-can-legally-drink stuff, laughed a little unsteady. Ye-eun sighed unhappy at her baby sister, shaking her head, as she did on every Christmas.

It was very normal. Jongdae didn’t know why he ended up feeling so empty about it.

//

Firestar was the first one at the scene, for once. Jongdae knew it was an unfair thought, because he was the one who was superfast; he wished he could help himself. Something ugly and guilty moved inside him, and he smiled at Firestar to try to forget it.

“I think his name was Marcus.” Firestar murmured, as if they were standing on holy ground. Or, well. A sacrilegious one.

“Please tell me you didn’t go and left all your fingerprints on the dead guy’s wallet.”

“No!” Firestar yelled at him, more quietly than he would do in less dubious circumstances. Jongdae rolled his eyes, because so what? Firestar angry at him was a wound that had already closed. It didn’t mean anything at all anymore.

Friends? What a joke.

(It had been three months since they last saw each other. Jongdae had reasons to believe that Firestar was ignoring him on purpose).

“What did you do?” he asked, hoping for dismissive. Firestar did that thing with his eyes, the one that made him look very angry for no reason. Jongdae thought, then, Good. Now we’re on even ground.

What a bitter relationship to hold on to.

Firestar stared at the dead guy, carefully avoiding to step on the blood or ruining any evidence that the killer may have left behind. It would be, probably, an useless effort. Day after day, body after body, and the cops had nothing; Jongdae couldn’t grip on anything, either. It was like everything was suddenly made of sand, escaping between his fingers and leaving behind just dust.

“We should call 911.” Firestar told him after a while. Jongdae noticed that he didn’t answer how he knew the man lying dead on the dusty floor. They were under a bridge, which was weird; the other murders happened on the victim’s house or place of employment, no matter if they had spouse, or children, or pets. To think about their killer changing their M.O. this late made Jongdae taste bile on his throat.

“Maybe it is someone else’s work.” Jongdae told (more to the wind) what they were both thinking about. It was still a bullet, yes, still at the head, also yes, but there were a lot of people who died like that (read as: executed). Their victim screamed high level mob, the kind of person who has a lot enemies. Like, a real lot, and all of them willing to kill. That was very bad, Jongdae thought. Very bad indeed.
“I don’t think so.” said Firestar, who had shooting down Jongdae’s small dumb hope bubble as a sport.

“It’s bad.” he insisted. “It’s more than that, it’s downright terrible. I don’t want a dead gangster on my hands. I don’t want a dead gangster at all.”

“We should wait for them to find him themselves.”

“Who?”

“Well.” Firestar blinked, as if waking up from a weird dream. “His friends, obviously.”

“Are you fucking with me.”

“They sure as hell will know more about happened to Marcus than us.”

“How do you even know his name?” Jongdae asked, but didn’t hope for an answer; which was, of course, all good, because he didn’t get one.

Just cool.

“I think it’s time to leave.” Firestar muttered, looking behind him. “Someone is coming.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. Just... Someone.”

“Great help. Great damn help, as always, Firestar. A+."

The sound of someone running got loud enough that even Jongdae, who didn’t have the stupid super-hearing like someone who weared a fucking cape, as if he had anything ground to stand on at all, could hear it. Something red and shiny and weird grabbed him by the arm and then fly away with him.

Like, literally.

Firestar made them fly away.

Jongdae just wished he could kill the fucker without being thrown in jail, where he wouldn’t survive the hurt feelings of Firestar’s many fans around the globe. It was a lose-lose situation, so he just resigned himself to it. He was an adaptable person; it was a constant source of pride, even if Yixing liked to call it conflict avoidance. What did he know, anyway? Yes, they did grow up together but the asshole wasn’t at that stage where he could read Jongdae’s mind.

(Although maybe Firestar could. That was, obviously, a big maybe. He said it wasn’t true, but Jongdae wasn’t sure if he believed him. Like, Firestar was probably telling the truth, but who could really know? Surely not Jongdae. People couldn’t expect him to be a good judge of character).

“It was close.” Firestar — who was the epitome of everything that was wrong with New York — nodded to himself like he did a good job with his cowardly escape. Jongdae could, I guess, kick him; he didn’t have a single clue about how Firestar would react, though. Would he look wounded, like he did when he wanted someone to do what he wanted? Or would he just be unsurprised, unimpressed?

There were so many things Jongdae was afraid of finding out.
“What was that, anyway?”

“I guess someone was looking for Marcus.”

“How would they know to look there?”

“Well, I did find him.”

“And still you wouldn’t tell me how.”

Firestar stayed silent.

Jongdae was suddenly very tired. His bed started to look like the best dream ever, even more than the one when everything was nice and nothing sucked. “Can we go now?”

He blinked, as if surprised that Jongdae wished to very much run away from him. “I guess. If you want.”

“I do.” Jongdae told him, feeling a cruel satisfaction in knowing that, on some small level, he hurt Firestar. Even if it was very little, even if it was for a second, he felt like they were finally even, kind of.

He didn’t know why he felt like that, so he left and didn’t really look back.

//

Everything with them was a setback. Two steps forward, one step behind. One step forward and suddenly two, three, four steps behind. In the end, they were who they always were; people can’t really change. It’s possible that, as the days went on and on and on, shit became even worse.

(I guess it was because of their absolute incapacity of talking, of compromising, of acknowledging).

//

Spring was mild that year. For some reason, it made the small criminals of the city wander around, making a nuisance of themselves; Firestar’s stray, Roman, was among them, but it never ended up on anything serious. Jongdae rolled his eyes at him constantly, but the stabbing was behind their resignation-based relationship. They weren’t friends, probably because neither of them knew where they stood with Firestar. Jongdae liked knowing that everyone else had a hard time with him too.

(He usually liked to be the first, the only, the best. Wouldn’t it be sad, though, to accomplish this old dream on the only situation he wished didn’t exist at all?)

“It’s getting hot.” Leonor told him, from the side of the pool where she was just floating around. They ended up on those lazy patterns, after a while; it was a friendship of sorts. She was pretty and inoffensive at her core. Also, Jongdae was tired of hiding all the time. He told her his identity after the second week, but he never showed her his wrists.

He said that it was private, and she believed him; the truth, though, was simpler: Jongdae just really hated pity.

“You’re just spoiled. Going away during the hottest months; you can’t do that anymore, because of your brother. Then you will have to stay here during the summer.”

“Yeah. It will suck so badly.”
He smiled at her, throwing water around like a toddler. Leonor used to roll her eyes a lot at this particular move; now she didn’t even blink, like it didn’t cross her mind to be annoyed at him at all.

“What do you think he is doing now?” she asked, idly. Jongdae tensed, only for a second, but it was enough to make her smirk. He didn’t want Leonor to know that he knew who she was talking about without anything more than a he. Because, in all hell, what did that say about him?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” he let the words come out of his mouth, hoping for convincing. She smiled pitying.

“You have to face your feelings like an adult.”

“I won’t hear a twenty two years old fortune heir give me advice about matters of heart.”

“First: ugh. Second: I’m the queen of divination! Please, hand your petty complains over to me — I will make them into something beautiful, you won’t even recognize it.”

“I don’t have anything to say.”

“Maybe he’s having sex right now. Hot sex. Kinky stuff.” she said, looking for all the world like she was wondering about the topic and finding it good enough.

Jongdae didn’t want to know what his face was doing. Like, no way in hell. No. Mostly because it was probably some disgusted, unhappy expression; he looked away, to the wall behind the pool, the side that didn’t end on Leonor family’s fancy garden. But it was also because he didn’t know what to do about it. He knew Firestar for four years; still, he couldn’t name anything that he knew about him. Nothing at all.

She smiled, in a way that was — hands down — the most sympathetic he had ever seen her look at someone. He felt a twisted sort of misery and pride to be the one putting that expression on her face. Leonor should do that more often — for a second it was like she was human, or anyone else in the world.

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“Do you have any siblings?” Jongdae asked, casually, two days after. He met Firestar because their vigilance routs overlapped, again; it used to happen more often than not — the main reason of his paranoia regarding Firestar’s being deliberately avoiding him.

(He hated this feeling of being overinvested. Which was weird, of course, since that was his life, non-stop, all the fucking time).

Firestar blinked, which was understandable. It wasn’t like Jongdae ever asked him anything meaningful (of course, he accepted his share of guilt. It was just that he was really resentful over the fact that Firestar wouldn’t do the same), so he had the right to act surprised and etc. Jongdae got him, he really did. Of course, being the person to reach out sucked a lot more than being the one randomly dragged into the situation, but Jongdae was a nice ruler and he was eager to do the forgive and forget dance.

“Uh, yeah. Older brother, younger sister. Do you have anyone?”

“Older brother.” Jongdae told him, long suffering just in thinking about Jongyul. “He sucks. Like, a lot. So badly. God threw him on my life on purpose, to make me pay for my sins. I can’t go to hell no more. I pay everything immediately because I have to look at his face, hear him talk his bullshit,
“being a general pain in my ass.”

“How much older?”

“Just two years but he likes to act like it was a decade.”

“Oh. My brother is four years ahead of me in life.” he laughed a little with that. Firestar made the worst jokes ever, but Jongdae found it endearing every single time. “And my sister, weirdly enough, is four years younger.”

“Your mom clearly couldn’t handle a new baby before the old one could at least go to the bathroom by themselves. Can’t say that I fault her.”

“She had a lot on her plate.” Firestar said, very neutrally, and Jongdae thought to himself Damn. Fucking bloody damn.

They stood in silence for five minutes before Jongdae decided that he couldn’t take that anymore. “What is your brother’s name, anyway?”

“It’s Minho.” Firestar answered him, sounding like he didn’t know what to make of that conversation. Jongdae felt the cool breeze of camaraderie, because he didn’t have any idea either. “What about yours?”

“The name of assholes: Jongyul.”

“My sister is called Minhee.” Firestar offered, like a branch of peace that Jongdae was way too eager into accepting.

“Oh! My cousin is called Mihee. Just a letter keeps them apart.”

“And a matter of personality.” his voice was matter-of-fact. “Since my sister has a terrible temper.”

“Like yours?”

“Worse.”

“Can it be possible?”

“Yes.”

“Mihee isn’t great either. She just turned twenty one, which means that she is going crazy on alcohol. Everyone thinks it’s normal, but we have a terrible history about shit like this on my family. I don’t understand why everyone isn’t freaking out; it wasn’t like she wasn’t drinking before. Why does she have to act like this now?”

Firestar patted him on the arm, intensely awkward. Jongdae, of course, was very grateful all the same.

“Minhee set my car on fire once.”

“By accident?”

“I wish — I’m pretty sure she did it on purpose. She was mad at me, or at least it was what she said. It wasn’t like I could afford another one, so I, like, walked to work for a year.”

“That’s cruel.”
“Yeah. I love her, though. She is the baby.”

“That’s probably why she gets away with stunts like this one. I can say that with first hand knowledge; I’m also the baby on my family.”

“What is your advice, then?”

“Next time set her on fire.”

Firestar laughed, which was unusual enough to make Jongdae weird all over. He determinedly didn’t thought about this. He wouldn’t do it even if someone offered him a million dollars.

(The night was cold, but they weren’t).

//

“It’s about a child”, said the woman, as if it explained anything at all, “it’s for her that he’s looking for.”

It was the literal first time Jongdae had ever seen Firestar’s face. It was shaped like a heart, and his cheeks got easily colored red (not pink) by the spring wind. His eyes and lips were pretty — things that Jongdae theoretically knew, but never really acknowledged. He wished he could memorize how something around his eyes made him look soft, or the subtle way his entire face moved when he smiled. At that moment, though, he wasn’t happy; he was, indeed, very concerned. So was Jongdae, as a matter of fact. Because standing right in front of them, weeping on a piece of fabric, was a designer who survived the killer’s attack.

(It wasn’t like Jongdae or Firestar or even the cops had done anything at all. She called 911 herself, but they would probably still take another forty minutes to arrive).

“What do you mean, a child?” said the face that could or couldn’t be Firestar. It was, indeed, pretty. Jongdae thought him beautiful.

“A daughter”, she muttered, lost, “or maybe a sister.”

“Ma’am—” Jongdae started, keeping a careful distance between them. On his experience, a woman who was just attacked by a strange man doesn’t want another of them too close to her. Firestar, for once, followed his clue. He looked like he had finally caught up with the fact that, when it was about abuse, Jongdae knew better than him.

(He stared at it in the face literally every day).

“I wish I knew…” she went on, sounding far away. In shock, perhaps. “Maybe a daughter, or a sister…”

He told Firestar, then, Stay with her, and went back to the streets to look for some hot tea. The poor woman was falling apart, and obviously couldn’t answer any questions. Who could blame her? She had won a fight that had taken down nine people.

“I don’t know what it is”, he told her, shyly, when he got back, a cup warming his hand. “but at least it’s hot, which would maybe provide some small piece of comfort.”

She stared at the cup, dubious. Which was what Jongdae deserved; handing her something unfamiliar while saying that it could be anything, like it was normal. In the end, though, she must’ve been too upset to care, because she held the cup and nodded gladly.
“I’m sorry”, she told them. “My name is Mary.”

“Like the queen?” Firestar asked, because of course he did.

“Like the mother of Jesus.” Mary answered, looking startled; she wore a golden cross around her neck, and there was something very Catholic about her.

“Oh.” he answered, blinking like a deer caught in front of highlights. “Of course.”

“You told something about a child…”

“Oh”, she sighed, exhausted. “He was very anxious, kept yelling at me, where’s her, where’s her. I said that I didn’t know what he was talking about; that if I knew, I would tell him. I asked who he was looking for, and he answered a child, a girl… He was yelling a lot, and my neighbor punched the wall… The one that we share. She probably thought that I was working late again. I always put on some music, and I guess some of them are really loud. The guy got spooked, I don’t know. He didn’t look like someone who would be scared away, but he got very upset with the whole stuff, though no more than me. He kept yelling, where’s her, where’s her. And I would keep telling him that I didn’t know this girl that he was looking for…”

Jongdae nodded, understanding. She was weeping a little, her right hand still grabbing the piece of fabric. It was floral, Jongdae could see under the weak light, which somehow turned the scene even more depressing. Firestar looked like he really wished he could touch Mary’s arm.

“Do you have any idea why he would think that you have this child?”

“I don’t know.” she shook her head twice, as if trying to show how much she had nothing at all to do with some kidnapping. “I don’t know why he would think that. I don’t even design clothing for children! Just adult women.”

“Did you ever sell something to someone that looked shady?”

“What do you mean, shady?” she blinked, a little offended. “I only know honest people.”

“What he’s trying to say”, Jongdae said over anything that Firestar was intending to answer. “Is that maybe you had some new customer recently. Someone you don’t really know… This person that could be anyone.”

“Well”, she answered them, sounding afraid, “There was this man.”

“Yes?”

“I had never seen him before, and he disappeared after that. He wanted some female clothing, for his wife. But the wife was so pale! And so was he. But the child, a girl, she was brown. I just thought she was adopted… I’m only remembering this now, because the daughter and the wife looked frightened, for a moment.”

“Can you remember this”, Firestar told her, soothing, “and say exactly what you just said to us, say it to the cops?”

“Yes.” she nodded, ending her tea. She looked strong, and resilient. Like someone who would only go down fighting. “I can.”

They only left her when the sirens got too loud to think, announcing the late arrival of the police. Jongdae looked back, only once, and saw Mary leaning against the window, looking at the sky.
Two weeks after that, the cops weren’t any closer to Mason than they were before Mary’s. Jongdae, at least, had more luck; they had a name (the one that Leonor never told the police about, since she hated them with the intensity of a thousand suns. Something involving her brother, Michael, an ex-girlfriend — hers? his? — and a lawyer having to get out of their bed to defend an heir — Leonor? Michael? — who should know better than cause a complaint of indecency), and they have a motive, so first things first and time to give birth to a profile.

“So”, Jongdae started, pointing at the panel they were using to build their shit. They couldn’t really complain, since their base was an abandoned warehouse — before them, the only thing living there for the last two centuries was cockroaches. “What do we have here.”

“Leila Khan was a teacher”, Firestar said, sounding like someone who you could trust on an eventual crisis situation. “She was thirty two and left behind a single cactus.”

“High school?”

“Kindergarten, actually. Her coworkers said that she was very nice.”

“She was the first one; the kid could be one of her students.”

Firestar nodded, putting a star beside Leila’s picture. She looked very alive in it, her smile blinding. “Then we have Clémèntine Gagnier. She was a fancy lawyer with rich, French parents, went to Cambridge. Twenty seven years old.”

“I have no idea.” Jongdae said, after a minute.

“Yeah, me neither. Then we have Juan Gómez, 31. He’s a wild card. Police knows shit about him, and we don’t either. Looks normal enough, stable job, no wife, no children, no pets. It’s just that he was so… Boring.”

“Doesn’t fit the profile.”

Firestar rolled his eyes. “Which is?”

“Shady or clueless people that could or could not be involved on some girl being kidnapping.” Jongdae answered him, matter-of-fact. Firestar stared at him like he had just slap his face.

“I know.”

“Yeah, I know that you know. We have a lot of people to go over. Can we please move on?”

“Fine.” Firestar said, full of wounded dignity. “Aekyung Hwang was a low level socialite. Korean dad, American mom. She was thirty four and had a son, who is a small child. Her mother was crying so much during her testimony that she had to be taken home.”

“She could know the child we’re looking for. We should check the kids who went to the son’s school and then disappeared on thin air.”

“Do you think she’s from here?”

“We can only assume, since the people Mason find guilty are being killed on our lovely city.”

Firestar sighed, and then nodded. Jongdae, suddenly, realized that the tiredness was more about the shitty situation they were dealing with and less about him. He felt like an asshole, which wasn’t
unusual.

“Hannah Sawyer, diner waitress. Forty one, with two children finishing high school.”

“Loving family?”

“More like messed up. She didn’t have her children’s custody, but sounded decent. Not someone who would stay silent if she saw a kid getting hurt.”

“Maybe favorite diner?”

“We could ask around.”

They moved on. “Paul Jones, the lawyer. He was awful, as we know. People knew him for defending scumbags.”

“A lot of enemies. Maybe some of them could use this serial killer stuff to kill him.”

“Yeah, but then we have Max Dean. Jones defended him just two months before he died; saved his ass from going to jail because of possession of child’s porn.”

“Was he guilty?”

“Fuck yeah.”

Jongdae leaned against the wall, wishing he could just disappear. “Who else?”

“Maria Hernández, the antique dealer.”

“The one with the teenage daughter?”

“Yeah.”

“Great. Just great. Who else?”

“Marcus Choi, mob associate. Very tough to knock down, but Mary did say that the killer’s MO is getting behind the victim’s back.” Firestar looked at him, something angry and upset and sad on his eyes. It disappeared, of course, just fast enough to make Jongdae wonder if it ever existed at all. “You know what this is saying.”

“Girl disappear; father or brother has a mental breakdown and starts to trace back the kid’s last months trying to figure out where she is. Finds some innocent people, doesn’t believe, kill them. Finds some nasty assholes who probably knew something, gets upset, also kill them.”

“He is tracing way too back, though. Leila stopped teaching almost a year before she was killed; was trying to change careers, be a nurse.”

“She could be in middle school already.”

“Not if she was on Aekhyung’s son’s classes. He is just seven years old.”

“We have to check this shit. I think it’s someone who just got out of jail, though. Went back to the land of the free and found out that this child he loved so much had gone missing.”

“It could push anyone over the edge…”
Jongdae sighed, exhausted with the whole thing, but knowing they had no chance of finishing the list on that same day. They had to go over the victims’ known associates, like friends and family and business partner and the fucking mob.

Firestar touched his arm, very gently, as if trying not spook some frightened cat, which was something Jongdae resented. He was, though, still addicted to Firestar’s face. And thinking that he was losing something like that all these years! He was prettier than the moon.

Jongdae, of course, would never tell him that.

“We should grab some lunch; it’s already mid afternoon.”

“I can go get it. Chinese?”

“I was thinking about Mexican, actually.”

“Okay. I’ll be right back.” he told Firestar, who smiled quietly, as if saying yeah, I know. These were softer than the ones he used to guilt people into acting like he wish they would. It was almost like, for a second, Firestar didn’t realize he was happy.

They ate in silence after that, thinking about the photos and the case. Thinking, too, about a scared girl alone in the world, and her family looking for her.

//

“Did you ever tell your family about what you can do?” Jongdae asked, randomly, during a particularly hot morning. The days were melting into what would, a month or two after that, become summer. During those lazy days between one tragedy and the next, Jongdae found himself hanging out more and more on Leonor’s pool, trying to drown the sounds on his head. She wouldn’t leave him alone, though, convinced that he should be declaiming poetry full of love to Firestar, demanding to know more about him (like, I don’t know, she would say, rolling her eyes, his fucking name).

“They always knew.” Firestar answered him, distracted. They weren’t doing anything relevant, because it was Saturday, and also very early; even the wicked need the blessing of sleep. They were just hanging out — I guess you could say that —; it was becoming a pattern since that day on the tree. They bounded over the mutual shame they made each other’s go through. “I was born like this.”

“How? Flying?”

“No,” he smiled, somehow bitter around the corners. “Different.”

“Oh? Did they handle it well?”

“She didn’t, actually. I’m the middle child of a single mother; by the time of my birth I was the youngest. My mother thought a lot about giving me up; she was worried that feed me wouldn’t be worth the trouble.”

“That’s awful. That’s bloody awful.”

“It’s in the past now,” he smiled. “Minho, who was only five, yelled a lot. He would follow her everywhere, afraid that she would take me away while he slept. After Minhee was born it became even easier to keep insisting, and my mother gave up on her plans for good.”

“Your mother sucks.”
“I guess.”

“Your mother fucking sucks.”

Firestar smiled. “Yeah, you’re right. She sucks. What about your family?”

“They don’t know, I never really told them. I tried a few times, but they didn’t get what I was saying, thought it was, like, delusional or metaphorical. I was afraid of what they would say, though, so I didn’t try telling them anything else.”

“ Wouldn’t you feel better if they knew the truth?”

“ Maybe. I don’t know. Sometimes I think my best friend knows, and that he is upset with me for not telling him for real. But I pretend like I can’t see his face and hope for the best. I guess I’m trying to convince him that I’m clueless so he’ll just accept it.”

“Isn’t it a little cruel? You know that people can’t read your mind. Also, it sounds an awful lot like lying.”

“Yeah.” Jongdae breathed. “I guess you’re right.”

“I’m always right.” Firestar answered him, sounding relaxed and casual. It was the first time ever that Jongdae saw him looking like that; he decided that it was a great look on him and should happen more often. “It’s one of my many superpowers.”

“Which are, exactly? Please state them with intensity level for future reference.”

He laughed. “Yeah, you wish.”

It’s nice, isn’t it? Jongdae would thought to himself, then, This dreamy idea that he likes me, maybe as much as I like him?

//

Jongdae stares at the pieces of bread floating like tiny islands on his soup, mostly to avoid looking at Yixing, who is at the other side of the table eating mac-and-cheese in a very aggressive way. He knows what he has to do. Firestar is fucking right, God curse him, and Jongdae has been lying and cheating and being cruel to his best friend, who didn’t ever do anything to deserve such poor treatment.

(It’s just that it’s so scaring put yourself out there).

“I have something to say.” he started, wishing that Yixing wouldn’t hear him. There wasn’t a god in heaven, unfortunately, because he raised his eyes as if saying please, do go on. If it was sarcastic, though, or just casual — that was something Jongdae couldn’t begin to imagine, since eyes weren’t as expressive as people would usually assume. “Something about my day. It’s kind of important.”

“It’s Sunday.” Yixing answered him, dubiously. “What did you do that’s so meaningful on a Sunday?”

“I’ve been seeing someone.”

“Romantically?”

“Not quite.” he cut himself off, trying very hard to think of some way in the world that would make his lies by omission look better. There wasn’t, of course. It was time to Jongdae to own up to his
poor, coward decisions. “He is, uh. Someone that I know for a few years.”

“Years?”

“In my defense, we used to hate each other a whole lot! There was no reason at all to mention him.”

“You’re doing now. Why?”

“It’s important shit, Yixing, I swear to God with my hand over the Bible.”

“You can go to hell for that.”

“I know. That’s why I’m saying it.”

“You want to go to hell?”

“What? No! I want you to believe that I’m telling the truth here.”

“You didn’t tell me anything. Just that you’re seeing some guy, and it isn’t really romantic. Are you sleeping with him?”

“Again, it isn’t like that. And you’re right, I didn’t say anything… The story is kind of long.”

“You know what they say, start on the—“

“Beginning. Yes. It’s just how do you know when it started?”

“You have to look on your heart —“

Yixing had to stop, because Jongdae pushed him really hard on the arm. He did it, but he still felt very uncomfortable, since it was painfully obvious that Yixing was trying to keep stuff very light, very cool, which usually meant that he was angry. He knew that Jongdae would run away at the smallest signal of conflict; the fact that he was going such lengths to keep it for happening said a lot about how he felt about the situation as a whole.

“What do you think about lies by omission…? Are they worse than the normal ones?”

“I guess. Usually, when you’re omitting then you know that what you’re doing is wrong, or at least frowned upon. You don’t want to face it, but you also don’t want the emotional charge of actively lying, so you just don’t say anything even when you know that you should… So I guess it’s isn’t the worst way to go, but it’s surely coward as hell.”

Jongdae sighed, thinking Well, that’s fair. “I’ve been lying to you. To everyone, actually; my mom, my brother, Baekhyun and Chanyeol, everyone. My aunts and my uncles, my cousins. I didn’t say anything about it even when I knew I should, just like you said. I acted cowardly. At the time it didn’t look like there had any other way.”

“What are you saying to me, exactly?” Yixing asked, carefully neutral and impossible to read. Jongdae wished, not for the first time, that people in his life always came with a manual of instructions.

“Do you remember when we went to the forest for me to show you my moves and you couldn’t go all the way because you were grounded and whatever?”

“It’s sounding an awful lot like a sexual innuendo—“
“It isn’t! It’s important!”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Do go on. It isn’t like I’m waiting for you to fucking say something since we were seventeen.”

“I know. I will say it now. That day I was pissed off with you, so I continued anyway—“

“You told me that you went home—“

“I lied. Can you let me continue?”

“Yes.” he said, softly. Scared of the truth he wished so much for.

“I kept going, and then I ended up there. The old factory, full of lights yellow and red, and only one very small that was green. I went, of course, to this solitary piece of thing, close to a weird container… I was young and stupid, so I touched it.”

“What are you saying—“

“I woke up on the next day feeling like hell warmed over. Terrible, and it lasted for two weeks. I told you it was the flu; I told everyone that, and no one had any reason to doubt my story. Not even you. And that’s, Yixing, was when my lying really started.”

“What happened to you?”

“Stuff about me, it just changed — I was very fast, very suddenly. Like sound or whatever. I used it mostly to go out and buy some Cheetos without my mom knowing, and then I would run to burn the calories of those shit. It was small things, because I was really bitter about not being human anymore. Because that was the core of the question, right? What happened to me — it was irreversible. Forever, Yixing. Forever. Stuff changed a year later, after High School’s graduation. I was eighteen years old and realized that I had had enough of self-pity.”

“So you did what? Became a vigilante, started living by your own rules?”

“Kind of,” Jongdae told him. “I joined the League shortly after.”

“Which one?”

“What?”

“Which one of them are you?”

“Uh.” Jongdae was, for the first time, very startled. “Mach.”

“Oh.” Yixing breathed, dream-like. “You were always my favorite.”

“What.”

“I always thought Mach was the best.”

“You didn’t, you’re lying.”

“I did!”

“No you didn’t, why are you such an asshole.”
“You can believe whatever you want.” Yixing told him, wounded. “I know the truth in my heart, though, and that’s what matters.”

“You suck. You suck so badly.”

“Yeah, whatever. Will you tell your mom, dad, brother?”

“I can’t do it right now. I can’t handle the emotional pressure so shortly after dealing with your sorry ass.”

“You’re stalling.”

“Yeah, maybe. Still won’t do it, though.”

Yixing sighed, like Jongdae wasn’t a particularly bright kid, something he resented very much. He stayed silent, though, so it was all forgiven until he opened his mouth again. “Who is the guy you were telling me about?”

“What?”

“The guy. The non-romantic situation.”

“No one, it was just a conversation-start.”

“It doesn’t make any sense. Are you chickening out?”

“Is this even a world?”

“Stop being such a dick. Tell me who he is.”

“No, I won’t!”

“I never hated someone the way I hate you.” Yixing concluded, after it became clear that Jongdae wasn’t planning on telling anything else.

“Later, okay? I promise. I can’t handle it right now.”

“Fine, whatever. Hope he doesn’t break your heart.”

“Yeah, no shit. You and me both.”

//

Eliza Smith died on a cold night. The autopsy said that she must have been there, lying dead, for at least seven hours before someone called the cops. She was twenty two years old, and used to be pretty; a fortune teller who helped (for the right price) desperate people seeking the comfort of visions of future. Her neighbors knew her name, but everyone else just thought of her as Ma’am.

“Maybe she was legit.” Firestar said, very dubiously, during the afternoon of the next day. “Or maybe she wasn’t, and a pissed off former client went after her to get some kind of revenge.”

“What could she possibly do that would deserve a bullet in the head? Smith was a local seer. The biggest shit she was involved with was traffic of puppies.” She had, weirdly enough, eight dogs and a houseplant; all of them ended up going to the custody of Eliza’s brokenhearted mom (whose name was Jane), who did an oath on her daughter grave to look after the pets she loved so much.
She was so normal, Jongdae thought at the time, who could possible kill someone like that?

“I asked around,” he started, “and people saw her with a girl, one that they said looked Indian — which, because she wasn’t white, could mean any ethnic background at all. There was a rumor going around that she had an illegitimate daughter, but it stopped after the girl went away; the neighborhood patted itself on the back and said like well, I guess she wasn’t old enough to be that kid’s mom anyway.”

“How suburban of them.”

“What is happening after all? I can’t figure out. A lot of the victims were good, decent people; Eliza Smith could be moral-less about taking money of a sad person looking for something bigger to believe in, but everyone have to eat. If there was a child on her home then the money issue would be even more pressing… Everything said that looking after the girl. Why did she die? Why would he kill her?”

“I don’t know. Why murder the teacher, or the waitress, or some low level socialite whose son attended a private kindergarten? Maybe he’s getting desperate.”

Jongdae hummed. “I think it was Marcus who kidnapped her, and Juan was some kind of middle-man. It’s the only thing that makes sense; Mason went after the lawyer just after Leila; everyone knew that Clemèntine was a dealer under the books for rich parents who had lost a child — the ones that wanted another who looked like the first. Grieving, sad relatives, wishing to have back what they had once. And maybe the girl was just ease to get, ease to give away, with all her family dead or behind bars.”

“Maybe Hannah was trying to help. And Eliza, now. It didn’t do them any good, because he wouldn’t listen what they were saying; it was like that time, when he couldn’t bring himself to believe Mary.”

“Hannah wouldn’t hurt a child for all money in the world. She had already lost her own, and was battling for the custody of them since she was thirty two. It was almost ten years of trying.”

“And maybe people are right and Eliza did have a daughter she gave up to adoption.” Firestar murmured, thinking it over. “Perhaps she wanted the child back badly enough to go after Clemèntine.”

“Do you think that Eliza’s baby got lost in the system? That Clemèntine got her that way?”

“I don’t know. Someone did, though, and ended up killed for it.”

Firestar got silent, listening to the emergencial line they were kind of using to keep updated on this case. It was sad because nobody knew anything relevant, and the murders kept happening like nothing ever changed.

Jongdae just wished that things were easier.

(He wished they were better).

//

When Fantine — 19 years old prostitute — was found dead on the floor of her apartment, Jongdae decided that he had enough. She was just a kid, much younger than him; her life was already hard, and then she showed up with unseeing eyes staring at the ceiling? It was something that really pissed Jongdae off about Mason — that he never bothered to close the eyes of the people he killed. The
logistic told Yixing (who Jongdae was asking shamelessly for information, which was easier to get since his best friend knew what he intended to do with the intel) that Mason used gloves. That he wasn’t fucking dumb.

So he could just as well give the smallest comfort and dignity to someone who would have lived so much more if he wasn’t born at all.

“It was true about her too,” Firestar said, floating just a little bit above the ground, like the show off he truly was. He couldn’t help himself, no matter how upsetting was the situation; Jongdae wondered if maybe that was Firestar twisted way of coping with shit. “She had a child — a son — six months ago, gave him up to adoption because she couldn’t raise him properly and the father was a piece of shit, someone named Kevin or Kyle. Clémence’s former personal assistant confirmed that she saw Fantine two weeks before Clémence was found dead. A guy that lives at the end of the street mentioned a woman coming and going recently, someone black-haired who liked to wear heavy earrings.”

“Eliza?”

“It’s possible.”

Jongdae rested his head against his hand, trying very hard to make his brain stop thinking — hoping, maybe, that the sea-like sounds of pressing his ears would drown the ugly thoughts. “Why would Mason do that? These women were looking for their children, just like him. Did he believe them to do anything worse than trying their best to help?”

“They couldn’t turn their back,” Firestar murmured, quiet and distant like a tired god. Or like a madman — Jongdae still didn’t know which category Firestar fell into. “They saw a girl suffering, and couldn’t turn their back. But when did they meet her?”

“I think that Hannah could be the first one. Was she friends with Eliza, or maybe Fantine?”

“There was a woman,” Firestar told him. “Someone who used to pick Hannah’s children at school when she couldn’t. They said the stranger liked to wear a lot of earrings, and necklaces, too.”

“Did they never have her name?”

“She said it was Lana, but everyone knew it was fake.”

“If Hannah started hiding the girl, she would probably hand her over to someone she could trust; Clémence or anyone else inevitably showed up looking for her.”

“The woman in earrings.”


“And then, when it wasn’t safe anymore, Fantine. But where is the child now? Who is the next on their list?”

“I think”, Jongdae told him, “that the true question would be what this new person did, now that they surely know why everyone else was killed for?”

They fell into bed the same way they did to each other’s life: messy and unsure, like they couldn’t be certain if it was the right call but were going to make it anyway. They kissed pressed against the wall
of the dusty warehouse they were calling home for those last few months — being there, almost uncomfortably, every moment but the ones when they would disappear into their ordinary lives.

Jongdae thought, when he pressed his lips against Firestar’s throat, *Oh. So there it is, this weird feeling. I was looking for it everywhere...*

“Could you,” Firestar started, breathless, “get these clothes off?”

It was a bad idea. A terrible, terrible one. Even so, he ended up saying a soft *Yes*, unimpressed with himself and his ability to resist temptation. He was raised Catholic, and God was probably ashamed of his absolute lack of resistance to what would undeniably ending up to be a shitshow.

He got out of everything but his leather bracelets. He never thought about showing his wrists to anyone, and he sure as hell wasn’t going to do that to someone who he was about to have sex with. Firestar nodded, understanding, and went for his own shirt, his chest showing a little bit more after every button. Jongdae thought that if that didn’t kill him then nothing else could. It was close, maybe, to small heart attacks; which was terrifying all in itself, since he didn’t know that he wanted something — anything — so badly.

“I like this about you,” Jongdae breathed against Firestar’s neck, this space where he realized very fast to be probably his favorite place in the entire fucking world. He knew that he could be making the undressing easier if he could just keep his hand to himself, but it was just so *difficult*. Jongdae hated Firestar a whole lot more during all these small times he was making him happy.

“What?”

*Everything,* he could have said, and it wouldn’t be a lie — wouldn’t be one at all. “Your face.”

“Oh,” Firestar murmured to himself, like on a dream. “I like your face too.”

After that, Firestar was naked, and Jongdae was busy. He touched his arms, softly, like someone would do to a fancy statue; he couldn’t ever let go of the god-like image he made of Firestar, even if he knew better than to think him perfect after all those years. *You’re so flawed,* he thought, *and still I like you more than life.*

“Are you sure?” Jongdae asked him, suddenly dubious about everything, including but not exclusively the hard floor were they would possibly end up and the lips sucking at his collarbone. *Wasn’t stuff going way too fast? Like, someone — Leonor, Yixing, maybe Junmyeon — could possibly say that he had it coming, but just because he knew that he wanted to a lot of stuff to Firestar’s face and body, a lot of them not bad at all, didn’t mean that Firestar wanted the same. (Maybe the ugly stuff. They *did* fight a lot during the first three years of their relationship, and Jongdae had more than one opportunity to find out if he had super-strength as much as he liked to fly — the answer was: kind of).*

“About what?” Firestar blinked, moving his head to the side like a puppy, inevitably making Jongdae smile.

“Us.”

He waited for something like *Oh, there is no us or even We’re just friends, right?; on his state of fever, maybe he hoped for I always loved you, let’s exchange names and adopt a cat together to make company to Alisa and whatever pet I have.* It wasn’t, though; just the weird kind of silence that made Firestar stand still. Like he was thinking *why* and *what* and *wait* and *maybe,* everything at the same time.
Jongdae thought, that exact second, *Fuck it. I want to have it, so I will have it, and worry about it tomorrow.*

“I—“

“Forget it.” Jongdae looked up; the way he knew made him look pretty and also casual, which was exactly what he was going for. “Can we go back to kissing now? I’m naked, you’re naked, and it sounds like a waste.”

“Yes.” Firestar answered him, fervently; it could be for the obvious out, of course, but it could, just as well, be Jongdae’s mouth — that was already back on his body, going lower and then lower until the only thing he could hear was Firestar’s soft *oh.*

When Jongdae woke up the next day, sore mostly because of the stupid hard floor where he slept for at least four hours, and a little cold about being naked at the beginning of morning, he was the only one in the warehouse. He didn’t need to check, because Firestar wasn’t particularly quiet, or a morning person — and also because he didn’t need to check for something that he already knew was bound to happen.

He got dressed, as fast as he could (which was seconds, an useful ability that always got him out of walks of shame), and went after his phone, which was carelessly tempting fate by being at the very end of a very old table. There was four texts, one *Where are you?* from Yixing, two variations of drunk speech from Leonor, and a single small notification of an unknown number. Jongdae pressed it, because he always ended up annoyed with the constant reminder of his avoidance tactics, and immediately wished that he had been stronger.

*Sorry,* said the evil message, *I had some errands to run. See you next week? M.*

Who the hell was M, that was what Jongdae wanted to know. It was, of course, Firestar, the only person clueless or careless enough with anyone else’s feelings to send a text like that. He didn’t sign as F, though, which meant that he probably forgot where they stood for at least a moment. It was enough to keep Jongdae wondering. He thought about that small letter all the way back home. M as in Michael? Mansoo? Minkyu? Matthew?

(Or, maybe,

just maybe,

like Minseok?)

Lily, Clemètine’s sister-in-law, patted her face with a napkin, trying very hard to avoid disturbing her make-up. She was the oldest and only sister before a line of five boys, and she learned very early, very fast how to be tough. Lily was, of course, terribly shaken — or so said the lawyer that was there, even if she didn’t know that Jongdae was being more than an overinvested third part —; thing was, Jongdae believed him. It must’ve been very upsetting, finding the woman you called family lying on the ground and all that.

It was just that it looked like she was more worried about her heart-broken brother, who, of course, lost his beloved wife, and not really grieving about the woman she watched being put on the ground two months before. Jongdae had visited Clemètine grave, wanting to know if she was well liked by
her relatives. It was a Protestant way to rest, sober and proper. It was also very usual: may rest in peace etc. It wasn’t a bad sign, because the family could just be very traditional. It wasn’t, though, a good one either.

It didn’t have any weed around, but that could be because it was recent. They didn’t have the time to grow out yet.

“Miss Gagnier, I’m very sorry asking,” he started, waiting a little after her name — but she didn’t say anything. Lily was off the table, then. “but do you know about any child that Clemèntine could be… helping, just before she died?”

“Oh, there was lot of them.” she answered, something like disgust around the corner of her eyes, hidden behind the make-up and the pristine arrogant of the rich. “Clemèntine was one of those charitable people, you know. Very involved with orphanages and the like. My brother thought her a saint.”

“Was she?”

“I wouldn’t know. People talked about her, saying that she could be running some kind of shady business, but I don’t know if it was true. Even if it was, I couldn’t look into it now.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” she told him, pointedly, waving off her lawyer as if he was an annoying fly. “you can’t say anything bad about the dead. They can come back, you know, and haunt you.”

“Did you like your sister in law at all, Miss?”

Lily sighed, leaning her head against her open hand. She was pretty, if somehow distant looking. A siren more than a friend; a wonderful, caring sister, he could see, but a terrible person to deal with on a daily basis. Jongdae still wished they had more time. She was so interesting, busy with her fancy life; handling family shit like it was nothing, burying a woman who she hated with all the proper rites of a loved one. He thought, then, that Clemèntine’s grave would be always cared for. Every single day, even after Lily were dead, no matter what truth surfaced, no matter what terrible press John was subjected to.

“Is it Lily like the flower?” Jongdae asked, after a while. She just stood there, patient, like she had all the time in the world — which, he supposed, was true enough to her.

“No, like the princess.”

“And one?”

She smiled. “Princess Lily, of course.”

“Do you know about some child, Miss Gagnier?”

“Oh…” she muttered. “I know a lot about children. Which one, though?”

“Miss”, her lawyer interrupted, “you shouldn’t keep talking.”

“Is it your professional advice?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’re terribly dull, Mister Jones.” she answered him, unsympathetically. “Since this man is as
much a cop as I am a lion.”

“Miss.” Jongdae called her, lowing his voice to avoid the prying ears of the elegant people dining around them, “I’m looking for a girl.”

“Is she your daughter?”

He hesitated. “No. Of a friend’s — he is looking for her, desperately.”

“Does he want her back? Didn’t he abandon her? Clemèntine only dealt with children who were left behind.”

“Her mother was dead,” Jongdae guessed, with the best of his abilities. “And her father was in jail.”

“Jail? I hardly think he’s the best option for the child. Maybe Clemèntine should’ve kept her, after all.”

“Kept her? Do you know the child I’m looking for?”

The lawyer, Mister Jones, tried to grab her arm, but she avoided him with a pointed look. It was clear, to Jongdae, that she was an honest, good woman — decent enough, whose only sin was having a brother who married a monster into her family. She didn’t wish for John to take the fall, but what could she possibly do? Who knew who would be next?

(She was the oldest, only girl before five boys. She learned very early how to be tough, and how to make the cruel decisions herself — so nobody else would ever have to deal with the consequences of deciding something like that).

“There was this girl, a little older than the rest.” she whispered, playing with her food, incapable of eating anything. “Maybe six? Eight? I saw her only twice.”

“Do you remember her name?”

“Yes, I know, although I wouldn’t say for sure it wasn’t a fake one. Anyway, she — the girl — told me to call her Faiza.”

“You talked to her?”

“Just for a moment; she disappeared the next day. I tried to ask Clemèntine about that, the strange girl living in her house, but she just said, That was a charity case. She’s back with her family now, and I didn’t exactly believe her…”

“But you didn’t want to get yourself involved.”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Did your brother know?”

“To some extent. Like I said, he told her a saint. He could just as well been believing that she was fostering temporarily a lot of strays, making a difference in this cruel world.”

“Foster care doesn’t work like that.”

“I know. So do our brothers. But John was always a bit slow to the truth, and how could any of us tell him her wife had been lying to him, cheating on him, probably working with criminals and using their home as base of operations?”
“It would surely be a shock.”

“Yes, and a terrible one. I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I just thought Clemèntine would be caught eventually.”

“And what about the children she trafficked?”

“They were better off,” she answered, almost coldly. “with rich families who wanted them, and not with their parents who gave them up.”

“The couples who looked for your sister-in-law didn’t want those children. They wanted their old one back. Was it fair?”

“Wasn’t it better than to live in poverty? I’m not saying that Clemèntine was doing God’s work, or even that she was good. She only cared about money and about herself — lucky us she didn’t have any children of her own, can you imagine? Anyway, what I’m telling you is: I touched the lies I would have to tell to keep her mess out of my brother’s sight, and I didn’t found them lacking. So I did it, and would do again.”

“You would be an accomplice.”

“I would be whatever it took to keep my family safe.”

“Including Clemèntine?”

“Yes, unfortunately. Including her.”

“Would you open the door and tell Faiza to run?”

“What would that accomplish?”

“Miss Gagnier. Lily. Please, tell me if you would do that.”

She looked at him, intensely, and sighed. Her lawyer had already left; she had threatened to fire him between the first and second glass of wine. Jongdae didn’t know why Lily had brought him there to begin with; maybe she thought it was a trap. “The girl was thin and scared. I didn’t know what to do, you have to believe me. I opened the door and went up the stairs, to the bathroom where my sister-in-law was taking a bath, and locked her in there. Two hours after that, she asked me what was that for. I told her that it was because she had let my dog escape the day before.”

“And where did Faiza go?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where did it happen?”

“At my brother’s house. She couldn’t have gone far on foot, but she looked like a smart girl — a bus should be easy enough to catch.”

“Do you regret it? Letting her go?”

“I didn’t at the time, when it was only that poor teacher, and then Clemèntine,” she told him, as if it was a terrible secret she was glad to be rid of. “but now I wish the girl had disappeared into the mist, wherever she was before. So many people died since then, all of it for one single mistake…”
He saw Firestar again only half an hour after he left the fancy restaurant where Lily and him had that awful dinner. He couldn’t tell if the food was any good; he could bet, though, that it was lovely, if only because of the price Lily paid for it. (Jongdae couldn’t afford his water, nevertheless anything else).

“Hannah lived alone.” Firestar said from behind him, like a fucking creep. Jongdae rolled his eyes, as was usual with them. He was kind of glad that Firestar was so consistently clueless; he couldn’t make a situation more awkward than the usual if he tried. “And she was, maybe, the waitress on the girl’s favorite diner.”

“Her father was in jail and her mother probably dead. Didn’t she have any other relatives left?”

“Didn’t that woman just said that Clemèntine only went after children who were abandoned, alone, and without no one to look out for or miss them at all?”

“Were you listening? Nothing weird about that.”

“It was important information.” Firestar answered him, wounded.

“Whatever.” Jongdae answered him, long-suffering. “It wasn’t like you were jealous of my fancy date or anything.”

Firestar paused, blinking surprised. He wasn’t wearing a mask, or a cape; actually, he was casual, with a jeans and a white t-shirt who could be transparent under another light. His face was very expressive and, as always, Jongdae was glad that he could see it. “No, I wasn’t.”

“What! You totally were. Tell me, it was because of the restaurant was impressive or because Miss Gagnier is like the evil goddess of Earth?”

“Neither!” he answered, truthfully, if a little spooked.

“Then what?”

“Nothing, I told you. I was just worried about Clemèntine’s sister-in-law, because she could be evil.”

“Lily Gagnier? She’s a puppy, even if a morally-dubious one.”

“How could I possibly know.”

“Well, listening to the conversation, apparently.”

“Wasn’t it the whole reason of this thing we started now?”

“What, your creepy ways? I could go on and on forever about it—“

Firestar, of course, kissed him to shut him up. There, in that roof, like a twisted romantic sense. Jongdae kissed him back, because he was just human, and the flesh was weak, but behind that he thought, just before letting everything go, I can’t let this become a pattern. I can’t at all.

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“So,” Jongdae muttered, “what’s your name anyway? Is it Matthew? Or are your parents more traditional, like maybe Mansoo? Minkyu? Is something like that, right, because your sister is Minhee, and your brother Minho…’
“My mom is Ji-yeon. I like it, because my aunts’ are Jeon-ja and Jung-ah, and my grandmother was Ji-nah.”

“So, I was right. Traditional family.”

“Are yours crazy about names too?”

“Yeah. My mom is Ye-eun and her sister’s Ye-jin. My father is Jong-seok and his sister’s Ji-ae. But forget it,” he shook his head, as if saying out loud how determinate he was to get to the bottom of the question, “what is your name anyway?”

“It isn’t fair,” Firestar told him, and smiled. They were lying on a proper bed that time, on some dark apartment that could or could not be Firestar’s. “You know the first letter of mine, and I don’t know anything about yours.”

“Oh, is it like this? Fine, I’ll give you a letter. It’s a J.”


Jongdae laughed, shaking his head. “My mother would die!”

“You said your brother is Jongyul. So Jong-hyun? Jong-hoon? Jong-seok? Maybe Jin-woo, if your parents were tired of Jong-whatever?”

“No, no, no, absolutely not. You suck at this game.”

“Well”, Firestar said to him, kissing his shoulder. “you are terribly bad too.”

“Will you really lose the innuendo? I said suck, and we’re naked on a bed.”

He grinned. “I didn’t know I just had sex with a fifteen years old. I will turn myself in to the police.”

“They wouldn’t want you.”

“Why not?”

“Too handsome. Will cause a riot on the cells.”

“I don’t think a police station have cells… Only detention centers.”

“You’ll cause it anyway. It’s all about your face.”

“Do you like my face?”

“I like everything about you,” Jongdae whispered against Firestar’s chest, so low that he wouldn’t ever hear it. “everything.” Then, as the show must go on, he smiled and looked up. “I guess it’s nice enough to stare at.”

“You don’t have to see it if you don’t want to…”

“Oh, don’t be silly”, Jongdae muttered, his lips pressing the softer-than-expected thigh in front of him. He loved Firestar’s smell — it was like lavender and sweat, which sounded disgusting, but really wasn’t. “Why wouldn’t I look at you, when it’s so easy to do so while I’m down here…?”

“I hate you,” Firestar moaned around the vowels, his consonants muted, like he couldn’t bring himself to think more than that. “Just keep doing it.”
Jongdae smiled, going down just a bit more. He liked doing that, actually — sucking dicks.

(He kind of liked it a lot).

He would, of course, miss that when everything inevitably went to hell. It was a sad fact of life, and since Jongdae knew that, he let himself enjoy it while it lasted — even if, weirdly enough, it were starting to look like Firestar wasn’t going anywhere at all.

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“Is it a relationship,” Jongdae started, pushing his food around on his plate, staring idly at the wall. Leonor, who was reading, raised her head like a confused giraffe. “If everything you do is fight and have sex, without talking about any of it? Like, never?”

“What in all hell are you talking about?” she demanded, waving threatening a pencil at Jongdae’s general direction. She was without her contacts, and couldn’t see shit. “Are you messing with casual sex? You would be terrible at it! Too anxious, your heart would end up broken. Please don’t do that.”

“Geez, Nora. Thank you so much for the vote of confidence.”

“First: don’t call me that, I’m not a child. Second: is it about Firestar or what the fuck is his name anyway?”

“I told you wanted me to talk to him.”

“Yeah, talking being the key word. I wasn’t saying to you to fall in bed with the man! Aren’t you worried that you’re maybe just a little more invested on this than he is?”

“Uh, yeah? That’s why I’m asking you? Is this a relationship, or what? Just fucking around, quite literally?”

“I don’t want to know, you’re like a brother to me, like bloody Michael, who is a beloved asshole. Can’t you talk to him about it? Not me?”

He laughed a little before realizing she was serious. “What? No! What would I say, uh? I’m sorry, handsome man whose name I still don’t really know—“

“Maybe without the first part—“

“—and I don’t want to look like I’m overanalyzing this, because I’m, like, a cool and mature adult, a functional human being, the image that continously I forced you to believe over the last few years —“

“—aren’t you really going to say that, right?”

“No, I won’t! I’m just showing you that I can’t do this.”

“What are you so scared of?”


“Is it still about the please don’t see me as a kid bullshit…?”

“He *obviously* doesn’t see me as a child.”
Leonor nodded, projecting waves of so now what? “Can’t you just talk to him?”

“I won’t talk to him.”

“Can you at least try?”

“No.”

“Please don’t be a dick. Mike is already a dick.”

“Why does Michael have all the privileges while I have none?”

“You got here too late. He already did all the shit someone can possibly do.”

“I fucking hate Michael.”

“I know, right? All of us.”

“He is such an asshole.”

“Yeah, he’s the worst.”

“Maybe he’s chilling at the pool, though.” Jongdae said out loud, thinking hard about Leonor’s brother pretty face. (And body).

“You’re so disgusting. This is, like, incest.”

“Just for you! Michael and me, we are like bros. Not brothers, just bros. Dudes.”

“You’re making it look sad and straight.”

Jongdae sighed, and Leonor patted him on the shoulder. “I’m very unhappy and that’s true, but I’m also very gay.”

“You’ll get through this.”

“I guess.”

“Should we go, then? I look amazing on swimwear.”

“You, my dear”, he told her, like a true gentleman. “look good on everything.”

“Yes,” she answered, gracefully, “I know.”

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The last one to die was Kevin Sawyer, drug dealer and Fantine’s ex boyfriend, suspected to be the father of the child she had to give up. Jongdae stood there watching, watching, watching while the police went about taking pictures, asking for witnesses, looking for help. For answers, just like Jongdae.

Anything at all would be nice, at that point in time. He had let go of his principles; he was taking the smallest lead, someone saying that they maybe saw a man that could or not be named something starting with an M. It wasn’t enough, of course; by the time he got there, Mason was long gone, and Kevin was already dead.

At least, Jongdae thought, Kevin was not only a known associate of Clemèntine, but also a terrible
person as a rule. If he went around with a child, after everything he did to Fantine, people would surely be talking about it. Especially if they were — and they must have been — aware of what Kevin was doing at the side.

The cops thought about that, too, even if they didn’t knew exactly who they were looking for. Jongdae tried to convince Firestar that they should speak out, let the police handle the situation, but Firestar wouldn’t listen. He never did. Even so, Jongade knew that it would be such a big risk, to lose whatever it was that he had with Firestar since the beginning; and it wasn’t like they couldn’t do a way better job than they friends wearing blue.

(Even, a mean small voice whispered at his ear, if between them is Yixing? How far are you willing to go, for this relationship you can’t even put a name on…?)

“Faiza was with him,” the devil said from behind Jongdae’s back, without bothering to announce himself. All the sex had made Firestar lazy and pliant, but also rude as all hell. Suddenly creeping on Jongdae became a big hobby. “I talked to this woman who used to live with Fantine, and went away after Kevin became a fix feature on their lives. She left because he was aggressive, and violent, and a convict rapist. She also tried to get Fantine, who was pregnant of ten weeks at the time, to go with her, but she wouldn’t. Her best guess was that Fantine thought that they could be a family; I can’t understand why.”

Jongdae rolled his eyes. “Really? You can’t grasp the idea that a pregnant woman trapped on an abusive relationship with a rapist who would later force her hand into giving her son away, you can’t grasp that she maybe didn’t know how to leave? Fantine was, as I’m sure you recall, only nineteen years old.”

Firestar just nodded, since there was nothing that could be said to that. Jongdae was impressed with how much less of a dick Firestar ended up to be, compared to the first turbulent year of their working relationship; he liked to think that maybe it was because of him, a little. That he helped make Firestar better, and not worse. “The woman, Cindy, she said that a girl was staying with Fantine, and that she thought it was about the son she lost to the system. She also knew that the custody, kind of, ended up with her because of a friend — a woman with long earrings who knew how to read people’s luck — couldn’t stay with her. Cindy didn’t know if it was temporary or if Fantine wished that the child could stay for good. Either way, the girl was cared for, and the name was Faiza. One day, though, Kevin showed up dragging Fantine by the arm, yelling something about money. After that the girl was gone, and Fantine was dead the next day.”

“Kevin was just a dealer, a very small fish. Who is the family to which Clemètine promised a daughter…?”

“I don’t know. They must be rich, though, and desperate, since this whole story didn’t seen to have scared them away.”

“Their child must’ve died recently. Maybe they were trying to keep the mother from suffering, maybe even dying?”

“Out of sadness?”

“Or maybe denial.”

“I’ll look for a profile,” Firestar told him, and Jongdae nodded, gratefully. “Someone very wealthy who lost a small girl recently and is struggling terribly with the news.”

“Maybe we’ll have luck and it’s going to be only one, or two. Three, max.”
Firestar smiled, fondly. “We should get out of here before the police spot us.”

“Kind of hard not to,” Jongade told him, helpfully. “with your cape being so red and ugly.”

“I’m not discussing it with someone wearing leggings.” Firestar said, an echo of their first argument, so many years before. It was just funny how people changed, and the meaning behind the words became something unthinkable — Jongdae couldn’t say that this sentence was cruel, but it used to be, once.

“Anyway, you’re right—”

“I’m what, now?”

“Right. You’re right. Can we go know? There’s so many things we have to do.”

*Like*, Jongdae could’ve said, *sex. Or, if we were feeling really wild, have a rational, grown up conversation about our feelings and expectations.*

(Whatever happened first).

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In the end, they chose the oldest chapter in the book: spreading rumors of a little girl named Faiza, who was running away from some adoptive family. They also tell that she was abandoned a few years back, that her mother may or may not be dead, that her father was locked away and her new mom was possibly evil. It wasn’t impossible, with the foster system being what it was; it would become even probable to anyone who knew the truth about this new “arrangement”.

Jongdae didn’t know where she was. He wished he knew, if only to make the whole thing less like a set up to someone who was desperate enough to kill and more like *hey. This is justice. This is your daughter or sister or whatever, safe and sound. Hopefully she will be happy. Probably you’ll rot in jail for the amazing number of twelve people that you killed. Either way, this is what law looks like — as you can see, it’s not about revenge.*

Firestar stood by his side, as had become less unusual during the last year, and almost commonplace after all the sex they were doing around the city. He didn’t really want to talk about that; Leonor had scarred him for life, and Yixing looked worried about Jongdae’s “feelings” and “tendency to low self-esteem” every time Firestar’s name — well, not his name. (This one would possibly be Mike, Matthew, Mikyu, Minseok). His pen name? Is that a thing? Or maybe he should just say hero identity — was mentioned.

Jongdae wanted to convince people that it wasn’t such a big deal, because why would it be? It’d been *years* since they first met, and Jongdae had, like, zero expectations. It wasn’t easy, though, mostly because his face would do that *thing*; the one that happened when he was lying to himself and fucking knew it.

He wasn’t sneaky. Everyone could read him like a book.

(Did Firestar know that Jongdae wished he could be *the one* — no matter how stupid it sounds? That he knew, or thought that he knew, that they could be the perfect movie couple, this silly soulmate propaganda that Jongdae never bought before meeting him?)

It was, of course, terribly dumb.

Especially considering that the love of his life was destined to hate him forever — he shouldn’t wish
for things that could come back and bit him in the ass).

Mason showed up, as they knew he would, looking for the person that he thought was spreading the rumors. He looked messed up, like someone who didn’t sleep anymore — or eat, for that matter. Even so, there was something very murderous about him, maybe involving the menacing black gloves and the heavy gun he was waving around like a newbie.

“What are you doing here, Mason?” Firestar asked, floating around with his red cape, something that Jongdae would be the first one to admit looked a little dumb, but helped with the God-like persona. Firestar was there, disappointed like he was invulnerable.

He wasn’t. Jongdae hadn’t agreed with that part of the plan.

“Who are you?” Mason asked, looking a little shell-shocked. Of course, there they had the perfect example of someone who had never seen a weird super-person using a costume before in their entire life. After that first moment of assimilation, they could be amazed, judgmental or ready to kick them in the face.

(Which category Mason fell into was anyone’s guess).

“I’m Firestar,” he said, very impressed with himself. Jongdae rolled his eyes, fondly. “And I know that you’re Mason, the man that’s been terrorizing the city. Is Faiza your sister?”

“She’s my daughter.” he answered, the knuckles of his fingers’ almost white around the gun. “Do you know where she is?”

“I know where she was.” Jongdae muttered, leaning against the wall directly in front of Mason. He could see the thoughts what and how and when as plain as day; it was always around him, people asking themselves these same little questions, all of them trying to answer the truest, bigger one Is he dangerous? “And I know what you did.”

“I was doing what needed to be done—“

“You killed the people who tried to make her free.”

“No!” Mason said, waving his hand at Firestar and then at Jongdae, confused of who he would be better off killing first. Jongdae felt a little honored; it was the first time someone thought him as intimidating as the flying painting of God. “They were lying.”

“Why would they lie? Their only sin was caring enough to reach out to the child you left behind.”

“She was supposed to be with her mother! I went to prison, yes, but she was supposed to be safe! When did Samaya die? Why didn’t anyone even tell me that they were taking my baby away…?”

Samaya, Firestar muttered. It was a beautiful name, its vowels somehow sad; it was, probably, because it belonged to someone who tried her best to raise a daughter while married to a man who couldn’t do shit to help her.

“They didn’t tell you,” Firestar said, “because she wasn’t in the system to begin with, as I’m sure you know. Clemèntine was the second to die.”

“That evil woman… It was her doing, all of it. How could anyone else be telling the truth after she told me what she did? How could I know for sure?”

“Was your answer to kill everyone?” Jongdae asked, wishing that he could just kick Mason in the
ankle, steal his gun and call the police. “Good, bad, everyone. Some of them were good people, just trying to help. Did you even know their names?”

“I knew everyone.”

“How could you not close their eyes? Of your daughter’s teacher, or her favorite waitress, or the nineteen years old prostitute that got out of her way to save Faiza from an abusive home? The fortune teller who tried harder than anyone thought she could? How could you not close their fucking eyes?”

“Was it really worse,” Mason asked him, so very calmly. “than to kill them to begin with?”

“Yes.” Firestar answered from above. It was a blessing, because Jongdae didn’t know what he could’ve done. “Because you say you did for a good motive, because you were angry, but you didn’t feel any guilt after that. You couldn’t care less.”

“I just want my daughter back!”

“Would she really be better with you? Or with some wealthy family that Kevin was successful in handling her over?”

“I’m her father.”

“You’re a serial killer,” Jongdae informed him, helpfully, “who she never met. Her mother is dead, and the only people who tried to help her were hunted down, terrified and dead — by you, Mason. You did that. In the end, I hope you know that she isn’t running to you; it’s more like away.”

And then, of course, all hell broke loose. Jongdae should have seen it coming, with the throwing salt at the wounds thing they had going on, but he was still surprised when Mason shot at him, aiming his head. It was, of course, his favorite MO, but shooting Jongdae first was a mistake; he wasn’t invulnerable, but he was fucking fast, and there was no bullet under the sun that could touch him.

(Firestar would’ve made a better target. He was self-righteous and easy to spot).

Jongdae ended up disarming him; and Firestar, as was usual with him, tied Mason up and started with his moral speech. The one where he talked about penitence, and regret, and reformation, and being there for the people they loved. Also spoke a lot about their duty as human beings to each other, etc. By the time the police finally got there, Mason was ready to turn himself in just to make Firestar stop talking.

//

They find Faiza sleeping on a pink, girly bed at Sinn-sil Hwang’s house — which could or could not be a manor. Rich people were the fucking worst.

Sinn-sil was the older and only sister of the fourth victim, Aekyung, who left behind a son who missed her every day. The daughter whose Faiza was replacing had died two years back, on a car accident that took the girl’s and her father’s lives.

Aekyung died because Mason felt that there was something weird with that family, but she couldn’t tell him anything (her big sister was so far away of every suspicion that it was, if horribly tragic, almost funny. Beautiful and perfect in all aspects, how could Sinn-sil ever cause Aekyung any harm?); he couldn’t, of course, believe her — or let her live, for that matter — since he was still a monster (cool motive, still a murder) and she, as the others, ended up with a bullet in the head and a pool of blood on her carpet.
(And her eyes staring unseeing at the ceiling).

In the end, Sinn-sil was investigated as suspect of child trafficking, but never convicted; Faiza ended up in the foster system and disappeared forever, one more kid to have a tragic past haunting down their entire life.

When all was done and gone, Jongdae was left tasting something bitter on his tongue — angry and ugly like cyanide.

//

They kept their charade for six other months, navigating very carefully the fact that any obligations that once tied them together was finally long dead, and they were left to realize that there wasn’t any lies to tell besides the ones about themselves. The name subject was avoided at all costs; Jongdae, particularly, was an enthusiast of the idea of omission, omission, omission. Why should Firestar know about those lonely, bitter years of his life, waiting for a soulmate who would set him free, all the while terrified of their inevitable hate for him? About those quiet nights when he would cry very lowly, trying to avoid waking up his brother — who, nevertheless, always knew?

There were some things about a person that no one was ever entitled to touch.

In the end, they bonded over their shared hate for pizza, something other people never understood, and Jongdae starts to tentatively, hesitantly think about him as M — the literal only solid thing that he knew about him.

(What is it the feeling of knowing anyone at all? How can you be sure that this information and not that is the one that will make them look clear? How can you be sure that the small, critical details are just enough to falling in love — with someone you never met, or with someone you only know the name, or even with someone you only ever saw using a mask?)

They fell in and out of bed with the neutrality of the sun rising and going away again; they wouldn’t ever meet each other in anywhere that could mean something, that could trace them back to their, well, true life — the one that Jongdae were so, so careful to keep far away from them.

It was, in a lot of ways, like a dream — this bubble that they fought very hard to build and were now terrified of watching pop. Beside the fragility of everything, their days also had the coloring of sleeping; the mist around their windows, the yellow of their sheets, the silence of their voices.

Sometimes Jongdae would ask himself if he was even living it at all. Between the distance self-imposed of his work, his afternoons with Leonor — spent not only swimming or floating around in her pool, but also throwing food at each other, and reading out loud the weirdest kind of porn — and almost every night crashing at Yixing’s, talking around his worries, wishing he could just go numb, it was almost as if he was in some kind of interlude. Waiting for something, and afraid of what it might be.

(It was, in a way, like a nightmare: the tension never ended and he couldn’t trust anything nice).

//

They go on their first official date seven weeks after Mason’s trial came to an end (guilty of all charges; life in prison) — it was revolting, somehow, because Faiza was now lost, and Samaya was very much dead. If Mason deserved his punishment, and he sure as hell did, his retreating back didn’t
Jongdae felt it any less hard for Jongdae to stare at the lonely graves of his entire family — dead or dying, wherever they were. He asked himself when did it go wrong? but the answer was beyond him. It was even beyond Mason, who lost himself in grief until he got the taste for blood and little to none self-restraint, these character flaws (can you call blood-lust something like this?) that would end up ruining the rest of his life.

And, of course, let’s not forget, damning his daughter to an uncertain, and mostly likely sad, fate.

Jongdae watched the whole thing, holding hands with Firestar — M? — during the shitshow. It was a joke, all of it, and when everything was done they walked home alone, as far away from each other as humanly possible.

Seven weeks after that found them on a date, and it was, surprising enough, Firestar’s idea. He just showed up on their traditional roof, which was basically any single one of them in the entire city — they were always really good in finding each other, like two sad pieces of an incomplete puzzle.

“We should grab some coffee,” Firestar said, somewhere in the shadows beside Jongdae. He was, as always, a terrible creep; sometimes Jongdae thought it something he did on purpose, to annoy and scare everyone without distinction. There were moments, though, that he felt like he could almost grasp some meaning, maybe important — some deep incapacity of communicating like a functional human being (but these times were short and gone in a blink, like a butterfly you see with the corner of your eye).

“We grab coffee together all the time.” Jongdae told him, helpfully. “What are you saying now?”

“I mean,” Firestar answered, using the same tone that Jongdae had seen him using to a child he thought particularly stupid, “like on a date.”

“Then why did you say coffee?” it was confusing because they were already way past dramatically performed gestures, life or death situations and even sex; also, some of those late nights eating take out, Jongdae kind of counted them as a date? He felt a little offended that they apparently meant way less to Firestar than they did to him.

“That’s what people do.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Oh, sorry. I forgot you were such an expert.”

“Actually,” Jongdae told him, feeling very smug, “I’ve been on a good number of dates during my life. It is, of course, because of my looks.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Fine, then my charming personality.”

“Eh.”

“My intellect!”

“Uh…”

“Jesus Christ, man, can you at least pretend that you have the slightest good taste and minimal discernment?”
“It’s not my fault that you’re lying. What do you want me to do?”

“I want,” he said, because Firestar wasn’t exactly the brightest crayon in the box, “you to lie to me right back.”

“That doesn’t sound like such a great idea.”

“I’m sorry, are you the expert?”

“No—“

“—I knew it —“

“But neither are you.” he ended, with an air that looked very final. “I think lying is a terrible idea that can only end in disaster.”

“Well, what I think is that honesty is overrated.”

“What are you hiding so much?”

“None of your business.” Jongdae answered with dignity. “If I wanted you to know, I would’ve said by now, don’t you think?”

“Touché.” Firestar conceded with a lot of grace. Jongdae, thought, knew better; this truth conversation/inquisition would come back to haunt him so badly, he was already regretting the whole relationship thing.

(What was the worst that could happen, anyway?, he would wonder, late at night, ignoring the small voice whispering words that sounded suspiciously like Everything).

That day, under the afternoon sun, what happened was:

They went on their coffee date — which was normal —, drank this thing that they had asked so many times before, in so many different days, that the barista already knew what it would be. They also did casual stuff: walking, holding hands, kissing, etc. Jongdae couldn’t see how any of that was different from all the other times that they did the exact same thing, but he went along with it anyway, because wasn’t it what you do for the people you love?

(Also, if he was honest with himself, he would admit the ugly truth: he hoped that, if he compromised this time, then, when the truth talk came back, Firestar would look at him and think You know what? Forget it, let’s move on.

It was, of course, a total delusion, but it was true that people had the constitutional right of dreaming).

In the end, Jongdae worried every second of every hour of every day they spent together, and he felt on his bones the breaking point approaching fast as lighting.

//

They exchange names in a cold morning of November.

It wasn’t a big moment. Some people loved to tell in details all that happened the day they found out their soulmate; the trees and the sky and the weather and the people around them. How everything stopped, how angels sang. How, in the particular case of a woman who heard the name of her soulmate because she had just run them over (no casualties), the relief was so overwhelming they couldn’t even breathe.
Jongdae never thought about those things. In fact, he made active effort to ignore everything soulmate-related since he was five years old. He wore bracelets before everyone else in his school and told them that it was about privacy. By the time he was a teenager, there was nothing on the internet that he hadn’t read, or listened, or believed.

It was an ungrateful job, this one of hating something that everyone else was determinate to make him feel blessed about.

(You have the names! family, friends and strangers alike would say, excited, That’s so lucky!)

In the end, though, Jongdae could tell everything about those seconds, every minimal detail; people can never forget the way they felt when their world cracked right in the middle, with a clean break.

“My name,” Firestar started, tracing patterns on Jongdae’s arm, idly thinking about something else, “isn’t Matthew.”

“I imagined as much.” Jongdae answered him, very quietly; he was afraid of breaking the spell. “You sister is called Minhee. How can a family be more traditional than that? Anyway, what is it? Is it Michael? Leonor’s brother is called Michael, but I call him Make because I know he hates it—”

“It’s Minseok, actually.” Firestar interrupted him, looking from under his eyelashes, his cheeks a little red. He was, Jongdae realized, sharing a secret; trying to make this an exercise in trust; sort of bonding time. How can something, he remember thinking, backfire so badly? “It’s Kim Minseok, actually. I thought you would maybe guess it when you started wildly with stuff like Minhyu.”


“Yeah.” he nodded, almost nervous, like he was waiting for something. “What about you…?”

“It’s Kim, too.” Jongdae smiled, weakly. “When we get married none of us will have to change surname, isn’t it lovely?”

“None of us would change anyway.” Minseok — Jesus fucking Christ, he was just lying there, not a single clue of what he was doing with Jongdae’s mind, with his feelings, with his entire life; like it was just easy as that, this is my name, let’s move on — told him, condescending. “What’s yours, anyway? I know you’re crazy secretive—“

“Uh, no—?”

“—but even you have to see that I’m trying to reach out here. I’m doing the first step.”

“Are you emotionally manipulating me?”

“What? No! Why does your mind always end up on this kind of crazy shit?”

“No,” Minseok sat down, looking severe. Jongdae always loved and hated that about him; how he acted like a judgmental God, even when he didn’t have a clue of what he was doing. (Especially when he didn’t have a clue). It was like a defense mechanism; he was Jongdae’s beautiful jellyfish. “You don’t get to do this. Every time that I try to build something real here, you always escape by my fingers like sand. You don’t take anything serious, but I wish that you could do for me just this small thing.” he breathed, as if underwater. “It’s important to me.”

“It’s Jongdae.” he said, very small, his eyes already locked on the exit points of the room. “Kim
“Jongdae.”

“What.”

“I told you,” he murmured, lost, “that my name started with a J.”

They stood there, and Jongdae eventually sat up too. He suddenly felt very naked, and very cold. The dream-colored sheets could be mocking him, or maybe it was the sounds of this city that never stopped coming from the street, becoming the noise of this conversation, blurring their breaths.

“Can I look at your wrists?” Minseok asked, very neutrally, after a few minutes that could’ve easily been centuries. Jongdae didn’t look at him, because there was nothing else that he wished to say. He engaged very little on that first conversation; even so, he already felt like it was enough.

That thing they had, he buried it there, with the practice of someone who finally put to rest some big terror — it was on that bed, over that sheets, on that motel bedroom where they met twice a week; he performed a silent burial for a life he never really had.

“I have to leave.” he informed, blankly, and disappeared into the bathroom. He was still looking at his reflection on the mirror (sad, tired, young) when he heard the sound of the front door clicking shut.

//

Yixing touched Jongdae’s shoulder, somehow light as a feather. Everyone was being very careful around him, even if it was already two months since he last saw Minseok; it was a general consensus that you never get over your soulmate rejecting you, and that extreme measures are expected, so Jongdae had the biggest care in not letting anyone but his closest friends know that yes, he had found his soulmate, and yes, he hated him.

In a way, it was a relief. He was confirming the narrative in which he believed his entire life. It was some sort of comfort, and at that point of the situation he would take whatever he could get.

“Do you want to drink some coffee?”


“You’ll never drink it again?”

“Never. I swear with my hand over the Bible.”

“You’re not Catholic anymore. It doesn’t really count.”

“Uh, no? Who would be stupid enough to deliberately attract the rage of a God who may or may not really exist? I prefer to be at the safe side, thanks. So, yeah. I will never drink this shit ever again.”

“What are you going for now?”

“Tea,” Jongdae said, smugly. It was Baekhyun’s idea, but he took the credit for it. “It’s a lovely drink, you should try.”

“Isn’t it made of, like, leaves? Roots?”

“Also flowers.”

“Sounds a little disgusting.”
“What the fuck do you think coffee is made of?”

“I don’t know,” Yixing told him, with no shame, “I never thought about that.”

“Are you proud of it?”

“Yes I am.”

They both sighed, leaning awkwardly against the table. The kitchen was an ugly shade of blue, with a lot of mismatched chairs and its most treasured component — a coffee maker. Jongdae had gone to the precinct with Yixing, mostly to nurse a hangover, skip work (he called in sick) and avoid Rosa. Truth was that he hated being alone, and everyone knew; but after all the shit with Minseok he felt as if he had to confirm every minute of every day that there were some people in that world that still didn’t actively loathe him.

“You should talk—“

“No.”

“It could be like, healing or shit—“

“I said no—“

“Maybe he doesn’t really despises y—“

“I don’t want to talk about it. Also, I’m hangover, let’s respect that, okay?”

“Jongdae,” Yixing said, long-suffering, “you’re an adult. You have to communicate, share your feelings, open your heart; he’s your soulmate.”

“That’s nice, I like that you mentioned it,” Jongdae answered him, sounding a little hysterical, “because that man is twice my soulmate, since he’s in both of my fucking wrists, and responsible for every single night of misery and gym classes spending hiding—“

“You can’t possible blame him for that. He isn’t guilty of being born.”

“No, you’re right, you know what? You’re right, I can’t fault him for my disgrace, but I sure as hell can put the blame on him for hating me! Because he hates me, Yixing, that’s written right here in my body in ink, you can read it right here it’s this is never going to work out because your soulmate fucking hates you —“

Someone coughed behind them. “Is everything okay?” asked Kim Minseok, Police Officer. Jongdae wanted to laugh — for so long he avoided even the idea of that name, just to end up caught on a trap of not knowing who the hell is this person that you fell in love with.

“We’re great,” Jongdae told him, softly. “Never been better.”

(by the end of the night, of course, he slept with the wrong kim minseok.

he didn’t really feel better after that).

//

The end of February came cold and hard, raining constantly and turning the streets into big pools of mud. It was also very close to Minseok’s birthday (03/26), information that Jongdae wished to all hell to erase from his memory. Sometimes he would find himself thinking what if the world were like
spotless mind, and we could just erase something or someone from our memories and never think about them at all…

He couldn’t answer what he would’ve done. It was easier if everything was done and gone, but wouldn’t he lose too many things? The bad, the terrible, the heart-breaking; but also the good, the funny, the pretty and the nice? Was it worth it, in the end of the day, not knowing what happened, incapable of understanding this piece of who you are, who you’ve been…? Would he still look for this lost possibly-love, oblivious to the fact that this car had already crashed and burn? Because that was a fact: Jongdae wouldn’t survive this mess twice.

He sent Minseok a message during these last few days of that cold month. He was inspired by the stupid movie; the possibility of really erasing his soulmate (mean, stupid, God-like soulmate) was so terrible, so unthinkable; not because of this weird, dubious bond, but because of this thing they built together, as a duo, as friends, as a couple.

(What is love if not all the big and all the little and everything in between?)

we have to talk, he sent and waited. Minseok was still Firestar, angry and predictable and in love with his own voice; he would never change, and Jongdae was grateful for that.

I know you, he realized, then, but do you know me?

It was ten minutes before Jongdae’s phone showed the notification of a new text. Jongdae had saved that name as Firestar, and then as M, and finally, after their last big fight, Minseok. He thought that he should at least be honest with himself on the privacy of his own phone, if nowhere else. It was only a few words, I can go to your place. Jongdae wished he could just say not creepy AT ALL but it didn’t feel like the right moment to joke around. It was just funny that he did know that dumb man, this super-powerful, lovely and kind of slow ex-boyfriend that he lost because of two small names, everything happening almost like a curse.

Minseok, as promised, knocked on Jongdae’s door soon after that, looking normal on a coat that could’ve belonged to someone who died during the Second World War.

(Of old age).

“Come in”, he said awkwardly, stepping aside to let him in. “Sorry about the mess.”

That was composed of: one big pile of dishes, a few t-shirts under the table and five books on divorce laws over the couch closest to the window. A small yellow cat (Alesia) meowed from the general vicinity of the kitchen. It wasn’t much, by any means, but Jongdae was feeling anxious, like he was close to walking off his own skin.

“I didn’t think you would want to talk to me.” Minseok told him, looking curiously at the cat. “Is that Alesia?”

Jongdae wanted to say, Oh, you remember, but he couldn’t. “Yes.” he settled for. “She’s a nuisance.”

“She’s cute.”

“I guess.” he gestured vaguely. “The devil is always nicer to strangers. Fresh meat.”

“I don’t think she’s a lion.”

“You’re right,” he answered, absently, looking at some point behind Minseok, “she’s worse.”
“You texted me.” Minseok pointed out, evenly. Jongdae wanted to slap him, or punch him, or fuck him. Whatever happened first would give him the same amount of emotional satisfaction.

“Yeah, because you didn’t. Jesus. Can you just… sit down? I think it inhibits yelling.”

“I didn’t come here to yell.”

“Yeah, whatever, I’m talking about me.”

(Minseok smiled, but Jongdae was too busy messing with some papers to notice. Actually, even if he did, he wouldn’t believe, so what was the damn point?).

“You have my name?” he asked, quietly, and Jongdae looked away. He didn’t want to talk about it at all. Couldn’t they just move on, each one with his life, and if he was going to be miserable forever — so what? Wasn’t peace of mind more important than the vague ideal of happiness? “On which wrist?”

Jongdae sighed, exhausted. He should just as well get that shit done with. “Both, actually.” he told Minseok, bitterly. “Thanks for that, by the way.”

Minseok, the fucker, nodded as if it was expected. “I imagined that.”

“Oh, yeah, Oracle? How so?”

“I have your name too,” he said, the quietest he had been during their whole relationship, the good and the bad, all those interminable years. “It’s the left one.”

“Oh.” Jongdae breathed, shell-shocked once again — it was almost like the last thousand months didn’t happen. He was fucking, they were fucking, everything was shit. Bloody damn hell.

“I was startled,” Minseok muttered, looking at Alesia, “when I found out about your name, and you left so suddenly. I thought well, I guess it answers any questions about what we are to each other…”

“Which was?”

“Together. Boyfriends, partners, whatever. But then I thought, maybe we just kept hating each other and karma came kicking our door.”

“Possible.” Jongdae agreed, nodding.

“For a second it looked even probable.”

“So you didn’t come after me. You know where I live, and I mean that you hear it as creepy as it is.”

“I couldn’t,” Minseok said, looking ashamed, “I didn’t want to know what you were thinking.”

“And now you do?”

“No. But you reached out, and it’s time for me to compromise. So I came here to found it, and you have the two names. My name.”

“Do you know what that could mean? Please, enlighten me, because I always thought that I was destined to some shitshow, and after that day it looked like I had found my destiny.”

“It meant that we changed, Jongdae. Can’t you see? I hated you and you hated me, but we could change, and we did. We love each other — I love you — and if you don’t believe me, then look at
your body. One of these had to happen first, and it sure as hell wasn’t love.”

“You don’t want it.” Jongdae told him, firmly. “You just think you do, but you’re wrong. Look at
your left wrist and get a grip, Minseok. This is a bad idea all around.”

“Why can’t you just try?”

“We’ve been trying for more than a year!”

“And it was working —“

“Obviously not enough—“

“We had a minor setback. So what?”

“How can you call it minor? It sure as hell isn’t minor and it isn’t mild. We have a major disaster on
our hands, mister. Major indeed.”

Minseok smiled, somehow fondly, “Can’t we try again? Preferably with fewer lies this time
around?”

“Truth is overrated.” Jongdae insisted, stubbornly, the fire of an old argument enough to make him
stop pacing around the room.

“I missed you.”

“You could’ve called.”

“I thought you hated me.”

“I’ve been dating you forever…”

“I had your name on my left wrist, Jongdae. Not like you; only my left, which meant that you hated
me. Since when? For so long? Had you ever stopped?”

“Couldn’t you just ask?”

“I could. Why didn’t you?”

“I couldn’t.”

“Jongdae.” Minseok said, seriously, with Alesia on his lap. When did it happen? Jongdae wished
that he knew. “Can’t we just try again?”

“I don’t know,” he muttered, pacing again. Maybe he would crave a hole on the ground and fell
through it, over the couch of Miss Hernández one floor down, which was old and pink. “It sounds so
much like a bad idea… A terrible one, actually.”

“Could it get any worse?”

“Please, don’t tempt fate.” Jongdae looked at Minseok, who was busy playing with the cat. Jongdae
liked him so much; loved the idiot. He just wasn’t sure if it was enough to take him back. “What are
you doing to my cat?”

Alesia purred. “Petting her.”
“I think she likes you.”

“That would be new,” Minseok told him, very quietly so he wouldn’t disturb her, “since animals don’t really like me.”

“I’m sure it’s the fucking cape.”

“I don’t know why you hate it so much.”

“It’s a cape. That’s also red. It’s obvious why I don’t like it.”

“No? It isn’t.”

“It’s a cape that is also red — you’re like a beacon to every super villain in town. It’s also terribly ugly.” he added the last part like an afterthought, but he meant it wholehearted.

“Were you concerned?”

“Obviously.”

“All this time?”

“Duh. Obviously. I mean it about the very ugly part, though.”

Minseok smiled, then, a little sadly, “I love you.” (Take me back).

He was telling the truth, Jongdae realized; it was even worse. They could hate each other the very next day; it could be all gone—

But.

Well.

(Weren’t all couples like that?)

“I love you, too,” he answered, and walked until he stopped right in front of Minseok. He leaned his face so they would be touching — cheek to cheek —, feeling each other smile. Alesia meowed, displeased, but they didn’t care about her at that moment (just later, when she started rioting). “I love you a whole fucking lot.”

Behind the window, entirely ignored, March was closing February’s cold rain—

and bringing, with it, what promised to be a very lovely, very beautiful spring.

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