Sonder

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Summary

If someone had told Donghun a year ago that he would willingly babysit four wannabe superheroes in their quest for fame and vigilantism, he’d have laughed. And maybe cried a little. But here he is, their only impulse control, frantically asking himself what on earth he has started. And when people actually begin expecting good deeds from them? It doesn’t exactly make the job any easier.

Notes

Here it is, the thing we planned three months ago. I’d like to thank the Discord sub-channel for indulging us with... whatever all this is.
To not over-tag, content warnings for each chapter will be posted in the beginning notes, so pay attention to those.

The main body of the work is written by gloxinie, the art and occasional outtakes at the end are by xelin. Find us on twitter @gloxinie_ and @blackandbluemv for writing updates and more art!

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CW for Chapter 1: implied/referenced animal abuse (specifically dogfighting)
insipience

Chapter Summary

insipience;
(n.) the act or process of bringing or being brought into existence

There’s a gun in the old woman’s purse.

Donghun blinks, yet the situation remains the same. The sweet, balding little grandma and her unassuming grandson are pulling guns on them. Without masks. In the middle of the day and in a well-lit bank just off city-centre. Junhee’s credit card is pressing into his arm where he’d shoved it up his sleeve the second their plans had hit his mind.

“I said, everyone on the ground!” the grandson shouts at them. His voice is loud enough to make his point, but it cracks in the middle, and Donghun can almost taste the embarrassment that rolls off of him in waves. The staff aren’t really impressed, but at some point they do all get on their knees. This dude may be awful at what he’s trying to do, but he does still have a gun, and a real one at that, so it’s probably best they don’t take any chances.

Junhee fiddles with his cufflinks and looks over at Donghun. Donghun would say he can read his question from the quirk of his brow and the set of his lips; would say they know each other so well they can communicate silently just like that, but they’ve only really been hanging out for two months or so, and living together for even less than that. Junhee’s face, like his seemingly unending supply of black ties, is a mystery to him.

Luckily, they can silently communicate in other ways.

Where are the others?, Junhee thinks slowly at him. His brows still scrunch together in concentration like he’s putting a lot of effort into directing the message at him, kind of like a baby that’s focusing on stacking Lego blocks. It’d be cute, if they weren’t in mild mortal danger right now.

Donghun shrugs, disguises it as a twitch when the grandma swings around to peer at him through her bottle-end glasses, hand twitching towards her decoy pistol. Likely didn’t have enough money for more than one. Rent cuts really are brutal these days, but what does the generation that fucked up the economy really expect?

In any case, Donghun should probably call the others. Less because they’re unable to handle the situation, and more because he knows Byeongkwan will throw a fit if he finds out he’d been left out of the action. This usually means they’ll have to let him win at Mario Kart for a straight week again until he talks to anyone but the Alexa in their living room, which really isn’t a good substitute for any human contact. The boy is going to ruin himself someday like this, honestly.
So he reaches out, scopes out the surroundings with his head. There’s a general sense of mild exasperation and annoyance about, like most of the customers are just worried they’ll miss their public transport back home more than anything else. As he expands his mental vision, tries to search the city for the others’ voices, he needs a few seconds that feel like hours to locate any of them in between the natural chaos of thoughts and noise underlying any big city. One of their… coworkers is probably in their communal apartment— Sehyoon, Donghun thinks— Yuchan is only a few blocks away, and Byeongkwan is so far that their connection is actually starting to fray a little, his surface thoughts staticky and jagged. Donghun transmits to them— and doesn’t that sound weird— to come help out if they’re able and then tunes back in to one of the robbers shouting something.

“Just give me the money already, faster, and you! On the ground!” The younger one waves his gun in Junhee’s face as the older robber is threatening one of the staff with her walking cane. As weird as this entire situation is, the sight of a gun in someone’s face doesn’t help Donghun relax in any sense, and he gets the idea that Junhee is probably also sort of tense right now.

They should be here soon, Donghun communicates to Junhee. At least Yuchan should be, and Byeongkwan never lags far behind, even as far off as he is right now. The moment Donghun’s thought hits Junhee is incredibly obvious: it makes him straighten up a bit and level the would-be robber with a look that has the guy hunching his shoulders up defensively, even though he’s taller and armed. The gun stays secure in his grip, though, pointed square at Junhee’s chest.

“You, I told you to get down, and your friend too!” He glances at Donghun, but luckily doesn’t seem to deem it necessary to threaten him as well. “Just listen to me and nobody has to get hurt!”

Junhee slowly raises his hands in a placating gesture, palms up, that does nothing to appease the guy in the slightest. “Well, nobody would have to get hurt if you’d just put d–”

“Don’t you dare talk back to me?” It comes out as a question more than anything and even the man himself scrunches his face up in displeasure at his tone. He’s still not wearing a mask. Donghun chances a look at the security camera that’s most likely pointed straight at the guy’s face and allows himself to roll his eyes internally.

“Listen,” Junhee begins, in what Donghun thinks he should title his Soft Dad Voice. “Listen, I understand why you’re doing this. You probably lost your job right? Or had medical expenses? And now you think you have no other place to turn to than this–”

“S–so what?”

“What I’m saying is you don’t have to do this. You can find support and–”

“Oh, would you just be quiet,” the grandma grumbles. Donghun gets the impression that she wishes she’d have brought a proper gun along. “Freddie, sweetie, just shoot him, will you? We don’t want the gentlemen from the police interrupting us.”

There’s a tremble in this Freddie’s pointer finger, the one hooked around the trigger of the gun. Junhee’s eyes flash down to it and suddenly, he seems a lot less relaxed, his self-assuredness wavering in the light of this new situation. Donghun, too, finds himself on edge, the start of a cold sweat tickling the back of his neck.

“Okay, we don’t have to–”
“Shoot them both!”

Junhee takes a sharp breath at the same time Donghun holds his. Adrenaline washes through his body, blood rushes in his ears. It’s not even he who the gun is pointing at, but he feels it all the same. For the briefest of moments, the world shakes out of its axis a little, changes alignment imperceptibly, and Donghun really doesn’t know if that’s the stress or Junhee’s specialty talking.

Freddie pulls the trigger.

The barrel clicks.

The world aligns again.

Donghun releases his breath. He knows Junhee is feeling the tingle of his luck brushing the skin of his palms just like he had been feeling his heart in his throat.

“What–” says Freddie, and pulls again. Again. Grasps the metal with both of his trembling hands. Junhee, meanwhile, is just back to smiling. He knows the gun is now as useless as his companion’s.

“See. Now, you just have to think about this. Do you really want to go to jail over robbing a bank? You’ll just throw away your future, won’t you?” His voice is gentle, imploring, free of any trace of fear. If Donghun had to talk right now, the words would get stuck in his throat left and right. Again, he’s happy that they have a negotiator like that. It makes things easier.

“I mean–” Freddie worries his bottom lip with his teeth, glancing back and forth between Junhee and him rapidly. Donghun lets himself believe they’ll resolve the situation just like that, easily.

“Freddie, God, you’re useless,” the grandma groans and– ah, there’s a switchblade under her packet of hard candy. Any hopes of getting out easily are dashed just like that as her wrinkled hand grasps the weapon securely: Junhee’s luck can do much, but it can’t render a blade unusable on the spot. The metal glints grimly in the sunlight and Donghun is just about to move forward to help when–

A falcon crashes through the front window.

A sharp scream tears through the people gathered in the room, everyone simultaneously huddling together and bringing their arms up to their heads as Yuchan tears through the glass, headed straight for the grandma with the blade. For the first time since she’d set foot in the bank, she looks fairly concerned, and Freddie… well, he’s down there with the rest of them, cowering on the floor. Not that Donghun can blame him, really. Even Junhee flinched a little at the flashy entrance. It happens when you can’t hear people coming from a mile away.
Get down, Donghun thinks to Junhee and gets to the ground as well, as carefully as possible, so he won’t accidentally slam his knees on a shard of glass. There’s a few bits of glass raining on his back from Yuchan’s incredibly expensive entrance already, he’d prefer if his legs at least stayed intact.

“Get off!” the grandma shouts and swings her knife up just as Yuchan brings his talons down. There’s a scuffle, a screech as her hand makes contact with one of his wings, the rest of the room shrinking back in apprehension. The Freddie guy pushes himself back up gingerly, grabs for the gun he’d dropped on the floor and Donghun wants to warn Yuchan, to tell him to do something, but before he can, the sound of excited yelling hits his brain just a fraction of a second before a gust of wind bursts in—through the door this time, Junhee’s wallet will be glad—after which Donghun barely has a second to process it all before both robbers, young and old, are tied together, hands behind their backs, with their weapons removed.

“The fuck,” whispers one of the staff.

I’ll get Yuchan! Byeongkwan’s cheery voice tells Donghun, there’s another flash of movement and the falcon is gone. The knife, speckled with blood from its wing, clatters to the ground.

There’s silence.

“What the fuck,” says the same staff member, louder this time.

And then there’s the sirens.

“Are you serious?”

Donghun shrugs. “I know it sounds weird, but...”

“Weird? Damn near impossible, more like.” The officer sighs and flips her notebook closed. “Fine, so some powered folk broke in and destroyed a whole window to stop a bank robbery that they magically knew was going on at that moment. And you’re sure you’re not involved?”

“Positive, officer.”

“And that guy?” She jabs her pen in Junhee’s direction for extra effect, who smiles guilelessly and walks towards them.

“Positive, again,” Donghun affirms. He gets the sense that it’s not really working.
The officer is quiet for a moment. “In any case,” she says, “’Uninvolved’ as the two of you were, how about this— you pay for the damage to the window and the city won’t be pressing charges for disorderly conduct in a public space.”

“Ooh, are you trying to blackmail us?” Junhee looks no worse for the wear as he’s standing with them now. Beyond a crease or two in his otherwise perfect suit, a strand of hair just slightly shaken from its original position and some glass dust on his shoulder, he looks just how he had when he’d stepped out of the loft this morning. Donghun resists the urge to brush the glass away— Junhee will most likely spend an hour cleaning and pressing the damn thing at home even though he has three of them that are identical. Let him make that effort, Donghun would love being uninvolved.

“No,” says the officer, a hint of irritation in her tone, snapping Donghun out of his reverie, “what I am trying to do is avoid generating extra paperwork by arresting you for colluding with unregistered powereds in vigilantism.” Junhee quirks an eyebrow. “Listen, nobody wants this extra stress when you’re doing things out of goodwill or whatever, so just— just pay the damage and you’re free to go, it’s not that hard.” She’s insistent, but in a way that people who don’t have a lot of energy to deal with the situation at hand are, so she seems genuine enough, Donghun thinks.

Junhee worries his lip for a bit and sighs. How he manages to think so deeply about even small things without getting fed up by the very concept of decisions will likely remain a mystery to him.

“Fine,” Junhee says, and extends a hand out to Donghun, “you had my card, right?”

When Junhee punches in the code to the loft door, the first thing they see is Yuchan stretched out on the cream sofa in the living room, head on Sehyoon’s lap and face scrunched up in a grimace as their healer’s hands are splayed over his bicep, fingers giving off a soft light to mend the wound. Byeongkwan is hanging out on the kitchen counter visible through the open-plan common space, nose buried in one of his graphic novels instead of paying much attention.

When Donghun had first approached Junhee, he already knew the guy was rich. What he hadn’t known, though, was just exactly how rich, and how that would reflect on his choice of living quarters. They’re high up, on the uppermost floor of an entire skyscraper— built by a now bankrupt company, bought up by Junhee as it had fallen into a state of disrepair. Whatever this floor had been beforehand Donghun doesn’t know, but what it is now is practically a giant loft. The ceiling is so far up that instead of letting it be only one story, the room is cut in two vertically, with a set of stairs leading up to a balcony and landing that allow access to some extra rooms. The ground floor is laid out with light wooden panelling, a TV corner with a couch and matching armchair to the right, and a fully stocked kitchen to the left, the wall on that side being replaced with big windows that allow a look at the city and the nearby forest, all stretched out below them like miniatures. It’s light, and bright, and it’s incredibly empty and cold, everything exactly where it’s supposed to be at all times. Donghun doesn’t want to know how much more impersonal it had been before they had all moved in. Even now, the place feels like a show home more than anything.

“Good to see you’re all still alive,” Junhee calls out to the room at large before freeing himself of his shoes and loosening the knot of his tie a fraction. Donghun glances to the side, torn from his
thoughts– Junhee sounds stressed, and it’s worrying him.

“We are,” Byeongkwan assures him as he’s picking on a tear in his sweater absentmindedly. “I gotta borrow your card to buy new clothes, though, those won’t last much longer.”

“How much did you run?” Junhee shakes some glass dust off his otherwise immaculate umbrella. Donghun makes a mental note to break out the new Roomba later.

“Well, I was at the usual donut place across town, so–”

“So a lot.”

“Yeah?” At least Byeongkwan has the decency to look sheepish.

“How many times…” Junhee sighs. “Don’t superspeed with regular clothes, it’s just plain unsafe. Have you even eaten yet? Don’t be fucking reckless, god, and you,” he continues, pointing over at Yuchan, who is watching the exchange with worry shining in his eyes, “you’re a shapeshifter, not invincible. Are you always going to break down windows and skewer yourself on a knife? This isn’t going to work out in your favour and then we’ll all have to bear the burden of that. Think, man.”

“I just…” Yuchan’s voice sounds drawn, strained from either the pain, an effort to not start crying, or a combination of both. Donghun feels a frown tugging at the sides of his face: This feels like a little too much. “I just wanted to help,” their youngest says, a tinge of hurt to his voice.

“Well, we would’ve had it under control,” Junhee states resolutely, “So think before you needlessly endanger yourself.” He pauses, then. “Don’t get blood on the sofa,” he adds and immediately turns to shut himself away in his study, conversation evidently over. God knows what he even does in there, probably balance his checkbooks just to actively ignore all of them. Donghun rolls his eyes and sits on the armchair closest to the sofa after toeing his shoes off, reaching out to ruffle Yuchan’s hair where it’s fanning out over Sehyoon’s thigh.

“Are you alright?”, he asks. Yuchan sniffs a little but keeps still as Sehyoon’s grip around his arm tightens. There’s little bits of light floating around the spot where their bodies touch, and it would look really pretty if Yuchan wasn’t currently bleeding all over his hoodie.

“I’m good, don’t worry!” Yuchan still tries his best to give the sunniest smile he can manage, and Donghun can’t help but smooth a hand over his forehead and return the gesture. He’s trying so hard, after all.

And Donghun had failed him.

It doesn’t really hit him until dinner. They make a point of eating together, even if Junhee more often than not excuses himself for flimsy reasons, and Yuchan is all better already: he’s trying to nab food from Byeongkwan’s plate, who does his best to fight back with squawking and screaming and everything you’d expect from a pair of practically three-year-olds. Sehyoon just ducks out of the way of the wayward bits of rice and smiles. He looks a little tired, a little more pale than usual, a stark contrast to his all-black hair and clothes. His power takes a lot out of him, quite literally, and…

...Donghun feels bad because it’s his fault.
It’s his fault that Yuchan is still moving his arm awkwardly, obviously expecting the pain to flare up any second again. It’s his fault that Junhee had to pay to cover their asses, and also his that Byeongkwan had to use roughly the equivalent of two days’ worth of calories just to bail them out in the end. If he’d just… he’s not sure, but if he’d maybe looked out for the robbers’ thoughts more, or had a plan in place in case situations like these happen, then maybe they’d be better now. Maybe they’d actually be the team of heroes he wanted them to be, not just wannabe vigilantes stumbling their way to a victory.

It’s time to make a plan, he thinks.

It’s hard to feel at home surrounded by a bunch of strangers.

Well, maybe not strangers. Acquaintances, maybe. Definitely not friends though, not any of them.

It’s been weird, adjusting to people suddenly living in his apartment, sitting on his chairs and eating his food. There’s actual lights on when he comes home, and sometimes he has to stop working for a while because the sounds of the younger members yelling about their two-man monopoly game are distracting him from grown person e-mails. It’s not like he dislikes it, per se, it’s just…. Weird. Difficult.

When he gets up to get water one night, it’s even more weird than usual to see the lights still on.

Even though it’s only been about a month since he offered his loft as a place for them all to live until they figured out better arrangements, some sort of routine has already set in. And when someone’s up at night it’s usually Byeongkwan fiddling with something to burn off his excess energy, or very rarely Yuchan wandering about with a glassy look in his eyes. Junhee changes his mind about water those times.

Donghun and Sehyoon, though, have been fairly unassuming. They both take up little space, don’t eat much, and don’t have many demands. They keep quiet a lot too, which is quite honestly a blessing; if they’d all be as loud as the young ones, he’d have kicked them out in a heartbeat and renounced his support for all this powered vigilante business.

So seeing Donghun at two in the morning with his head buried in his hands is disconcerting to say the least.

For a moment, Junhee considers just going back to his room, but then Donghun blinks at him blearily and even without having Donghun’s powers he knows he can’t just turn tail and leave without making things extremely awkward. So he takes a seat across from him at the kitchen table and casts his gaze over all the scattered notes. Some handwriting, some scribbles that vaguely look like team plans from Junhee’s old sports classes, all colour-coded neatly and even with post-it notes where apparently more explanation is needed. From the look of it, Donghun likely stayed up more than just this one night to prepare all of these, and as his fingers twitch over one of the formation drawings, he looks like he’s not really done yet either.
“What is all this?”, Junhee asks, because it feels easier than telling him to go to sleep, even if Donghun’s eyes are all bloodshot and swollen; even if his hair is standing up in every direction from him grabbing it so much. It’s too quiet to move. The chair creaks under the weight of his body.

“Battle plans,” Donghun says, and rustles around his pile for a while before resurfacing with two pages crammed full with tiny, neat handwritten lines, black on white and the colours of the rainbow and more on top. It’s like he tried to colour code his breathing. Oh, here’s one, and here’s the next, and the third, and–


Donghun clicks his tongue. “For every battle,” he retorts, and he sounds kind of irritated. Maybe Junhee shouldn’t push. “We can’t afford more of what happened at the bank to happen, can we? We can’t just keep crashing into windows and endangering civilians and getting Yuchan hurt. We need to be more focused if we’re really gonna do this from now on. So I took the liberty of drafting some battle formations and some guidelines of when to use our powers– here’s yours, by the way–”

Donghun slides him a new sheet, with ‘Junhee’ written on top and vigorously markered over in red, “and I also put together a list of identity-concealing items we could use, too. I wanted to get everyone in on it once I’m done getting everything down and organizing it, but since you’re already here…”

Junhee chances a look down at his guidelines that had been pressed into his hands insistently. The first bullet point that catches his eye is: ‘No using luck as a last resort if you’re about to die.’ He thinks back to the gun he’d gotten in front of his chest just days ago, how rearranging reality always seems less safe when he’s on a time limit, sighs, and leans forward.

“So. What’s the issue.”

“What issue?”

“The issue that’s keeping you up at night doing this. We could very well be doing it as a group, you don’t have to break your back all by yourself.”

He’s pretty sure Donghun is rolling his eyes right about now from behind his hands. “There is no issue,” he says, “someone just has to be responsible for team safety, and I know you’re the leader, but I feel like I have a better grip on things, so, you know, just....” He shrugs.

Junhee really doesn’t want to push this.

“Fine.” He stands up, takes another look at the papers– individual guidelines for everyone but Sehyoon, formations that seem to necessitate the presence of a well-formed, well-established team that all trust each other at all times, and nods. “Fine, sure. You just do you.”

Back in his room, he remembers he didn’t even get any water.
There’s few things Yuchan likes more than getting to spend time with everyone all at once. Junhee is missing a lot of the time, and sometimes Sehyoon shuts himself away, and really all he wants is for everyone to at least eat dinner together and maybe have a game night or something once a week. He’s not really used to the concept of doing things with other people but Donghun says that’s how families do it, and he’d like them to be a family, maybe, sometime in the future.

Or maybe families are more trouble than they’re worth. Still, though... it’s a nice thought. For now he supposes they’re a good enough bunch of coworkers. Does that concept apply to vigilantism? Is Junhee’s enormously giant loft their office? Man, that’s weird.

Anyway.

“I have a mission for us,” Donghun announces one day during lunch, waving a packet of papers at the rest of them from across the dining table.

“Oooh, sounds official,” Byeongkwan drawls, “who’s it from? The FBI? Homeland security?”

Yuchan turns to Byeongkwan. “Do you think Homeland Security could contact us?”

“I mean, sure, because we’re awesome, right?”

“Woah, that’s really cool,” he breathes, words pressing against the excited little bubble in his chest. It is cool, the idea that one day they’ll be recognized and hailed as heroes, or at least as somewhat decent, maybe above average people. He realises that may sound like he has really low standards, but that’s all he got right now.

“Not really,” Donghun denies, a little flustered at getting cut off this way. Yuchan thinks he should get used to it: Byeongkwan does that a lot to everyone. Not really maliciously, but he has a lot to say and a lot of urgency in when to say it. Sehyoon would mutter something about being used to instant gratification at this point, if he could hear Yuchan’s thoughts.

Donghun clears his throat. Yuchan resolves to listen this time.

“So,” he begins again, casts a glance over the table to make sure everyone’s mentally present, “there’s been some complaints recently about some stuff, and see, I followed up on it, and turns out there’s some really weird illegal shit happening right around the corner—”

“Drugs?” Byeongkwan pipes up. “Human trafficking?” The moment Donghun pins him with a stare, he seems to deflate three sizes. “Was just wondering,” he mutters.

“The shit you get excited by...” comes Sehyoon’s voice, quiet from where he’s trying to melt into the shadowed recess of the room’s corner.

“Anyway. This group of people set up an underground dogfighting ring, which is illegal, obviously, and also awful for the dogs, so we’re gonna go rescue the dogs. Who wants to rescue some dogs?”

Donghun nods as three arms go flying in the air (two of them Yuchan’s; he’s just excited, is all) and makes eye contact with Junhee across the table.

“Fine,” says Junhee, setting down his fork, “let’s go rescue some dogs.”
Turns out that rescuing some dogs isn’t quite as straightforward as apprehending a senior citizen and her socially anxious grandson trying to pad their savings account.

“So,” Donghun announces, extending an arm towards an entirely nondescript and derelict-looking building, “that’s the spot.”

“Really?” Byeongkwan asks, his incredulity muffled only a little bit by the face mask he’s wearing. (They all have one, but Yuchan’s has Rilakkuma on it, which objectively makes it the best one out of all of them.) “That’s the big illegal place?” He sounds disappointed, and Yuchan really cannot fault him. It’s hard to feel like a hero when a wayward breath could make the paint on the facade crumble to dust.

“Did you think they’d have a big neon sign up front? Hi, bet on dog murder here, just down the steps?” Byeongkwan shrugs a little and looks off into the distance. Donghun’s made his point, though.

“Right. So. There’s two entrances from what I could tell, so I’d suggest we take the back door and just keep our eyes peeled. Sehyoon, you take point, Junhee follows behind the rest of us. Remember the instruction sheets I gave you.” The mention of those draws quiet groans from both Byeongkwan and Yuchan. Either Donghun is not paying attention or he’s just pretending not to hear. “Again, in case we run into trouble, which we shouldn’t, cause as little property damage and injury as possible. Come on.”

“Do we really have to avoid injuring dogfighting organizers of all people?”

Yuchan finds himself nodding along with the question. Donghun sighs.

“Don’t kill anyone, at least.”

“Do they let the dogs do their housekeeping too?” Byeongkwan complains as they all make their way down the dark, dilapidated stairway. Junhee has already gotten into one near slap fight with a spiderweb before remembering his cool businessman character, and the overhead lights keep flickering. It makes Yuchan feel a little unsettled, gnawing on his bottom lip as he keeps an eye out from the middle of the pack. Not that there’s much to look out for.

They all stop for a second as Sehyoon tries the handle to the door in front of him. Byeongkwan’s hand brushes against Yuchan’s back– he feels tense too, somehow. More subdued, despite all his complaining from before. Some of Yuchan’s anxiety can’t help but dissipate at that thought.

“It’s open,” Sehyoon whispers, and carefully moves through the doorway. There’s no explosion of light, no bear trap clamping shut over his leg, not even any kind of alarm. It’s quiet.

Too quiet, comes Donghun’s thought-voice. Before him, Donghun shakes his head, scratches at the nape of his neck– Yuchan isn’t too good at tells, but that’s something he does when he accidentally broadcasts. So he’s probably as stressed as the rest of them, when his job is to keep a cool head and plan things. (Then again, maybe all his plans are just products of him being stressed out? That’s how he sounds when he talks about them in the mornings, anyway.)

“Go on,” Donghun says out loud instead, and they all step single-file directly into what seems to be the fighting arena.

“Sure aren’t hiding anything, are they,” Junhee comments. It’s a sparsely furnished room, can’t even be called decorated by any stretch of the imagination: grey floor, unpainted walls, a few harshly
blinding lights hanging from the ceiling. And in the middle of it all, a small arena fenced off with plywood. There are stains on the floor inside the fencing, on the fencing, an errant spatter of dark even having made its way outside of the barrier. It’s blood, and so brazenly and shamelessly displayed that Yuchan doesn’t really know what to think. How to process this.

“At least nobody can complain these guys aren’t evil enough,” Sehyoon mutters. Yuchan feels like he’s looking a little more absent than usual: hand lingering over a blood stain on the barrier a little longer than is probably hygienically appropriate, looking down at the ground with a furrow to his brow that he doesn’t get often. The atmosphere here is putting a damper on everyone’s moods, he supposes.

“Guys, focus,” Donghun hisses from the other side of the room, as far away from the dried blood as possible. “Focus. Remember what we’re here for.”

“What are we here for,” Byeongkwan answers him as he’s craning his head around to look for anything other than the pit of death.

“The ledger. With, you know, all the betting transcripts? The shit we actually need to get these people investigated?”

“So we’re not going to kick ass today?”

“No! There’s nobody even here!” Donghun throws his arms out, makes a show of looking around the room, “or do you see a lot of criminals out and about? Would I lead you into a den full of people with guns and aggressive dogs?”

“We do also have guns,” Junhee supplies from where he’s investigating the door to another room.

“You’re the literal only one of us who has a gun, give me a break,” Donghun huffs. “Anyway. There shouldn’t be anyone here. If there is, just… be safe. Everyone go pick a direction, the sooner we’re out the less chance there is that we’re caught by someone.” Despite his outward self-assuredness, his eyes keep flickering to the doors visible to them, as if he’s expecting someone to break them open at any point. It’s almost as if the absence of a tangible threat is making him even more worried.

They all spread out, Donghun joining Sehyoon and Byeongkwan and Junhee making off on their own to check doors and rooms, which leaves Yuchan alone. With the blood. In the dog torture room. He shivers a little and looks around for anything to do while the others are busy with their expeditions. There’s a door tucked in a far corner that nobody’s opened yet, so he tries the handle (unlocked, not exploding, good start), peeks inside (dark, also not exploding, going well so far) and enters the room.

Said room, one quick fumble with the light switch later, turns out to be some sort of… actually, he has no idea. Waiting room? There’s chairs, and lots of cages piled on top of each other, empty and opened. For the dogs that the people bring, most likely, since there’s tiny metal bowls in the cages and not much beyond that. Not fit to hold any living being for an extended amount of time. (And not fit to hold anything alive at all, frankly.) Some metal sticks are leaning against the wall next to some chairs, some a little dented, one with blood crusted on the bottom of it, and Yuchan does his very best to not imagine at all how that might have happened. Nope. None of that here, not today.

Making his way through, there’s another door to the far end of the place, with a stained glass inlay and a plaque that just reads ‘Staff’. What an innocent word to use for… well. Criminals, really.

This door does also not explode and neither is it a mimic (Yuchan is starting to question video game
logic just a little bit) but it does lead him to a smaller, office-type room. A desk, one of those chairs with really great back support, some bookshelves– it’s almost like he got transported into some old smart person’s home study, just with a little more death.

And, oh, his foot just nudged against something decidedly metallic.

Yuchan squeezes his eyes shut.

Waits for a second.

Decides he’s not about to die, and opens them again. He’s not sure if the whimper he just heard was from him or from something else. As he looks down… it was probably from the something else.

There’s a little ball of white fur rolled up in the cage, looking up at him with two dark, glassy eyes. It’s shaking a little, and oh, whining too now, and…

“Aw, baby, don’t worry,” Yuchan whispers as he sits down on the floor in front of the cage. The dog– he assumes it’s one, even with how much it tries to hide from him– cowers in the furthermost corner of the cage, which honestly doesn’t do much, considering it’s probably about as big as industrial living conditions for chickens, which he had to look up once for a school project in fifth grade and then ended up writing a petition against. All of his classmates signed, but it didn’t really get any further than that. Maybe he should revisit it someday.

Anyway. The dog.

“Shh,” he tries, gently prying open the door– it doesn’t even look like the dog will fit through it at first– wincing as the squeaking metal spooks the little animal even more. “Shh, hey. Don’t worry, I’m not gonna hurt you, okay? I’m here to help.” Two tiny metal bowls sit in one of the corners of the cage, both almost empty now. Whatever water there is left definitely won’t be enough for even the next few hours, not to mention until evening or whenever it is that these people come back. The little dog is still whimpering, ears folded down, and Yuchan doesn’t think he can stand it.

He extends a hand. Slowly, so the dog can see every movement. “I don’t have any treats, I’m sorry baby,” he explains, “so I hope this is okay?” He wiggles his fingers a little bit, avoids eye contact, and waits until the little ball of fur stops shivering enough to take a cautious step forward. “That’s right, hello,” Yuchan coos, “my name is Yuchan, and who might you be?” His fingers slowly find their way under the dog’s chin, scratching lightly at the copious amount of white fluff as the dog allows it to happen cautiously.

It takes some time– he doesn’t have a watch with him, didn’t think he’d need one– until he can finally scoop up his new friend without being fright-peed on. He’s rocking him up and down a little, even gets a little tongue wag in response, when he hears footsteps approaching.

His first instinct is to squeeze the dog tighter and freeze. There’s not really much he can do with an armful of semi-scared animal and no weapon at hand. He’ll just have to hope that whoever is approaching is friendly.
Luckily enough, it’s only Junhee that sticks his head through the doorframe.

“Yuchan?” he asks, “everything okay in here?”

Yuchan shrugs. “I found a dog,” he offers, and lifts up the dog. It’s relaxed enough now to wag its tail a little bit.

“...Ah.” Junhee doesn’t sound quite as enthused as he enters the room and looks around. “Is there anything else in here?”

“I didn’t really check,” Yuchan admits. Junhee lifts his eyebrows, sighs, and sets off to rummage through the desk drawers. Whatever, Yuchan thinks, and tickles the dog’s ears, earning a few licks of his hand in response.

He’s keeping this dog. He is absolutely keeping this dog.

One after the other, the rest of their group enter, and soon enough, Junhee holds up a folder.

“This should be the ledger you wanted? Seems to be in some kind of code, but we should just take it with us anyway.”

“Any encryption key?” Donghun moves past Yuchan to inspect what Junhee has found.

“No, I don’t think. Would be really dumb of them, too…”

“We can’t just give the police a book of codes,” Byeongkwan points out. “They’ll just throw it away.”

“That’s a lot of trust in our law enforcement.”

“Yeah, for a reason.”

They start to squabble, then, as usual, and Yuchan tunes it out, focused on the heartbeat of the tiny creature he’s holding against his chest, the way the warmth of its body radiates through his hoodie. Whoever owns this dog doesn’t deserve it, he decides. It’s not getting the care and love it deserves in this… dump of a place.

“We’ll figure it out in the loft,” Junhee tells them, because he’s allergic to calling the place home ever since the rest of them moved in. “Yuchan, stop cuddling the dog, we have to move.”

“What do you mean?” Yuchan says absentmindedly, “the dog is ours now.”

“Excuse me?”

“We’re taking the dog. Or do you think it’ll be taken care of well here?” There’s the heavy taste of defiance in his mouth, and he’s ready to stand up straight, fight for this dog and its rights like he’s never fought for anything else in his life, but Donghun’s eyes are so warm and pitying, the hand on Junhee’s arm so firm as he says:

“One of you take the cage too, just in case.”

And that’s how Yuchan got his very first pet.
“So,” says Byeongkwan.

“So,” echoes Donghun.

“What are we naming it anyway?”

Yuchan sniffs. “It’s a her, firstly, and secondly she already has a name.”

“And what would that be, then?” Donghun asks from his reclined position on the couch. Junhee’s shut himself up in his study, trying to somehow crack whatever code the ledger is written in, and Sehyoon is busying himself with wiping down the kitchen counters. He’s been even more distant than he usually is ever since the dog has appeared, and Yuchan sincerely hopes it’s not because he’s an anti-dog person, because in that case they’d need to have a strong talk.

Yuchan watches the dog (his dog now!) wag her butt at him as she barks at a ball, high-pitched and not quite as ferocious as she would likely want to be, and says: “Lady Frostington the Third, Duchess of Wintershire.”

“What.”

“Excuse me?”

Even Sehyoon stops washing his hands for just long enough to stare judgmentally at Yuchan from across the entire length of the loft.

“I’m serious,” Yuchan states, spine straight and face fierce. As far as a pout can be fierce. Okay, maybe less fierce and more pathetic, but it’s the thought that counts.

“Okay. Lady Frost… whatever that was. Frosty. Sure. That’s her name now.”

Yuchan nods and continues to watch their puppy– a Samoyed, apparently, and a young one from what he could find on Google– try to eat her toy, a little bubble of pride floating in his chest.

“Lady Frostington the Third Duchess of Wintershire,” he whispers reverently, “you are the best thing that has ever happened to me.” Byeongkwan clears his throat. “And you guys are okay too, I guess.” Byeongkwan nods, satisfied, and throws him a Wii controller.

“Loser does tonight’s dishes!”

They’re all sitting around the dining table, the four of them and Frosty begging for some of the sausage, when Junhee bursts out of his room, yells: “I got it!” and makes for the door almost immediately. They all blink, a little confused in the wake of his late-night energy.

“Where are you going?” Donghun asks him.

“I’m delivering this to the police!”

“Without your face mask?”
Junhee stops where he’s pulling on his shoes, hobbles a little on one foot until he thinks of putting his other foot back down. “...Maybe?”

Donghun just looks at Junhee until his shoulders slump and he holds up the ledger in defeat. Two gusts of wind later, Byeongkwan is gone and so is whatever took Junhee his day to work out.

“I wanted to deliver it, though,” he says, and it’s the first time any of them have seen him be petulant. Donghun doesn’t bite.

“Come eat something,” he says instead, and Junhee does.

Two days later, they’re in the newspaper.

Well, not directly– none of their faces are. Or their names. But on the front page, just above an article about the upcoming partial eclipse and a report about the assumed suicide of Congressman Lee is a picture spread of their local police force in action. They’re busy kicking down the door to the dogfighting arena they’d been in just previously, and in a little corner on the bottom it reads: Local Vigilantes Deliver Decisive Evidence.

Junhee is happier than they’d ever seen him that day, even going so far as smiling at Sehyoon over lunch. Sehyoon doesn’t reciprocate, and Junhee still refuses to go near the puppy, but Donghun reckons that’s alright: it’s progress.

They do all need to talk about something, though, so come evening he gathers them all to sit on the couches in the TV corner. Yuchan is only half paying attention, too busy scratching Frosty behind the ears, and both Sehyoon and Junhee are busy keeping as much distance from her as in any way possible.

“So,” Donghun says, “since we were mentioned in the newspaper, I think we have to talk.”

“About what?” Byeongkwan blinks at him from where he’s trying to lure Frosty away from Yuchan with one of the new toys they’d stolen Junhee’s credit card to buy.

“About our public personas maybe? You know. If we act like ourselves all the time, people will figure out who we are, and the second the police want us gone they’ll just arrest us. I’d kinda like it if that didn’t happen, so.”

Byeongkwan hums. “Don’t they already know what you and Junhee look like, though?” From the corner of his vision, Donghun can see Junhee fiddling with the cuffs of his dress shirt again. Why he’s still insistent on dressing up formally in such a private setting nobody really knows. “And anyway, unless we start wearing full masks and spandex hero outfits and calling ourselves Fast Boy or Seventeen_Healing.mp3,” he looks at Sehyoon as he says that, “people are gonna find out who we are anyway.

“The second a single piece of spandex even enters this building is the second I murder all of you and leave,” says Sehyoon from in between the pillows he’s piled himself under. It’s the most he’s said at a time since… ever, Donghun is rather sure. “The police are gonna leave us alone as long as we don’t cause too much trouble, which we won’t if we stay out of public fighting. I kinda doubt they’d
want to use so much energy on catching us for no reason.”

Junhee sighs. “You’re underestimating how much certain people want to control people like… us, but sure. All of you should at the very least wear face masks out in public, though, like last time, and not give people your real names, that’s just basic common sense.”

Yuchan perks up at that. “Do I get to wear my Rilakkuma mask then? Can I be Bear Boy?” He’s practically bouncing in his seat as he asks, pout half-formed as if he’s anticipating having to fight for his right to be the soft hero he wants to be. Junhee looks him over, sighs again, and stands up.

“Let’s not decide our public apperances immediately. And in any case…” He trails off as he looks at each of them for a brief moment, then gestures upwards to his workshop door, halfway obscured by the railing of the balcony cutting the room into two even stories. Donghun is pretty sure that in the little time they’d lived together, none of them has ever set foot in his workshop, it and Junhee’s actual bedroom having remained private spaces and closed to the rest of the group.

“I have something for all of you that might help us out in that regard.”

Donghun walks back into the kitchen, dodging the two youngest who run past with their arms full of cutlery and glasses. He watches Sehyoon drain a pan of pasta before the realisation kicks in, and he spins around.

“Don’t run with knives! Byeongkwan, don’t carry more than one glass at a time!” he yells, watching as Yuchan precariously takes one of the five glasses Byeongkwan's carrying and places it on the table. Donghun debates staying to monitor them for the fear of something smashing, but Junhee is now watching them closely from his seat on the couch– probably to make sure these newcomers don’t wreck anything within their first week in his loft– so Donghun feels it is safe to help Sehyoon with dinner.

“That’s everything?” he asks, watching Sehyoon dump several pans in the sink. When Donghun had mentioned cooking dinner for the first time as opposed to continuing to order takeout, Sehyoon had silently joined him in the kitchen. They had hardly spoken, both comfortable to let the other work on
their own thing, and the unspoken agreement had led to an impressive amount of food within the hour. Donghun isn’t sure when Sehyoon had learnt to cook so effortlessly, but the guy had seemed as monotone and peaceful as he always did.

Sehyoon offers a small hum of acknowledgement in response, picking up some of the various bowls and plates to take them to the table. Donghun follows, manoeuvring out of the way of Byeongkwan’s eager mission to obtain five dinner plates. Yuchan is already sitting at the table, enthusiastically tapping the surface with both hands as though it will bring food to his plate faster.

“Junhee, come eat with everyone,” Donghun says, eyeing up the suited man slouched on the sofa. He’s been watching everyone set up dinner, but has not budged from his seat.

“I have more than enough money to buy us takeout for a lifetime, I don’t see the point,” was his response, to which Donghun furrows his brow.

“Junhee—” he begins, but Junhee has already stood up and begun to make his way over to the table, steadily avoiding eye contact.

“Calm down Yuchan, you’re going to break the table,” Byeongkwan says, patting the buzzing Yuchan on the shoulder. There is a short delay as Yuchan tries to relax a little, rubbing his hands together as though he can’t contain his energy and has to express it in some way. Only once everything is on the table and everyone has sat down did Yuchan finally attempt to dilute his excitement.

“Okay guys, pretty decent team effort. From most of us, anyway,” Donghun says, not bothering to hide his glance in Junhee’s direction. Junhee chooses to ignore him by shovelling food on his plate as though he hadn’t even noticed the other was talking. Opposite Donghun, Yuchan is staring at the food with stars in his eyes. With how thrilled he seems, you’d think that he hadn’t eaten for a month.

“You ate like eight slices of toast for lunch, you shouldn’t be this hungry,” Byeongkwan laughs, watching Yuchan violently pierce a piece of pasta with his fork. “It’s like you’ve never had a proper meal before.”

“Well, I sort of haven’t,” Yuchan answers shyly, shoving his fork into his mouth. His quiet mumble steals everyone’s attention; even Junhee looks up from his plate. Once Yuchan realises everyone’s staring at him, he freezes and nearly inhales his pasta.

“Like, a sit-down group meal? Never?” Donghun says in disbelief. Yuchan shakes his head, and there is a pause as this information settles in. Sehyoon’s quiet voice breaks the silence.

“I’m cooking again tomorrow,” he says.
valiancy

Chapter Summary

valiancy;
(n.) the qualities of a hero or heroine; exceptional or heroic courage when facing danger– especially in battle

Chapter Notes

This took a while but we’re still going strong! 
Tbh I’m not exactly happy with how this one turned out, but I hope the next makes up for it. And nina’s art elevates it as usual :^)

Junhee’s workshop is like a whole new world.

Admittedly, Byeongkwan doesn’t tend to waste much time wondering what Junhee is up to when he locks himself away, not like Yuchan who practically camps in front of the workshop door to just catch one glimpse or two of the interior. Byeongkwan just supposes the guy has a secret or two to keep and leaves it at that. He gets it, he really does. Some things just aren’t meant for prying eyes.

Nevertheless, seeing what’s going on in the man’s private space makes for an interesting experience. Junhee always seemed so insistent on keeping everything neat and clean in the communal spaces, surfaces and items so untouched that for a good few days Byeongkwan really thought they’d broken into someone’s unused show home. This place, however, is filled wall to wall with clutter: blueprints littering the surfaces, the couch buried under scraps of cloth and a collection of coffee cups stacked on what appears to be Junhee’s main work surface. He had wondered lately where the Mickey Mouse mug he’d bought when he moved in went. There’s also a narrow staircase at the very end of the room leading down to what’s most likely Junhee’s own bedroom. Byeongkwan averts his eyes, just in case.

“So, what do you have for us?” Donghun asks, gingerly picking a cutout of thin wire mesh from one end of the couch so he can sit down, trying his best to not knock anything over with his legs. The way he looks around makes Byeongkwan think he’s intrigued by all this as well, but he hides it better than Yuchan, who blatantly picks up things to stare at them, Frosty tucked securely under his other arm.

Junhee fidgets a little, then pulls out a big, black suitcase from under his primary work desk, crouching down to undo the clasps holding it closed. “Sooner or later we’ll have to actually fight people who are more capable than whatever one Google search about guns gives you, so I thought we should be prepared in case anything does happen. So.” He clears his throat as he pushes the suitcase open, revealing… some black fabric. Byeongkwan can’t help but make a disappointed noise– he’d expected something flashier. A few small explosions, perhaps.

“These are protective outfits, not exactly bulletproof but as close as I could get them at least,” Junhee
explains as he lifts one of the garments up. It unfolds into what looks suspiciously like a spandex body suit, covering everything from the throat to the ankles. “The arms and legs are detachable, in case any of you need that, but I’d recommend wearing the full thing, just for safety’s sake.”

Sehyoon clears his throat, and Byeongkwan’s attention immediately shifts towards him. It would be embarrassing otherwise, being so aware of what someone else does at any given moment, but Byeongkwan supposes that they do live together, and his hypervigilance is merely because of that fact and only marginally because Sehyoon actually has a very pretty face once he brushes his bangs aside for a minute.

“Didn’t I say I’d leave if we have to wear spandex?” he points out, and Byeongkwan feels inclined to agree a little bit. As much as he likes Captain America, he doesn’t necessarily want to dress up like him.

“Relax,” Junhee says. Byeongkwan could swear he rolled his eyes but it’s hard to tell behind the thickly rimmed glasses Junhee sometimes wears when he needs to see things better. “Those are just for under your clothes. You’re not actually going to run around in just these, unless you’d prefer to show your exact butt shape to the world. Plus, if your clothes rip, you don’t accidentally flash everyone around you, so don’t whine and just take the thing.”

Sehyoon scrunches his nose (somewhat cutely) and looks at Junhee. Junhee gazes back, evenly, and holds out the body suit until Sehyoon sighs, steps forward and snatches it from Junhee’s grip. “They conform to your body shape, so you have to break them in for a few days, but then they should be good,” Junhee tells him, and hands out the rest of their suits. When Byeongkwan grasps his, he takes a moment to feel how the fabric gives way under his fingers, almost like some kind of modelling clay. He has no idea what material his is, or how much it cost Junhee, and frankly he’d rather live in ignorance.

“I do have other stuff, though,” Junhee throws out when he sees Sehyoon ready to make his way to the door. It’s hard to be his usual sneaky self in a room this cluttered with things apparently. “Here, this is for you.” There’s a flash of metal, a glint of silver in the suitcase, then Junhee throws something short and cylindrical across the room. Sehyoon catches it with ease, turns it over in his hand, and Byeongkwan tries to not think about the way his fingers shift and flex as he grasps the object.

(He doesn’t have a thing. It would be stupid to have a thing.)

“What’s that?” There’s barely any inflection in Sehyoon’s voice as he inspects the tube, holds it up to his face and twirls it around.

“It looks a little like a lightsaber grip,” Yuchan offers. Byeongkwan perks up, and his and Yuchan’s eyes meet across the room.

“It is—it—” he starts.

“It’s not a lightsaber,” Junhee says resolutely. Byeongkwan can see Yuchan pout and hug Frosty closer to his chest. “It’s a staff for close quarters combat. Light materials, durable and easily portable.”

“A staff?” Sehyoon flips the tube over a few times, until his finger brushes lightly against what seems to be some kind of mechanism and suddenly, both sides of the tube rapidly extend outwards. Sehyoon jumps a little, stumbles, catches himself, and only narrowly avoids poking his own eye out with it. “Oh,” he says, when the staff comes to a rest, totalling maybe a little more than his own body height, “Yeah. Okay, I see now. Yeah.” A pause. “This is... pretty well made. Um. Thanks.” He
doesn’t look up from the ground, but neither does Junhee, too engrossed in sorting around whatever else there is left in the suitcase. “Uh, sure,” says Junhee, “It’s whatever, honestly. Anyway.”

The next item Junhee procures is an unassuming bracelet. It’s silvered, basically just a ring of chainlinks and a blue stone in the middle, the polished surface shimmering under the artificial lamp light. Frosty barks happily at it. Junhee tenses up, as usual when Frosty makes too much noise or is too affectionate with him, bracelet rattling in his grasp. When Byeongkwan looks towards the door it’s ajar and Sehyoon is nowhere to be seen.

“Where’s…” Donghun shrugs, and Byeongkwan drops it. It’s not like he should be surprised at this point.

“Moving on,” Junhee continues, maybe a little more loudly than he’d wanted to if his displeased expression is any indication. “This is for Donghun, and also this.” He grabs a black thing off of one of the tables and brandishes it in front of him.

“Is that a stun gun?”

Byeongkwan sort of hopes whatever he gets isn’t that underwhelming.

“Yeah, just a little upgraded and adjusted, it’s better than what you could find at the store.” Junhee tosses Donghun the stun gun, who fumbles a little with it before catching it, and then holds up the bracelet. “This is… well, basically you press the stone and it creates an anti-mind force bubble of sorts. It doesn’t last forever, but as long as it does, it creates an area that blocks out any efforts to read someone’s mind or tamper with it.”

“So it would block my power,” Donghun says.

“Yes, essentially.”

“Why would you give me this?”

“Because,” Junhee sighs, “it goes both ways. Nothing goes out, nothing comes in. It’s for protection. It’s just obviously not tangible, which is what the stun gun is for. To keep anyone away who might want in.” Donghun nods contemplatively and Junhee moves to give him the bracelet, which Donghun immediately slips over his wrist. “The bubble is pretty small, but I think one other person aside from you could fit under it, if you squish together a little. You can still use your powers on the inside, just not outward.”

“Huh.” Donghun stares down at his bracelet for a while, tilts his wrist forward and back to watch the little chain links shift. “This is actually really nice.” And he looks up and smiles.

Junhee ducks his head almost reflexively, a twist to the corners of his mouth as he avoids any kind of genuine emotion– as always, Byeongkwan thinks. “In a fight you’re our weakest link,” Junhee says and acts like he doesn’t hear Donghun take a wounded step backwards. “Byeongkwan,” he says instead, and Byeongkwan feels his focus shift from feeling bad for Donghun to being very much interested in what he’s going to get. “This is for you.”

The first thing he sees is more of the same black fabric. He considers feeling disappointed for a second, but then there’s a flash of pink, then a flash of green, then a lot of both, until Byeongkwan sees what Junhee had bundled in his arms: a full workout outfit. There’s black pants, a full neon green-and-pink shirt, and even a pair of matching running shoes hanging from Junhee’s crooked fingers. “I’m getting clothes?” he asks.

“You’re getting speedster clothes so you don’t have to steal my card to buy new outfits,” Junhee
amends. Byeongkwan hunches his shoulders a little; it’s not like he regrets taking Junhee’s money, since he has more than he could possibly spend in a single lifetime, but being called out like this feels… awkward. Sort of, funnily enough, like being scolded by a parent, which Byeongkwan suspects not many of them have experienced lately. “That’s fair,” he says, and lets Junhee stuff the heaps of fabric in his arms.

“Also I have goggles for you,” says Junhee, and pulls out something that looks a little like protective goggles you get in chemistry classes, but specifically the ones made for people who already wear glasses of their own, transparent and giant and extremely bulky.

“I’m not wearing those,” Byeongkwan tells him. Junhee balances them on top of the shoes in his arms and ignores him.

“And for Yuchan,” he says, “here’s a leg band. It expands and contracts with your transformations so we can actually tell you apart from real animals in case we need to. Oh, and…” he pauses, looks down into the suitcase with a contemplative look, and pulls out…

...a yoyo.

“A yoyo?”

“A yoyo.” Junhee hands it over, clearly too in his head to notice how Yuchan’s brow is furrowed, how his shoulders slump in practically the perfect picture of disappointment before he collects himself and gives a smile that is very sweet and also very artificial.

“Thanks, Junhee,” he says quietly. Nobody is surprised when it doesn’t get acknowledged.

“Also I found a collar for the d… Frosty.” This is the last item he pulls out: a simple, black collar with a little dangling charm in the front. “It tracks where she is, I’ll send you the software for it later. And it has a built-in camera in case we need to see what she sees.”

The moment Yuchan’s smile turns genuine the tension fades from Byeongkwan’s shoulders.

“Junhee, that’s—”

“Now get out of my workshop. All of you.”

Truthfully, Byeongkwan spends more time outside of the loft than inside. He does like it to some degree, and he loves his bed, bigger and softer than anything he’s ever owned before, but it’s still pretty awkward, especially whenever either Junhee or Sehyoon are around.

It worries him a little. It’s not like he wants to doubt Donghun’s guidance and judgement, but somehow he can’t help but feel like maybe he’d made the wrong choice at some point. He wanted to build a team, right? A team of superpowered vigilantes to help fight crime and tackle corruption and evil, maybe to help prove that powered folk aren’t all chaotic vagrants who steal and lie at their leisure.

(Not that Byeongkwan is exactly a lawful and upstanding citizen, but it’s the thought that counts.)

Neither Junhee nor Sehyoon have struck him as particularly capable team players, however, so he feels like it’s his right to be a little confused. Shouldn’t they have looked for more open and friendly
people? He knows this girl, a really friendly ex-neighbour who could make plants grow all strong and fast, but Donghun hadn’t even met her before dismissing her outright. She’d have fit in better than either of those two, Byeongkwan thinks, so it’s really a shame.

Luckily, birds aren’t quite as uncomfortable to be around. He tosses the flock gathered at his feet some more torn off pieces, watches them quak and squabble with their beaks to get the best, softest pieces, and smiles. It’s nice, spending time like this. Not even the older women gossiping on the bench next to his can break him out of this hard-earned tranquility.

“My granddaughter brought a friend with her this week. Powered, bless her heart,” says one of them.

Well, maybe they actually can break him out of it. It doesn’t seem that hard, suddenly.

“Oh, what did you do?” The second woman leans forward in concern, hand pressed over her heart like she’s about to fall over in well-meaning indignation.

“I entertained her, asked her parents if she’d been registered, then told my daughter to not let our sweet honey be around that family any longer.” The other woman makes a noise of assent. “Really, I have nothing against… these people, but it would better for everyone if they just stayed within their own spaces and didn’t flaunt themselves so much. It’s just better that way. Safer, right?” Both of them nod for a while until the first woman changes the topic to a dog she’d seen and Byeongkwan takes that moment to leave, unwilling to properly think about the roiling in his stomach and the indignant heat climbing up his body. It’s not like he’s not fully capable and ready to fight a couple of old weak grandmas, it’s just that he’d likely get in trouble if he did. And they’re supposed to be good people now, watching out for innocent civilians.

Even when they think like… that.

The sun is high in the sky when he makes his way in the direction of the heart of the city. It’s bright and warm, one of those mid-July days he used to spend playing outside and scraping his legs just a few years ago. It’s nice, even if a little loud: summer holidays are in full swing, and that means lots of little children out and about. There’s a group of teenagers hanging out outside a skateboard store, laughing a little too loudly and playing music a lot too loudly. Byeongkwan looks down at himself. He figures he would absolutely fit in with these people just based on appearance: from his bright orange hair to Junhee’s special clothes to his height he looks like one of them. But he’s not a teenager anymore, is he? And even if he was… well. One of the guys looks up at him and squints in confusion, probably to figure out why this random guy is staring at him. His face mask is tugged down, showing some of his nose in some kind of fashion statement. Byeongkwan lowers his head, hurries on, and tugs his own mask downward just the tiniest bit. It makes him feel a little lighter.

He’s just standing at an intersection, waiting for the cars to pass by, when he hears sirens.

At first, he doesn’t think much of it. There’s sirens everywhere in big cities. It’s probably nothing major.

Then he figures maybe he could go check it out, see what it’s about. Maybe he could help, or get the others to help with him. They’re heroes now, after all.

Then he sees the two newscasting vans, and any thoughts of just staying and enjoying his day evaporate as he turns and immediately begins following them.
It doesn’t take very long to figure out what’s happening. The vans come to a stop near a plaza, renovated pavement and trees and benches here and there, all surrounded by copious amounts of police tape keeping away the small crowd of onlookers. There’s multiple police cars, barricades near the surrounding streets, and a fire truck is parked a ways away, with officers and firefighters milling about the space. One of the officers, a woman with hair pulled back into a tight bun, who seems so weirdly familiar to Byeongkwan even though he can’t put his finger on it, is talking rapidly into a walkie-talkie, eyes nervously flickering to one of the office high-rises that surround the plaza. Her carefully polished badge and the tension holding her upright tell him that she’s likely a person in a significant position trying to take care of equally significant issues.

His gaze shifts to the office building, and he takes a breath before grabbing for his phone and texting their provisory group chat.

Whatever’s going on right now, he bets they could at least attempt to help fix it.

The minute Donghun arrives, others in tow, he immediately seeks out Byeongkwan.

“Has anything happened?” he asks. Byeongkwan shakes his head.

“If anything had, all those news people would have updated the world already.” He extends an arm in a sweeping gesture to indicate the three separate anchors currently reporting from the scene.

“What’s going on anyway? I couldn’t get close enough to hear anything important, the staff shooed me away when I tried.”

“Hostages,” Junhee says curtly. The phone in his hand lights up again, gives a few furtive buzzes, likely live updates on the situation. “Nobody knows much. I’d bet it’s some office workers being held, though.”

“Why, though?”

“Money? I don’t know. It’s probably better that we don’t, we’re just here to diffuse the situation.” Privately, Donghun can’t help but disagree with that assessment, but he gets it. Emotional attachment is bad, and all that. “So what do we do?” he asks instead of arguing.

“Well…” At that moment, one of the police looks up at them, eyes narrowed in suspicion, and Junhee smiles.

“So are you people?” The officer asks as they draw close, Junhee up front and the rest of them hanging about behind him. Donghun remembers this face: her piercing eyes and hair pulled back into a tight bun are the same as they had been when they’d thwarted that bank robbery a while ago. She doesn’t seem too pleased to see them again, and Donghun can only imagine that Junhee returns that sentiment.

“We’re here to help,” Junhee says, and flashes his best smile. It’s not really effective considering he’s wearing a face mask, and the officer simply quirks an eyebrow at him.

“We don’t need the help of civilians, please move along,” she tells them. Then pauses. Taps her chin. “Oh, you’re the guys who blew out that window, aren’t you?”

Junhee goes to say something, but pauses when she holds up her hand. “Spare us. We both know.”
“...We do,” Junhee acquiesces.

“So. Why are you here?” Now that Donghun is closer, he can see just how run-down and tired the woman looks. A few strands of brown hair have come undone from her hairdo, haphazardly swept under her uniform hat and sticking to her forehead. She’s tense, uniform wrinkled like she’s been tugging at it a lot. Her nametag sits crooked over her breast— it reads Officer Hu in bold, black engraved letters that might just be the neatest thing about her appearance. In short: she’s probably not having a good day right now.

“Well, you already know we’re vigilantes—”

“Vandals.” Officer Hu seems less than impressed.

“Vigilantes,” Junhee presses out between teeth gritted under an impressively strained smile, the last traces of his honeyed public persona fading. “Anyway, as I was saying. We would like to offer our expertise and help if at all possible.”

“Out of the goodness of your heart?”

“You could say so, yeah.”

Officer Hu looks around for a moment, sighs, drags a hand over her face and then grabs Junhee’s elbow with an unsurprisingly firm grip. “Come on,” she says, and drags him into the shade of the parked fire engine, away from anyone who might listen. The group follows. Donghun wonders if he should prepare an escape plan right about now.

“Okay, listen,” Hu says as soon as they’ve rounded the corner. “I know you’re going to try some shit no matter what I say, and frankly we’re not getting anywhere by ourselves, so you know what? Be my guest. Help us.” It should feel like more of a victory, but when someone uses this type of reluctant tone with you, it never really does seem that way.

Junhee shakes his elbow free of her grip, finally. She lets him go. “What can you tell us about what’s going on?”

“First off what I can tell you is that you didn’t hear any of this from me or my superiors can and will have my ass. For all intents and purposes I dragged you here to tell you to leave and never disturb police operations again, clear?” All of them nod. Even Sehyoon, in the back, arms crossed as a shield. Donghun sympathises. “Good. So. There’s an office floor in there, and a daycare for the kids of the workers. As far as we know, when the perps infiltrated the building, they rounded up the kids and the office personnel and gathered them somewhere in the building. They’re asking for money and a free exit, which we are willing to provide, but we’re trying negotiation first.” Even listing down the facts, her voice wavers around some of the words, strains in her throat like she’s having difficulty keeping her cool. “Not much has been happening, it’s all going in circles so far.”

“How many are there?” Junhee’s got his pensive leader face on: eyes narrowed and focused, thumb rubbing at the side of his chin. Whatever animosity there’d been between the two, Donghun feels like it’s set aside for now. Filed away in the face of the greater good.

“I’m not sure,” Officer Hu admits. “We’re assuming a medium-size group, though. Maybe four or five? One of them is negotiating with us, so that leaves the others to keep an eye on the hostages, and they’re almost certainly armed well. I wouldn’t recommend barging in before you guys know exactly what you’re up against and we can’t exactly help with that part beyond pulling up blueprints of the building.”
Junhee’s eyes flash towards Donghun, then Yuchan, then back: “That’s fine. I think we got this.” His face moves in what’s likely another of his grins, and Donghun notes with no small amount of exasperation that his usual cockiness is starting to return now that he’s regained his footing. “So if there’s nothing else…?”

Officer Hu hesitates. “One more thing,” she says, and weirdly enough, she sounds more uncertain than anything about it. Immediately, Donghun’s body tenses for what’s about to come. “Don’t let the children get hurt. And if you happen to find a woman in a green hijab and her daughter among the hostages, would you make sure she’s alright?” The group blinks. “Take it as a personal favour, not a professional one.”

Donghun is about to reply, affirm that they’ll do everything they can, when someone beats him to it. “Of course, ma’am, don’t worry,” says Sehyoon of all people from behind the rest of them and for the first time, the officer smiles.

“Again, this is off the record, I never recruited you to do anything.”

“Of course not.”

And then she’s gone.

“Kim Sehyoon,” drawls Byeongkwan, “did you really just willingly talk to someone out loud?”

Sehyoon pinks a little. “Shut up,” he mutters as he ducks his head, “anyway, whatever, what are we gonna do about this?”

At that, none of them waste a second– they all turn to look at Donghun in frightening synchronicity. He thinks about protesting, but really, they all know he’s the man for this particular job.

“Well.” He clears his throat. “I do have a few ideas.”

So? You get anything yet?

Almost, I’m sort of slower than usual, Yuchan thinks back as he makes his slow, meandering way through the air vents. He’s not sure if it’s an inherent part of the form he’s taken, but it’s hard to focus like this, drifting through the air. The soft buzzing of his own wings seems to throw him off a little bit. He’s really not used to this.

After what feels like an eternity, he arrives at the grates that separate the air vents from the fourth room he’s checked so far and slips through without issue.

Below him, so much more gargantuan than he’s used to, lays an auditorium. Rows of plush red seats, lowering step by step every row, face a stage at the far end with a speaker’s podium and some projection screens behind. Yuchan buzzes around a light affixed to the ceiling, drawn to the bright shine, as he takes in the situation which does not exactly look pretty.

There’s a small group of people shoved into the back corner of the stage, sitting huddled together on the floor. Even from here Yuchan can hear the nose, the quiet crying of children and murmuring of parents seeking to console them as now and again an armed thug passes by to make sure nobody’s trying anything.

Adding up the two he’d seen in the hallway guarding the door to the auditorium from the outside, there’s five of them in total. They all carry guns and have black masks pulled over their heads save
for one of them who’s quietly talking into a walkie-talkie. That might be the contact for the hostage negotiator, Yuchan figures. The other two are patrolling, always keeping an eye on their captives, just in case. They don’t have to do much more, considering there’s no windows and the only door leading into the actual room is watched by those stationed outside.

When he relays all this to Donghun, he’s quiet for a while.

Go back to the offices, he receives after Donghun is done thinking. We’ll meet you there.

“I don’t think anyone’s noticed us enter,” Junhee confirms quietly. They don’t exactly have to whisper, the main office room is down the hall from the auditorium, just out of sight of the two thugs standing guard, but better safe than sorry.

“Good.” Donghun’s fingers absentmindedly scratch Yuchan’s neck. He looks a bit more tired than usual, skin pale and eyes drooping, and he knows it’s because this kind of extreme transformation takes a lot out of him. He wishes it wouldn’t be necessary. “Do we have everything we need?”

“I have Jun’s weird briefcase,” Byeongkwan announces, holding up a silver, metal case he’d been told to get from the apartment. He’s not even sweaty from the run, Donghun notes.

Junhee grabs the briefcase and gently sets it down on the nearest available surface. It knocks against a framed family photo, which they all pretend to not have noticed. “This is the equipment for the guards,” Junhee explains as he presses open the clasps to reveal a set of custom made guns and ammunition embedded in a protective black styrofoam. “They’re sleep darts, of a sort, experimental but worth the risk. They’ll disable any adult in a second’s notice, if you know how to hit your target.”

“And if we miss?”

“Either have Byeongkwan speed-deal with them or fight all five and their guns upfront.”

Donghun grimaces. “Yeah, but he shouldn’t tire himself out that much, you know that. It’s dangerous.” Byeongkwan rolls his eyes from the sidelines, but decides not to say anything.

Junhee shrugs. “Easy,” he says, “that means don’t miss. Who of you is the most trained with firearms?”

Nobody says anything. Donghun can practically see their plan shatter right in front of them.

“Me, I guess.” They all turn to Sehyoon, who’s busy staring at the tips of his shoes as he fidgets. “I’m not exactly a sniper, but…”

“Good enough for our purposes,” Junhee states and goes to assemble and check both of the pistols. “Why don’t you guys go over the plan one more time while I prepare?”

In times like these, Donghun thinks, Junhee really acts like a leader.

“On three,” Junhee mutters to Sehyoon. Sehyoon nods. From where Donghun is standing, freshly transformed fly-Yuchan perched on his hand, they both look tense, and they also look like they want to seem extremely cool and collected, like they do this every day. They don’t. It’s obvious. Donghun doesn’t really know whether to feel reassured or more nervous.
“One. Two.” Junhee takes a breath. “Go.”

In impressive synchronicity, the two duck around the corner breaking their sightlines with those of the guards, tranquilizer guns up and ready to fire. From behind them, Donghun sees the guards’ heads snap up, immediately drawn to the movement. For a fraction of a second, everyone is quiet. Then the guards grab their weapons, one of them inhales as if to yell, and Junhee and Sehyoon fire.

Two little needles and two bigger thumps is all it takes as both guards slump against the very door they’re guarding, then slide down to the floor, shout dying in the guard’s throat and coming out as a wet gurgle that has Byeongkwan grimacing. Junhee holds up his hand, and they all still, listening for any sign of someone from the inside coming to see what’s going on. When nothing happens, there’s a collective sigh of relief. Sehyoon lowers his gun slowly.

“Good job, guys,” Donghun tells both of them, which makes Sehyoon suddenly be extremely interested in his own feet. Junhee clears his throat. “Yeah, uh. Good job,” he echoes quietly. Donghun could swear that the tips of Sehyoon’s ears pink a little.

But there’s no time to be distracted like this right now, so he claps Sehyoon on the back and nods in the direction of the door at the end of the hallway, suddenly so daunting and unapproachable. There’s people in there, innocent bystanders and thugs with actual guns that could do actual damage, and it’s not his friends he’s worried about.

(Okay, maybe he’s worried about his friends too, a little. A lot.)

(Are they all even friends yet?)

“We should continue,” he says before he can start overthinking anything. This is not the time or place. Donghun knows this, but just knowing it doesn’t help much.

“We should,” Byeongkwan says, bouncing on the balls of his feet. Sometimes Donghun wishes he could be that thoughtlessly excited.

Two of them are in the front right now, Yuchan transmits to Donghun, their negotiator is in the back. Hard to get to. I could probably reach one of the guys in the front right now.

Got it. Thanks. Donghun nods to himself, then goes to touch Byeongkwan’s elbow softly. The guy is practically all pressed up against the door, ear smushed against the wooden surface in hopes of hearing anything at all worthwhile. The frown on his face tells Donghun it’s not going well.

“What,” Byeongkwan mouths at him, unwillingly tearing his eyes away from the door.

“All right,” Donghun mouths back.

Byeongkwan cocks his head in confusion.

I thought you were supposed to be fast? Donghun tells him. Byeongkwan takes another second, then huffs and kicks his shin lightly.

“Fine,” he whispers, looks behind him to see if everyone else is as ready and willing to do this as he is. Then, he wrenches open the door, and is gone in a flash of movement. Donghun signals the others and they all make their way through as fast as they can, Junhee bracing his umbrella in front of himself and Sehyoon grabbing a hold of his mini staff from the holster strapped to his leg. Donghun, well, he has his stun gun, which is bound to be more exciting than Junhee’s actual regular store-
bought umbrella, he supposes.

When they enter, the commotion is already well underway. Two of the thugs are shouting, confusion painting their faces as they look down on their hands, where their guns had presumably been before Byeongkwan had sped past and plucked them from their hands with a speed unmatchable by anything short of a military grade fighter jet. On the far side of the room, their speedster is currently busy wrenching the walkie talkie away from the criminal in the back and hitting them over the head with it. At the same time, before Donghun can take any more than two steps, there’s a tiny flicker of movement around the air vent at the side and suddenly a very solid, very real Yuchan materialises out of thin air and falls on the guy just under him. Behind him, Sehyoon stifles a laugh.

“Donghun!” Donghun’s head snaps up to see Junhee, guarding against a punch by wrenching up his umbrella. Miraculously, it doesn’t bend or break, which automatically makes it more solid than Donghun’s own old man bones. “Help a guy out here!”

“Sure,” Donghun shouts back and goes at their common enemy. He’s noticed Donghun by now, so he doesn’t have the element of surprise, but he does have the element of one extra set of limbs.

(That maybe came out a little weird, but it’s hard to be witty in the heat of battle.)


“Yes,” Donghun shouts back, a little exasperated, and points at his leg. Junhee takes a second, then: “Go for it!” So Donghun moves behind Junhee, not before trying to trip up their opponent, who shakes it off easily, eyeing both of them warily. Donghun knows this has to be fast, so he leaves himself no time to stop: he crouches down, Junhee steps back onto his thigh, uses the hands braced on it as a launching pad as he propels himself up, grabs the thug’s face and slams it down onto his waiting knee.

He crumples, and so does Junhee, right onto Donghun’s crouched body, and they both go flying. Just before Donghun cracks his head unpleasantly against the laminated floorboards, he sees Sehyoon move towards them and just at the edge of his vision Yuchan choking out the other thug. Then, his vision goes a little spotty for a few seconds as the unstoppable force meets the immovable object.

(The immovable object wins, unfortunately for Donghun’s skull’s structural integrity.)

There’s still noise all around them. He can pick out a fair amount of crying children and worried voices, but there’s no sounds of punching anymore and when Donghun turns his head as much as he’s able, he catches Yuchan just in the process of tying his guy’s hands behind his head with one of Byeongkwan’s colourful zip ties. Byeongkwan, meanwhile, is fiddling with the walkie talkie he’d taken off his opponent, three guns haphazardly stacked next to him in the most careless display of a safety hazard Donghun has seen in a very long time. A weight is being lifted from him– certainly not a mental one, but his body does feel a little lighter as Sehyoon drags the third man off of him and Junhee.

Speaking of him and Junhee.

“Get up, your elbow’s killing me,” he groans out. His face is still smushed against the back of Junhee’s skull in a way that is decidedly not comfortable. The thought that he might be getting Junhee’s hair in his mouth right about now makes him grimace.

“Right,” Junhee says, not sounding very happy himself as he heaves himself up and away from
Donghun’s rapidly dying body. “I think I sprained something, that move was a terrible idea.”

“It’s not my fault you’re skipping your senior citizen yoga poses, you know.”

“You’re older than me!”

Donghun throws his head back and laughs, and just like that, things seem a little less stressful again. Junhee blinks at him, then abruptly tears his eyes away and lifts his chin in the direction of the hostages who are probably not exactly impressed with their professionalism right now. “We’re still on a job,” he says, “let’s get everyone out of here.” The mask is back on, the walls are back up, but Donghun counts it as a win. He’s never actually heard Junhee be truly indignant about anything, after all.

Donghun, too, gets himself up under a considerable amount of huffing and grumbling, dusts off his trousers and looks about. Byeongkwan’s still on the walkie-talkie, Yuchan is busy dragging all of the thugs into one spot, and Sehyoon is fiddling with his compacted staff. The civilians are still sitting there, huddled together, eyeing them all a little mistrustfully.

“We’re the good guys,” Junhee calls out to them and turns up his empty palms. “Don’t worry, the police will be up soon. They might ask you guys some questions, but not much beyond that. Is anyone injured?”

A little girl raises her hand timidly, a couple of bright red handprints circling her arm. She doesn’t look to be in immediate distress, but Sehyoon still goes over and crouches down next to her. The second his sparks light up she giggles in delight, content in watching them restore her bruised skin back to its original colour. For some reason, Sehyoon doesn’t look quite as constipatedly angry as he usually does.
Meanwhile, Donghun casts his gaze about the mass of people gathered on the auditorium stage. There’s a decent amount of them; the adults dressed in neutral office clothing, the children sticking out with their rainbow clothes, some of them clutching toys to their chests. In that crowd, the tall woman in the mint green hijab stands out easily. She’s holding the hand of a little girl, a little lighter skin than her mother, with her hair plaited neatly. Donghun nudges Junhee, and they both make their way towards her.

“Ma’am?” The woman looks up. “Hi. I’m Do– I mean.” He clears his throat. “I’m… a friend. An officer sent us to check up on you. Are you alright?”

The woman eyes him up and down, regards him skeptically. “Who sent you?”

“Officer Hu, I think she was.” And just with that, the woman’s face brightens. She nudges her daughter to get up so they can both follow them a little ways away from all the people.

“Lijing sent you?” she confirms again. The little girl looks up at the mention of her name and squeezes her mother’s hand. Both of them, Donghun thinks, are a lot more relaxed now that the threat is over. None of the thugs are moving, all of them knocked out cold and awaiting their prison cells.

“If that’s her first name, then yes,” Junhee confirms. “She said to look out for you specifically. Are
you doing alright?"

“Yeah, we’re both fine, thank you.” She smiles, then starts as if remembering something and sticks out her hand. Donghun shakes it. She has a firm grip. “I’m Fariha, Lijing’s wife, and this is our daughter Weiwei.” Weiwei smiles, the corners of her lips wavering a little, and Donghun tries really hard to not ruffle her hair or pick her up. Bad manners. Wait until at least the third meeting. (At least, that’s when strangers started picking him up as a kid.)

“Speaking of… your wife, we should probably get down there soon and deliver the perps,” says Junhee. “I bet all of you would like to get out of here as quickly as possible, eh?”

Soon, Byeongkwan comes to give them the all clear, and then they’re off, guiding the workers out with Yuchan in tow in the back, dragging the half knocked out, half dazed villains with him. Even if Sehyoon is the one with the thighs, Yuchan is somehow the strongest out of all of them. Maybe it’s the remnants of some other power in his soul, something that got beaten out by his shifting before it could develop to its full potential.

The media are waiting for their exit, kept at bay by the police tape but not deterred by it in the slightest, snapping pictures and throwing out questions like German festival caravans throw out candy.

“Did you rescue those people? What’s your names? Are you illegal or registered? Is the police authorising these activities?” All Junhee does is look at them blandly, any twist to his lips hidden under his mask, and raise a hand to acknowledge the presence of the reporters. Otherwise, though, he disregards them, and the rest of them follow his lead. Donghun looks back over his shoulder. Sehyoon and Yuchan both seem tense under all the attention, Sehyoon ducking his head and Yuchan reaching up a few times to fix his hair as he goes. Donghun sympathises; he’d rather not have all this flash in his eyes. It’s almost disorienting.

At the end of the pathway cleared by the police tape there’s a small congregation of police and firefighters, watching cautiously as they approach. As soon as they’re in range, three of the police spring into action, hurrying forward to take the hostage takers off of Yuchan’s hands. Donghun watches for a tight bun pulled back around a severe face, and as soon as he spots it, he drags Junhee and Sehyoon over. Sehyoon looks a little reluctant to part from the little boy whose scraped cheek he’d tended to, but he doesn’t protest too much.

“You’re back,” Officer Hu comments, one eyebrow quirked in a not quite readable expression. Donghun would like to think she’s impressed, or any emotion that doesn’t lead to them being thrown in a cell for unlawful application of powered force. “Did you check…” She trails off as someone steps up next to them.

“We’re okay,” Fariha says, smiles, and then Officer Hu gets an armful of clingy daughter tugging at her chest lapels from where she’s perched on her other mother’s arm.

“Good,” Officer Hu says a little thickly, and suddenly, the situation seems way too intimate and personal for Donghun and any of the others to be a part of, even though it only takes her a few seconds before she’s collected herself again, the picture of professionalism except for where she’s clutching her wife’s hand, likely seeking reassurance as much as she’s giving it. “I… well, thank you,” she continues, eyes trained on Byeongkwan and Yuchan who’d joined them. “You should probably go now, though, before anyone gets any bright ideas. I’ll get some form of compensation to you, if that’s necessary? The office does have funds for these kinds of situations.”

They all look at each other, a little confused until Junhee gives a little shake of his head.
“That won’t be necessary. Vigilantes don’t exactly work for pay, do they?”

Officer Hu nods.

“Oh, you go, then. And… thank you, again. You lot did good today, for a lot of people.” There’s a moment of solemn silence. Then, Junhee puts a hand on Donghun’s shoulder and ushers them all away from the scene, luckily unseen by the reporters currently busy with the police.

“So,” Byeongkwan says once they all duck around a corner.

“So?”

“What do we do now?”

Junhee thinks about it for a second. “We go home and shower, I’d suppose.”

“That’s it?” Byeongkwan deflates, and so does Yuchan. Even Donghun feels a little put out. It feels a little anticlimactic, just letting the day end like this. The sun is a little lower in the sky, and with a start he realises that they’ve spent a considerable amount of time in there. “That can’t be it,” their speedster complains as Yuchan nods his head vigorously next to him. “We need to do something to celebrate properly!”

“And what would that be?” Junhee asks. His arms are crossed cautiously in front of his chest.

Byeongkwan looks at Yuchan. Yuchan looks at Byeongkwan. After a second, they both take a breath and look at Junhee.

“Movie night!” they exclaim in unison.

“Absolutely not.”

Junhee, as Donghun well knows, will not be getting his way today.
coalescence

Chapter Summary

coalessence;

(n.) the process of coming or growing together to form one thing or system

Chapter Notes

so, how’s everyone feeling after the comeback? did you guys enjoy it? personally black and blue ended me;; the best late birthday present i could’ve asked for woop

no new warnings for this chapter, aside from a little swearing and dumb boys fighting.
also a bunch of cheesy shit sorry abt that

The loft’s common area is not usually what anyone might consider ‘homey’. The others always complain about that, and Junhee always remains steadfast in his interior design choices. This place doesn’t need to feel like a home, after all. It will never truly be one.

Still, their two youngest are getting carried away with acquisitions for their impromptu movie night and for once Junhee doesn’t feel like he should be stopping them. After all, as Donghun had kindly pointed out to him as he pulled him aside earlier, “we’re all supposed to be happy about not dying. Don’t fuck it up for us.” He’d fight it, usually, but to be honest he’s a little worn out from today as well as it all ended up going. Some days it’s best to take a back seat and relax a little as the chaos continues around him.

From his position, comfortably sitting on one end of their reasonably spacious white leather couch in front of the TV, he can see all that’s going on if he twists his body just right. Of course, he’s just reading his book, he doesn’t really care about what these people are up to but if he happens to look up once or twice, well. Then that’s that. Right now it’s blessedly peaceful, Yuchan and Byeongkwan out on a snack run while Sehyoon quietly preps some food in the kitchen. He’s doing that a lot, taking on domestic tasks without so much as a peep in protest. Junhee wonders how he can be so malleable, yet so quietly hostile all at the same time. Well, he does almost everything except for going near Frosty, but Junhee doesn’t like that either so he supposes he doesn’t have much room to judge.

The front door opens, then, and through it pour two boys with their arms full of more grocery bags than they should actually physically be able to carry. A voice at the back of his mind wonders how expensive all this was. He’d given them his card to take along– not that he doesn’t know that they routinely steal it whenever they need anything anyway. You’d think none of them had any money to their name.

His eyes fall to Yuchan, laughing happily as he sets his bags down on the kitchen counters, grabbing a few packages to turn over in his hands curiously. Maybe some of them actually don’t have very much, actually. If anything. As long as his credit card finds its way back into his wallet by the end of
the day, he supposes he shouldn’t mind too much.

“Did you guys get everything?” Donghun asks once he emerges from his room, doing god knows what. Probably analysing every step they took in the hostage building in immense depth. Junhee really wouldn’t put it past him. “That’s… a lot of stuff.”

“It’s all good stuff,” says Byeongkwan, wholly unrepentant as he shrugs. “Plus, most of it doesn’t go bad fast, and Yuchan said he hasn’t eaten any of these things before, so I decided we had to buy everything.” Yuchan nods along to his words, clutching a bag of caramel popcorn to his chest, and with a sigh, Donghun relents.

“As long as Junhee doesn’t complain, I guess… But let’s not have these lying around next year, got it?”

“Yes, dad!” Yuchan and Byeongkwan sing in unison, and Donghun leaves them be with a private little huff to himself.

“It’s still so weird you’ve never had popcorn,” Byeongkwan tells Yuchan as they go to work unpacking everything and preparing snack bowls. “Like, popcorn is a universal experience, dude. Were you raised in a cult?”

Yuchan just ducks his head with a sheepish smile and clears his throat. “Not really, no,” he says in such an evasive manner that even Byeongkwan gets the hint and moves on.

Not for the first time, Junhee wonders just what exactly Yuchan has gone through in his life. Not that it… matters, really. He’s not going to listen to these peoples’ sob stories and become attached. That’s not how this is supposed to work. He’s just here to provide the headquarters, equipment, money and the luck. That’s all.

“Scoot over.”

Junhee looks up at Sehyoon, wiping his hands off on his thighs. “There’s plenty of room here,” he points out, and Sehyoon sighs before plopping down on the other end of the couch. “Frosty came into the kitchen,” he says, unprompted, as if that explained everything. In a way, it does.

They sit in silence for a while. Junhee isn’t particularly surprised; they don’t talk, barely to anyone else, and definitely not to each other. There’s no reason why that would have to change right now, even as they’re silently commiserating about having incredibly loud and energetic flatmates. Sehyoon shifts after a while, mouth opening like he wants to say something, but before he can, Yuchan leaps over the back of the couch and lands sprawled in the middle of it, clutching multiple smaller bags of snacks to his chest.

“What are we watching?” His grin is almost blinding in its radiance, and once again, Junhee doesn’t have the heart to shoot him down, so all he does is vaguely motion towards his DVD cabinet. Almost immediately, Yuchan drops the snacks and runs over to look, Byeongkwan not far behind. With a sigh, Sehyoon gets up to help Donghun bring the snacks to the living room.

“Do you have Netflix?” Byeongkwan calls over his shoulder.

“No.”

“Like, Amazon Video or Hulu or something?”

“No.”
“Do you own anything that’s not a documentary?”

“No.”

“God, you’re so boring,” Byeongkwan whines. “We can’t celebrate by learning about—” he snatches a random DVD case from the shelf, “—About the butter churning industry in Soviet Poland, that’s against the law!”

“And what law would that be?” Junhee asks, eyes trained on the little gap where the DVD has once stood.

“The law of my human rights, keep u—”

“Hey, Byeongkwan, what’s this?” Yuchan pokes his finger in the gap just as Junhee lets his head fall back. Great. He shouldn’t have let them near the shelf in the first place.

“Huh. Weird.” The two youngest look at each other for a second, then get to work removing the first layer of DVDs from their designated spots.

“You’d better put them back like they were before,” Junhee protests. It falls on deaf ears.

“Is that—”

“Let me see!”

“Is that…. Lion King?”

Junhee swears he’ll develop a headache in the next five minutes.

“I don’t get it though! These are all fun movies, why would you pretend to be boring like that?”

“Because I am boring, leave me alone.”

Tragically, the entire argument is clearly audible from the kitchen. It’s all a bit… much. Sehyoon sets down the popcorn bowl and sighs.

“Is this really what living here will be like?” He’s really mostly talking to himself, yet Donghun still pats him on the back briefly as he passes by.

“We’ll all get used to it. It’s better than the awkward silences at any rate.”

Privately, Sehyoon disagrees, yet he grabs some more snacks and carries them over to the living room, where someone had set up a tiny, cheap Ikea table to serve as their snack station. Where they’d got it from, Sehyoon does not know. Junhee’s storage room is dark and filled with mysteries, or so it appears to him.

“Oooo, Kingsman, I love that one!”

Sehyoon has no idea what Kingsman is. Frankly, he’d much rather sleep for a while than listen to everyone’s yelling for two more hours. Hopefully they’re the types to be quiet during a movie.

(Who is he kidding. Byeongkwan and Yuchan are absolutely not even remotely the types to do something like that.)
“Wait,” says Byeongkwan, and from behind him, Sehyoon can see Junhee tense a little bit. A minuscule fraction of an amount, undetectable if you’re not particularly in tune with how people look when they’re uncomfortable.

“Wait wait wait.”

Junhee clears his throat.

“Is this…. why you wear suits all the time? And the u– holy shit, the umbrella. Oh my god. Holy shit.” Byeongkwan legitimately sounds like he’s in awe, like the secrets of the universe have unfurled and presented themselves before him. It’s just Junhee, though, sitting on the couch in a slightly wrinkled dress shirt and suit pants, squinting at Byeongkwan like he’s close to throwing him out the loft right now. He might as well be, honestly.

“Drop it, Byeongkwan,” he says. Somehow his voice isn’t quite as commanding as usual. Nobody really seems to mind him where they’d usually frantically scramble out the room at the first opportunity to leave him alone.

“Nope,” answers Byeongkwan, serene smile on his face, then: “I wanna watch this.”

“No you don’t.”

“I do! It’s been so long! Plus, Yuchan hasn’t seen this yet, have you?”

Yuchan blinks in confusion, thinks for a second, then shakes his head. “I haven’t.”

“Yuchan hasn’t seen anything, I don’t think that counts right now.”

“But… I want to see it?” He sounds a little uncertain; whether it’s because he really wants to see it, or because he really didn’t want to until Byeongkwan started jabbing him in the side insistently, Sehyoon will probably never know. In any case Yuchan is pouting now, hugging Byeongkwan’s arm to his chest, eyes all big and sparkly. It’s the look that even gets Sehyoon all soft, and he seriously thinks about intervening until Junhee rolls his eyes and slumps back into the couch.

“Fine,” he says, “Suit yourself.”

Junhee not being an utter asshole is a rare thing to witness.

They all end up squishing themselves onto the big couch. There’s a matching armchair right there, and the floor isn’t exactly cold or uncomfortable, but it only takes a little whining from Yuchan about not wanting to exclude anyone for them to at least somewhat try to all fit. It’s hard though, getting five grown people to sit on a couch meant for three, and Sehyoon gets horribly squished in between Byeongkwan and the armrest until someone takes mercy on him by unceremoniously shoving Byeongkwan half on Sehyoon’s lap, to copious protests by the two but relieved sighs by everyone else.

“Your elbow’s uncomfortable,” Sehyoon tells him evenly, if quietly.

“Sorry,” Byeongkwan mutters and adjusts. It’s still not the best, and Sehyoon knows his right leg will be aching like hell come tomorrow, but it’s fine enough for now.

“So what’s Kingsman about, anyway,” asks Yuchan from in between mouthfuls of popcorn. Can’t even wait for the DVD selection screen to play to eat, apparently.
“See, when an old man and his manners love each other very much—”

“Can you shut up for one second?” Junhee sounds… irritable. He always does, though. Not much of a change. “Just watch the movie. Please.”

“You just don’t want to miss any of your favourite scenes~” Byeongkwan drawls. Despite it, he settles down, half of his back pressed against half of Sehyoon’s torso and arm. It’s a dull burn, his body heat, little pinpricks of sensation travelling throughout. It’s uncomfortable. It’s also mildly pleasant, though. Sehyoon elects to not think about it for now. Or ever, preferably.

As he could have told anyone beforehand, movie experiences aren’t exactly a quiet affair with these types of people around. Byeongkwan comments on everything, Yuchan chews with his mouth open, Donghun tries patiently to explain things, so they all end up talking all over each other and the movie, and Sehyoon is this close to just bolting. There’s a restlessness coiling in his stomach, his ears physically trying to shut out all the noise. From the set of Junhee’s shoulders, he feels quite the same.

It doesn’t happen for a while, but it does happen, eventually. When Byeongkwan starts outright laughing at one of the fight scenes, where the character defeats some thugs in a bar, Junhee bristles.

“Manners make– Ju–” Byeongkwan wheezes out, “This is so something you would– Have you ever said that to anyone? Actually, I’ll bet money on it right now, I–”

“Would you just shut up,” Junhee growls, shoves himself off the couch with a force that jostles Donghun and sends a popcorn bowl flying, and storms off towards the kitchen.

Aside from the movie soundtrack playing, it’s awfully quiet now. And awkward. God, so awkward.


“I’ll go,” Donghun mutters and gets up.

Donghun finds Junhee sulking in the kitchen, arms crossed over his chest as he glares daggers at the coffee machine. There’s a beat of silence as Donghun finds himself thrown off course by the force of Junhee’s pout and his fingers clenched in his sleeves in the soft evening darkness.

“What is it?” Even if he’s angry, he still tries to keep his voice down, and Donghun matches him in turn.

“Just wanted to see how you’re doing.”

“Oh?” Junhee exhales, looks at the floor and reaches absentmindedly for a tea bag to toy with. “I’m pissed, you didn’t have to come in here to hear that.” Funny that—he sounds more resigned than anything. Donghun has seen him angry before. This isn’t angry. This is just kind of… sad.

“You know he didn’t mean to make you feel bad, right?” Donghun asks as he sidles up to the counter opposite the one Junhee is leaning against. “I think he was just trying to tease you. In a friendly way.”

“Well, he fucked that one up,” Junhee grumbles. He even sniffs disdainfully for effect, but soon enough his shoulders slump again. “Listen, don’t tell them this, but it’s just a sore subject, alright?”

“I think they all figured at this point.”
Junhee glares at him. Donghun grins and slowly, cautiously, like peeling back a layer of paint, Junhee returns it.

“You didn’t read my mind to find out why I got mad, right?”

“Would I do that?” He’d considered it. Strongly considered. But maybe the trust of his friends is more important than satisfying his own curiosity this once.

“Then maybe I’ll tell you what it was about one day,” says Junhee before he reaches forward, gives Donghun a friendly pat and makes his way back out of the kitchen.

“Remember, friends. That’s what you are,” Donghun says to his back. The shrug he gets in response is somehow rather fitting.

Donghun watches as Junhee goes to sit back down, stealing Byeongkwan’s popcorn in the process to loud, entirely half-hearted complaints. He doesn’t quite fit in with the rest, he never has, but they’re all laughing and Byeongkwan is awkwardly patting his shoulder so he figures it’s alright. This is the best outcome. It’s not exactly perfect, but it’s as close as they can get.

His gaze falls to Sehyoon, who frowns down at his hands.

Well. Maybe not perfect for all of them. But they’ll work on it.
Morning greets them with biting sunlight and cricks in the neck.

Sehyoon panics just a little bit when the first thing he feels upon waking is a pile of limbs. There’s legs pressed against his, someone’s hand is grabbing at his shirt and Byeongkwan is practically drooling all over his shoulder. The shared body heat is warm and so thoroughly alien to him that he quickly extricates himself from his place on the couch, taking a few steps back as he does so. Byeongkwan slumps over a bit as he loses the structural support of Sehyoon’s shoulder, and he feels just the littlest bit bad about it.

Just a little.

It’s fine, he has to go pee anyway. And shower. It’s alright.

When he gets back, the rest of them are already awake, as much as they can be this early in the morning. There’s Donghun moving about in the kitchen nook, the coffee machine whirring as Byeongkwan and Yuchan raid the cupboards for the rest of the snacks they’d bought. Junhee, with a puffy face and the worst case of super-saiyan bedhead Sehyoon’s ever seen on anyone, looks blearily at the TV as he idly clicks in between channels for anything interesting. It’s weird to see the man so out of his element, unpolished and acting like a regular human being, but then again they had all seen him cry a little bit at Lion King yesterday, so he supposes there’s actually a human heart under the facade.

Not that that should interest him at all. He’s not here to build interpersonal relationships or anything.

Anyway.

Sehyoon grabs an apple and sits down next to Yuchan and Byeongkwan, already halfway into their leftover mini pretzels. Just then Donghun emerges from the kitchen and passes one of the two coffee cups he’s holding to Junhee, who grabs at it blindly and mutters what could maybe, with a lot of goodwill and leniency, be considered adjacent to a thank you.

“None for us?” Byeongkwan asks through a mouthful of slightly stale popcorn.

“Get your own,” Junhee grumbles, and Donghun just shrugs as he sips at his own.

They sit like that in silence, respectable distances restored after whatever possessed them to use each other as blankets and furnaces just hours before, watching as Junhee flips through boring channel after boring channel. Who would’ve thought there’s nothing interesting going on at 9am on a Thursday?

“-this jewellery collection, simply sublime, why don’t you tell us mo-”

“-the Huns began their war of conquest-”

“-the most delicious way to start your day-”

“-politician Daniel Lim has been found dead in his ho-”

“-masked vigilantes helped secu-”

“Wait, wait, go back.”

“What?”
“I think that was us just now. Go back.”

Junhee frowns in confusion, but does click away from the nature documentary on right now. The TV screen flickers a little, and, huh. Yeah. That’s their faces alright.

Seeing themselves from the perspective of the cameras is a little surreal, honestly. There’s Junhee and Donghun up front, masks up and hair down, trying to get the reporters to take a step back, and the herd of hostages just behind them. They manage to show a quick clip of each of their obscured faces before the program switches to some kind of discussion panel.

“So what we have seen is obviously a big development for the city’s powered community,” says an older woman in a pinstripe suit, “but is it a good or a bad one? Hank, what are your thoughts?”

“Yes, well, see, the issue is that we don’t know anything about these young men. Sure, they helped secure the situation, but we have no idea how potentially dangerous they could be, or if they’re even on the general public’s side to begin with, and–”

“Plus, they’re acting outside of the jurisdiction of the law,” adds a third panelist, “and for all we know, they’re not even registered. We need accountability, that’s why we have the police force.”

“Not like the police force always works that well with its corruption–”

Junhee lowers the volume a little. “They’re opinionated,” he states dryly.

“We’re not doing anything wrong though, right?” Yuchan’s doing this thing where he recedes back into himself when he doubts himself, hunched over and all, and damn Sehyoon wishes he’d paid less attention, because now he’s worried and that won’t help anyone.

“We’re not,” Donghun answers him quietly, arm stretching out behind Byeongkwan’s back to scratch at their youngest member’s neck. “We might not exactly be legal in all we do, but we have good intentions. That’s all that matters in the long run.”

“Unless we get arrested.”

“You have too much money to ever get arrested, Junhee, you know that. You could pay bail in, like, a millisecond.”

“The child is right, you know,” Sehyoon mutters, which earns him popcorn spilled on his lap and Byeongkwan reaching over to smack his shoulder in retribution. He snorts. Idiot.

Junhee turns the TV volume back up again.

“–the eyewitness accounts of victims present at the scene certainly clear up a lot of questions the viewers might have about what exactly it is that these vigilantes are able to do. What do we think?”

“Well, we still don’t know a lot. The shapechanger and the speedster are fairly obvious, of course, but there’s three more who we really can’t quantify just yet.”

“One of those three is said to be a healer. By eyewitness accounts, of course.”

“But a healer with an incredibly atypical manifestation. I don’t know about you, but all high-profile healers I’m aware of have a different type of presentation that absolutely falls out of line with this person so far.”

Sehyoon hasn’t felt properly anxious in a long time. It’s not like he’s forgotten the pit in his stomach,
or the acidic feeling of his stomach turning, or the cold when he’s being put on the spot, when there’s too much spotlight on him, when eyes turn to look and analyse and tear apart. But it hasn’t happened in a long time, and for some reason, foolishly, he thought he didn’t have to feel this way anymore. At least not as much as he used to.

He clears his throat.

Hugs his torso.

Looks away.

Even without mind reading capabilities he knows that Donghun is trying to catch his eye, so he resolutely keeps staring at the wall instead.

The TV speakers fall silent once more. Junhee must’ve turned it off.

If anyone were to ever invent a way to taste tension, it would be one of them right now.

“I have no idea what they were talking about,” he says. “There’s nothing weird about what I do.”

Next to him, Yuchan shuffles a little before a weight leans against his side. “We know that,” Yuchan mutters quietly. “We know, and we trust you. They just don’t know what it’s like. Plus, we’re all weird anyway, so it wouldn’t matter if you were, too.”

We trust you.

Do they, though? Do they really?

Should they?

Sehyoon sighs and shifts, but doesn’t shake him off. It’s not like he doesn’t appreciate the effort. It just doesn’t make him feel any better.

“Anyway, though,” says Donghun, forcibly cheery. Even if he wasn’t a mind reader he would still be very much aware of… this. And Sehyoon both appreciates and resents it.

“Anyway. That’s us on the news, huh.”

“It’s kinda weird.”

“But fun!”

“Since we’re at that point, however the hell we got here,” Junhee says, “we should probably think of a team name. Like Donghun wanted earlier. Just something for people to call us by that isn’t ‘powered vigilantes’.”

Donghun hums. “That’s actually a decent idea, yeah. Does anyone have ideas?”

Silence, again.

God, this is awful.

“Uuuuuuh,” Byeongkwan utters intelligently, “um. Awesome Hero Boys?”

“No,” Junhee says.
“Masked Avengers!”

“Nope.”

“Justice League?”

“Isn’t that copyright infringement?”

“Guys!” It’s taken Yuchan a minute but he’s back to his cheery self, bouncing on his seat and—apparently—brimming with ideas. “Guys, okay, so. We’re going on adventures basically, right? To fight evil and stuff. So we’re the Adventure…. Uhhhh…”

It’s quiet again. Awkwardness: the leading killer of friendships worldwide.

“Go on,” comes a gentle encouragement from Donghun, “Adventure?”

“Well, the adventure is reaching out to us, usually, so. Adventure is calling… something.”

“Something?”

“Um. People? Us? Emotions? I don’t know, why is this so haaard…” There’s a plaintive whine in his voice that for one Sehyoon can absolutely identify with.

“So what, Adventure Calling Emotions?”

“Uh. Kinda?”

More quiet.

“Actually that’s weird, forget about it.”

“No, no, it’s the best idea we have,” Byeongkwan protests, “plus, it’s kind of cool!”

“It’s really not,” mutters Sehyoon. It isn’t. It’s cheesy.

Junhee sighs.

“Tell you what,” he says, “let’s go with ACE instead. It’s shorter.”

“W–wait, hold on.” Never has Yuchan been this confused. “You’re… accepting one of my ideas?”

“Not really, just improving on i–”

“That means you liked some of it though. Oh my god? Kwannie, hold me!” And dramatically he swoons in Byeongkwan’s arms, who’s laughing too hard to provide any actual support in holding him up, and they slowly slide to the ground this way, yelling something about a Rose and a Jack.

Weird.

Sehyoon looks up and meets Donghun’s eyes across the couch. He wishes he hadn’t done that.

“ACE okay with everyone?” Donghun asks everyone, except he’s only asking Sehyoon, and he’s not asking about their team name at all.

“It’s alright,” Sehyoon says, even though it isn’t. Still Donghun nods at him and drops it.

“ACE it is, then. I’ll contact some news stations about it so they can work it in later.”
And with that, Sehyoon decides it’s time to take his leave. At least an hour of silence should be afforded to him at some point, right? That’s not too much to ask.

He leaves.

He tries very hard to not feel lonely when nobody follows him.

Still, living with other people makes human contact kind of a necessity if you don’t want to creep around in the dead of night to get anything done. (Which Sehyoon would be more than alright with, mind you, it’s just that it’s slightly inconvenient. He would know, he spent his first two weeks in the apartment like that, but even an emo can miss the sun some days.)

Human contact, in this case, means an overgrown puppy holding a smaller puppy following him around everywhere.

“Sehyoooooon,” he whines.

“No.”

“But Sehyoooooon!” Sehyoon looks back for one second, and wasn’t that a mistake: Yuchan’s pouting, cheeks puffed out and all. It’s lethally adorable.

“I said no.”

“But please, I need someone to help me bathe her and Byeongkwan doesn’t know how and Donghun is busy and Junhee doesn’t want to, so–”

“Well, I don’t want to either.” And that’s the truth, bitter as it is. He doesn’t want to. He can’t.

“Please?” He’s still looking at Yuchan, and suddenly there’s a bunch of fur in his face, something pawing at his chin, and suddenly his stomach goes cold and he can’t breathe he can’t breathe he can’t–

He pushes Yuchan away.

“I told you, stop! Fuck off! I said no, so leave me alone with your Frosty shit!”

And he turns and runs, not for the first time, and not for the last.

Yuchan’s stricken face is clear as day in his mind even an hour later, but he’s too busy breathing into his cupped hands and keeping his thoughts at bay to examine how it made him feel. Or how he made Yuchan feel.

Fuck, he probably messed up a lot.

There’s some shouting, the banging of a door, and Yuchan rushes back into the common area with a scrunched up face and tears in his eyes, and Byeongkwan is immediately on high alert.

“Hey, hey, come here,” he says, waits until Yuchan sets Frosty down in the midst of her toy pile, and then gathers him up in a hug. “What’s wrong, what happened, shh, it’s alright. Don’t worry. It’ll be fine.”
“H–he just,” Yuchan barely gets out as he’s being led to sit on the couch, “he just. I just wanted to make him feel better but I think he hates me. And Frosty. He hates me and he’s gonna make me get rid of Frosty even though I like her and–”

“Hey, no, he wouldn’t do that,” Byeongkwan mutters, even though he’s not so sure himself. Instead of admitting that, he just rubs Yuchan’s back soothingly. He hopes it’s soothing, at least. “Maybe he’s just stressed, right? Some people don’t take well to spending time with animals in general. He might be one of those?”

“What person doesn’t like animals, though?”

“I mean, you’re not wrong, but.” Byeongkwan clears his throat. “I don’t know, I just… I bet he didn’t mean it. He was still rude and he should apologise, but that doesn’t mean he hates you or Frosty, okay?”

“Ugghh,” Yuchan groans into Byeongkwan’s increasingly damp shoulder, “but are you sure? What if he does. I hate this. I hate everything. I’m so dumb, I shouldn’t even be crying. Fuck.”

“Is that your first swear word?”

Despite everything, Yuchan gives a wet chuckle. “Maybe?”

“It’s alright, man. Crying is fine. Just get it out and we’ll get you some more of those chocolates you like, yeah?”

“…Yeah.”

Byeongkwan smiles as he gathers a boneless pile of Yuchan against his side.

“Thank you. Love you.”

He sighs.

“I love you too, buddy. It’ll be fine.”

Despite having tried to justify Sehyoon earlier, Byeongkwan is more than ready to physically fight him the next time he emerges from his emo cave. Square up, throw down, fists against fists because how fucking dare he make their baby cry.

Not that Yuchan is a baby, but he’s their youngest and taking care of him just feels right. Maybe it’s a holdover from Byeongkwan’s family.

Old family.

Whatever.

In any case, he’s ready and primed to start shit, but when Sehyoon finally does come out, hair mussed and eyes so, so tired, Byeongkwan leaves it be.

He does glance meaningfully in Yuchan’s direction when he enters, though, and scowls a little for good measure. Never let it be said that Kim Byeongkwan lets being gay get in the way of protecting his friends from asshats. (Even if the asshat is another of aforementioned friends.)

“Oh, hey,” says Sehyoon, awkwardly hanging out on the stairs leading up to the second floor
landing that his room is on.

“Hey,” Byeongkwan answers flatly. Yuchan, meanwhile, tries very hard to drown himself in his lunchtime cereal.


“Any second now you’ll get it out, I’m sure,” Byeongkwan snarks. Sehyoon glares at him. Somehow, it doesn’t have the usual impact.


Yuchan sniffs a little. “Depends.”

“Because uh, Frosty’s toys are still very improvised? I guess? And I guess she’d maybe like new ones. Or a proper dog bed so she can hang around the couch more, I guess. Anyway, uh, I wanted to know if you have time if you want to come help pick some things out for her. Byeongkwan can come too, if he wants. If that’s alright.”

Byeongkwan blinks a little. Squints.

That’s not really Sehyoon, is it? Did he get taken over by a doppelganger? A nefarious shapechanger? There’s no way that’s really him.

But Yuchan is grinning all bright and happy, and disregarding his puffy eyes it’s actually really nice to see, so Byeongkwan lets it go for now.

“Sure, we have time! Can Frosty come?”

“To see what she likes, sure.”

“Sweet! Lady Frostington, honey, we’re going outside!” Yuchan bustles off in search of his sweet daughter, which leaves just Byeongkwan and Sehyoon, awkwardly looking at each other.

“You have issues, buddy,” Byeongkwan says.

“I know.”

“Well, luckily so do the rest of us. Just don’t yell at him again, yeah?”

“I won’t if he doesn’t shove a dog in my face again.”

They gaze at each other for a while until Byeongkwan breaks it by nodding.

“You did make that clear, I guess. Come on, the shops close in a few hours.”

Sehyoon miraculously follows without complaint, and Byeongkwan ignores the buzzing of the phone in his pocket as they leave.

Byeongkwan does like shopping. It’s not the worst thing in the world, and looking in all the windows is fun, but at some point travelling what feels like the length of the entire city tends to take a toll on one’s feet. Even if your literal job consists of running around to fight criminals. But at least Yuchan is happy, running around with Frosty and a giant bag of purchases without a care.
Sehyoon pays for all of it, which would be a lot more touching if he’d actually used his own money, but it’s the thought that counts. They all know Junhee will nag them about uneconomical use of team funds later, but it’s not like they’ll go bankrupt anytime soon. Or ever. So.

Two more specialised interior decoration stores and one ice cream each later, Yuchan sets down the bags and collapses straight onto a public bench.

“Aaaah, I’m tired…” he whines, the happy sort of whine that isn’t a complaint so much as a contented statement.

“You insisted on getting the fairy lights, now scoot over,” Sehyoon tells him and prods at Yuchan’s legs until he frees up space for all of them to sit on. “I can’t believe you got us to tag along for your furniture shopping?”

“If Lady Frostington deserves a nice bed, then I deserve a nice bean bag,” Yuchan states primly and folds his hands in his lap. The giant grin he’s sporting betrays his prim facade somewhat. “Really, though,” he says and leans to the side, just enough to knock his head against Sehyoon’s shoulder lightly, “thank you. This is nice. It’s like going shopping with my brothers, actually!”

“Do you have any?”

“Well. I have you guys, don’t I?”

For the first time in what seems like forever, there’s a tenderness in Sehyoon’s expression, a smile expressed mostly in the eyes, and it’s so warm that Byeongkwan has to look away before he says something stupid.

Brothers. Byeongkwan knows they’ve talked a little about this team being like a second little family, but…

His phone is burning a hole in his pocket.

He’s just not sure if being a family is a good idea, anymore.

“–wan?”

Byeongkwan blinks. Shakes his head. “What?”

“We’re going back,” Sehyoon informs him. There’s an inscrutable lack of an expression on his face, and his eyes flicker over the panes of Byeongkwan’s face attentively. Like he’s looking for something. Like he noticed something.

Byeongkwan clears his throat.

“Sure,” he says. “Let’s just pop in that gardening store you wanted and head off.”

“And the hairdye!”

“Right, that too! Come on, let’s get it.”

Junhee is thankful for the quiet that settled in the loft once the three of them had gone. It makes it easier to get work done; maybe he should invest in soundproofing for his room like he’d done with his workshop. He hadn’t had a reason before, but now his reason comes in the shape of two incredibly loud borderline-children that hang around the flat practically the whole day.
He’ll think about it. Right now, he’s just a little busy trying to sort out about six huge piles of paperwork and figure out what goes where.

Junhee, well, he’s always been a more old-fashioned type of guy. He understands the appeal of technology, uses it himself a lot, but there’s something about reading on a screen that’s inherently distracting to him, that makes him lose focus and where he’d been in the document. Paper is unwieldy, impractical and kills the environment, but it also saves Junhee’s last remaining brain cells that haven’t been smoked out by Frosty’s habitual late-night barking.

The issue with all this paper is that it’s everywhere, and there’s just so much of it. It comes with the territory of doing what he does, but still, he wishes there was a little less of it. Maybe he should hire a guy to take care of all his financial responsibilities. If he could find someone he’d trust enough to not fuck up his businesses doing so.

Maybe his trust issues are the problem? No, it must be everyone else who’s wrong. It’s fine.

He’s about halfway through reviewing this quarter’s preliminary report from the little two-shop coffee chain he’d set up two years ago when there’s a soft little knock on his door.

Right. Donghun’s still here. “Yeah?”

Donghun opens the door, but doesn’t enter. Good. “Hey, do you know where the spare kitchen towels are? I think I fucked this one up,” he says, holding up a towel that’s more a rag than anything, with stains and what seems to be a circular burn mark on one half.

“What did you even… actually, I don’t want to know. Try the little yellow box in the spare room, on the higher shelves somewhere.”

“Right. Thanks.” Donghun makes to leave, but pauses for a minute to look at Junhee struggling to find wherever he put the expense report. “If you need any help with that, let me know, yeah?”

“Yeah, yeah,” says Junhee, waving dismissively, and soon enough, the door closes and he’s left to his own devices again.

Fuck, he probably actually lost whatever it was he needed.

What was that again…?

And where’d he put his pen?

Some days he really does wonder how he’s come this far without accidentally selling all of his assets to a fake Ukrainian prince to get a share of fake Ukrainian prince money.

“Remember: friends. That’s what you are,” says a voice in his head that sounds either like Donghun or his conscience. The two have taken to sounding alike these days, and Junhee doesn’t really know what to make of it. Or what to make of his current train of thought, for that matter. No, actually, he’s fine. He can figure this out by himself.

Fifteen minutes later he’s taken more steps backwards than forwards and is consequently no further than he was when he started in the first place. In his head, Donghun clears his throat, and Junhee rolls his eyes as he gets up from his writing desk.

Point taken, he supposes.

“Donghun?” he asks into the space of the common area. The TV is still on, sound muffled a little,
and on the couch is Donghun, sprawled out and apparently napping. The blanket he’d been covering himself with has slid down, exposing his arms to the mildly cool air conditioned temperatures, and Junhee only hesitates for a second before reaching forward and tugging it back over his napping form, covering everything up to his chin. He even tucks the corners behind his shoulders a little, mindful of Donghun’s unconscious shuffling to not wake him. He probably shouldn’t disturb him right now.

He still would like to not suffer alone, though.

In the end, he scribbles something on a post-it note, pastes it on Donghun’s forehead and goes back to trying to figure out how to keep his places from going bankrupt within the week.

When Donghun shows up one hour later with two mugs of coffee and a sleepy smile on his face, neither of them bring up that this is the first time Junhee has reached out to anyone for help in all the time they’ve known each other. Donghun just sits, hands him his coffee, and gets right into sorting the documents with him in companionable silence.

It’s nice, this. Almost something he could get used to.

It’s dusk by the time Byeongkwan and the others arrive with all their purchases. When they’re all done unpacking at least the essential bits, both Frosty and Yuchan immediately slump down face first into their respective beds and brand-new cushioning, whining like they’ve not gotten any rest since the Bronze Age. He’d usually make sure Yuchan at least eats a little before passing out and drooling all over his new furniture, but for some reason he feels pretty drained as well, so all he does is give Donghun a nod in passing before climbing up to the bathroom and then shutting himself in his room. Until someone knocks, at least.

“Yeah?” he half-shouts, but really he’s just hoping whoever it is will go away.

The door cracks open a bit. So much for that.

Sehyoon peeks in quietly, then pushes the door open fully when he doesn’t see any immediate destruction. He’s carrying a tray with a steaming mug and two sandwiches on a plate that he gingerly sets down on the nearest desk.

“Donghun asked me to bring you this,” he says as he gestures in the general area of the food, “it’s tea and stuff. Since you haven’t eaten yet.” As much as he’s been trying all day to be friendly and forthcoming, there’s a certain stiffness in the set of his shoulders and the twist of his lips that betrays some amount of the uncertainty inherent to him in social situations. It shouldn’t be this reassuring, but it is. At least he’s still the same man as before.

“Thanks,” Byeongkwan says, and rolls over on his stomach. “That all?”

“I did also want to talk to you.”

Huh. That’s new. Nevertheless, Byeongkwan gestures towards an empty chair and waits for him to sit.

“You never talk to anyone, so I’m a little shocked? What’s it about?”

“Well. Uh.” Sehyoon grabs one of the sandwiches to pick at. “It’s about you, really? Oh, here,” he adds, holding the tray out to Byeongkwan when he makes grabby hands at it. The hunger is starting
to make itself noticeable at this point, just a little bit.

“Me?” Now there’s an answer he hadn’t expected.

“You… seemed off. Today, I mean. In general. And I know all of us would go to Donghun about stuff like this, when we’re feeling down, but I thought maybe it’d be nice to talk to someone who can’t read your mind for a change,” Sehyoon gets out in one big rush before he can change his mind about it all, and damn, but it’s adorable.

“You don’t have to make up for your Frosty thing by becoming everyone’s number one helper,” Byeongkwan points out, “but… I mean. I don’t know. There’s not much to tell.”

“This isn’t what that is. Go on, though?”

Byeongkwan looks down at his pockets. Pulls out his phone. The screen lights up with a few missed calls and a dozen or so text messages he hasn’t read yet.

“My, uh. My sister’s trying to call me.”

“Oh,” Sehyoon inclines his head. “That’s a good thing, no?”

Byeongkwan sighs. “Maybe,” he offers, but it’s a weak offering at best and they both know it. “It’s… we didn’t part on the best of terms. Me and my family, I mean. They wanted some things from me that I wasn’t exactly ready to… well, in any case, I just don’t know what to make of this. If she’s just missed me or if she’s trying to. Other things. You know.” He flips the phone around, up, down, twirls it in his hand as he speaks, gaze trained downward. There’s more he could say, there’s always more to the story, but as much as he likes Sehyoon…

Well. Maybe not now.

There’s a soft creaking as Sehyoon shifts in his chair.

“The way I see it,” he begins contemplatively, “is you can give her a chance. She can’t physically get you to do anything you’re uncomfortable with through a phone, right? Just answer one of her calls later. It’d be a shame if she just wanted to talk and you passed up on that because you were scared.” One side of Byeongkwan’s face is tingling. He doesn’t have to look up to know how intensely Sehyoon is staring at him. Byeongkwan pulls a face.

“Stop making sense.”

That tears a laugh out of Sehyoon, and they both relax a little. Byeongkwan takes a sip of his tea, lukewarm by now but still nice. There’s perks to having a mind-reader make your drinks, after all.

“Come on,” he says and pats the space on his bed beside him, “tell me how you got Junhee to not throttle you after looking at his bank account.”

“Bold of you to assume I’m still alive,” Sehyoon says in his best deadpan, and comes over to sit.

It’s midnight when Byeongkwan is finally alone with his thoughts. And by then, the red little ‘Jiwoo (5)’ in his call history doesn’t seem all that daunting anymore.
The first night in his bedroom, Yuchan wakes up gasping for breath with the sound of his heart thudding in his ears.

Sweat plasters his hair to his forehead, and his vision struggles to focus on anything. His mouth feels extremely dry. When he hovers his hand over the phone resting on his nightstand, the screen flashes a bright ‘2:34AM’ at him. His breath hitches in his throat; he tucks his knees up to his chest, pressing his head into them as though it will make the world disappear. It is not Yuchan’s first nightmare. In fact, they have been a regular occurrence for almost as long as he can remember. But they never grew any easier to manage. It sounds ridiculous to say you’re scared of the dark when you’re no longer a child, Yuchan supposes. He became so used to relying on the light to get any sleep that he almost dreaded his first night in a bedroom, especially when Donghun hummed a ‘goodnight’ before switching off the light.

In the complete darkness, Yuchan feels empty. Lonely.

He isn’t sure when morning came, but when he lifts his head up, early dawn sunlight is filtering through his curtains. There’s a moment wherein he turns to check the time on his phone once again, but finds a glass of water on his nightstand instead. Yuchan truly doesn’t remember it being placed there but, after a short delay, he drinks it all at once.

Over the following month, Yuchan finds himself staying awake rather than trying to sleep. On the few nights that his body demands rest, he wakes up with matted hair and tear-stained cheeks. Every single time, a glass of water rests on his nightstand.

There is only so long that Yuchan can manage without any actual sleep. Tonight is an especially bad night. When he wakes up, a cry escapes his throat. It’s so loud and sudden that Yuchan shoves his hands against his ears to block it out, forgetting where the noise is even coming from. Only once his vision settles does he calm down. At the creak of a floorboard, his head snaps to look at the door. Footsteps. A bolt of familiar dread hits him, throws him into his memories. Through his slightly blurry eyes, he can see a figure hovering in his doorway. A sharp pang of fear passes through him, makes his breath shudder in the ominous familiarity of the situation, but as his eyes adjusts, he realises- Sehyoon?
Sehyoon stands alert, clothed in a black hoodie with his hair messily shoved back. He looks a little out of breath, betrayed by a reddish tint across his cheekbones and his slightly short breaths. In one hand, he holds a glass of water.

“Sehyoon?” Yuchan whispers, swiftly wiping his damp eyes across the back of his forearm. The figure in the doorway hesitates, before taking swift steps further into the room and holding the water out to Yuchan, who takes it and starts to drink without any uncertainty. Sehyoon drops into a crouch, pulling something out of his hoodie pocket. Yuchan stops drinking to lean over the edge of his bed, curious. “What are you doing?” he asks, but his question is ignored. Instead, Sehyoon shoves the random object into the plug outlet beside Yuchan’s nightstand and flicks the switch.

Out of nowhere, the room lights up. There is a soft, golden-white glow emitting from the moon-shaped nightlight Sehyoon had plugged in. It covers the walls and ceiling of the room in a dusting of star-shaped lights. Yuchan's so busy staring that he hardly notices Sehyoon attempt to slip out of the open door. “Wait,” Yuchan says, causing Sehyoon to fall to a stop. Glancing back, Sehyoon offers the smallest, briefest of smiles- it is gone quickly, Yuchan could have imagined it. A moment later, and Sehyoon has disappeared, pulling the door shut behind him. “Thank you,” Yuchan says to the empty room, left in the warm light that basks his surroundings.

Maybe he can get some sleep tonight.
After they make a name for themselves with the hostage rescue, things get… quiet for a while. They settle into a routine: hang out at the apartment, punch people that need punching, and keep an ear out for anything serious happening. They still get brought up on TV sometimes, shaky in-action phone camera footage accompanied with speculation about their powers and motivations and the nature of ACE, but nothing quite as spectacular as that first day anymore.

Which is good. It gives them more room to breathe.

It does also make Donghun a little antsy. He knows it’s dumb to feel unproductive when there’s nothing to be productive about, but he can’t help but worry that this is it. This is what they were supposed to do and now they’ll be sinking back into obscurity.

All this work, for a bit of saved money. And some saved lives - which is good. But it’s not good enough, now that he’s gotten a taste for heroics.

So, all in all, things are quiet.

Even Junhee asking for his help is a cause for excitement these days.

“So,” Junhee begins, tapping away at his keyboard, “I have a favour to ask you.”

He’s still very formal though, even if they’ve been through this whole process at least once a week. At least these days he actively approaches him instead of Donghun having to needle him about his issues.

“Sure. Shoot.”

“I’d like you to go to a gala with me.”
Well. That’s unexpected.

“That’s unexpected?”

He can see Junhee huff and roll his eyes a little. “I just don’t want to go alone, because then people invite yourself to talk to you, and I don’t actually like any of them. I’d rather just not be going, but I sort of have to. Charity stuff.”

“Right.” Donghun nods. “So I’m your plus one?”

“Essentially.”

And this is a question that Junhee will not take well, most likely: “Do you think we could take the others with us too?”

Junhee’s eyebrow rises up.

So does his other.

“You want to unleash them in a gala? Of old rich businesspeople?”

“Well. That does sound pretty bad if put this way, but-”

“It sounds pretty bad period. That’s an awful idea.”

“I know, I know.” Donghun sighs and pushes his hair back. “I just, see, I think it’d be nice for all of us to get out again at some point. And who knows how they’d wreck your workshop if you’re gone for the night?”

Junhee measures him quietly.

“You’re going to tell them to wreck my workshop if I leave them, aren’t you.”

“Maybe?”

“...God, I hate you. Why do I even let you in my room.”

“Because you have the organizational skills of a toddler.”

Junhee’s eyes narrow, and Donghun ducks his head as he realises he’s crossed a border in his teasing. Even if they talk a little more, even if Donghun helps him out sometimes and Junhee repays him by not being as weirdly rude and cold to him, they’re still probably not quite friends yet. He keeps forgetting that.

“I’ll go talk to them about it, then. Sorry to keep you.”

“It’s fine,” Junhee sighs. “Just find all of you a good tailor, because I’m not letting you associate with me if you’re dressed in your old rental graduation suit. It’s bad for my image.” He waves Donghun off, then, and he goes.

Not without trying to figure out how much tailored higher-end suits for four people might cost, though. (Probably a whole lot. Probably more than what is in Donghun’s bank account now.)

“Has anyone seen Byeongkwan?”
Yuchan shrugs from where he’s sat on the floor, waving a ball in front of Frosty’s face. “Said he’s out today.”

“Again? Where’s he even going?”

“Don’t know,” says Yuchan, and is quickly sucked back into paying attention to his baby.

Unfortunately, Donghun muses as he suppresses his sigh and goes to pull out his phone, this is sort of par for the course these days. Ever since the movie night, that is. It’s not like Donghun expects all of the group to be available at all times, but if he could at least answer his texts from time to time? Children these days. Seriously.

Byeongkwan does return sometime in the afternoon, just after lunch. He’s a little flushed in the face and his hair is wind-blown, but he’s happy, and Donghun is willing to not pry any further.

“Guys,” he calls, “who wants to dress up fancy and go to a rich people event?”

Sehyoon isn’t really interested. Figures. Byeongkwan will bring him around, though.

Turns out what really brings Sehyoon around is the novelty of getting to pick out customised suits. He grumbles when they go shopping once again, all the way up until he has an employee call him sir and offer him champagne. It’s a shock to all of them except Junhee, who swiftly plucks a flute of it from the man’s hand and takes a drink.

“Byeongkwan, if you get that shade of orange, you can pay for the suit yourself,” he drawls with a critical glance at the catalogue of fabric swatches Byeongkwan is holding, conveniently flipped to some bright orange monstrosity with a golden leopard pattern. Donghun is not really one to judge fashion choices, evident in how he hasn’t forcibly dragged Byeongkwan into a season of Queer Eye yet, but even to his taste it’s a little… much. Not like Byeongkwan himself isn’t the definition of a little much, though. He himself already has a colour and cut in mind, not exactly a stranger to expensive clothes and charity functions, but it’s fun watching the rest of them run around and point out colours to each other like children in an amusement park. Even if it does take them hours to settle on anything at all.

“Can we just go,” Sehyoon complains loudly from downstairs. He’s been ready for a good while now, just threw on the suit that had been delivered and slicked his hair back. Everyone else is doing some weird fancy shit in their rooms, and while Sehyoon doesn’t particularly care about being on time he would strongly prefer not having to stand around and wait for everyone else to get their shit together.

Nobody gives any indication to have heard him. Typical.

His prayers are finally answered ten minutes later with Yuchan and Byeongkwan both emerging from the bathroom and thundering down the stairs, likely wrinkling the immaculately ironed suits already. Sehyoon has to admit they both look cute - Yuchan in a white suit and tie with a pastel pink shirt, hair fluffed up and curled just a hint, and Byeongkwan having settled on an orangey-red suit jacket paired with black. He looks a little bit like a traffic cone with his hair freshly re-dyed, but it works for him. However that’s possible.

(Maybe it’s the face. Maybe it’s just because he’s Byeongkwan and seemingly incapable of ever looking bad.)
“Oh,” Byeongkwan says when he catches sight of Sehyoon, “you look good.”

Sehyoon shifts on his feet and looks down. It’s not like he really made an effort, he just picked the most basic suit design available to be done with it. He can admit the pants show off his thighs well, but aside from that… “Uh. Thanks. I guess.” He clears his throat. For some reason, his cheeks are burning.

“Aw, you’re blushing,” Yuchan teases the second Sehyoon remembers that he can’t hide behind his hair anymore. This was the worst idea, people will be able to see him and perceive him as a being with material presence and then he’ll have to live with being remembered by people for things when he’d just rather sit at home in solitude.

“Hey.” There’s a feather-light touch on his elbow - Byeongkwan, who’s leaning closer, searching his face for something if his wide open eyes are anything to go by. “I’m sure they won’t mind if you wanna stay home instead.” There’s concern on his face, plain as day, and as always Sehyoon feels confused, taken aback, that it’s actually directed at him. He thinks of the apartment, how nice and quiet it would be all alone. Not even Frosty would be here, given into the care of a dogsitter for the evening. It would be perfect.

Next to Byeongkwan, Yuchan pouts dejectedly.

“It’s fine,” Sehyoon finds himself saying. “I’ll live.”

When did he become so whipped?

Before Yuchan can turn their impromptu gathering into a cuddle-fest, Donghun finally exits his own room. He looks good as well, clad in an obviously expensive three-piece navy suit, a pair of custom silver cufflinks gleaming when he goes to adjust his tie. He’d definitely thought about what he wanted. It’s good.

“Where’s Junhee?” Donghun asks as he reaches them.

“Still getting ready, for some reason.” Byeongkwan shrugs. It’s really been a while. If Sehyoon didn’t know Junhee at all, he’d wonder if he fell asleep under his work desk or something.

“Sehyoon,” Donghun calls quietly, a hand coming to rest on his forearm. Everyone’s so awfully touchy today, what’s with that? “Did you water your plants today? It might be too late to do it when we’re back.”

“Oh.” Those. Yeah. Sehyoon shrugs. “They died on me already. I just haven’t thrown them out yet.” The words come out a little flat, just the wrong side of stilted, and Donghun sighs before he draws back. Sehyoon doesn’t know what he’d expected.

He’s never been good at keeping things alive, after all.

“Junhee!” Yuchan is obviously bored without Frosty around - he keeps fiddling with the cuffs of his jacket sleeves and pacing around. He’s almost as bad as Byeongkwan when he hasn’t gone fast for a few days. “We’re all ready to go!”

“Stop being impatient, god,” comes a grumble from across the loft just before Junhee’s door opens and the man strides out. Good. They’re all ready now.

Except Donghun, for some reason, is frozen in place. Staring? Yes. Definitely staring.

It’s not like Sehyoon doesn’t know why - they’re probably all a little taken aback. They’d all
expected Junhee to sport one of his usual greyscale suits, maybe change out the cuffs or wear a fancy
tie. They had not expected metallic purple layered over black and hair so artfully tousled it could go
on the front of a fashion magazine. And gloves. Not really.

Still, though. Sehyoon nudges Donghun’s side with his elbow, which seems to be enough to call him
from his trance.

“Oh. That’s a fancy suit,” says Donghun. Behind him, Byeongkwan goes to cover his face in what is
probably embarrassment.

“...Yeah.” Junhee looks down at himself. There’s a hint of purple waistcoat peeking out from behind
black lapels, his shoes are polished better than some peoples’ cars and his bowtie had had a four-
figure price tag. He adjusts his glasses. “It’s fine. Our driver is waiting downstairs, let’s go.”

“You hired a driver?”

“Driving yourself makes you look poor, I’ve learned. Come on, we’ve wasted enough time.”

“You’re the one who wasted our time,” Byeongkwan points out, not entirely unkindly, and he has a
point.

The charity venue is on the other side of the city, and traffic is thick as usual for Friday evenings,
when all the commuters are trying to get home from work. Their car is stuck in traffic for a while; for
every minute it remains still the tension in Junhee’s shoulders coils tighter. Donghun supposes
Byeongkwan and Yuchan loudly playing car spotting games in the back seat doesn’t really help
things. Sehyoon, in the middle row next to Donghun (yes, the car is that big, for whatever reason)
has dozed off, face leaning against the black-tinted glass of the windows.

Just as Donghun starts thinking about what to say so Junhee won’t accidentally rip his hair out from
the stress practically emanating from him, their driver slows and pulls into a side street, up to a
parking lot next to a looming villa and garden laid out before it. “We’re here,” she says gruffly, the
only words she’d spoken all night after confirming their destination, and pulls up to one of the red-
uniformed valets collecting keys and parking cars. “I’ll stay outside until you would like to be driven
back.”

“Thank you,” Donghun tells her before they all exit. Junhee stays silent, simply dropping the key in
the young valet’s hand as soon as everyone’s out of the car. Sehyoon blinks blearily, suppresses a
yawn - his eyes have puffed up a little from sleep, and some of his hair has come out of its gelled
form. He’s really not the type for events like these, Donghun thinks.

“All right. Before we go in - just behave yourselves, please. If there’s anything, find Donghun or me.
Preferably me, unless I’m talking actual business with someone, in which case… figure it out
yourself.” Junhee exhales, smooths his hands over his lapels. He seems just a little nervous, which
Donghun doesn’t quite get - surely he must be at these kinds of events often. He certainly acts like it,
after all. But Junhee doesn’t give him a moment to think about it, instead simply turning towards the
mansion in a sign for everyone else to follow his lead.

The building is rather gorgeous from where Donghun is standing. Tall, solid, built of stone with a
well-maintained and polished facade. The garden is perfectly kept, trimmed hedges and neat rose
bushes framing perfectly symmetrical gravel walkways with a fountain in the middle, just in front of
the wide stairs leading up to the double doors framed by stained-glass windows and iron framings.
This looks a little like an upper-scale museum, he figures, or a rich person’s house straight out of a
It’s almost overwhelming in its pleasantness and grandeur in a way that makes Donghun feel… uneasy.

It’s just Junhee’s stress rubbing off on him, he tells himself.

Entering the villa after showing their invitations to security, it looks about as grandiose from the inside as it does from the outside. A great hall extends in front of them, chandeliers illuminating the way to where a giant marble staircase goes up, then splits in two and curves into a gallery, doors branching off to other parts of the building here and there. It’s filled with people - mostly middle-aged or a little older, immaculately dressed. None of these people would seem out of place at a classical opera.

Donghun looks down at himself and then at Byeongkwan’s hair, almost like a shining beacon in the midst of all this black, blue and grey. If they’d fit in at an opera, though… that’s another matter.

Servants weave their way through the crowd intermittently, sporting trays with champagne and little snacks. One of them walks past them. When he’s gone, Yuchan is inconspicuously chewing on something, a pleased look on his face. “These fish things are great!” he declares.

“At least ask the man,” Donghun chides, “don’t just steal from his tray.”

“But he looked stressed, I didn’t wanna bother him…”

He’s not exactly wrong - all the staff are looking rather run-down, both inside and outside of the estate. Donghun doesn’t need to focus very hard at all to sense the stinging feeling of their stress, peppered in between the carefully neutral pleasantness of the general crowd. Nobody really seems to pay them any mind, which… is what Donghun expected. It’s what he was used to, too, in a way, back then. Junhee, on his part, seems rather adjusted as well - he just gets the attention of a butler, who hurries over to inquire if they need anything taken care of or coats to be taken to the coatroom. As they talk, Donghun looks around and quietly wanders off. He’s just going to see what these people are like, he figures. He doesn’t have to enter into any big political discussions.

“Personally, I do think universal healthcare is a good thing,” Donghun insists about half an hour later. His face is a little flushed - not from alcohol, he’s only had half a glass (that’s actually getting pretty stale) but rather from the effort it takes to not slap his conversational partner over the head.

“In my opinion the concept of using taxes to subsidize costs just puts too much burden on the healthy and takes money they would need just as badly-”

“That’s why looking out for one another in solidarity is so important to do in our society and politics to ensure that these needs can be met-”

“Donghun!” Yuchan sidles up to him, carrying three mini pastries in a napkin in one hand and some champagne in the other that Donghun swiftly plucks out of his fingers. Yuchan just pouts.

“You’re too young to drink.” With the other hand, he plucks up a pastry and shoves it in Yuchan’s mouth.

“I’m nineteen, that’s old enough!” Yuchan whines through a mouthful of pastry cream. He doesn’t seem actually upset, though, so Donghun just pats his hair with a grin. The man he’d been arguing with has gone at this point, off somewhere else to extol the virtues of capitalism and every-man-for-himself-mentality. Good. Donghun doesn’t have to listen to that shit.
Instead, from across the room, a woman is eyeing him. Even among the high-class guests, she stands out in the way her body is poised, the way her lacquered heels are reflecting the light. She’s a bit younger than the rest, maybe in her late thirties or early forties, with blonde curled hair and red lipstick going well with the red bodycon dress she’s wearing. Rings sparkle on her finger as she lifts up her glass of champagne to sip at it. All the while, her eyes stay unerringly locked on Donghun’s face.

Donghun shivers a little. “Yuchan, where’s everyone else?”

“Junhee got held up talking to someone. Sehyoon’s probably asleep in a side room and Kwan is getting drunk at the bar. Why?”

The fact that even Yuchan has a better eye on their group than Donghun does worries him just a bit. “I should probably find Junhee, ask how long we’re going to stay…”

He goes to move, but before he can take too many steps, there’s a clicking of heels and something red slides into his field of vision. “Please, if I could have a moment, Mr. Lee?”

“Uh.” Donghun blanks for a second, but it’s a second that makes saying he’s busy way too awkward, so he just nods. “Sure, Miss…?”

“Isabella Adley, pleased to meet you.” She extends a hand adorned with rings and perfectly manicured red nails. Donghun takes it gingerly. This close, her blue eyes are piercing in their intensity. “I did not wish to disturb you, but I just needed to greet you and extend my condolences. Your parents were wonderful people.”

“That… that was years ago,” Donghun manages. A part of him knew someone would try to talk to him about it. He just wished it wasn’t so soon. “But they were. Thank you, I guess.”

“It seems to me you’re rather taking after them. I had the pleasure of working with them a few times on some miscellaneous projects. I’m glad to see you’ll be carrying their ideas onward.”

“Oh, no, that’s…” Donghun sighs. Well. He is technically doing that, just not…. Politically…. and he can’t really tell this woman that, now can he? “I’m just here with an acquaintance. I don’t really think all of this is for me.” It isn’t. It really isn’t. He wants it to be, but some things are better left to better people.

“Ah, Mr. Park? I saw you all come in together - I did want to go say hello to him as well, would you know where he is?”

Yuchan points him out to her. When the clacking of her heels goes under among the ambient noise of the talking crowds, Yuchan turns to Donghun. “Your parents?”

Donghun nods. “Let’s talk somewhere else.”

They find a quiet corner, aside from most of the crowd. Donghun would prefer ducking into one of the spare rooms, but that feels like an intrusion of privacy.

“So,” he begins, turning around and leaning heavily against the door. “I guess you want to know what happened.”

Yuchan shrugs. “Not if you don’t want to talk. I mean, I’m curious, but parents are sort of…” A touchy subject, Donghun finishes internally. Yuchan’s not wrong, but Donghun keeps being
surprised at how maturely he’s handling this particular situation.

“They…” He sighs. “They were great people. Cared for me, gave me a good life. Loved each other. When they found out I had…” he gestures to his head, “…they supported me a lot. They even started becoming active in social campaigning and were vocal in support of powered people and their issues. At some point they became proper political figures. I was all set to follow in their footsteps, you know. I was part of a few youth programmes but nothing extremely public at that point. I was preparing for a big project, then, when the call came through. Car accident. Weeks shy of my eighteenth.” While talking, he’s subconsciously drawn into himself, hunched over and tense. He doesn’t notice until Yuchan puts a hand on his back - not rubbing or soothing, simply a token of his presence. Donghun shakes himself and continues. “I dropped out of politics at that point. I just… couldn’t. I couldn’t do what they did. I still can’t.”

“I’m sorry,” Yuchan mutters. “I feel like I should’ve known who they were.”

“Well, you had your own issues to contend with, didn’t you?” Donghun gives him a slight smile, reaches out to ruffle his hair. “Don’t worry about it. Young people usually don’t pay attention to politicians. Junhee might know, but I don’t expect any of you to.”

“Still. Good parents deserve to be remembered.” Yuchan leans into him, gives him puppy eyes from where he’s semi-towering over Donghun’s hunched form. Who gave him the right to be so tall, anyway? “It sucks that an accident took that from you. You guys were probably a really good family.” A family I’d have died for, he doesn’t say, but Donghun understands all the same.

But there’s the thing, isn’t it? Donghun steels himself, looks at his feet stuck in prettily shined shoes, and utters a thought he’s never told anyone else in his life before.

“I wish I was sure it was an accident.”

Charity events are by nature uneventful until the actual charity donations start. Junhee gets roped into conversations, some more inane than others. By the end of it, both pockets of his trousers are stuffed with business cards and he’s made not a single significant connection at this entire event.

Well, there’s Adley, at least. She’d sidled up to him, told him Donghun had told her to say hello, and promptly lured him into a conversation on the social standing on powered people and the ethical ramifications of the newly proposed concept of government-mandated yearly activity reports on registered powereds. He finds himself agreeing with her on a lot of her arguments, silently noting the determination in her voice when she talks about the rights of powered people. He wonders what she’s doing at this specific charity event. Maybe he should ask her later - her card is sitting heavy in his pocket, together with the other ones but somehow feeling more significant.

There’s the clink of cutlery against glass from upstairs - their host, an elderly bearded man with a slight hunchback offers them all a genuinely warm smile, then launches into his pre-prepared welcomes and thank-yous. As this goes on, there’s a few subtle shifts of the crowd, and the rest of his group finds their way to him, at the very back of the crowd, just next to the entrance.

“The main event’s starting?” Donghun asks when he’s in earshot. Junhee nods; the rest of them all gather up around them. They probably look like a stoplight, or a circus gathering.

“Have you donated to them yet?” Byeongkwan asks as he goes on his tiptoes and stretches his neck to try and see anything.
“I’ll do it later,” Junhee says. He’s planning to, has a cheque squared away in his breast pocket for
either the main donation drive or to give to the host afterwards. He doesn’t want to leave without
actually supporting the cause at hand.

“Now, as you have been notified,” the host calls from above, “we’ve prepared a very special auction
event for tonight’s gathering. The items have all been generously provided by a number of celebrities
who support the cause. I want to thank everyone again for supporting the Initiative for Victims of
Powered Violence. Now, if you please?” He waves his hand, and one of the staff hurries over from
the gallery above to where the host stands just at the end of the stairs, wheeling a tray covered in
cloth before him. “Our first item for tonight is a golf ball autographed by our very own…”

Junhee tunes out the auction as four very sharp, very accusing pairs of eyes turn to focus at him.

“We have to talk, Park Junhee,” says Donghun.

The bathroom door has barely closed behind the last of them when Donghun rounds up on Junhee, a
hand fisting in his lapels as he’s pressed backward against the cold tiled wall.

“What the fuck are we supporting here?” Donghun borderline-snarls, voice chilly and piercing.
“Why are we here? What did you think- did you think at all?”

Slowly, carefully, Junhee raises both of his hands, palms flat and open. “I don’t understand your
problem,” he says, in the most level voice he can muster. Behind him, the forms of the other three are
visible - Byeongkwan frowning at him, brows furrowed; Yuchan wide-eyed next to him, leaning on
each other almost as if looking for support from one another. Sehyoon, leaning against the bathroom
door, seems more impassive, definitely not as bothered at the situation. Junhee addresses him when
he speaks. “I was invited to this event, and most of you guys invited yourselves. I don’t see why
you’re so an-”

“Really?” Donghun laughs - a joyless sound, one that would make Junhee recoil if he had the space
to - “You didn’t even deign to tell us that we were going to an anti-powered charity? Do you go to
these events a lot? Are you just… just… running around with people who hate us?”

“This isn’t- they’re not against us, they’re for helping victims-”

“And how many charities are there for us? You’re really going to put our time into helping the 99%
that, by the way, routinely harm and murder us for who we are? Has your guilt complex finally
softened your brain this much that you can’t see what you’re working for here?”

Junhee grimaces, his face and neck starting to burn in what he recognises as defiance. That’s a low
blow and they both know it. Who does Donghun even think he is, putting his own morality above
everyone else’s? “You know what I’m doing here. Don’t act as if this is completely baseless-”

“It is baseless, just because you happen to hate yourself for the shit you did doesn’t mean we-”

“Guys.” Byeongkwan’s voice, quieter than it’s ever been, cuts through the red-hot haze of anger.
“Guys, Yuchan’s crying. Please stop.”

And he is, now that Junhee’s vision refocuses and he looks at them, really looks. Byeongkwan’s
supporting Yuchan, holding him by the waist and stroking his head with the other as Yuchan is
slumped over his shoulder, back shaking and whimpered little sobs escaping him. He’s facing away
from them; still, the sight is like a shock to Junhee’s system. Byeongkwan’s eyes, as they switch
between Donghun and him, are distant and full of judgement.
“We’re gonna take the car home,” he says, quiet as before. “Go take a walk. Let us know when you’ve stopped fighting.” He cranes his head to mouth something at Sehyoon, who steps forward to help support Yuchan. “Donghun’s right, you know,” Byeongkwan says, and then they’re leaving, the sniffling of their youngest going with them.

Slowly, Donghun’s grip relaxes and his hand falls away from Junhee’s suit. It’s rumpled, wrinkled, but Junhee can’t even think about that right now.

“Let’s walk, then,” Donghun says, reluctance dripping from the very set of his mouth. Junhee can’t say he’s looking any more forward to this.

But they already spooked Yuchan. Maybe it’s better to stay away for now.

They leave the villa in tense silence. Behind them, the white stone facade feels oppressive, like it’ll crumble down and crush them at any moment. Junhee wants to ask if they should call a taxi, or where they should even go, but he doesn’t dare break the silence.

Plus, he’s still kind of pissed at how Donghun got all up in his face so suddenly, so all he does is shove his hands in the pockets of his trousers, crumpling up the business cards as he does so, and stalk behind him over the gravel path. He’d retrieved his umbrella and is currently using it as a walking stick, stabbing the ground next to him as they walk. They make their way to the main street cutting through the upper-class neighbourhood, big buildings rising up behind hedges and immaculately-kept gardens, expensive-looking cars parked here and there on the curb. It’s quiet. They’re quiet.

At some point, they turn a corner that leads them into a more lived-in district of the area. They’re still far away from the loft, but the actual city is starting to take hold here. They walk among the nighttime crowd, talking on the phone or among each other or marching down the street with their earbuds securely blocking out the world around them, and Junhee can feel the last tendrils of agitation let go of him. He takes a deep breath. Another one. Looks out of the corners of his eyes at Donghun, who’s been looking at the ground for the majority of the walk. He seems quieter too now, the tension no longer holding his body up rigidly. It’s almost as if someone’s cut the strings of the puppet and the anger with it.


There’s silence as Donghun mulls over his words.

“I’m hungry,” he says finally.

“Yelling tire you out?”

“Don’t,” Donghun says, barely sparing him a glare, and Junhee concedes. There’s no point in being petty, really, not anymore. Instead he looks around, trying to orient himself and figure out where they are exactly.

“There’s a ramen place not far from here,” he comments when they pass a rather bedazzled neon street sign. “It’s not exactly five stars, but it’s good enough?” Somehow it comes out as more of a question than a statement.

Donghun shrugs. “Sure, I don’t mind,” he says. Junhee doesn’t actually know how Donghun feels about ramen, but it’s not really a food you can go very wrong with, so he leads the way. A few
minutes of a walk later, they duck into a side-alley bathed in soft golden light from a storefront. The ramen place is open to the street, only a few pieces of cloth overhead partitioning it from the public space of the street outside. The smells waft out to greet them where they’re standing, and the last tense part of Junhee uncoils slowly. He hasn’t been here in a very long time, yet somehow it’s exactly as he remembers it. “After you,” he says, and Donghun ducks under the cloth to enter, Junhee following suit.

The inside has been rearranged a little, the walls now a soft beige and the tables swapped out for darker, newer-looking wood than he remembers. The man behind the counter, though, preparing food for a couple sitting on the stools in front of him, is the same man Junhee remembers from years ago, if now a little older, with crow’s feet crinkling up the corners of his eyes and grey streaks in his black hair. He looks up when they enter, and a smile blooms over his features.

“Come in, sit, I’ll be with you in a moment. It’s great to see you again.” Junhee nods, ignores Donghun’s confused glance, and leads him to one of the tables tucked away in a corner, just next to the bathroom doors and partially obscured by a beaded curtain. He’d usually sit up front at the counter, but something tells him they might need a semblance of privacy for this.

“You’ve been here a lot?” Donghun asks as he seats himself.

“I haven’t been in a few years now, but yeah.”

They sit for a few minutes, watching the man cook until he serves up two bowls to the couple and rounds the counter to approach them, notepad in hand.

“So, what can I get you boys?” He looks at Junhee. “No sister tonight?”

Junhee coughs awkwardly. “Not today, I’m afraid. Donghun, what do you want to eat?” And just like that, the cook’s attention is diverted to recommending the week’s special and other especially good dishes. They end up ordering, a regular Shoyu Ramen for Junhee and Tonkotsu for Donghun, and settle in as they wait.

“It’s nice here,” Donghun comments idly. Awkwardly, if you ask Junhee. “It’s got the same feel as those Japanese restaurants.”

“The owner is Japanese.” Junhee nods at the man, currently busy retrieving ingredients. “He’s really particular about his flavours, but it works great for his food. Do you…” he hesitates, “Do you want to talk before we eat or after?”

“Before.” There’s conviction in Donghun’s voice that Junhee doesn’t necessarily share. “Let’s talk now.”

Junhee sighs.

“Sure. Let’s do that.”

In the end, they still stare at each other in awkwardly tense silence for a good few minutes until Donghun clears his throat. “I’m sorry,” he offers, “for yelling at you. I should have handled the situation differently. Especially considering Yuchan was present.”

Junhee nods along. He’s not quite sure what Yuchan’s story is, what he’s experienced, but him crying and Donghun’s careful demeanour around him tells him enough for him to know he shouldn’t pry. Not that he necessarily wants to pry, but a part of him has been restless ever since he heard his
sobbing. He’s not… heartless, per se, and if they’re going to enter into a work relationship, he’d prefer if they all at least felt safe.

Maybe being yelled at helped him realise that. He’s not sure.

Donghun is talking again. “I do think, though, that you didn’t behave… well. I know what you’re thinking, but it was unfair to allow us to come with without telling us what you were up to in the first place.”

Junhee sighs. Donghun really does know what he’s thinking, huh? “It’s just…” He looks down, traces patterns on the reddish brown wood of the table. “I want to make things as right as I can. I hurt a lot of people, you know that. I am… was… one of the people the recipients of the charity need to be protected from. We may be a minority but that doesn’t mean we can’t hurt people. Hell, we’re even better at hurting them than they are at hurting us.”

“But you’re a fringe case,” Donghun points out. “You’re not the norm, and even you try to make up for your mistakes. If one of us hurts one of them, it’s a fringe case. If they hurt us, well, they have the government and society behind them. I just don’t think the very few victims of powered violence should be your sole focus when we are being put on lists and denied rights of non-powered people.”

Junhee falls silent for a while, gazing down at the table, then up at Donghun contemplatively. “I won’t apologise for my priorities,” he says finally, “and I won’t apologise or explain what I donate to, because you know I would never act against what’s good for us as a whole. However.” He clears his throat. “However, I’m sorry that I handled the situation so poorly. I should have said something and given you the opportunity to back out. I’m sorry about that.” Surprisingly, it’s not hard at all to be mature and apologise properly when Donghun is looking at him like this, acceptance and understanding where before there’s been fury.

“I’m sorry for attacking you,” Donghun answers. “I will try to be better about that if anything like this ever happens again. I think I was just… I don’t know, uncomfortable with not being in control of the situation. You know. Cornered.”

Junhee nods. “I get that. We should talk it out with the others too, when we’re back at the loft.

“Sure. Let’s eat first, though. Is your suit okay?” Junhee looks down at himself with a critical eye, at the front of his suit jacket, crumpled up and with fingerprints all over the black lapels, and shrugs.

“Nothing some ironing won’t fix,” he decides, and turns said critical eye on Donghun instead, sitting across from him, shoulders broader than usual in the navy fabric and slim waist accentuated by the waistcoat. He looks good. “You, though,” he adds, “should wear suits a little more often from now on.”

Donghun coughs, turns his head away, shrugs. “Well, this one isn’t awful,” he concedes. Junhee will take that.

The food gets delivered, steaming hot bowls and freshly made noodles. They eat, mostly quietly, but every now and then Donghun talks about possible leads he has in terms of crime-fighting, and Junhee talks about improvements to their protective gear and offensive equipment he might make when he has the time. They fill out the space between them with words as best they can, until Junhee feels like maybe tonight won’t actually destroy their friendly relationship for good, that he’ll still be able to join Donghun when he’s researching in the middle of the night and coax him away to help him look for his stapler. It’s good, he decides. This is good.
They finish, and pay, and the owner makes Junhee promise to come back more frequently from now on, and they leave. Outside the sky has fully darkened in the meantime. The streetlamps are on, casting their fluorescent orange glow on the cobblestone street under their feet and further out to the streams of people still walking the streets at this hour. “Let’s walk for a while, we can call a cab if it gets too late,” Junhee suggests, mainly because he doesn’t yet want to face the other three and make his way through the same apology again. It’ll be worse, being this vulnerable in front of three people instead of one, people he isn’t quite sure will be as mature in this situation. Next to him Donghun nods his assent, gaze trained on his phone that had buzzed in his pocket just earlier, and Junhee breathes a sigh of relief.

They walk, this time shrouded in companionable silence, Junhee’s umbrella not quite stabbing the ground to death anymore. It’s only ten minutes later when a drop of something wet on Junhee’s forehead makes him look up towards the sky, shrouded in dark, heavy clouds.

“Fuck,” he manages before the skies just open up. He grabs Donghun’s wrist - looks around - locates an alcove and drags them both under it. It’s cramped, Donghun’s elbow digging into Junhee’s side harshly, but at least they’re not getting drenched. In front of them, the streets slowly empty.

“What are you doing?” comes Donghun’s voice from next to him.

“Protecting us from the rain?”

Donghun coughs furtively. “You’re aware you’re carrying an umbrella, right?”

Oh. Right. Junhee looks down at it, tucked securely in the crook of his arm. Well, it probably wouldn’t get damaged that much, right? It’s still built as an umbrella, after all.

“Fine,” he says, and opens it with a flourish. “Let’s walk to a place we can call a taxi to.”

Donghun ducks under the umbrella, pressed too closely to Junhee again in an effort to escape the pretty much torrential downpour blanketing the city. They walk hurriedly, rainwater seeping into the bottoms of their trousers, until Donghun spots an empty bus station, the kind with a plastic half-house that they seek refuge under. The second they get to safety, Junhee curses and shakes the umbrella to get rid of the water, inspecting its mechanisms for any damage. It looks alright, but he’d have to take it apart in his workshop at home to be fully sure.

“What’s wrong?” Donghun pulls the phone from his ear. “I ordered a pick-up, by the way, but are you alright?”

“Yeah, it’s just… I’m trying to see if this thing got damaged in the rain.”

“Dude.” Donghun shoots him an immensely unimpressed look. “It’s an umbrella. It’s designed to stop the rain. You’re fine, stop fretting.”

“No, I mean.” Junhee huffs a breath. “This isn’t really an umbrella. The water could’ve gotten into the small bits and then I’ll have to replace half of the mechanism again.”

“This… isn’t an umbrella?” Donghun shifts a little closer, pokes at the wet material. “What is it then?”

“Oh.” Junhee looks up at him. “It’s a gun.”

“It’s a….. What.”

“A gun.” Junhee grips the handle of the umbrella, twists and pops it out a little bit, revealing a
compact trigger mechanism. “There’s a cap on the nozzle to make it look like an umbrella, and so no fluids get into the gun proper, but I just can’t be sure if it’s a good fit for this kind of weather… what is it?” The entire time he’s been explaining, Donghun had been gaping at him. Just standing there. He sputters, now, and looks up and down between Junhee and his gun.

“This… you…” His voice goes up by an octave or two. “You’ve pointed this at me. You’ve waved this in my face. Oh my god.”

Junhee rolls his eyes. “Donghun, it’s fine. It wouldn’t even fire normally. You have to press this—”

“No!” Donghun yelps as he leaps forward to catch Junhee’s hands with his own. “Are you crazy? Don’t play with the firing mechanism, that’s improper gun safety etiquette!”

Junhee blinks at him. “I built this thing, I know how it works. But. Sure.” He twists the handle back in place and rights himself up. “Seriously though, you don’t have to be so anxious about it. I know how to handle this thing.”

“Fine, fine, I just…” Donghun shrugs and runs his hand through his hair. Except his hand stills where it’s still on his head, and he slowly turns on his heel to look at Junhee. “So, wait. Did you maybe… get inspired… by a certain movie?”

It’s Junhee’s turn to look away, hand twitching away from Donghun’s to cover his mouth in embarrassment. He can feel his cheeks burning again, this time bashful rather than angry. “That… I mean. Just. Don’t tell Byeongkwan about it, he’d never shut up.”

Next to him, Donghun laughs. “Sure, your secret’s safe as long as I can make fun of you for it in private.”

“This is blackmail.” Despite himself, though, a smile stretches out over his face, and something obscure and small jumps in his chest.

When they finally arrive back at the loft, Donghun feels exhaustion take over him. Today’s been… a long day, even without all the emotional turmoil that fighting brings. He’s really just looking forward to finally get this suit off and going to bed.

Of course, when they enter the loft, they’re greeted with a complete redecoration of the place. So this is what Byeongkwan had texted him for, huh… it’s not like it’s actually bad or anything. The throw cushions are actually kinda nice, and the fairy lights, while a little intrusive, mellow out the space a bit. He just hopes they haven’t rearranged his own room too much.

Junhee grumbles a little about it, because of course he does, but even he doesn’t seem to have the heart to get genuinely upset about it, instead just chucking his shoes off his feet as Donghun makes his way up to the bathroom-

-Only to be greeted with a veritable mess of red and pink just all over the place, on the shower curtain, the tiled floor, even specks on the mirror.

“Um,” he says, “what exactly happened here?”

“Oh! Sorry! We meant to clean that up before you came home, whoops,” comes Yuchan’s voice from behind him. Donghun turns and… ah. His hair is pink.

His hair is pink?
“When did this happen?”

Yuchan grins and reaches up to fiddle with his still-damp curls. “Just now! Do you like it? Kwannie said it’d be fun, and I really like how it looks!”

Donghun watches Yuchan show off his hair and can’t help but smile despite himself. “It’s… it’s good. I think it fits you well. Do you want to help clean up the bathroom before we go to bed?”

“Yes!” Yuchan holds up the bucket and mop he’d been carrying with a grin. His eyes are still a little red-rimmed and bloodshot, but he seems to be feeling a little better now, which Donghun is infinitely grateful for. He doesn’t know yet how to make it up to him, he just knows that he has to.

From downstairs, Junhee yells something that roughly translates to ‘who the hell broke into my room’ and Donghun has to try really hard to not start laughing too loudly. It’s fine. They’re going to be fine, one way or another.

(He does go and find Sehyoon though, after the bathroom is as clean as it will ever be from now on.

“Sehyoon,” he says lightly, “what happened to Yuchan’s hair?”

“Byeongkwan dyed it for him,” Sehyoon shrugs, “I mostly stayed out of that.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be the responsible one when we’re gone?” Donghun can’t help but tease.

“What are you, our parents?” Donghun quirks an eyebrow, and Sehyoon smiles - actually smiles - before telling him he’ll clean up after Byeongkwan and Yuchan next time.)

That night, Sehyoon wakes up to footsteps in the hallway.

He’s slowly gotten accustomed to the noise that living with four other people brings, but he still wakes quickly when people move about at night. A part of him thinks it’s Yuchan again, maybe still shaken up from the day’s events, so he slips out of bed quickly and cracks his door open, meaning to get some water from the kitchen for him.

As he approaches the railing separating his floor from the common floor below, he can see someone moving down in the living room area. Not Yuchan, then; his room is right next to Sehyoon’s and the door is definitely shut tight. Who, then…

Below, Byeongkwan steps into the moonlight streaming in through the glass part of the facade. He’s got something jammed in between his shoulder and his head as he’s struggling to fit his arms through the sleeves of his light jacket. He’s saying something, whispering, and Sehyoon finds himself subconsciously leaning closer to hear.

“I’ll be there in a bit. Don’t worry. We’ll sort it out, okay? I’ll stay as long as I need to,” Byeongkwan promises to whoever’s at the other end. He pats his pockets, casts a glance around the loft - Sehyoon draws back and holds his breath, knowing it won’t actually do anything - and strides out the front door, the soft click of the locking mechanism the last thing he leaves of himself.

Huh, Sehyoon thinks. Sure wonder what that was about.

And then he turns and goes back to sleep.
“Sehyoon?”

Upon hearing his name, Sehyoon looked down from where he was looping fairy lights through the balcony railing. Yuchan - hair currently a beacon of bleach blonde - was holding different colours of cushions against the sofa, each patterned with moderately cliché flowers, plants, or Instagram-esque quotes.

“Do you think our couch suits more of a glaucous grey or a cinereous grey?” he asked, displaying two cushions that looked suspiciously like the same colour.
“The first one?” Sehyoon suggested helplessly, choosing instead to focus on untying a knot in the length of wire he was using. After a thoughtful pause, Yuchan made a noise of confirmation, and continued pondering over his questionable design choices. Something about him still seemed off, and Byeongkwan couldn’t really blame him. He seemed to be distracting himself quite well with decorating right now, though.

Byeongkwan, upon having been told he “lacked aesthetic capabilities” by Yuchan, was now sulking half-heartedly on the floor with Frosty strewn over his legs.

“I think we should do the others’ rooms too,” he said eventually, having grown bored of whatever deeply artistic decisions were being made around him. “Their rooms are so bland, they could use it. Sehyoon’s room is sort of bland too, but that’s kind of his thing, so it’s acceptable.”

“And touch whatever perfectly regimented stuff Junhee has in his room? That’s a death sentence,” Yuchan objected, throwing a quick thumbs up to Sehyoon when the fairy lights suddenly lit up. “We don’t even know the code to get through his door.”

“Donghun knows it,” Sehyoon said evenly. The heads of the younger boys spun towards him like owls, and he shrugged them off uncomfortably. Of course he’d know, Byeongkwan realised. Donghun helped Junhee with paperwork these days. If someone had to know the code to Junhee’s old man lair, it’d be him.

“He wouldn’t get that mad at us,” Byeongkwan prompted temptingly, meeting Yuchan’s eyes and digging around for his phone. Upon sensing the direction of the conversation, Sehyoon looped the last string of fairy lights around his fingers with a sigh.

[10:33] the BEST: is it going okay? you’ve been out ages
[10:33] the BEST: you didn’t kill him right
[10:34] Dadhun: It’s fine, we just stopped to get ramen
[10:35] the BEST: oh
[10:35] the BEST: well. not to interrupt what i’m sure is a lovely date but
[10:35] the BEST: i need the code to jun’s room
[10:36] the BEST: it’s important
[10:36] Dadhun: ...I’m not going to ask
[10:36] Dadhun: Fine. But if he asks, you’re just a really good guesser
[10:37] Dadhun: And it’s not a date.

“I think Junhee has more of a classy grunge aesthetic,” Yuchan said, waving away the fluorescent wall art Byeongkwan was holding.

“A what?” he said, but Yuchan was now too busy admiring the fake succulents (he knew Junhee wouldn’t water real succulents, and he didn’t want to be indirectly responsible for plant murder) to listen. Sehyoon was leaning against the doorframe, probably attempting to remain uninvolved so as
to avoid the inevitable murder that would take place when the others came home. “You suggested we ask Donghun,” Byeongkwan had told him. “You’re indirectly responsible either way.”

“Have you washed the dye out yet?” Byeongkwan knocked his hand against the bathroom door. “Sehyoon’s finished hanging up the lights in Junhee’s room. It’s a huge improvement.”

“Uh... It looks like a crime scene,” Yuchan whispered, poking his head through the open door.

“Oh my god, your hair!” Byeongkwan pushed the door further open, ruffling a hand through Yuchan’s drenched curls. His attention was promptly stolen by the state of the bathroom: red stains over every white surface; bright streaks up the walls; pink water in the sink and bath.

“A crime scene,” Yuchan repeated. “Junhee is going to kill us.”
Byeongkwan comes back the next day, just after lunch. He’s tense, and quiet, and makes no move to greet Frosty like he usually would.

“You missed lunch,” Donghun calls from the kitchen, where he and Sehyoon are busy loading the dishwasher.

“I know.” Sehyoon, looking closer, notices that his skin is paler than usual; his hair messed up; bags under his eyes pronounced, like he hasn’t slept. He probably hasn’t. “I’m gonna go take a nap,” he mutters as he’s listlessly stepping out of his shoes and dragging himself over to his room. The door shuts quietly behind him.

Sehyoon turns to Donghun just as the latter tries to get his attention; they look at each other until Donghun jerks his thumb in the direction of Byeongkwan’s room. ‘Ask him where he went,’ he mouths at him. Sehyoon nods, pushes himself off the kitchen counter, and makes his way to Byeongkwan’s room.

When he opens the door, quietly, he peeks in to find Byeongkwan face-down on his bed, limbs all sprawled out. He hadn’t even bothered to change into pajamas or take his socks off before knocking out, and ordinarily he’s fussy about sleeping with socks on. (Sehyoon has no idea how he knows this, just that he does.) Byeongkwan is breathing evenly; asleep already. It had barely taken him a minute.

Carefully, Sehyoon steps closer until he stands at the side of the bed. From up close, he notices that Byeongkwan’s face is positively ashen, lips chapped, eyelids trembling. For a lack of a better word, he looks exhausted. Not the type of exhaustion after not sleeping for the night, either, but rather the type that has Donghun nag him all the time about speeding too much.
Sehyoon crouches down and places the back of his hand against Byeongkwan’s forehead. It’s clammy, colder than usual, and Sehyoon almost feels like he’s touching a corpse. The thought makes him cringe, yet he keeps his hand where it is. Focusing on Byeongkwan’s body, on his health… there’s definitely some things out of whack, energies not flowing where they’re supposed to be. His legs, particularly, seem to be cut off from the rest of his body in that regard, like it doesn’t have enough life to nourish them for now.

He probably doesn’t. Sehyoon sighs. Whatever Byeongkwan did this to himself for, he hopes it was worth it. Nevertheless, dwelling on it won’t change anything; even though he knows Byeongkwan will get better with some extended bed rest, because humans are resilient and enduring creatures, he still leans forward and pushes some of his own life into Byeongkwan’s. He watches as sparks of light rise from the contact point between Byeongkwan’s forehead and his hand; watches as they dance around languidly as a pulsing glow of light connects them. For Sehyoon, the aesthetically pleasing visual contrasts sharply with the feeling of having his own gut sucked out, of his feet getting colder the more he gives. It’s alright, though. He’s always been better at regaining his energies than other people.

He stops when a slightly healthier flush has overtaken Byeongkwan’s skin and his breathing has less of a wheeze and rattle to it. When he moves to right himself back up out of his crouch, a sudden wave of dizziness hits him - his vision goes staticy and fuzzy, there’s a whine in his ears, for a split second he feels like throwing up. But, instead, he takes a deep breath, presses a hand against his temple, and half-stumbles his way out of the room.

Outside, Donghun quietly clears his throat. He’s gazing at Sehyoon as he approaches. It’s hard for Sehyoon to read what Donghun is thinking, but then again… it’s hard for him to read what anyone is thinking.

“Did you ask?”

Sehyoon shakes his head. “He’s sleeping. Plus, it doesn’t really matter right now.”

“I feel like it does.” Donghun sighs, shakes his head. “But maybe not now. Come on, let’s make you feel a little better.”

Sehyoon looks at Donghun, at the hand he’s reaching out to him, and hesitates. He’d rather stay with Byeongkwan, make sure he’s recuperating alright, but… he knows this is necessary, so all he does is lead the way to his own room.
Byeongkwan is prescribed two days of strict bed rest. He’d have complained, but he slept through most of it anyway, so Donghun supposes it wouldn’t have made much of a difference either way. He’d seen him walk around the apartment again this morning, back to his usual chipper demeanour, taking time to eat breakfast with them all and playing with Frosty. Donghun doesn’t think he’s completely back to what he was like before, but maybe that will just take some time.

He’s weighing packets of napkins in each hand, trying to figure out if it’s worth it taking some with them or if they should just stick to cheaper and more universally usable kitchen paper rolls, when he registers the music outside. It doesn’t quite sound like the soft, soothing melodies inside of the department store, so Donghun turns in confusion and peers out of the front windows of the store, half-obscured by an advertisement decal. What he can half-make out is a gathering of people all moving in one direction, and is that a parade float? He squints, meanders over to the glass. There’s
flashes of colour passing by, the people laughing and cheering at something.

Oh.

Oh, Donghun’s completely forgotten this was on today.

ACE Groupchat

Today, 1:43pm

Donghun: I completely forgot Pride happened today?

BYONK: wait pride is happening??

BYONK: i’m a fake gay

yuwuchan: me too damn

Kim S.: Are you like… all gay

BYONK: ya

yuwuchan: ya

Donghun looks away and presses his lips together to not laugh in the middle of the store.

Donghun: Yes.

Kim S.: Wild

Kim S.: Wait is Junhee the token straight person

Park Junhee: Stop using this chat if it’s not an emergency.

Park Junhee: We can’t mute this in case there is time-sensitive information, so please take this somewhere else so those of us who need to do work are not bothered.

yuwuchan: so you are the token straight person

BYONK: i cant believe it

Park Junhee: If i tell you, will you stop bothering me?

yuwuchan: probably?

Park Junhee: Then no, I’m not. Now shut up.

There’s this warm, twisty thing that happens to Donghun’s insides when he reads the last message. There’s no real… reason for it, he supposes, not really. He sort of knew already, after all. It’s just.
Nice. To know that he’s surrounded by people who are like him.

Yeah. That.

The chat pings a few times, mostly just all of them lamenting how busy they are. They’re not wrong, either - Junhee is never not busy, Frosty got sick yesterday which has Yuchan and Byeongkwan running around in concern and too preoccupied to do much of anything else, and Sehyoon would probably actually rather die than set foot in this kind of big gathering of people. So, Donghun thinks, there’s no real point in wandering about on his own.

His focus goes back to the procession of rainbow flags, travelling across the expanse of the giant glass walls looking out from the store into the city. Maybe, though…

“Welcome back!” Yuchan calls from where he’s idling on the couch, Frosty on his lap. He’s holding her like a tiny baby, even though she’s been hitting a growth spurt over the past few weeks, and is almost double the size she was when they found her. (Which is still small, but unfortunately Donghun knows just how big Samoyeds get, so this is really only the beginning.)

“How’s Frosty?” Donghun bends to take off his shoes, then carries the bag with his purchase into the apartment.

“A bit better now. Though I think she needs to go to the vet if she’s still like this tomorrow.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do.” Donghun trusts Yuchan with this: he’s read so much, talked to dog owners and even decided to pick up one of those scientific animal medicine journals that really only people with degrees understand. All just to make sure that Frosty will be living her best life with them, free from any pain or harm. Yuchan had told him once that he doesn’t ever want her to feel like she did in that cage again, and he gets it, so he leaves Frosty’s care to Yuchan unless there’s something he specifically can help with.

So instead of prodding too much, he simply steps over to pet Frosty’s head, receives a tired yet loving lick of the hand in return, then makes his way over to their dining table, directing an interior critic’s eye to the surrounding walls. He doesn’t want to put it up in the kitchen, or on the glass wall, so instead he procures a set of adhesive gum from the bag and starts putting up the piece of fabric on the wall separating Junhee’s room from the dining area.

Speaking of Junhee.

“What’s that all about?”

Donghun turns to see Junhee, outside his room for what is probably the first time that day, carrying his huge pitcher of water to refill. No more awkward late-night run-ins for him, he’d said when the package had turned up on his doorstep. Donghun can respect that, he thinks.

Donghun shrugs. “We’re not going to Pride, so I brought Pride to us,” he says, gesturing up at the rainbow flag that’s sitting a little crookedly on the wall. He probably has to move the left corner up a bit. Hanging things on walls is so annoying.

“Nothing’s stopping you from going, though.”

“And would either you or Sehyoon take care of Frosty if we did go?”

“...Probably not.”
“Yeah, see.”

“But,” Junhee turns off the tap and turns to lean against the counter, his ironed trousers wrinkling a little in the process, “Pride is only once a year, unless you want to drive a few hours to whereever else they have it. If you want to go, or if Yuchan wants to, you should. I’d probably text you if anything was on fire.”

“Would you?” And more importantly, would Junhee stop throwing a hissy fit every time people want to do something he doesn’t want to do? Donghun leans forward, squints, peers at Junhee more closely. Something’s up, he just doesn’t know what.

“I mean, take it as a group trust building exercise or whatever, but-”

“It’s fine!” Yuchan calls from the other side of the living area. “I don’t really want to go anyway. It’s way too warm.”

Donghun actually physically straightens up in confusion. “But you said you wanted to-”

“I changed my mind!” Yuchan’s slumped over the couch. He looks relaxed, voice as bright as ever, but Donghun isn’t sure if he wants to trust it. “I don’t want to inconvenience anyone. Just this is fine too.”

“You’re allowed to want thin-”

“Don’t, please?” Tentative tendrils of discomfiture reach out from where Yuchan is sitting, prominent in the slight downturn of his lips and the tension now holding his shoulders up, taut, in a defense position. “I just don’t want to go anymore.”

Donghun sighs. “Fine,” he says. “Fine. The flag is enough, then.”

This isn’t the only time when Donghun feels like something is wrong.

They’d all spent a pleasant time that day with one of those rainbow roll cakes Byeongkwan brought along, and for a brief few hours things felt like they were all in order, like the day they’d thrown their movie night. But it’s been a week now, and Byeongkwan is just… not present. And even when he is back at the loft, he doesn’t engage as much anymore. They haven’t played Mario Kart in weeks.

So, something is clearly going on, especially when Byeongkwan staggers his way back home at three in the morning, exhausted to the bone from what is clearly a misuse of his powers. The thing is - Donghun can’t talk to him. He could force it, but this needs to be done by someone Byeongkwan actually trusts with his secrets.

Does he even trust anyone anymore? Well, maybe that’s a little dramatic, but it’s not like Byeongkwan ever talks to any of them. He’s clearly hiding something, and whatever it is must be eating at him. Isolating him.

For all his talk about being the emotional leadership of this group, Donghun has no idea what he should be doing to get him back on track. Should he just ask Sehyoon? Does Sehyoon know anything?

But if Sehyoon did know, would he tell him?
Somehow, Donghun manages to get them all outside for a day a week after. Their group hasn't been much of a group - even Junhee can acknowledge this, and he's barely ever present to begin with. So it's nice, taking a day to interact with everyone. Or maybe not nice so much as dearly necessary for their continued existence as a cohesive group.

Donghun steers them all to a nice little café two streets down from the bank they'd blown the windows out of. It feels like it happened such a long time ago, Junhee muses as he sips on his strawberry frappe, legs crossed and gaze trained on the streets outside. Then again, it feels like it just happened yesterday all at the same time... trying to quantify the amount of time you've worked with self-styled superheroes is a little tricky, after all.

"I still can't believe you just drink sugar." Junhee looks up to see Sehyoon looking evenly at him, one well maintained brow quirked in either quiet amusement or quiet judgement. He's hard to read if you aren't Byeongkwan, most of the time. "I thought classy businessmen always take their coffees black."

"I'm allowed one weird thing about myself, I hope."

"One?" From next to Junhee, Donghun chokes on his Americano a little. "One is maybe a little... understated. I've seen your room."

"My room is perfectly fine, I don't know what you're talking about-"

"Oooh. Guys. This is so cool."

Cool? Junhee really doesn't think their squabbling is exactly cool in any way, but... oh. He follows Yuchan's gaze outside of the café. Their youngest is practically pressed up against the glass, eyes wide and fingers twitching with interest. Outside, performers of some sort have started setting up while Junhee was busy defending his honour in the face of blatant disrespect. There's a table that folds up, a table cloth, some chairs, and what appears to be a bunch of supplies neatly laid out on top - some cups, silvered and glinting in the sunlight with intricate carvings, as well as some decks of cards and some coins scattered about. One of the buskers is busy twirling a pen around and making it disappear and reappear in his hands, drawing a small crowd of onlookers and children who want to witness the magic up close.

"Oh. The street magicians?"

"Yeah! Can we go outside when they start? I've never seen proper magic before..."

Junhee casts an incredulous look in Yuchan's direction. He can't really be serious when he says that, can he? "Yuchan, you shapeshift for a living. Donghun actually reads minds for a living. I think we're all a bit more magical than they could hope to be."

"But street magic is fun. Please? I used to want to do magic as a kid, but I never got to try it..."

Yuchan finally tears his eyes away, and oh - he's pouting properly now, eyes all wide and bright and eyebrows drawn together in this pleading look that he often gets when he's about to ask for the last bite of the food. (They always give him the last bite of food, because they're whipped. Even Junhee, secretly, a little bit, although he would never admit it to anyone out loud.)

Junhee sets his cup down with a soft clinking sound and sighs. "Fine. Let's go see the street magicians."

When they manage to make their way outside, a sizeable crowd has already formed around the table
set up at the street. Some have their phones out to record, some are whispering to each other, but the majority have trained their focus solely on the four performers and what they have to offer.

"Now, under which cup will you find the money?" The man speaking is tall, heavy-set with an impressively maintained goatee and semi-slicked back hair. He looks put-together, like he wants people to look at him and notice his presence as soon as he enters. His smile is warm, his gesturing wide and all-encompassing, yet Donghun's face sits in a quiet frown when he looks at him. Junhee suppresses the urge to ask - if it's important, he'll tell him. He will trust Donghun with such matters. They all do.

The young woman in front of the table points to a cup, and the man lifts it to reveal nothing under it. "Ah, unfortunate, my dear, but these things do happen. Thank you for your generous contribution." He gives a smile and waves her off. "Who wishes to try their luck next? Come, come, and see if you can best me in this game of chance!"

"He seems more like a circus performer than a magician," Byeongkwan mutters from Junhee's side. Junhee tends to agree with that sentiment - there's certainly not much impressive magic going on, at least not with him. Of the three other performers aside from the one with the goatee, one is standing watch, keeping a careful eye on the crowd, while the two others perform more traditional magic - a tall, muscular woman is showing off some sort of sleight of hand with cards; another, smaller woman is making little red balls levitate in the air in front of her. Looking at them, Junhee doesn't really think they're powered in any way - or at least they are not using gifts of that sort for this act. This is all just smoke and mirrors.

"How unfortunate," the man with the goatee booms again as he pats the next player's hand. "Now, before you get all angry at me, I assure you that this game is being played fairly." He lifts up his hands, tugs at his sleeves to show they're empty, and lifts one of the two untouched cups to reveal a folded bill underneath. "This is a completely fair game - with good odds of winning! Of course, if you do not have time to partake but would wish to support us nonetheless, Reo over there takes care of any generous donations you might want to give. Now! The next contestant, please!"

Sehyoon sighs. "I don't know," he says quietly, "seven people have lost against him already. I haven't seen anyone win. That's not exactly great odds, is it?"

Donghun raises an expectant eyebrow at Junhee. "Are those probable odds at all?"

Junhee shrugs. Looks at the man shuffle the cups after popping money under one of them. Watches his movements and the twitches of his fingers and imagines himself back in the casino. "No. Not really."

"So, are they cheating?"

"Maybe, who knows. Do we care?"

"The players are putting actual money in," Donghun points out, "not just coins. And if they're cheating on that front, who knows what the others are doing. Or what the donations even go to. I'm just saying, there's no harm in letting them know they should play fair."

Byeongkwan grunts. Even though Junhee can't see him, he knows he's rolling his eyes. "We really went from armed kidnappers to busting small-time street performers, huh? Good thing nobody expects anything of us."

"Ah," Donghun clears his throat. Shuffles his feet. He seems a little tense, like he's not sure how to react to Byeongkwan being so blunt and. Well. Negative. "I mean, we don't have to, but..."
"We're here anyway," Junhee points out. "And I just want to test my luck, that's all." He pats Donghun on the shoulder briefly, then steps forward, tugging his face mask over his mouth and nose. "Let's see if he can keep up with me."

The man beams at Junhee as he approaches. "Another lucky contender, I see! Come, come, step up to the table. Wonderful. What might your name be, young man?"

"Junhee," says Junhee, clearly a little uncomfortable with being talked to like this.

"It is such a pleasure to meet you, Junhee. So! This is a game of cups. Do you know how it works? You put some money in, as a betting pool of sorts, and if you win, we’ll pay you out triple of what you put in. If you lose, we keep the money. Does that sound fair?" Junhee nods along to the explanation, his eyes trained only on the man’s hands instead of his face. He places a folded note under one of the cups and waits patiently for them to be shuffled. Even from this distance, Donghun can feel the slightest shudder in the framework of the world, can see the set of cups double for just a split second. He wonders if anyone else can see it too or if it’s just his specific powers that enable him to notice these things. Byeongkwan at the very least isn’t noticing anything - he’s on his phone, disinterested as can be. He looks like a teenager dragged along to a public outing against his will. Maybe an age difference of only a few years is more potent than Donghun had once thought, especially when they’re all still relatively young.

“Wonderful. Now! Where is the money you put in?” The performer spreads his arms wide, gives Junhee a friendly smile. Junhee looks at him, eyebrow quirked, and leans forward to pluck his money out of the man's sleeve.

"Here," he says. “Fascinating. I wasn’t aware that was part of the game.”

The busker sputters. His face is rapidly taking on an impressive shade of red, blotchy on his face and his neck. “I didn’t… that was not. I-"

“Listen.” Junhee leans closer. Lowers his voice. Donghun squints, then realises that won’t help him hear any better. “If you’re going to scam people out of their money, at least get better at lying. Mine was just a lucky guess, and that could happen again. If you would kindly stop what you’re doing, as well, that would be wonderful.”

“Show’s over!” the man squeaks out. The two women immediately stop their tricks, shifting forward towards Junhee after waving at their respective crowds dismissively. “I don’t know what kind of moral police you are, but this is how street performers work. We have to earn a living somehow - I guess you wouldn’t understand, with your designer suit and all.” He gives a judging glance over Junhee’s clothes, then refocuses on his face. “We have to eat, so just let us do our thing, yes?”

“And you earn your living through donations?” Junhee gestures towards the tall, quiet man in the back (Bob? Reo?), who’s cradling a clipboard in his arms. “Donations to your bank account? Soliciting donations that do not go to the goal you’ve declared isn’t exactly moral, either. Or legal.”

“Okay, that’s enough.” The smaller woman steps forward, grabbing her tall counterpart’s deck of cards, shuffling through them quickly. From where Donghun is standing, the cards almost seem to glint for a split-second, like little metallic sheets under the sun. “I suggest you take a walk away from our street.”

“We will break your pretty little nose,” the tall woman supplies helpfully. Reo just nods. The crowd behind Junhee has only dissipated somewhat - some have stayed, pressed against the store walls as
far away from the impending danger as possible, but all holding up cellphones, ready to record the altercation at any moment. Donghun looks at Junhee - very recognisably the Junhee who is part of ACE, who helped save those hostages, who’s been on TV.

Okay, this isn’t worth it, Donghun transmits to everyone at once. Let’s go. We know their faces, we can probably get their details to Officer Hu somehow.

Junhee glances at him, brow furrowed and mouth set in a firm line, but he nods and relaxes the hand he’d twisted into the man’s shirt sometime during their arguing. “This isn’t over,” he promises. “Try to find a honest job before the police find you. Trust me, it’s much more rewardi-

A fist cracks into the man’s face.

“Aedan,” Reo gasps, “what-

Byeongkwan comes to a stop, shaking his hand out. Aedan’s face now has four very distinct knuckle markings across the cheek, and Byeongkwan’s knuckles are a little red. He pockets his phone.

“I got bored,” he says. “Are you gonna fight or what?” From above his mask, his eyes are cold in this apathetic distance that Donghun has never seen from him. Frankly, it concerns him a little.

A lot.

“Sure, little man,” the tall woman growls, and suddenly there’s a hand like a vice around Byeongkwan’s forearm, and while he is fast, he can’t phase through someone’s fist. He still struggles as her grip tightens. The frustration on his face doesn’t seem very much like this is just some strong woman he’s dealing with.

Careful. They might have powers. Donghun immediately takes several steps back, trying to keep an eye on everything that’s going on. He may have fought regular people before, but he can’t hope to win in a fight against someone with actual offensive powers. He’s not built for that. Neither is Junhee, actually, and he’s right in the middle of it, in a stalemate with Aedan, the palms of his hands red and burnt. Waves of pain reach Donghun, and, with a grimace, he tries to block Junhee out as much as possible. There’s not much he can do actively, so instead, he probes into the minds of the group. If the one thing he can do is extract information, then this he will do.

Around him, he can vaguely feel movement. From the corner of his eye, he can see Sehyoon bringing down his staff on Reo’s head, observes how Yuchan grips the tall woman’s wrist, locked in a battle of sheer strength with her. Byeongkwan is still struggling, and Junhee - his hands and forearms are red, sore, bubbling with whatever heat Aedan is expelling from his body. Even blocking out his pain, Donghun’s hands hurt in sympathy.

When one of the short woman’s cards embeds itself in Sehyoon’s thigh, slicing open what Junhee had promised to be near-bulletproof protective clothing, Donghun grips his taser and storms forward.

Fuck being weak and passive, he thinks to himself. He can’t just stand by. Not now.

Junhee grits his teeth at the burning. Sehyoon’s healing is helping a little, a cooling sensation sucking the heat out of his hands, but it’s not enough - his skin is still sore and blistered. Whatever he was thinking, hand-to-hand fighting someone with fire in them, it was the worst idea he’s had in a long time.

Speaking of bad ideas.
“Where’s Byeongkwan?” He can tell his voice is strained from the pain, hoarse though he hasn’t been yelling at all. He’d mask it better, pretend to be healthier, but they’re all sitting beaten in an alleyway in the middle of the day and he’s just tired.

“He left when you made that other guy run,” Donghun offers from his left, sporting an impressive black eye and a nose that he should probably get checked out. “Which, I’m still not sure how you managed that. We were losing pretty badly.”

“I just told him the police were probably on their way by now, and that aggressive powered folk are usually punished harshly.” He shrugs. To be honest, he was riding on luck more than anything else.

“Do you think they recognised us?”

“If they haven’t, the people who filmed the whole thing definitely did.”

“Will we get in trouble?” Junhee glances over at Yuchan, huddled on the floor and clutching his wrist. Sehyoon had repurposed parts of his shirt for a sling for his damaged and over-strained arm. It’s not very solid, more a reminder to not move his arm too much until Sehyoon manages to give it a proper look over.

“Probably. The local news are going to love us now.” Junhee sighs. Lets his head hit the stone wall behind him. “We need to have a talk about this, don’t we?”

Sehyoon looks up from where he’s handling Junhee’s burns. “Don’t blame Byeongkwan too much. He probably has a lot on his mind.”

Junhee scoffs.

“Care to explain what you were doing?” is the first thing Junhee says when he sees Byeongkwan sitting at the kitchen table. He seems like he’s been home for a while, but his shoes are still on, like he’s prepared to be out the door as soon as possible.

Byeongkwan leans back in his chair, but his shoulders are squared, his hands are clenched into fists. “I was getting shit done,” he says. “Since you were about to run off with your tail between your legs.”

“Ever thought that this was not the time to be picking a fight? With cameras on us?”

“So what?” Byeongkwan stands up. His face mask is tugged down, so Junhee sees his frown clearly, sees how his lips twist when he gives a bitter laugh. “It wouldn’t have mattered, but apparently we can’t even win against some fucking street performers? What are we even?” He spreads his arms wide, looks around the room at all of them. “What are we doing? Is this what you meant when you said we were going to be heroes? All you have us do is sit on our asses and do the police’s dirty work!”

Junhee knows he should be calm, rational, but his face is heating up, there’s something burning and eating away at him that doesn’t feel all that dissimilar to his hands just hours ago. He steps forward. Byeongkwan stands his ground.

“We need to build our image, but if you want to just go around and punch people for no reason, be my guest! What are you, five? Incapable of listening to simple instructions?”

“Like you’re incapable of telling us before you go give money to bigots?” Byeongkwan walks
forward, arms still outstretched, until their chests bump together. Though he’s shorter, he keeps his eyes on Junhee’s throughout. “Why should we listen to him? Or you? Nothing we do amounts to anything, so what’s your justification for keeping us here when we all have better things to do?”

“What’s this really about?” Donghun asks from somewhere behind them. Junhee is too busy staring down Byeongkwan to check. “You’re obviously mad about something.”

“Oh. Am I? I couldn’t tell. Thanks for explaining to me what I’m thinking all the time.” Byeongkwan rolls his eyes, drops his arms, and shoulders his way past Junhee towards the door. “I’m gonna go hang out with my real family. Sorry to inconvenience you or whatever.”

The door slams shut behind him. Junhee lets out a shuddering breath.

“Does anyone,” he grits out, “know what’s going on with him?”

He’s met by three faces that seem to know just about as much as him. That is to say: not very much, for once.

Junhee nods, rubs his eyes with the heel of a hand, grabs the first thing he can reach off the counter and squeezes until he feels it give beneath his fingers.

“I’ll be in my office,” he announces, and leaves without cleaning the bits of banana off his fingers.

This time, Byeongkwan doesn’t come back to the loft for a week. Sehyoon tends to everyone’s wounds, boosts their recovery periodically, and observes their moods quietly. Junhee doesn’t leave his room for anything anymore, instead preferring to spend most of his time in his workshop upstairs, doing who knows what really loudly. Yuchan is clearly anxious and locks himself away with Frosty a lot, opting to play with her over doing much else. Donghun, for his part, is working to the best of his ability to somehow keep this entire ship from sinking miserably, dragging everyone to group dinners that just go by in awkward silence more often than not. He doesn’t know where Byeongkwan is, can’t locate him, and evidently this takes a toll on his self-image.

Sehyoon himself just waits patiently. If Byeongkwan wants to come back, he will. Of course this isn’t the most pleasant situation for them to be in, and he’d rather he never left in the first place, but he’ll take what he can get. As long as he’s alright.

He’d like to think his patience pays off, when he’s getting up one night to go to the toilet, and, when he shuffles across the walkway back to his room, sees Byeongkwan sitting in front of his door. He looks exhausted, but he manages to smile up at Sehyoon when he approaches.

“Long night?” Sehyoon asks.

“Long week. Can we talk for a bit?”

“Sure.” Sehyoon opens the door to his bedroom and leads Byeongkwan in, pats the bed cover to signal he should sit. “You’re back late.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Not really.” He shrugs. “Just unexpected.”

Byeongkwan shrugs, flops on his back over the entire length of the bed, and stares at the ceiling. He talks hesitantly, like he’s not entirely sure what to say. “I… I didn’t want to run into the others. It’s a
little awkward, after the fight and all.” Byeongkwan glances at Sehyoon out of the corners of his eyes, as if seeking for approval. “I didn’t really mean to start a fight, I was just… stressed? Obviously that’s not an excuse, but—”

“It’s not, but it’s an explanation. That’s a start.”

Byeongkwan huffs a laugh. “How are you so chill with this? Why aren’t you angry?”

“Because I trust you to know what you need to do,” Sehyoon says, and that’s really all there is to it. “If you ever need help with anything, then I’m here, but I’m not going to force you to talk or stay here or whatever.” He shrugs. “You’re capable enough to sort out your own shit.”

“Huh. That’s the first time I’ve heard someone say that to me.” Byeongkwan chuckles, but it sounds kind of wet, and when Sehyoon looks he’s busy rubbing his eyes. “Thanks, though. I’ll keep that in mind.” He seems sincere enough, so Sehyoon doesn’t push it. Maybe being lax like that isn’t the best approach to keep him safe from harm, but it’s the best approach for Byeongkwan to trust him, and that’s all he wants right now. His trust, so he can help once Byeongkwan actually decides things are getting too much for him.

“I should probably get some sleep,” Byeongkwan decides as he pushes his upper body up with his elbows. “Been a long day.”

“How are you going to stay at the loft for a while?”

“Uh.” He grimaces. “Probably not? I just came back to get some stuff… I’m not moving out, but I don’t think coming back is a good idea right now. I still have some things to do, anyway.”

“I mean, at some point you’re going to have to talk to them.”

“Yeah.” He shrugs. “Not today, though.” He sits up fully, hops down from the bed, stretches. “Thanks for the talk. I’ll call you if I need anything.”

“That’s not a free pass to treat me as a delivery boy.”

“You said if I need anything. Needing food is needing something.” Byeongkwan grins, the wide, soft kind of grin he gets when he’s happy or looking at Frosty being cute. “I’ll see you later, Sehyoon.”

“Yeah,” Sehyoon mutters, “you too.”

_I sure hope so_, he thinks as he watches the door close after him.

Byeongkwan doesn’t have to wait very long.

“Kwannie, hey, I’m glad you could make it!” His sister is the one who opens the door, as always. She gives him a smile and a side-hug and ushers him inside. “Mom and dad will be so happy to see you. I’m glad you could make it tonight.”

Byeongkwan takes off his shoes, puts them in a neat pair next to his mother’s upturned high heels. “Let’s hope so,” he says. “I brought a gift and all.” He did, actually, the gift bag dangling from the crook of his elbow as he brings up a hand to fix his fringe. “Right. What do you guys need me for?”
Jiwoo shrugs. “Let’s go sit down first, there’s no rush. Come on.” She puts a hand on Byeongkwan’s back, uses it to lightly steer him towards the living room. Byeongkwan goes without much resistance.

The living room is as he’s remembered it - small, clearly decorated on a budget, but clean enough that he doesn’t feel entirely uncomfortable. That’s all thanks to Jiwoo. She’s always done the brunt of the housework, in some effort to prove herself the superior sibling. She’d succeeded, of course, even with Byeongkwan doing…

Well.

“Byeongkwan, honey.” He looks up from the beige carpet into the eyes of his mother.

His mother is older than most mothers of people his age. Both of his parents are. Her pulled back grey hair is hidden with copious amounts of reddish-brown hair dye, but her skin is starting to wrinkle, giving her the look of someone who frowns a lot. Byeongkwan has heard her be described as a severe woman, and he’s inclined to agree. She’s wearing a button-up blouse and a simple skirt, a pearl necklace laid carefully over her collarbones. It pays to take care of your appearance, she’d taught Byeongkwan when he was little. Looks like another lesson that didn’t quite stick.

“She brought you something.”

His mother reaches out a hand, and he takes the bag with both hands, presents it to her. She peers inside, lifts out a tube here, a serum there. “These look expensive.”

“I saved up to buy them. This brand is supposed to be great for skincare, so-”

“Ah. Right.” His mother nods. “Jiwoo bought me a subscription to their monthly box delivery some time ago.” Beside Byeongkwan, Jiwoo is suddenly standing a little taller, glowing from her efforts being mentioned. “Still, you made an effort. Come, sit. Jiwoo darling, would you fetch us some tea?”

“Of course,” she chirps, and leaves for the kitchen.

As soon as Jiwoo is gone, awkwardness comes to take her place. Truthfully, Byeongkwan hasn’t talked to his mother like this in a long time. Jiwoo was the one who’d contacted him, the one who’d talked to him and told him about their family’s situation, who’d asked him to maybe consider coming back, at least for a little while. It’s always been his sister.

“Byeongkwan.” His mother tuts at him when he looks at her. “I understand you insist on dressing like you do, but the hair? Really? I thought I raised you better.”

“So,” he deflects. “I haven’t heard the full story yet. What’s happening? Why do you need my help?”

His mother sighs, leans forward to pat his hand. “You’ve always been forgetful, haven’t you? Jiwoo already told you about it.”

Byeongkwan stills, confusion tingling in his head. “I don’t think she has. I’d have remembered…”

“I did,” Jiwoo pipes up from the entrance to the living room, carrying a tray with four steaming cups of tea. “Last week.”

“Oh.” Byeongkwan looks at his feet. “I forgot, then. Sorry.” He really, really does not remember being told anything, but maybe he’s just wrong. He was always forgetful as a kid too, so it makes sense.
“Ah, thank you, Jiwoo darling. Come sit with us.” His mother takes one of the cups. Byeongkwan waits until Jiwoo sits and takes her own before grabbing one. The tea is bitter, medicinal, the type that his mother has always liked. There’s never been any other kind at home. It’s still disgusting, and Byeongkwan resists the heavy urge to scrunch up his face or spit it out on the spot. His sister and mother drink like they’re not bothered in the slightest, which is just unnatural. At least Jiwoo used to dislike this stuff as a kid.

Things do change, after all.

“As Jiwoo has already told you, we’ve had a run-in with a crime family who… don’t like us. They’ve been fabricating things, making it seem like we’re doing something illegal, when our family business is completely above board.” His mother sighs, and there’s a kind of world-weariness to her posture that Byeongkwan remembers from the times she’d ask him to help them out with their business. “We want to set the record straight, but there’s no way they’ll listen to us unless we pay them money that we can’t spare.”

“So you want my help to…”

“We’re breaking into their house,” Jiwoo pipes up. “To steal the fabricated evidence.”

“You’re staying well at home,” his mother says, glancing at Jiwoo out the corner of her eye, “but yes. There’s no other way.”

“I… I don’t know.” Byeongkwan shifts in his seat. Suddenly, the very air feels oppressive, the two pairs of eyes across from him boring holes into his forehead. “Listen. I’m happy to help with whatever, but that’s illegal, I thought we left that behind for good-”

“I thought you left for good,” his mother says, and Byeongkwan shuts up so fast he can hear his teeth click. “I heard you’ve helped out Jiwoo with chores, and as lovely as that is, it really doesn’t make up for you betraying your own family to… gallivant about with your friends.” She’s still quiet, but her words are precise, clipped, and her tone has grown so cold that Byeongkwan imagines he can feel the chill settle in his bones. “You don’t have room to say what is and isn’t acceptable for us to do, honey. Now, drink up, your father will be home soon and he’d rather like a talk with you as well.”

Byeongkwan hangs his head. “Yes,” he says, and downs the last of his tea.

His father isn’t home for thirty more minutes, that the three of them spend in uncomfortable silence. At least uncomfortable for Byeongkwan, though his sister and mother seem to feel well at home, chatting quietly to each other while Byeongkwan clutches the cup of tea in his hands - the second one he’d been given, which is two too many.

He’s just about finished the bottom of that one too, trying to be as slow as possible, when he hears the clicking turn of a key and a soft thump as the front door closes behind someone.

Byeongkwan’s father, all things considered, can only be described as a warm-looking person. He’s big, with a soft round face and a broad body shape. He’s started to bald since Byeongkwan saw him last, but he still looks very similar to how he did years ago. It’s almost like looking in a mirror, if a mirror made you decades older and about three feet taller.

“Byeongkwan,” his father says, halting in the doorway separating the living room from the hallway. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”
“Jiwoo said you guys needed help with things.” His father eyes him for the better part of ten seconds, and Byeongkwan presses his torso backwards into the cushioned seat. His father may look warm, but his eyes still feel like they can scan the deepest parts of you to show you all your flaws if you tested him.

“And are you willing to help?” His tone is gruff. Quiet. Testing.

“I don’t know.”

“Why’s that?”

Byeongkwan clears his throat. “I just don’t want to… I used to help with… not very legal things, and I feel bad about that, so…”

“How legal is vigilantism?”

Byeongkwan falls silent. His father stares him down as he approaches, sits on the chair opposite his, takes a mug of lukewarm at best tea and drinks from it. “From how I see it,” he continues, “you didn’t want to work with your family anymore. It had nothing to do with the legality of our work.”

“That’s not-”

“Let me finish.” He takes another drink. “From how I also see it, you chose to abandon us. Now you’re back, which only means you have some type of sentiment you can’t shake. Maybe you want to reconcile. And we can certainly do that - Jiwoo has missed you a lot. It’s hard, being a single child.” Jiwoo nods softly, but makes no move to speak up. “The only problem is that your mother was hurt by what you did, and so was I. We need to know we can trust you.”

“You can trust me, just not with-”

“There’s no qualifiers in that statement. Either we can trust you, or we don’t. And if you’re pulling out from this, it means we can’t trust you. Which means Jiwoo can’t trust you either, and that would be a shame. She’s been happy to spend time with you.”

Byeongkwan picks at his fingernails. Tension thrums through his body - he wants nothing more than to up and leave, leave all this behind again. But he can’t. “We’re your family,” his mother supplies quietly, and she’s right, isn’t she? Blood is thicker than water? He’s missed being home. And maybe it won’t be so bad after all. He’s just helping them not be falsely accused. That’s fine to do.

(You know there’s no false accusations, a voice says in his head. It sounds so eerily like Donghun that Byeongkwan thinks he’d found him, except Byeongkwan has taken great care to shield his mind from any intrusions the way he’d been taught, so he knows that’s not the case.)

(But yes. He knows. Or rather, a part of him that he’s starting to doubt knows.)

(Does he know?)

(Maybe he knows less than he thought. He’s always been forgetful.)

Byeongkwan sighs.

“Fine, I’ll help.”

The genuine smile his mother gives him is the first he’s seen in a good decade. He’s not sure how to feel about that.
They park on a shadowy sidewalk. It’s late, and dark, yet the street lights don’t quite reach the car, so it feels eerie in a way. Byeongkwan has always preferred daylight.

“Let’s go,” Jiwoo says. She’d wheedled her way into coming along after all. Somehow, her rosy makeup doesn’t exactly spell nighttime break-in to him, but she’d swapped her white dress for the same kind of black clothes everyone else is wearing, so it should be fine. Still, he doesn’t really want to see her in danger.

Jiwoo hands them all their masks, just in case, that they tug over their faces as they quietly creep towards the back gate of a mansion. They’d parked rather far away to not arouse any suspicion, so it’s quite a walk. Again, Byeongkwan is reminded of how much he hates keeping pace with people who are slower than him. Patience isn’t his strong suit, especially not when he just wants to get things over with.

(He remembers the street performer he’d punched and cringes internally. Not his best showing, now that he thinks about it.)

“We’re here,” his mother mutters quietly. “There’s two night guards on duty. We need you to disable them.”

“Me?” Byeongkwan asks.

“None of our powers are usable for combat. If you have any other bright ideas, let me know.” Her tone of voice makes it abundantly clear that she does not want any alternative ideas, which isn’t news to Byeongkwan. He doesn’t want to just go and attack people who are simply doing their jobs, but does he have a choice at this point?

(Yes, the Donghun-voice says. Yes, you always have a choice.)

No. He really doesn’t.

“Fine,” he says, and speeds off.

He used to feel dizzy and disoriented when he first started coming into his powers. Now it’s like breathing, the way he moves his body forward a little bit, the way he focuses his mind and shifts into his speed the way other people go from swimming to walking on land. It feels nice - sometimes he thinks he can only truly focus when he’s running and doesn’t have to slow down all the time.

The night guards are easy to locate, they’re both patrolling the gardens of the mansion on opposing sides. He even feels bad as he knocks them out and deposits them in nearby bushes - they couldn’t see it coming. That’s a little unfair, now that he thinks about it.

It can’t be any more than forty seconds until he comes to a stop in front of his family, his body forcibly yanked to a halt. “Now?” he asks. His legs twinge a little. They’ve been doing that more frequently these days. Maybe he should ask Sehyoon if everything’s alright.

His mother’s eyes are closed, her manicured fingers gripping onto the metal of the gate they’re crowded around. “There’s security cameras everywhere,” she says. “There would be a way up the facade on the side, but we need more than one person to carry everything we’re trying to take.” Byeongkwan still doesn’t quite know what his mother’s power actually entails, only that it’s something with electrical currents. Whatever it is, it seems to give her a pretty good insight into how the building’s security is set up. “Byeongkwan, you running shouldn’t set off the cameras, so you go up, your father will scale the building in the cameras’ blind spots. He’ll know what to take, so follow
his lead.”

They both nod, and Byeongkwan takes off without any further commentary.

It doesn’t take Byeongkwan very long to traverse the building, though it is a very big mansion indeed. He’s tempted to stop a few times to look at some of the art or the flowers on display, but decides that the risk of being caught on camera isn’t worth it.

Soon he’s on the top floor. He doesn’t see many cameras, so he allows himself to come to a stop in a seemingly unused room, white drapes covering all the furniture. There’s a thin layer of dust on everything, to the point where he can even see his own footprints.

That’s probably not a good thing.

Looking out a window, he can see his father scaling the building in a feat of acrobatics that doesn’t fit at all with his broad frame. He’s not often seen his father put his powers to actual use, so it’s a little jarring to see him like this.

He pulls his head back just as his father arrives at the window and pulls himself through. His feet impact the floor softly as he regains his balance on solid ground.

“This way,” he says quietly, and leads Byeongkwan to what appears to be an office, dark brown bookcases and a writing desk made from the same material dominating the space. “You go through the computer, I’ll gather any physical evidence.”

Byeongkwan wants to ask if he should call it evidence if it’s forged, but decides against it. There’s no point in antagonising him. Instead, he sits down in the fairly comfortable leather chair and starts up the computer.

“There’s a PIN.”

“Then find it. What else are you here for?”

“I’m not a…” His father gives him this look, and Byeongkwan falls silent. He doesn’t exactly connect this look with anything good, so it’s better to leave it. Instead, he decides to root through the desk drawers for any post-it notes or notebooks to give him any clue. He can hear his father search the entire room as he does so. Once, when he glances up, he’s pretty sure he sees him pocketing an expensive-looking letter opener.

(Don’t start anything. It’s not worth it.)

He goes back to work.

There’s nothing in the drawers. Byeongkwan is about to say that out loud, when he figures - it’s a four number PIN. There’s only a finite amount of combinations, and he’s very fast. So, maybe it’s worth a try?

It must look weird, him hunched over the computer normally, but hands blurred to the point they’re unrecognisable. It feels weird to him, too. His fingers keep slipping as he types - he’s not exactly used to using his hands and his powers together for anything beyond punching people in the face.

“I’m taking all these down with me. Don’t take too long or we’re leaving without you,” his father says, lifting up a box filled to the brim with things. Byeongkwan isn’t sure how much of that is
valuables and how much is what they actually came for, and he doesn’t want to know. He just nods, eyes still focused on the blue glare of the computer screen. When he enters another combination of numbers and the screen actually unlocks, he startles so bad he almost falls backwards in his chair.

That’d have been embarrassing. Yuchan would laugh at him for weeks if he knew.

Anyway.

Finding incriminating files isn’t exactly hard, thanks to the immaculate file naming system of whoever took time to compile all this. Deleting it all, however, is going to take a lot longer, considering there’s video files, audio files, pictures… all together it’s thirty, maybe forty gigabytes of footage and information.

It’s probably quite hard to fake video evidence.

(But who is so obsessed with his family that they get together all this evidence? What have they been doing in the years he hasn’t talked to them?)

In any case, he sets out to compile all of the folders of evidence into one big folder to delete it all at once.

He’s watching the progress bar fill slowly (way too slowly) when he hears… something. A car alarm? No. Hold on.

Sirens.

Fuck.

His eyes fly up to the webcam built into the PC, little green light blinking evenly.

Fuck.

There’s no time, so he cancels the last folder to be transferred and instead deletes the big folder first. The deletion bar blinks at him, innocently, as it continues to fill far too slowly. There’s nothing he can do, either. For once, his speed won’t speed anything up, so he’s stuck sitting there. Waiting.

The sirens grow louder.

“Shit, this is making my head hurt,” Byeongkwan mutters to himself, and instead ignores his aching legs stands up to go look outside the window again. His family are still stood at the gates, urgently whispering to each other. Then-

“The house is surrounded. Put your hands up and slowly kneel on the ground,” booms a voice from a loudspeaker downstairs. There’s a flash of red, a flash of blue, and Byeongkwan can see police cars slowly approaching from either side of the house. He chances a glance back at the files - still in the process of deletion, and curses softly to himself.

There’s nothing he can do now, so he turns on his heels and speeds back down the stairs. Except his legs ache, and then they tense up, and then they hurt so much that one more step will actually kill him, so he stops. In the middle of the grass surrounding the mansion. His legs immediately relax, but they still ache, so he should probably just go slowly…

Ah. Or he could be aimed at by an armed officer.

“On the ground, I said!” Some of the officers approach from behind Byeongkwan, some from
behind his family. They’re surrounded. Actually surrounded.

What are they going to do? Byeongkwan could probably run, even with the pain, but he can’t just leave his family behind, can he?

Jiwoo tugs on their mother’s sleeve urgently. Mouths something. From where Byeongkwan is standing, it looks a lot like “go”.

Go? But they can’t, right? And shouldn’t they share their plan with him?

“Guys—” he tries to call out, just as he makes eye contact with a young policeman. He’s obviously terrified - clutching his gun tight in two hands, trembling, wide eyes trained on Byeongkwan. “Don’t move!” he yells, and his voice even cracks in the middle. Byeongkwan winces. Not the situation he wants.

“No, listen, I—” He makes to reach forward, reach out somehow-

“No!”

A gunshot. He’s never heard a gun fire from this close before. Or has he? But he doesn’t remember it sounding so piercing. It hurts his head.

No. Wait. Not his head.

Byeongkwan looks down. Down.

There’s a hole in his gym shorts, in the middle of his right thigh. He lets his hands sink, probes at his leg.

His fingers come away sticky and red.

Oh.

“Guys,” he starts again, staring at his father, his mother, Jiwoo, “what are we…”

None of them meet his gaze.

“Jiwoo?”

Jiwoo takes a deep breath and raises her hands to the sky. With her rises a wall of darkness. Byeongkwan recognises this, he’s seen it before. This is their exit strategy. This is what they do when everything goes wrong and they need to confuse and leave.

Except Byeongkwan can’t run after them.

Except Byeongkwan is stuck here, with guns trained on him.

There’s confused shouting all around him, the policemen on high alert, but he can barely hear it over the thrum of blood in his ears. It’s only now that the pain truly hits him, his leg screaming in protest, his entire body starting to shiver and shake the more blood leaves him.

That doesn’t matter. What matters is that his family left. And he’s still here.

Byeongkwan takes a deep, rattling breath, closes his eyes, and forces his legs to move.
Of course, that doesn’t last him very long. As soon as he’s out of immediate danger, his legs collapse beneath him, and his body goes flying. He dully registers a pain in his shoulder, something impacting with his torso, and then everything goes quiet for a while.

He can still hear the policemen shouting in the far distance, and he knows it won’t be hard to find him. He’s bleeding, and he likely left a big fat trail of blood leading to his exact position. He covered some ground, but not much. He doesn’t have much time.

Instead of looking for an exit out of the dark, narrow alleyway he found himself in, his hands go to his leg again. As soon as his fingers skim the fabric stretched over his thigh, a blinding-hot wave of pain hits him, eats into his brain until all he can hear is violent static.

Byeongkwan turns his head, yanks off his mask and vomits.

When he comes to again, a few seconds later maybe, the sound of nails against chalkboard ebbing at least the littlest bit, he finds he’s cold. Which is dumb. It’s summer. It’s a warm summer evening.

He shivers. He’s still cold, though, the chill gnawing at his legs. That’s probably not good.

He presses one hand to his thigh. He tries to stem the flow of blood, but the wound is too big. Probably too close to some major artery. He swears he can feel blood pumping out of his body with every pulse of his heart.

*Think, Byeongkwan,* says his internal voice. It doesn’t sound like Donghun anymore. His brain is probably too tired to keep up that game. *Think. What can you do.*

Byeongkwan screws his eyes shut, thinks. Thinks. Shouldn’t jungle survival shows have taught him how to survive in situations like this? Wait, no, nobody gets shot in the jungle. Dumb. Dumb Byeongkwan.

He swears there’s something he can do. but the pain is clawing at his head, his leg feels like it’s burning. He really can’t focus, and-

He isn’t going to die, is he?

No. That’s dumb too. Nobody dies from a thigh wound. It’s always the chest, or the stomach, isn’t it?

But it’s bleeding a lot…

He presses both hands against it again.

Through the haze of his thoughts, he can feel something press against his other leg. A brick? No. Wait. His phone. That’s his phone.

His phone.

Sehyoon.

He fumbles with his back pocket, other hand still pressed firmly against his thigh, and gets out his phone. He swipes a shaking thumb against the lockscreen. It leaves a red smear against the display. His hand is practically dripping.

That’s not good.
The text on his phone swims before his eyes. He squints. Tries to find the call button. Why is everything on this screen so small? Oh. There. Good.

His call history is sparse. He almost presses Jiwoo’s name, but decides against it. Not a good idea.

Sehyoon. There. He taps against the screen decisively, but bringing the phone to his ear feels like more effort than he’s ever expended on anything in his life.

The dialling sound is grating.

*Pick up.*

“Byeongkwan?” Sehyoon’s voice is tinny, staticy, but it’s *there*. Thank fuck. He’s there.

Byeongkwan squints up at the wall opposite him.

“Temple Street,” he reads out carefully. He can feel his words slur together regardless. “Rich neighbourhood. Mansions. We came near here for the charity.”

“Byeongkwan? Are you alright?”

“Help,” he says, and then his phone clatters to the ground.
Sehyoon’s phone rings in the middle of the night.

The ringtone is jarring enough to jolt him awake immediately, whatever dream he’d been having dissolving in front of his eyes. He looks at the phone display, squints against the harsh light - it’s three in the morning. The caller ID reads Byeongkwan - Byeongkwan, who is calling him at three in the morning.

What are the chances he’s just calling to have a relaxing chat?

“Byeongkwan?” He clears his throat. His voice feels rough when he talks, gravelly from sleep and deeper than usual. He blinks blearily down at his knees. Why is he calling so late?

“Temple Street,” Byeongkwan says slowly, carefully. The space between the words slurs together. He sounds tired. “Rich neighbourhood. Mansions. We came near here for the charity.”

The way he’s struggling his way through the sentences, the edge to his voice that Sehyoon can’t quite place, has him wide awake in the span of a second. Before Byeongkwan can even finish talking, he’s up and on the search for clothes to throw on quickly. “Byeongkwan?” he asks, just to make sure he’s still there. “Are you alright?”

Dumb question. Obviously he isn’t alright.

“Help,” Byeongkwan whispers from the other end of the line, and then there’s a scraping, piercing impact noise, like he threw his phone away. Or let it fall.

“Byeongkwan? Hey. Byeongkwan. Are you still there?” He grabs the nearest pair of pants, tugs them on as he’s walking around to find his key to the loft. “Byeongkwan. If you can’t talk, tap on the phone to let me know you hear me. Is that okay?”

There’s a pause, some rustling, some scraping over what Sehyoon assumes is the microphone, then a soft little tap to the phone case, loud enough to be clearly audible through the phone’s connection.
“Okay. Are you hurt? Tap once for yes.”

A single tap.

“Bleeding?”

Another tap. Byeongkwan is clearly trying to hold his breath, or be quieter, but the wheeze to his air intake is noticeable. Sehyoon winces. He sounds bad.

“Alright. I’m coming to get you, stay where you are.”

Two taps.

Sehyoon is about to ask what Byeongkwan means, but before he can, he can hear more voices filter through the phone.

“Sir, I found some more blood! Seems he came down this street, but I’m not sure exactly where he went from here.”

“That’s fine, just fan out and search the surrounding area. He can’t have gone very far, we’ll find him sooner or later.”

Oh. Hm.

“Okay.” Sehyoon takes a deep breath. “Stay where you are. Don’t move. Apply pressure to the wound. Alright?” There’s no answer. Byeongkwan’s breathing is shallow, as quiet as he can make it. That’s fine. As long as he’s breathing. “Okay. Just hold on, I’ll be with you as soon as I can.” He lets his phone sink, hangs up, types Byeongkwan’s whereabouts into his map app, and immediately dials 911.

“This is 911, what is your emergency?”

Sehyoon takes a breath, nods, and puts on his adult person voice. “There’s some person here,” he whispers urgently, a panicked undercurrent to his voice that isn’t entirely fake, “he broke into my home, he’s bleeding maybe? I don’t know if he’s armed, but I hid in the study. The address is 52 Archer Street. Please send help fast, he might have powers.”

There’s a clicking sound on the other end of the line, likely the 911 personnel typing. “Are you the only person in the house?”

“There’s my little daughter as well. Please, send someone fast. I have to hang up, he might hear me talk…”

“Okay, sir. Don’t worry, we’ll get some officers to check it out right away.”

“Thank you,” he breathes, hangs up, straightens up from the hunched position he’d instinctively adopted trying to convey the sense of panic, and leaves his room.

He needs a way to get to Byeongkwan as fast as possible. It’s way too far to go on foot, and he doesn’t want to transport a potentially unconscious, blood-covered boy in a bus, so car it is. Junhee’s or Donghun’s? ...Donghun’s. He’s likely to be less mad. (Plus, his seats are cheaper and easier to dry-clean.)

Sehyoon goes downstairs and quietly steals into Donghun’s room. Over the years he’s gotten used to walking quietly - it’s no real trouble avoiding any creaky floorboards. Donghun is a neat person, so
he only needs to go through two nightstand drawers and a jacket pocket to find his car keys. Donghun doesn’t stir even once. Sehyoon considers feeling a little guilty for all of two seconds, but this is for Byeongkwan’s good. Donghun would agree, if he were awake, so it’s fine.

The elevator ride down to the car park takes an excruciatingly long time. It’s not like he can do anything standing there - he can’t call Byeongkwan, if he has his ringtone on and it alerts anyone left in the area he’d be fucked - and there’s no way to speed up his slow descent in any way, but he can’t tell that to his rampant anxiety. All he can think about is getting to Byeongkwan in time. What if he’s too late? What if his wound is too severe and he doesn’t make it? What if he arrives to see his…

No. No time for that. Sehyoon gently taps his cheeks with both his hands and shakes his head. He’ll be fine. He has to believe in that.

The car park is dark and empty when he arrives. He knows this building used to house offices, so they built this entire subterranean garage, but now the only two cars in it are Junhee’s and Donghun’s, parked next to each other just in front of the elevator. The lights overhead aren’t on - probably to save on electricity, since nobody’s using the place anyway. Sehyoon’s steps echo loudly in this giant, empty concrete box as he hurries up to the car.

Donghun’s car is nice, but it’s old and definitely pretty worn at this point. It might’ve belonged to his parents, but Sehyoon never asked, and Donghun never told, and it really does not matter at this point. Sehyoon probably breaks about twenty traffic rules and nearly runs over a traffic light on his way to the location Byeongkwan had given him. He ditches the car in a suitably inconspicuous location as soon as he can, fingers itching for something to do too much to stay clenched around a steering wheel anymore.

“Oh. Where’s Byeongkwan?” he mutters to himself, eyes trained on his map application. Go straight here, then a right, then a sharp turn into an alleyway-

And another sharp turn right into a police officer.

Byeongkwan groans when he hears footsteps approach. His heart would speed up in an anxious fit again, but his fingers are numb from the pressure he’d been exerting on his wound and he’s just tired. Tired, numb, and cold. If the police have found him, it’s not like he can do anything against it. It’s fine. He’ll deal with it later. As long as he gets to be alive.

“Byeongkwan?”

“How?”

“Byeongkwan, hey. Look at me.” The person takes his face between both of their hands and tilts it up to meet their gaze. Oh. Is that Sehyoon?

“‘S’tht. Ynn?” Well, maybe that question didn’t quite come out right. Why does Sehyoon look so worried, though? It’s too late to be worried. Isn’t he exhausted too?

“I’ll heal you now, alright? I can’t repair all the damage right now, but I’ll stop the bleeding,” Sehyoon explains as he gently nudges aside Byeongkwan’s hand that he’d been pressing against the bullet hole. Byeongkwan wants to protest, because something about keeping his hand there is important, *vital*, but Sehyoon is so gentle about it that he just lets him. He watches as Sehyoon rolls up his pant leg, lays his hands on bloodied skin, the sensation somehow numb and far away, and counts the specks of light rising from his fingers. One… two… he loses count. Furrows his brow.
Cold envelops his leg. It’s almost like dipping his foot into the sea in early summer, numbing the pain and the throbbing and the fire eating on the inside of his thigh until there’s only his pulse thrumming in his ears that’s left.

“’ll be alright?”

“Yes. I’ll get you back to the loft and heal you as much as possible later.”

“’m not gonna die?”

Sehyoon’s shoulders tremble. “No,” he says, and he sounds vehement. “You’re not going to die.”

“Good.” Byeongkwan nods. “I d’nt wanna die yet.” He tries for a joking tone, but the way Sehyoon looks at him, with something shining in his eyes and his eyebrows drawn together in concern shows him he wasn’t quite there. “I w’na live,” he says, and this time he knows he means it as deeply as he can.

“...Yeah.” Sehyoon hangs his head. Byeongkwan could swear he’s muttering something, talking to himself, but it’s way too quiet to make out any words. He’d have to focus, and he’s too loopy to do that.

An indeterminable amount of time passes until Sehyoon seems satisfied. Well, not satisfied so much as... unable to continue? Through Byeongkwan’s hazy vision, his skin seems paler than usual, and he’s breathing heavily. Raggedly. Sehyoon scrunches up his face, shakes his head, and grabs a roll of bandages from beside him. “Hold still,” he says, and wraps up his thigh. The bandages soak up blood as soon as they touch his skin, and part of Byeongkwan wonders if those will really help any. What do bandages have that Sehyoon’s healing doesn’t?

“Come on. Get up, we need to get you out of here before anyone comes back to check this area.” Sehyoon stands up, drags Byeongkwan with him, slings one of Byeongkwan’s arms over his shoulder. “Can you walk like this?” Byeongkwan tests the leg he’s standing on, wobbly and unsteady, and grimaces weakly. He feels at least a little better now, the healing Sehyoon had given him giving him the faintest sense of energy, but it’s not much, and he knows it won’t last for very long.

“Not sure,” he mutters.

Sehyoon sighs. Nods. His hands feel cold, and not the pleasant kind that had soaked up his pain and given him reprieve before. There’s sweat on his forehead. “Alright,” he says, and turns so Byeongkwan can hop on his back instead.

Byeongkwan holds as tight as he can onto Sehyoon’s shoulders. Hanging there, on his back, he can feel the way his clothes stick to Sehyoon’s, and if he looked down, he could probably see the way the residual blood soaks into his shirt. He breathes out. Slowly, gradually, he can sense the feeling coming back into his toes and his fingers. There’s still a thrum of sharp hurt under his skin, but it’s much better than before, so it’s easy to ignore for now.

“How’d you get here so fast?” he asks. Sehyoon doesn’t answer, just carries him out of the alleyway with purposeful steps, takes a big one over something crumpled in a heap on the ground-

Over what?

“Hey, was that a person?” Now that Byeongkwan looks around, he sees three more people passed out around them, where the alleyway he was in feeds into a broader street. They’re wearing police uniforms, and they’re unconscious, each one of them.
“Yeah.”

“Did you do that?”

Sehyoon staggers a little. His grip on Byeongkwan’s legs tightens. “I just knocked them out. They were about to find you, so…”

“Oh… Thanks.”

“Yeah.”

They don’t talk until they arrive at the car and Sehyoon gently deposits him in the front passenger’s seat, then comes around to slide into the driver’s spot. He drives carefully, but his hands are trembling against the steering wheel, and one time he has to pull over to violently cough into the crook of his elbow for what feels like an eternity. Byeongkwan rubs his back before he realises that all he’s doing is smearing blood all over his clothing.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry. I should ask you that.”

Byeongkwan looks down at his leg. There’s a hole in his shorts where the bullet entered his body - and it’s still in there, isn’t it? A bullet. Sitting in his leg. He can’t see the wound anymore, only the bandages, except they’re so soaked in red that it might just as well be the open wound on display. He goes to speak, but for once, he doesn’t have any words to express what he’s feeling.

“It’s like a drama,” he says instead.

“What?”

“You know, the… the piggybacking. At night. ‘s cute.”

Sehyoon coughs again, but it sounds less deathly this time. Just strained. Did Byeongkwan say something wrong? Wait, what did he say again? His brain is so. Sluggish, again. Hazy. It feels uncomfortable. He scratches at his forehead. His fingers feel cold against his skin from all the blood that’s coating them. Cold blood that came from his leg.

Today really isn’t a good day for him.

“You good?” Sehyoon is glancing at him out of the corner of his eye.

“Yeah. Just… I’m tired.”

“That’s fine. You can sleep if you want, we’ll be home soon.”

“Alright.” Then, quieter: “I’m sorry.”

“What for?”

“For… making you get me. And the… the blood.”

“We’ll talk about it in the morning, okay?”

Byeongkwan nods, rests his head against the window, and watches the streets pass blankly around them. At some point, his eyes slip shut, and Sehyoon lets him sleep.
He can’t remember if he woke up during the night at all. He thinks he might have, vaguely remembers gasping for breath as his leg flares up so much his body couldn’t ignore it anymore, but every time the pain was immediately taken from him by cold hands, so he’s not sure if those were dreams or not.

When he does wake up for good, the first thing he notices is that he’s parched. There’s a vague
headache brewing, the kind you get from clenching your teeth too hard, so he doesn’t even bother trying to get up, instead just opening one eye carefully. It’s dim - someone’s drawn the curtains, but what little light filters through the thick red fabric tells him it’s probably sometime during the day.

Byeongkwan raises a hand to his face. It’s clean, aside from the bits of dried red and brown under his fingernails. Did Sehyoon bathe him? He can’t remember anything from after he fell asleep in the car, so he might have. It’s hard to believe that he’d sleep through something like that, though.

Distantly, he hears the sound of clattering. It might be someone working in the kitchen. Something in the back of his mind knows he has to eat soon, but there’s this vague nausea that hits him when he thinks about food, and, maybe not now. Some tea might be nice, though. He should go ask for some tea… or maybe he could rest some more. He’ll ask once someone comes to visit him.

Byeongkwan closes his eyes. He is still exhausted, despite sleeping for who knows how long. He’s ready to drift off again, already halfway between awake and asleep despite the dull pain in his thigh, when he hears the door creak as it opens. There’s a pause, and then people enter. He’s too comfortable to check who it is, or move at all, so he doesn’t.

“Is he asleep?” a voice questions.

“Yeah. He’ll probably sleep for a while. His body must be exhausted.” Someone sits down next to the bed, and a cold hand touches Byeongkwan’s cheek lightly. Almost immediately he can feel his budding headache receding, and the pain in his leg fading. If he opened his eyes, he would probably see tiny globes of light float all around his head like a tiny galaxy.

“Sehyoon, we need to talk,” Donghun says. Sehyoon’s answering hum is noncommittal at best.

“What about?”

“You know what about, don’t play dumb. You’re this close to passing out, you can’t do that to yourself much longer.”

“He needs healing, Donghun. We can’t really take him to a hospital - this is his only option.”

“Not when you overexert yourself it isn’t.”

“What do you expect me to do, let him just bleed out in a ditch?” Sehyoon sounds legitimately upset, and Byeongkwan wants to reach out to comfort him, but his body feels like it’s sinking into his mattress and even fluttering his eyelids is too much effort.

Donghun sighs. There’s the sound of footsteps again, like he’s pacing. “Sehyoon,” he starts after a while of silence, “this is dangerous. You know that.”

“I know my limits. Stop.”

“Do you, though? Do you know how severely you could damage your body? Moderation. We’ve talked about this.”

“Getting shot in a major artery isn’t exactly moderate, now is it.”

“I’m worried you’ll spiral. You’re pushing yourself so hard, it’s only a matter of time until-”

“I think your water’s finished boiling,” Sehyoon snaps. His fingertips briefly dig into Byeongkwan’s skin where he’s carding back his hair out of his face, but he immediately relaxes his hand, removes it from his forehead. Byeongkwan misses it, a little bit. It’s comforting.
“...Fine, but you’re not getting out of this discussion. We’ll talk about it later.” Donghun leaves, and Byeongkwan is sure he didn’t only imagine the distinct air of frustration to his voice. He’d ask, make sure that Sehyoon is alright, but Sehyoon’s fingers push into his hair again once the door closes and he can feel himself slip back into his interrupted slumber.

When Byeongkwan wakes up again, the light against his eyelids is brighter than it was before.

“Nh,” he vocalises, and opens his eyes. Blinks. Groans as he adjusts to the light in the room.

“Sehyoon?”

“Yeah?” There’s a rustling from the other side of the room, then Sehyoon steps into his field of vision. “Everything alright?”

Sehyoon looks, for lack of a better word, wrecked. His hair is messed up from where he’d probably run his hands through it a few too many times, and it hangs into his eyes in stringy clumps. His skin is almost as pale as Byeongkwan’s own, and there are deep purple shadows under his puffy eyes. It looks like he’d been punched in the face. He shivers, rubs his arms, and puts a hand on Byeongkwan’s forehead again. His hands are freezing.

“Does it hurt again?”

“No,” Byeongkwan lies. “I’m good. Are you?”

Sehyoon frowns. “Of course. I wasn’t the one who got shot.”

“And I’m not the one who probably hasn’t slept all night.” Sehyoon clears his throat sheepishly, and Byeongkwan knows he’s hit the nail on the head. “I’m going to be fine. You should rest.”

“Byeongkwan, you almost died,” Sehyoon says quietly, and, well. He’s got a point. “You called me, and I almost had to listen to you bleed out right there. No way am I going to sleep when there could be complications at any moment.”

“Aren’t I healed now, though?”

Sehyoon shakes his head. “I can’t do that much at once. Plus, the bullet is still in you, and who knows what that might do to your body.”

“Right. That.” Byeongkwan looks down at his hands. The dried blood under his fingernails is gone. “I... Thank you. Honestly. I sort of wasn’t expecting you to pick up so late.”


“What, Sehyoon being responsible for once?” Byeongkwan teases. He’s trying to lighten up the situation, get a smile out of his friend (surely they are friends by now, right?), but Sehyoon’s face closes off even further, and he hunches into himself.

“I’m being serious, you know,” he says. “You don’t have to tell us what happened, but you can’t do this again.”

Byeongkwan swallows thickly. “Fine. You guys deserve an explanation, too.”

“Later, though.”
“Yeah, later.”

Junhee is in his workshop, putting together a Frankenstein of a gun that would fall apart the moment you touched it the wrong way, when Donghun knocks.

Which he can’t hear, so to him he’s in his workshop, putting together a gun when Donghun just barges into his workshop.

“The hell?” Junhee asks as he’s fishing out one of his earplugs. “What’s this for?”

“I brought you more coffee,” Donghun says, setting down a steaming cup gently next to the five other cups Junhee had neglected to bring to the dishwasher yet. “And I was hoping to talk to you.”

Junhee, after casting a mournful glance at his project, sets down his tools and turns around so he can lean on his work table. “What about?” he asks, grasping the cup and taking a sip. It’s decent. A little low on the sugar.

“Byeongkwan.”

“Ah.” Junhee nods. “How is he?”

“Recovering, I think. But there’s things that we need to do for him.” Donghun waits for a beat, then continues when Junhee shows no signs of asking any further. “The bullet he got shot with is still in his leg, and we need to get it out so he’ll recover properly.”

“It’s not really like you can get him to a hospital without being asked questions. Will he be fine with it in?”

“No.” Donghun’s voice is resolute. “He won’t be, and you’re right. So we need you to remove the bullet for him.”

What.

“What.”

Donghun just keeps looking at him evenly, and… “Holy shit, you’re actually serious?” Junhee laughs, out of nervosity more than anything, and sets down his mug. “You want me to perform surgery? With what training - with what supplies?”

“You’re our best shot,” Donghun states, and if that isn’t a statement on just how badly things are going right now. “You’re inventive enough to throw something together. You have steady enough hands to build a gun umbrella. And you’re lucky.”

All this together sounds mildly convincing, Junhee has to admit, but - “I’m still not a trained doctor. What if I fuck up? What if he dies because I did something wrong? I can’t have that on my plate, Donghun.”

“I thought you were trying to care about the team a little more?”

“Just because I feel bad about Yuchan doesn’t mean I’ll risk murdering someone who’s eaten food out of my fridge.”

Donghun sighs. Folds his arms in front of his chest. “All I know is that the bullet needs to be removed as soon as possible, before it gives him some infection or poisoning that Sehyoon won’t be
able to treat. Either you do it, or I will, and I think we both know who has the better outlook in this case."

The thing is, he’s right. Donghun may be their emotional backbone, but he’s not good with manual detail work, or probably the sight of an up-close surgical wound. Junhee has never done anything like this before, but neither has Donghun, and one of them has to step up.

And with all that Sehyoon is doing right now, maybe it’s Junhee’s turn to do his part. Junhee’s turn to… prevent a potential death.

Or cause one.

“You care about him,” Donghun adds on quietly when he doesn’t react, tries to catch his gaze, but Junhee blinks evenly down at the ground. “Even if you won’t admit it out loud, you’d care if he died. You’d beat yourself up over not doing anything when you could have.”

“That’s a low bar to set.”

“But the bar has been set, at least.”

Junhee brings up his hands and presses the heels of them to his eyes. Suddenly, he feels so much more exhausted than he did just ten minutes ago. “I don’t think you know enough about me to tell me what I’ll think,” he points out.

“I don’t mind, as long as you’ll do it.” Donghun has never quite pleaded with him so blatantly before, and, what weakens Junhee’s resolve most of all: if he had any doubt in Junhee’s capability, or thought he could do the job better himself, he’d never have asked him in the first place.

“…Fine. I can’t believe I’m doing this, but fine.” Junhee shakes his head. “Just give me an hour to improvise something. Do we have disinfectant spray anywhere?”

The grateful smile he gets from Donghun isn’t quite worth what he’s about to do, but it’s a start.

Removing the bullet is one of the more stressful things Donghun has experienced in his life, and he’s not even the one doing it.

He’s standing at the side, out of the way in Junhee’s workroom, temporarily converted into an operating space. It’s the best they could come up with in this short a time - one of the sturdy tables has a cloth on it, everything’s been disinfected as much as possible, and they brought some lamps in so Junhee could see what he was doing. Ten minutes before the removal someone even turned up to deliver a set of medical implements. Donghun has no idea what kind of contacts Junhee has that he could organise something like that on short notice, and without being asked questions. He supposes it would’ve been too much to ask to organise a discreet doctor as well.

Junhee, well, he isn’t a trained medical professional, and the incision looks a little janky, but he does get to the bullet, lifts it out of Byeongkwan’s thigh carefully, face screwed up in disgust behind his surgical mask. Sehyoon grips Byeongkwan’s hand tighter, funnels more healing into him to mask the pain of having his leg cut open. He’s whispering something that none of them can make out; probably not even Byeongkwan himself, who’s laying on the flat surface of the table with a half-awake look blanketing his face. He doesn’t flinch once, which is probably thanks to Sehyoon overworking himself again. He’s been doing that a lot. Too much. He sways where he’s standing, but steels himself once he feels Donghun’s eyes on him.
“Do you want me to stitch up the incision?” Junhee asks once he’s let the bullet fall into a tray by Byeongkwan’s side.

“It’s fine,” Sehyoon says, reaches out, and places two fingers on it. The light that blooms around the connection between their bodies is weak at best, flickering, and they all know he’s not healing as much as he usually does. “It should be alright like this,” he still says, a stubborn streak that Donghun doesn’t know will ever break, “just bandage it up just in case.”

“Alright.” Junhee does just that. When Sehyoon draws back, he takes a half-step back, stumbling, and Donghun rushes forward to stabilise him.

“Let’s get you in bed, yeah?” Sehyoon tries to shake his head, to protest, but Donghun gently steers him out of the room and across the landing. Downstairs, Yuchan is looking at them with a worried expression, and Donghun gives a little wave.

“They’ll both recover,” he tells him, just to see his pinched expression loosen a little.

“Byeongkwan wants to talk to all of us later,” Sehyoon adds.

“Sleep first. He can talk to us tomorrow.”

He does talk to them tomorrow.

“Hey,” Byeongkwan greets them as they all file into his room. He lifts a hand, waves weakly. Donghun resists the urge to wave back, mainly because he’s carrying a tray. Byeongkwan sits up a little straighter once he sees him.

“Is that breakfast?”

“Yes. I don’t think you’ve eaten yet, have you?” He sets down the tray next to Byeongkwan’s leg, on the bed. “There’s tea, and some pastries. You liked blueberries, right?”

“I do. Thanks.” Byeongkwan smiles, and though it’s small and a little strained, it’s genuine. It feels like the first positive thing that’s happened over the past two days, ever since Sehyoon staggered home in the middle of the night with blood all over him, gasping about Byeongkwan needing help.

They all sit - Yuchan on the bed next to Byeongkwan, the others on chairs - while Byeongkwan sips his tea. He looks at all of them, apprehensive to break the silence, but whatever he sees reflected in their faces, it propels him to take a deep breath and nod to himself.

“I used to be involved in my parents’ criminal syndicate,” he says.

Well, that’s quite an opening.

“It… wasn’t really a syndicate, actually,” he corrects himself immediately. “They weren’t successful, at least not when I was with them.

“When I was, what, ten, they started working towards establishing a presence in criminal circles. I’m not sure why, I guess we were pretty poor then. Anyway. They started to try and get me and my sister involved, too. They probably wanted us to take over whatever they were trying to build someday, and help to keep it all running.

“It started pretty slow. We were sent to playdates with children of people they wanted an in with, and
they kept trying to sell us on how what they were doing was a good thing for everyone involved. They all have powers, too, so they told us they’re trying to help other powered people with their earnings. I believed them for a while, so I did what they wanted.

“Some time after, they wanted our help with more visibly illegal things. Stealing, blackmail, break-ins, stuff like that. Anything to give them an edge. Jiwoo - my sister - went along with it a lot more easily. I started to doubt. At one point, I realised that I just don’t want to do this anymore, I don’t want to be their accessory to petty crime, so once I turned eighteen, I up and left. Lived alone since then. I never contacted my family, though I wanted to, and they never contacted me either. I guess that fucked me up a bit. I still… loved them, after all. I think I still do, even after…”

Byeongkwan clears his throat. His voice has grown thick, and he aggressively rubs the back of his hand over his eyes before continuing.

“Sorry. Right. As I was saying - I still loved them. So when Jiwoo called me a while ago, and told me that they wanted to get in touch again, I agreed. I went out to see her, and things were good for a while, you know? We got coffee, talked about our lives. She has a boyfriend now, and I lost my chance to bond with him.” He laughs weakly. It’s really more of an exhale than anything. “Then she starts talking about issues our family has. How she’s suffering from them too. She lost her job, there’s people hating her for who she is, her paycheck got stolen… And I help her, because I’m still her brother. We’re still family, even if we parted on bad terms. I stay out longer. I maybe start doing things for her I’m not proud of. I broke into a man’s apartment to scare him in the middle of the night, because he broke up with her and she wanted to get revenge. Not really glamorous work.

“Then, one day, she tells me my parents want to talk to me. That they’re happy we’re getting along so well, and proud of me for finding my way back. She asked me to meet them. And I agreed, because they’re my parents, after all. I go, and they tell me I need to help them with this thing, and I don’t feel like I can refuse because I’m on their turf now, and what would Jiwoo think if I just turned my back and left like that? What would all that work I put in mean if I backed out now? So I drive with them to this mansion, and they tell me there’s forged evidence against them, by people who want to see them burn. In hindsight I’m pretty sure it was all real, and they just needed me to dispose of it for them. Anyway, we get caught by the police. One of them shoots me with no real warning. I stand there, surrounded, and my family just… makes their exit. Somehow I managed to get far enough away to call Sehyoon, but I don’t know what would have happened if he hadn’t been there so fast.”

Byeongkwan falls silent. “No. I know what would have happened.”

Donghun knows, too.

It’s quiet.

“Why did you get involved when you were a kid?” They all look at Yuchan. He looks at his hands when he asks. Donghun is about to say that’s none of their business, to keep some things private, when Byeongkwan lets out a long sigh.

“They always made me feel like I wasn’t good enough,” he says. “I grew up wanting to prove to them that I was more than just a problem child. They made me feel like… I don’t know, like I was dependent on them, that I wouldn’t be happy without them.” He clearly struggles to find the proper words at times to describe what he’s been thinking. “I guess they manipulated me into doing things for them. But I still did them, so it’s not like there’s no fault with me.”

Donghun had sort of guessed his family would be like this. When they first met, when Byeongkwan had poured out all the things he felt he did wrong in his life and Donghun offered him a shot at
redemption, he knew that a healthy household wouldn’t produce such a profoundly regretful personality. He doesn’t have first-hand experience with this… manipulation - or abuse - that much is true, but he knows the red flags, the warning signs, and what he told him back then ticked most of them for him. Still, it’s a little jarring to hear him admit that this really had been happening. It makes it more real than the speculation Donghun had done before. It makes him feel like he should have done something, which is absurd, because they never even knew each other back then, and there’s not much he could have done in the first place.

Byeongkwan grimaces as their eyes meet, and Donghun looks away. He might have worn his pity too openly.


“There’s that. Alright.” Junee nods, straightens up, and leaves the room. They all watch the door swing shut behind him.

“Well. That was rude,” Byeongkwan mutters. “I do actually want to finish all this food, I really don’t want to kick you guys out, but…”

“Got it, got it. Come on, Sehyoon.” Donghun stretches, then pats Sehyoon’s shoulder. “We have things to talk about anyway.” Sehyoon, silent, shrugs and follows him. His eyes haven’t met Byeongkwan’s all this time. The door clicks shut behind them.

“Let’s talk in my room.”

“Okay.”

As soon as the door closes behind Donghun and Sehyoon, Byeongkwan lets his head hit the headboard of his bed and groans. “God.”

“What’s wrong?”

Oh. He glances at Yuchan, who’s still sitting on the bed next to him, hands folded in his lap. “Sorry. I, uh. Just. I can’t stand the whole pity parade people throw when I tell them about my issues.” He waves his hand, shrugs, and opts to take a bite of one of the pastries instead. It’s really good, even though he’s getting crumbs all over his chest. “I love Donghun,” he mumbles around his mouthful, “I really do, but his sad puppy eyes don’t help.”

Yuchan looks up at the ceiling. “Yeah,” he hums, “sometimes it’s nice to vent without being told how fucked up your life is. Like, you already know. It’s not news. Talking to someone who understands what it’s like is better usually.”

“Exactly.” Byeongkwan swallows his bite, furrows his eyebrows, turns to look at Yuchan. “Wait, since when are you all mature like that?”

Yuchan chuckles. “I’m just a year younger than you. I’m not actually a baby. ...Even though I cry in public sometimes.” He grimaces, but Byeongkwan can tell he doesn’t mind bringing it up as much as he lets on.

“But still. I’m pretty sure you’re not actually legally allowed to swear yet.”

“Hey.” Yuchan raises his hand as if to push him, but changes his mind when his eyes go to the mug
of tea Byeongkwan is still holding to his chest, and instead shuffles over to knock their shoulders together lightly. “I mean it, though. I’m not a child, even though I wish I was sometimes so I wouldn’t have to do shit like have responsibilities. You can talk to me, if you want to. No pity or apologies on behalf of whoever.”

Byeongkwan considers that. Looks at Yuchan, who for all intents and purposes, is something like a cross between his best friend and the little brother he’d always kind of wanted. Yuchan, who seems to understand a lot more than he lets on. He can’t help but remember the time Yuchan had told him he’d never had Oreos before, or all the times he sits down at the breakfast table with puffy, red-rimmed eyes.

“My parents…” he begins slowly, haltingly, trying to find the words as he goes along, “…my parents have always been like this. I read this reddit thread about narcissists once, and I feel like that describes them pretty well. They just… I don’t know. They were never really compassionate, unless they could get something out of me.”

He glances over at Yuchan, who is watching him with sharp eyes, nodding lightly as a sign for him to continue. “They kept making me feel like I wasn’t quite good enough. No matter what my grades were, or how much I did around the house, Jiwoo was always better. My dad would hang out with me sometimes, just to turn around and make me feel like shit for forgetting things I wasn’t even aware were things. Like, random anniversaries or tasks they never told me about in the first place?”

“Did you have anyone to vent to then?”

“Not really.” Byeongkwan laughs, but it feels as hollow as it sounds. “They went through my things a lot, and were mad at me if I ever hung out with someone I wasn’t supposed to be befriending for their great criminal empire. All I had was Jiwoo, and I guess they used that to get me back.”

“Yeah, makes sense.” It doesn’t, not to normal people, but it probably does in the context of people like his parents. “Are you thinking of going back to them?”

“Nah.” Byeongkwan finishes off his tea and puts the mug back on the tray with a gentle clinking sound. “I think they almost had me when I went to help them, but nobody could brainwash me enough to accept being shot for them.” It’s only in the middle of his sentence that he realises that he truly means this. He’d wanted to reassure Yuchan, downplay the extent that his family had gotten into his head, but he actually doesn’t want to go back at all anymore. Guess almost bleeding out in an alley will do that to you.

“Good.” There’s a soft creaking as the mattress shifts, and Yuchan’s warm hand envelops Byeongkwan’s own. “That’d be dumb, because you have a family right here.”

“You mean you?”

“I mean all of us. I know things can be a little strained sometimes, but I feel like they’re a family to me. They can be to you, too. A found family is just as good as a biological one.”

“Oh, this family is definitely better than my old one.”

“Yeah. Same. Hey, do you think you can get out of bed yet? Playing Smash against CPU is boring and I want company.” Yuchan pouts, bats his eyelashes the way he does when he wants to charm one of them into doing something for him. Byeongkwan sighs. Guess he won’t be getting much bed rest today.

He’s right, though. Maybe this could be his real family. He figures he kind of likes the thought.
“You wanted to talk?”

“It feels like that’s the only thing I’ve been doing for the past few days,” Donghun tries to joke. “Sit down?”

Sehyoon looks torn, standing in front of the door from Donghun’s room to the common area, but he relents and sits down on the very edge of his bed. “What about?”

“I’m sorry for pushing you yesterday. I should trust you more,” Donghun admits. “I was just scared. You looked awful.”

“Well, that’s rude,” Sehyoon mutters with no heat whatsoever behind his words.

“It’s true. You still look like shit.” At least he’s slept, and showered again, but his skin is still so pallid that Donghun thinks a strong enough ray of light could shine right through his arm. Sehyoon looks down at his hands, turns them over, and brings one up to rake it through his hair.

“I am a bit of a mess, aren’t I?”

“I mean, when aren’t you, really?” Donghun looks out of his window. The sky outside is a light blue, only sparsely dotted with clouds. It’s been warm for a while now. Somehow, Donghun associates summer with better things than this. “I just wish you would talk to me about your burdens more. We used to be closer, and I don’t know what happened.”

There’s a thump as Sehyoon lets himself fall spread-eagle on the bed. “Yeah. I guess we’ve both been stressed,” he tells the ceiling. “I’m sorry. I’m in my head a lot.”

“I get that. I don’t want you to suffer all by yourself, though. You don’t have to internalize so much.”

“When I saw him, I… I can’t just not. You know that. I don’t want to see anything else die when I could be preventing it.”

“You have to take care of yourself too, though.” Donghun walks over to the window, cracks it open to let the breeze in. It’s pleasantly warm outside, not one of those hot-as-fire summer days. “Promise you’ll at least take it easier now that he’s recovering by himself?”

“I promise.” Sehyoon nods and props himself up on his elbows. His gaze travels the length of the room, and falls to something on Donghun’s desk. “Hey,” he starts, “is that the succulent I gave you?”

“Huh?” Donghun twists his body around to see what he’s talking about. “Oh, yeah, it is.” It’s still in the pale yellow pot it’d been in when he first received it, sitting next to his pencil holder.

“It’s still alive? It’s been so long.”

“Well, unlike some people, I don’t have the habit of killing all my plants.”

Sehyoon scoffs. “Asshole,” he mutters, but there’s a faint smile on his lips.

“Good morning!” Yuchan calls from his seat at the breakfast table at Byeongkwan, hobbling out of his room slowly. They should have gotten him crutches. “We already set the table, sit down.” He stretches to pat the chair beside him, that Byeongkwan gently lowers himself into, face screwed up in
discomfort.

“My leg is killing me. I can’t believe how much people with two good legs take theirs for granted?”

Sehyoon straightens up in his seat. “Do you need-”

“I’m fine, I’m just complaining.” Byeongkwan waves him off and snatches a piece of toast off the little bread basket in the middle of the table. “That’s the only perk of being sick, you get to complain and people can’t be fed up with you without it being rude.”

“And how much are you going to stretch that perk?” Donghun asks between bites of his omelette.

“Until you’re all sick of me, obviously.”

“Aw, we could never be sick of you.” Yuchan grins at him. Byeongkwan grimaces back, but does end up smiling at the bubbliness that Yuchan exudes. “Do you want eggs? I helped make them, I’m basically a five star chef now.”

Donghun glances at Junhee’s door, still closed, and sighs softly. “It’s not really like him to sleep in so late,” he mutters.

“Maybe he’s skipping group meals again?” Sehyoon offers from where he’s pouring abnormal amounts of jam on his slice of toast.

“Maybe I emotionally traumatised him with my dramatic monologue yesterday?” Byeongkwan definitely seems more chipper today, tearing into his food with a single-minded focus. “He has the emotional capability of a sponge, so now he’s just non-functional. Dying.”

Donghun rolls his eyes fondly. “You’re not quite that powerful yet.”

“H...hey, that’s rude, I am perfectly capable of-”

Junhee’s door opens, and Donghun immediately misses whatever Byeongkwan is saying in the background.

“Donghun, one second?” Junhee looks exhausted. His hair is messy, sticking up in all directions, and he’s wearing his thick-rimmed reading glasses. His tank top is messily tucked into his sweatpants, but it hangs low on either side, exposing slivers of skin as he rubs at his cheeks. This is… definitely the messiest any of them has ever seen him, and Donghun is, frankly, shocked that Junhee would ever leave his room like this.

Sehyoon pats Donghun’s thigh under the table, and Donghun jolts back into the present. Swallows his food. “Uh. Yeah. Sure,” he stammers as he makes his way around the table and to Junhee. “No problem. What is it?”

Junhee puts a hand on Donghun’s back, leads him into his room, to his work desk that is littered with notes and cups of some sort of caffeine. “This is all the information I could find on Byeongkwan’s family.”

Donghun inclines his head in askance. “His family? Why?”

Junhee clears his throat, then looks off to the side. “Considering they tried to get him before, he might not be safe. If they go after him aggressively, it could compromise all of us. So, we need to go after them first.”
Donghun takes a moment to just look at Junhee. Search his face for anything. He really just looks vaguely exhausted. Did he stay up all night for this? Is this why he left in such a hurry the day before?

“We’re sending them to prison?”

“We’ll certainly be doing our damn best.” Junhee seems determined, mouth set in a thin line and eyes blazing. This is the most passion he’s shown for anything beyond his suit collection, Donghun realises. He’s serious about this.

“Okay,” he agrees, “we’re sending them to prison. Show me what you have once we’ve eaten breakfast.”

“But I…”

“No. Food first,” Donghun insists, and pushes Junhee out of his room. “We’ll figure details out later.”

“...Fine,” Junhee says, and avoids Byeongkwan’s eyes when he sits down at the table. It shouldn’t make Donghun feel so fond.

Many things about Park Junhee shouldn’t make Donghun feel so fond.

*

**ACE Groupchat**

[14:23] BYONK: i’m UP good MORNING

[14:23] Donghun: So is the sun. And all of us. You’re not special.


[14:24] BYONK: morning is when i say it is

[14:24] BYONK: and i say morning is when i wake up

[14:24] Donghun: How does it feel, having 8 hours in a day?

[14:25] BYONK: not as rejuvenating as over 12 hours of sleep

[14:25] Park Junhee: Not as rejuvenating as muting this groupchat will be, if you don’t start taking it seriously.


**Junhee Has No Sense Of Humour**

[03:14] yuwuchan: is water wet
[03:14] yuwuchan: can water be wet
[03:14] yuwuchan: if water isn’t wet, does that mean water is dry
[03:15] BYONK: what no water can’t be wet
[03:15] BYONK: wet literally means saturated with water ??
[03:15] BYONK: water can’t be saturated with itself
[03:15] yuwuchan: why not
[03:16] BYONK: if you saturate water with water it’s……..just water
[03:16] yuwuchan: but if it’s not wet then it’s dry
[03:16] yuwuchan: and water can’t be dry
[03:17] BYONK: water isn’t WET or DRY it’s NEITHER
[03:17] yuwuchan: how can it be NEITHER
[03:17] BYONK: IT'S AN EXCEPTION !!!!
[03:17] yuwuchan: BUT HOW
[03:17] BYONK: IF WET IS SATURATED WITH WATER AND DRY IS NOT SATURATED WITH WATER
[03:18] BYONK: WATER IS CLEARLY NEITHER
[03:18] BYONK: STOP TELLING WATER TO BE WET OR DRY
[03:18] BYONK: WATER CAN BE WHATEVER IT WANTS TO BE
[03:18] BYONK: WATER DOESN’T HAVE TO BE DEFINED BY YOUR STANDARDS
[03:19] yuwuchan: are you telling me water is nonbinary
[03:19] BYONK: yes
[03:19] yuwuchan: sweet
[03:20] Donghun: I'm literally begging you two to go to sleep.
[03:20] Park Junhee: I was woken up for this.
[03:20] BYONK: your own loss for not muting the chat

**Junhee Has No Sense Of Humour**

[10:40] Park Junhee changed Junhee Has No Sense Of Humour to ACE Groupchat.
[10:54] yuwuchan changed ACE Groupchat to Frosty Fanclub.
[10:56] Donghun: I will take your phones away.
[10:56] Park Junhee: This groupchat is for work-related enquiries and emergencies only.
[10:56] yuwuchan: frosty is always an emergency
[10:57] yuwuchan sent an image.
[10:57] Park Junhee: We don't need photos of a dog we all see every day.
[10:58] yuwuchan sent an image.
[10:58] yuwuchan sent an image.

Frosty Fanclub

[17:02] BYONK: are tomatoes really a fruit or is it an elaborate ploy to trick the entire population
[17:05] Kim S.: Anything with seeds is a fruit
[17:06] BYONK: cucumber??
[17:06] Kim S.: A fruit
[17:06] BYONK: pepper????????????
[17:07] BYONK: a v o c a d o ?????????????
[17:07] Kim S.: I'm sorry to break it to you
[17:08] BYONK changed Frosty Fanclub to Sehyoon The Fact Man

Sehyoon The Fact Man

[13:04] Donghun: Since I am out getting food, is there anything you guys want?
[13:05] BYONK: common sense
[13:05] yuwuchan: motivation
[13:06] Kim S.: a will to live
[13:06] Park Junhee: A groupchat that actually listens to my basic requests.
[13:07] BYONK: sjkdfHSDJKFHSF


[13:08] yuwuchan: s'mores poptarts and caramel popcorn, please~ <3 <3

[13:09] BYONK: aren’t poptarts just sweet ravioli, if you think about it ??

[13:09] yuwuchan: g a s p

[13:09] Kim S.: Get some more pasta, Donghun, I think we're almost out
Gathering information ends up being more challenging than first anticipated.

This isn’t because Junhee is a sloppy researcher. Well, he sort of is, but not because he leaves holes in his investigation. He’s actually pretty thorough - it’s just that he forgets to look into anything on a more human level. It’s always blueprints, and drone pictures, and business front ledgers, not the spouses or friends or relatives, so Donghun has to sit him down repeatedly until he’s finally happy with where they are at. They have a few leads, some more promising than others, and backup plans that won’t involve anyone getting shot again.

The hard part now is to break the idea to everyone else.

Especially Byeongkwan.

“You want us to do what?”

Donghun worries at the inside of his cheek as he watches Byeongkwan’s stare flicker between the two of them. In hindsight springing it on him like this, without any forewarning, might have been a bad idea.

“We want to~”

“No, no, I heard you, I just. You want to arrest my family?”

Donghun falls silent, nods awkwardly. He supposes that this is in fact what they’re trying to do.

“Do you think they should be free with the things they’ve done?”

Byeongkwan rolls his eyes at Junhee, but he does seem to genuinely think about his answer. “I… they probably belong in prison. I guess. Yeah. But can you give me a few days? That’s not the kind of shit you say yes to very easily.”
“To think about it?”

“Sure. Whatever.”

While Donghun had known this would not exactly go smoothly, he still can’t help but feel a little disappointment. “That’s fine,” he says, because it is fine. They have time. “But you should stay inside for the time being. Just in case.”

“Why?” Byeongkwan glances down at his leg. “I’m healing decently.” He is, with Sehyoon’s help - his limp is barely there anymore, and he can walk for sustained periods of time now. It’ll still take time until he can run, let alone speed properly, but it’s a price they’re all willing to put up with for the sake of his leg being functional at all at the end of the day.

“I’m not sure how to say this.” Donghun glances at Junhee, who just shrugs at him, and blinks down at his hands. “Sehyoon got you out, but the police looking for you went back to the alley you were in. When they didn’t find you, they sent out a general internal notice for a man with your powers. They’re pretty sure it’s you, too, or at least the ACE speedster.”

“Oh.” Byeongkwan frowns to himself. “Should’ve expected that.”

“They’re not releasing the information to the public yet,” Junhee adds on, “since they probably want to wait to see if you do end up dead somewhere before they start creating a public panic. But this means you shouldn’t drag your feet with your decision.”

Byeongkwan sighs, then nods. “Alright. Just… give me a day, at least.”

“That’s fine,” Donghun assures him. “Just let us know and we’ll talk about our course of action.”

Byeongkwan does end up taking the deal, which both of them had expected. He doesn’t exactly sound thrilled about it, which Donghun had personally expected as well. He just hopes Byeongkwan will be alright emotionally, whatever the outcome.

“So,” Donghun says, tapping his fingers on the dining table. They’ve all assembled around it, for lack of a better space anywhere else. “Junhee and I looked into the house you broke into with your family, and it turns out it belongs to a pretty well-decorated detective with the local police force.”

“Is that why there were officers everywhere immediately?”

“Likely. The woman herself was out of town that night, but she’s back now, and she’s obviously not exactly pleased. We thought that it might be best to contact her first, see what she’s willing to give us in information, and see what our best options are from there.”

Byeongkwan nods slowly. “When I went to delete all the digital evidence, I had to leave a little behind. Maybe that could help, if she wants to share it?”

“And you might want to apologize for breaking into her home in the middle of the night.”

“Hey, I’ll apologize by helping her arrest people, isn’t that enough?”

Junhee huffs, but in a way that Donghun hopes is endeared rather than fed up, and starts gathering his things. “Good talk. Let’s go.”

“Wait, now?”
Junhee shrugs. “Unless you have anything else to do?”

They all look at each other, a little dumbfounded. Donghun supposes that no - there’s nothing they need to do very urgently. This is their only priority for now.

The mansion is definitely more closely guarded than the last time Byeongkwan has been here.

Granted, the last time had been at night, but still. There’s two patrol cars parked on the sides of the street, and if he peered more closely, he could likely make out the sitting forms of officers in them. He doesn’t - catching attention could be very detrimental for once. Instead, he tugs his ballcap deeper into his face and prays that all of the orange of his hair has been concealed properly by it. Who knew that him drunkenly deciding to become a carrot would come back to bite him in this manner?

Junhee leads them up the gravel walkway to the entrance of the building. Byeongkwan personally feels entirely out of place here, and he knows at the very least Yuchan does as well, but Junhee exudes this aura of confidence like he knows exactly what he’s doing. It helps them blend in a little, Junhee more than the rest of them. Not for the first time, Byeongkwan wonders how much of Junhee’s confidence and poise is an act.

It takes a while for anyone to open the door. Idly, Byeongkwan wonders why any person would need a house as big as this in the first place, when an apartment block of this size could accommodate so many more people. Junhee and Donghun had said that the woman lives alone, which just feels more sad than anything else, to him. He’d rather live in a cramped apartment surrounded by friends than in a big, luxurious home like this all by himself.

If he had a therapist, he’d say something about him craving non-destructive emotional contact to cope with the trauma his parents had left him. But he doesn’t have a therapist, so that’s irrelevant, and Byeongkwan is not going to think about it much more than that.

“What can I help you?” The woman who opens the door looks haggard, tired, or maybe just really busy. Her hair is military-short and the wrinkles on her face stand out sharply. She’s older, definitely - maybe mid-fifties. Still, she carries herself with importance, straight posture and all.

“My name is Junhee,” says Junhee, “and we are here to talk to you about the break-in you suffered lately. We were hoping we could help each other.”

The woman peers at all of them in turn. She’s taller than all of them, which probably isn’t all that hard, all things considered. She’s older, definitely - maybe mid-fifties. Still, she carries herself with importance, straight posture and all.

“My name is Junhee,” says Junhee, “and we are here to talk to you about the break-in you suffered lately. We were hoping we could help each other.”

The woman peers at all of them in turn. She’s taller than all of them, which probably isn’t all that hard, all things considered. “You lot seem too young to be with the police.”

“We’re…” Junhee pauses, weighs his words. “Independent.”

One of the woman’s eyebrows inches up slowly. “Don’t let anyone else hear you say that kind of thing. Right, come in, but I don’t exactly have a lot of time for trivialities.” She ushers them in and, with a resounding and echoing click, closes the front door behind them.

Standing in the front hall now, in broad daylight, it somehow feels even emptier than before. He’d expected the building to be quiet at night, but nothing has changed except for the light filtering through big windows and sheer curtains and the footsteps of six people echoing in between the high walls. He wonders if anyone else lives here, or if it’s just her.

The woman leads them up to her study, a path Byeongkwan wishes he didn’t recognise as well as he does, and motions for them all to sit in front of her desk. There’s only one chair. They all stand, even with Donghun softly trying to nudge Byeongkwan towards it. His leg may still ache, but it’s better to
stand than to be singled out.

The woman watches them for a while, then huffs and leans against the side of her own desk, her hip against the wood of it. She crosses her arms in front of her chest; since she is only wearing a short-sleeved top, Byeongkwan can clearly see the faded tattoos covering her arms from her wrist and sneaking up all the way under the fabric of her clothes. There’s studs in her ears, multiple on each side, and Byeongkwan thinks they might have been friends, had she been born about thirty-five years later.

“Introductions first, right? I’m Amelie Sorn. I used to work for the police department, now I’m mostly freelance after blah blah you probably looked up everything about me already. So you have me at a disadvantage.”

They introduce themselves, one after one, until only Byeongkwan is left. He looks at his fingers, twisted together in an accurate representation of his nerves currently, and breathes in. “I am Kim Byeongkwan, and I want your help to arrest my family.”

Amelie blinks. “Now there’s a sentence I don’t hear every day. Elaborate?”

It’s hard to recount the tale of a break-in to the victim of said break-in, but Byeongkwan tries his best anyways. Amelie listens, and doesn’t show any immediate signs she wants to throw them all out or call the police, so he figures they aren’t completely screwed yet.

“So you want them arrested because they’re dangerous to you?”

“Essentially, I guess, yeah.”

Donghun clears his throat. “And because they’re morally-”

Amelie waves one of her hands dismissively. “It’s fine, let the pale twink speak. Being self-serving is fine when it’s about shit like this.” Donghun falls silent, taken aback, and she pauses for a bit before rounding her desk and typing something. Her black, gently pointed nails clack against her keys.

“So,” she continues, “unluckily for you, you managed to delete most of my actually important evidence. There’s some left, in the folder you forgot, but it’s mainly incidental shit. You’ll have to put some work in to build a proper case against them.”

“That’s not going to be a problem.”

“Good. Someone give me an e-mail or something I can send this to.”

Junhee slides over a pristine business card for her to copy his details off of. “Are you requesting payment?”

Amelie huffs. “I have more than enough money. I tend to deal in favours instead.”

“I’d really rather prefer a more immediate payment.”

She barely even looks up. “Listen, the way I see it, you’re plenty indebted to me, and the little man doubly so for me not ratting him out. You can deal with my favours. If you like arresting people, you might even have fun doing them.”

Junhee frowns. There’s a pinched look on his face, but he only fixes the lapels of his suit and says nothing. Maybe Donghun’s hand gripping his elbow softly has something to do with that. Junhee inclines his head a little towards him, and they have what looks like a brief mental conversation
before Junhee nods.

“Fine,” he acquiesces, “but we’re not doing anything illegal.”

“I’m a freelance detective. What am I gonna have you do, smuggle drugs?” Her eyes, when they finally do meet Junhee’s, are cold and entirely unimpressed. “I’ve forwarded you all the relevant information, together with my phone number. Contact me should you have any questions.”

“Will that cost additional favours?”

“That depends on how well you can keep up. Now. Is there anything else?”

Donghun scratches his cheek awkwardly. “Will you be pressing charges regarding the break-in?”

“They stole my shit and knocked out my guards, what do you expect me to do?”

“We just…” Donghun glances at Byeongkwan. Shrugs. Rubs the back of his neck. “We think our colleague might be in trouble, since he was technically involved, right?”

Byeongkwan tries to ignore Amelie rolling her eyes like they’re a gaggle of stupid children. “I’ll pull some strings. I don’t think anyone can pardon him from his case unless you actually bring in the family, though. Do the police a favour, and they’re likely to let his involvement slide.”

It’s not a very wholesome answer, and probably not one that Donghun was looking for, but he accepts it nonetheless, with a nod and a thin smile. “Then we’d best get going.”

“Yes, you should.” Amelie waves them off, attention long since focused back on whatever work she’s doing. Byeongkwan figures that his first assessment wasn’t quite correct. He would not want to be friends with this woman, no matter if she was twenty or eighty.

As soon as they all walk a sufficient distance from the mansion, Byeongkwan stops to kick at a pebble. “She’s an ass,” he complains. There’s a whine in his voice that he doesn’t even care to mask at all. The leg he kicked with throbs in protest, and he realises he probably shouldn’t jostle the remains his injury too much.

The others stop. Byeongkwan has fallen behind just a little, and he looks up to look at all of them, standing in this half-circle to avoid taking up too much place on the sidewalk. He doesn’t want to look at their faces, just in case they’re disappointed at him for making them go through so much effort because he fucked up. They wouldn’t even need to be here if not for him. They owe that detective a favour because of him, one none of them knows anything about, all because of him.

He really managed to make all the wrong choices, didn’t he?

He wants to say something else, apologise maybe, but someone takes one of his hands before he can figure out how to phrase whatever that is. He blinks, raises his gaze to Yuchan, who’s squeezing his hand gently.

“It’s alright,” Yuchan tells him quietly. “None of us mind. As long as she can help you, we’ll deal with her.” He reaches out and wipes Byeongkwan’s cheek. His hand doesn’t quite come away dry, and only then does Byeongkwan realise that he’s started crying.

“I’m sorry,” he manages, and brushes away the rest of his tears by himself. “Sorry. I’m fine. Just overwhelmed. We have a lot of work to do, right?” He smiles, but he has no idea if any of them buy
it. By the way Sehyoon awkwardly hovers next to him on their way back to the car, he might want to work on it a little more.

Even given Amelie Sorn’s information, they don’t have enough to turn in to the police immediately. That much they’d already known, else the detective would have likely done so by herself.

“So,” Junhee asks his monitor, “how exactly do we turn up conclusive evidence?”

The rest of them stay silent.

“What if we break into their apartment? Byeongkwan would know how to get in safely.”

“And do what?” Junhee leans back in his chair and rubs his eyes, pushing his glasses up a bit in the process. “Unless we know what we’re looking for, we’re essentially flying blind. And if we fail to find anything the first time around, then we might just as well pack our bags and give up.”

Sehyoon shrugs, hands buried deep in the pockets of his jeans. He looks tired. “Byeongkwan, do you know anything?”

Byeongkwan worries his bottom lip between his teeth for a while, contemplating. “I don’t know. All I know is they said they’re working with someone to liberate powered people or something like that. I’m not sure if they meant that or if they just tried to keep me around, though.” He shrugs.

“Liberate?” Sehyoon quirks an eyebrow. “That’s a strong word to use.”

“Let’s not get into that right now,” Donghun interjects, exhaustion apparent on his face and in his voice. “Leave the politics for some other time, please.”

“No, I’m just saying,” Sehyoon says, “that they might be working for someone with very strong beliefs on the matter.”

“So, an underground powered activist?”

“But what would an activist gain from all the illegal shit his family is doing? Wouldn’t that just harm their reputation?”

Junhee clears his throat. “Whatever the case,” he says, “this is as good a place to start as any. I want to talk to Officer Hu tomorrow, see if she can help us out at all, and we’ll go from there. If any of you have knowledge of the pro-powered activist scene, now’s the time to cough that up.” He looks at Donghun. They all look at Donghun. Donghun sighs.

“Sure. Let’s do that.”

Sehyoon is staring up at his ceiling, hands folded loosely over his stomach, when there’s a soft knock on the door.

“Mm?” He doesn’t really move to look, but it can only be one of two people, he figures. When the door creaks open slowly and a set of sock-covered feet pads into his peripheral, he knows he was right.

“Sorry, were you sleeping?” Byeongkwan asks him. His voice is raspy, like he’d just woken up himself, and his clothes are dishevelled. Sehyoon shakes his head and sits up.
“Just relaxing, don’t worry. Do you need something?” He pulls his legs back to shift into a cross-legged position, and Byeongkwan takes advantage of the freed up bed space to climb onto the mattress opposite him, leaning against the wall and dangling one leg off the foot of the bed.

“Not really,” Byeongkwan admits. “I’m just having trouble sleeping, I guess.”

Sehyoon nods, hums quietly. “It’s been stressful lately. I understand that.”

“Do you?” Byeongkwan’s eyes glint in the moonlight streaming down through the crack in Sehyoon’s curtains, and for a moment he’s afraid that he’ll cry again, but then Byeongkwan cracks a feeble grin and his fear is laid to rest for now.

“Maybe I do.”

Byeongkwan laughs quietly, stretches his arms out into the air, almost as if he’s grabbing for the ceiling. “Everyone understands a lot more than they let on, huh? First Yuchan, now you.”

“I guess we’ve all dealt with shit in our days. Even if we didn’t quite have the family you did.” Sehyoon shrugs, looks at his curtains sway slightly in the breeze coming in through his cracked-open window. It’s still warm in his room, but bearably so.

“So, what’s your baggage?” Byeongkwan asks, a curious lilt to his voice. Sehyoon pulls his legs to his chest, leans his head against the headboard, and says nothing. After a while, he can hear the heavy sound of Byeongkwan breathing out, and a rustling of sheets as he changes his sitting position. “That’s fine. But will you tell me someday?”

“Maybe,” Sehyoon answers after some thought. Byeongkwan nods and pulls one foot up to knock it against Sehyoon’s pajama-covered calf.

“I’m glad we can trust each other,” he says, and he says it so earnestly that Sehyoon actually feels a little bad for him. “I know I can talk to you whenever I want to, and I know you would talk to me too if you had big secrets.”

“What, you don’t have any secrets anymore?” Sehyoon tries to joke. It feels a little forced to him, personally.

“No, I mean sure I do, but small insignificant stuff. And I wouldn’t mind sharing, they’ve just never come up so far.” Byeongkwan shrugs. “It’s just nice, isn’t it? Not having to hide things from each other, even if you might have to from others.”

“Yeah,” Sehyoon affirms. “Yeah. Definitely.” Byeongkwan, eyes up in the air, doesn’t notice the way he tugs at his hair to fall into his face, obscure his features. Byeongkwan, lost in thought, doesn’t notice many things, and that’s probably for the best, too.

Byeongkwan does end up falling asleep, back pressed against the wall of Sehyoon’s room, and Sehyoon figures he can at least lay him down properly, head on the pillow and tucked under Sehyoon’s thin summer blanket, before he gets himself some water and forgoes sleep entirely in favour of mindlessly refreshing the same five apps over and over again until the sun rises.

The next morning finds Junhee out and about way too early. He’s glad for his car - he really doesn’t want to be stuck in public transport during rush hour. He does, though, take the time to take a quick walk around the block, watching everyone hurry to their jobs and leave coffee shops with their to-go cups safely cradled in hands and empty cups quickly thrown into bins. Sometimes he misses this,
misses the regular, clear-cut office workdays, the normalcy they would bring. He doesn’t miss not having any money though, that much is for sure, so he stops at a coffee shop for an overpriced sugary drink and a bagel and a newspaper too, while he’s at it. He chooses one of the comfortable armchairs in the corner, overlooking the entrance and the counter, shoots off a quick text, and skims the headlines as he chews slowly. There’s some story about the city giving out grants to its public schools, another about the mounting trade war, but what draws Junhee’s eye is the big, bold headline leading a picture of a man in a rugby helmet. It reads ‘Rugby Legend Anderson Found Dead’ and under the picture are a few columns of finely-printed text. Junhee squints at them, takes a second to get his glasses out just to not strain his eyes too much, and skims the story. He’s heard of this person before, but never in a good way - more in context with his repeated slamming of powered people. Some comments of his aired on TV just recently, about his belief that maybe locking them all away might help keep the rest of the world safe, but Junhee didn’t quite feel like watching any more of him. Apparently he died of an accidental alcohol and drug overdose. Junhee can’t quite say he feels bad for him.

Junhee startles a little when someone pulls out the armchair opposite to his. Looking up he comes face to face with Officer Hu, looking a little less harried than the last time he saw her. She’s still in her uniform, done-up as always, and Junhee figures she’s just about to start her shift.

He stands up to greet her, but she waves him off, and simply sinks down to sit. She’s carrying a mug with her, white porcelain and dark, steaming coffee with no creamer swirling in it. “Good morning,” she says with just a hint of a smile.

“Good morning, officer.”

“What did you wish to discuss?”

“Jumping straight into the formalities, are we?”

Hu shrugs. “I figure you called me for a reason. You don’t seem the type to enjoy small talk if you have bigger things to worry about.”

Once, that statement could not have been further from the truth, but today Junhee only nods. “I figured if I talked to you, you might be able to offer assistance. We are trying to bring some people to justice.”

Hu leans back in her seat. “You want to arrest someone?”

“Essentially.”

She hums, takes a sip. “You are aware,” she says as she sets down her mug, “that generally speaking, announcing your vigilante activity to the police isn’t a good idea?”

“I’ve been told,” Junhee answers. “But you don’t seem to be having a problem with us, exactly.”

“That may be the case. Are you hoping for any help from the police?”

“Ideally.” Junhee glances down at his bagel, but decides against eating any more for now. It’s a shame, but Hu doesn’t have any food, so it wouldn’t be polite. His stomach roils in gentle commiseration. “We want to bring in the family that broke into Detective Sorn’s mansion. Have you heard of that?”

Hu hums. “Hard not to, if you’re a police officer anywhere near this precinct. They’re still looking for that speedster they shot. Can’t have anything to do with the one that hangs around your group,
can it?” Her eyes are calculating, piercing, and Junhee realises how she got her leadership position.

“I’d like it to not.”

“As Sorn probably told you already - if you can give us hard evidence and he corroborates with a witness statement, we can have him exonerated.” She dips her voice lower. This is probably not something she wants people to overhear lightly.

“She did. I’m wondering, though, it feels a little corrupt to me, doesn’t it?” Junhee takes another pointed sip, notes the way Hu’s face twitches in displeasure before she can school it back into a careful nonchalance.

“I wouldn’t go that far. Think of it as extended witness protection. Plus, it works out in your favour, so I’d take what you can get.”

“Or else you’ll have us all arrested?”

Hu laughs, and it’s higher, more melodious than Junhee had anticipated originally, more like the sound a carefree woman with no burdens on her shoulders would make. “That would just mean more paperwork. None of us wants that, are you not up to speed with the stereotypes?”

“...Fair enough.”

“So.” The officer rights herself, brushes a likely imaginary speck of dust off her lapels, and grows focused and serious once more. “Do you have enough evidence to bring them in?”

Junhee looks off to the side. “Not… yet,” he admits grudgingly, and if he didn’t know any better, he could have sworn that made Hu deflate a little. Nevertheless, she just gives a curt little nod.

“Then get to collecting. I’ll warn you, though, that illegally obtained evidence will not hold up in a court of law, and while it might be enough to get them arrested, it won’t be to get them actually on trial. Find some way to obtain your evidence without breaking into their house. Once you have something, let me know and I’ll send out some people.”

Junhee nods. “Can you let me know when the arrest happens?”

Hu tilts her head quizzically. “That is usually not quite foreseeable, but sure, I’ll try to let you know if I can. Is there any particular reason?”

“Just…” Junhee shrugs. “Just thinking that it might be good closure for someone.”

“Hm.” Hu checks her watch, then pulls out a pen and a small notepad from one of her jacket pockets. “Well, just contact me under this number whenever you’re able, and I’ll see what I can do. I’m quite late for work, so unless there’s something else...?” She trails off expectantly, and seems a little relieved at Junhee’s answering shake of the head.

“Nothing for now. I’ll be in touch.”

“Good. Have a good day, Mr. Park.” She drains the last of her cup, stands, matches Junhee’s bow, and makes her way out of the café at a not quite hurried, but still rather brisk pace. Junhee looks down at his toasted half a bagel, now long since grown cold, and sighs mournfully. Maybe one day he can finally have a breakfast that he can finish without interruptions.
Back at the loft, it takes them a while to organise their next course of action.

“How far is your family’s apartment from here?” Donghun is bent over Junhee’s computer, tabbing in between Sorn’s email and a map application. Byeongkwan recites the address for him to put in, and he hums as he scrolls outwards.

“It’s not too bad. I could probably hear you from here, if you try to broadcast as clearly as you can.”

“You want to stay?”

“We can’t all go,” Junhee points out. “They’d figure out something was up. If you want this to go without physical fighting, you need to talk your way in somehow. Make them think you still want to work with them.”

Donghun glances up just long enough to see Byeongkwan scowl at the floor. He understands - it’s not his idea of a good plan either, especially considering it involves Byeongkwan being thrown back into an environment that could continue to harm or trigger him. It’s their first real shot, but it doesn’t have to be their only one.

“Are you sure you want to do this? If you don’t, we’ll find other ways somehow.”

“I’m fine.” Byeongkwan certainly doesn’t sound fine, let alone happy, but by the set of his mouth and the furrow of his brow, he has more to say. “I just… I know I need to do this. I can’t just sit back and let you guys do the work for me.”

“You can, though-”

“I really, really can’t.” There’s a glint in Byeongkwan’s eyes that makes Donghun think twice about arguing any more. “I need to… do something. So this is fine. I just… I’m not sure how it will go.”

From next to him, Yuchan reaches out to grab his elbow and jostle it a little. “You don’t have to go alone. I can come along unnoticed, or as a friend or something.”

“And we can have Sehyoon posted as backup,” Donghun chimes in. “If you signal me, I can let him know you’re in trouble. The three of you should probably be able to take your family down, from what you said about their power set.”

Sehyoon fiddles with his sleeves from where he’s slumped all over a desk chair. “And what about him?” He flaps his hand in Junhee’s general direction, who’s currently busy frowning at his phone.

“I’m trying to contact an acquaintance, see if she can help with any other leads. The woman Donghun met at the gala, Isabella, she knows a thing or two about powered activism. Maybe she can dig up something on the underground movements.”

“Oooh.” Byeongkwan stops not-so-discreetly massaging his thigh in favour of wiggling his eyebrows at Junhee. “Texting a lady friend? While we’re all working?”

“That has got to be the straightest thing you’ve ever said.”

They all pause.

“Wait, did Park Junhee just make a real joke with his real face?”

Junhee scowls, but there’s just the slightest uptick of the corners of his mouth, and he quickly fakes a cough to have an excuse to cover it. He doesn’t say anything, and hunches his shoulders up just a
little like he’s feeling awkward, so Donghun takes it upon himself to diffuse the situation.

“All right, we all know what we’re doing. Byeongkwan, try to not exert yourself too much. If you need out for any reason, let me know, alright?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry, I can handle them.”

Donghun wishes he didn’t doubt that as much as he does. Who knows, maybe he’ll be proven wrong.

Byeongkwan, Yuchan and Sehyoon leave some time after, after making sure they have everything they need in case it comes to an altercation. Donghun busies himself with going through the folder of collected evidence while Junhee leaves the room with phone in hand. Most of this really is borderline unusable, just written correspondences and witness statements. One word against another. The only other type of evidence that Sorn could recover is a single clip of shaky phone footage of some type of altercation between Byeongkwan’s father and some other man. This likely had some connection to everything else Sorn had collected, but Donghun really can’t see a use for that beyond showing that the man isn’t quite the most pleasant individual.

When Junhee doesn’t come back for a while, Donghun swivels around in his really quite comfortable office chair and looks around the room to pass the time. He’s been in here quite a few times already, but he’ll never get over how simultaneously minimalist and messy this entire space is. The desk is cluttered with loose paperwork, about five different kinds of fountain pens, and the amount of coffee cups just laying around everywhere sort of makes Donghun want to cry a little bit. What would it take for Junhee to live just a little bit neater?

Donghun stands up, stretches his arms over his head, shakes out his legs. His whole body feels like it’s cramped up, from stress or whatever else, so he paces around the room, eyes scanning the bookcases and their contents. The books seem boring - economic journals, old college textbooks with broken spines. Donghun wonders if there’s a second layer here too, if he’ll find Star Wars Expanded Universe novels or comic books behind the front of professionalism.

He takes a few steps back. The heel of his foot touches against something.

Donghun frowns and stretches to look back over his shoulder. It’s just Junhee’s bed, probably the neatest part of the room. Is there something under the bed? Is Junhee really the type to just shove his junk under his bed like that? He’s supposed to be 24, not 14.

He crouches down, elbows braced on his knees, and reaches forward for whatever’s under there. The least he could do is put the stuff away where it’s supposed to go, not stashed away just out of sight.

His fingers find the same material his foot had, and he tugs out a… box? It’s a regular cardboard box, but flat enough to fit under a bed, and wider to accommodate for it. It’s opened, but two pieces of tape have been adhered haphazardly over the two flaps of the box and the crack in between them where the tape can’t hold them down completely. It looks like something Junhee had taken with him here and then forgotten to unpack. Or chosen not to unpack?

Without even really thinking about it, Donghun goes to pluck the tape from the flaps of the box. They spring open without prodding, like they’d wanted to on their own accord.

Donghun pushes the two smaller side flaps aside as well, looks inside, and picks up a figurine.
An anime figurine?

What?

The plastic face of a dancing girl with pompoms is grinning back at him, winking cheerfully. When Donghun puts her aside to look through the box more, he pulls out a variety of pop albums, a signed photocard of a man Donghun vaguely recognises as some Taemin wedged in between them. There’s a few keychains, some smaller Nendoroids, and at the very bottom are little cardboard sleeves with incense and a flashdrive titled ‘sleep sounds’ with black, broad strokes over its surface.

Donghun leans back on the balls of his feet. Picks up the figurine again. Turns her over, looks at her pigtails flutter with pretend movement. Out of everyone in this apartment, Junhee seems the least likely to be into cute things like these. Or anime in general. He works all the time and doesn’t let himself have fun unless he’s forced to. What’s he doing with all of this?

When the door creaks behind Donghun’s back, he almost loses his balance with how fast he turns his head. Junhee is standing there, phone in hand, looking down at Donghun with an expression that can be only described as confusion.

“What are you doing?”

Donghun looks down at the figurine in his hand. Sets it down. Stands up quickly and brushes imaginary dust from his shirt.

“Uh. Nothing. I just…”

“Going through my things, huh?” Junhee walks over to Donghun, pockets his phone, and sits down on the bed, reaching down to pick up an album case. While he flips it over, Donghun rolls his weight back on his feet into a proper sitting position, one leg folded inwards, the other flung out haphazardly.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “That was unwarranted. I got curious, I guess.”

“Why’s that?” Junhee places the album down gently next to him on the duvet and fiddles with a Nendoroid of an angry-looking man with swords and an undercut. He doesn’t look at Donghun, and Donghun shifts awkwardly.

“I don’t know, really. Your room is just kind of… I’ve never seen anything that shows off your personality. I wanted to know what someone like you could be hiding.”

“Maybe I’m just boring.”

“From what I’m seeing, you’re just a weeb.”

Junhee laughs, loud and clear, and finally makes eye contact with Donghun. He looks a little sheepish, shoulders hunched just the slightest bit.

“Maybe, yeah.”

“Why did you put all these away?” Donghun picks up the signed polaroid to inspect it more closely. “This probably all goes for a lot of money, if you don’t want to keep anything.”

“I want to keep these things.” The air conditioning hums gently. Junhee’s foot taps against the floor a few times as he’s thinking of what to say. “I don’t want to get rid of them, I just feel like I’ve grown out of everything in there. You know, I’m a businessman, I wear suits, I shouldn’t have the shelf
space to put a Nico up there.” He shrugs. “Simple as that.”

Donghun runs a hand through his hair and tousles it up a little.

“My grandma used to love playing Skyrim,” he says.

“Huh.”

“Yeah, she was really into it. She even watched speedrunners and tried to emulate their strategies. Got within twenty minutes of the then world record at eighty-five. Died a few years after, but, you know.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

Donghun sighs. “Thanks. What I’m trying to say is, you’re never too old for things until you let yourself be too old. You’re never too professional for anything, either. I bet you there’s thousands of professional working adults watching children’s cartoons right now.”

Junhee is silent for a while, pulling at his bottom lip with his teeth, before he spreads out his arms and lets himself fall on his mattress. He bounces off it once and comes to a rest with his hair spread out around his head in a way that makes it look softer than usual. He’s not wearing any gel in it today, Donghun notes. It suits him, the loose, messy hair.

“If I have the free time for hobbies, I have time I could be using to work.”

“But none of your work is that pressing,” Donghun points out. “We have lots of downtime, too. Without hobbies, you’ll just work yourself into a burnout.”

Junhee folds his hands over his stomach, looks at the ceiling. “Do you have any hobbies?”

Donghun shrugs, even though Junhee isn’t looking at him anymore. “I like going to karaoke a lot,” he says, “and I used to skateboard when I was younger. I watch a lot of dramas, too. The silly romantic kind.”

“You do?” When Donghun looks up, Junhee has pushed himself up on his elbows, gazing down at him.

“Yeah. I guess that’s still better than being a damn weeb.” He grins, and Junhee grins back, the tip of his tongue trapped between his teeth. It’s cute.

“Want to watch some of my weeb things while we wait for any sign from Byeongkwan?”

Donghun groans. “Please, no, I have standards.” He follows Junhee to the living room, though, and feels a little warm when he sees him pull out a few of the economic journals from his shelf to replace them with a handful of figurines.

He’d be proud he was able to encourage the man to embrace himself, but he’s too busy wondering if he’s ever cosplayed before. He had to have. There’s probably pictures somewhere.

“Are you laughing at me?”

“Nope. Why would I ever do that?”

It’s warm out, even to Byeongkwan in his sleeveless shirt and knee-length gym shorts. The sun beats
against the pavement and three sets of shoulders, gathered on the sidewalk next to an intersection.

“I’ll wait here,” Sehyoon tells them. “Go do your thing. Don’t take too long, standing around in public is awkward.”

“You’re such a baby. We’ll try to not get in trouble though.” Byeongkwan pats his arm a little awkwardly, nods to himself, takes a deep breath and turns to set off in the direction of his parents’ apartment complex. Yuchan is trailing behind him, currently still human, looking around the area curiously.

“Do you want me to be a fly when we go?”

“Only if they’re home. If it’s just my sister, then it’s probably fine to say you’re my friend.”

“Or your nurse, maybe.”

“I would absolutely not trust you as my nurse.”

“Hey, why not?” Yuchan takes a few bigger steps to fall into line with Byeongkwan, pouting down at him. “I’d make a great nurse.”

“Sure you would, you’d just talk all the old people into sleeping.”

Yuchan knocks his shoulder into Byeongkwan’s, giggling, and Byeongkwan almost forgets all about what he’s about to do until he comes face to face with the door he’d been going in and out of for years as a kid. The doorbell with the Kim nametag is still neat as ever, in a row of other names Byeongkwan doesn’t recognise. This has always been more of a transient neighbourhood. God knows why his family decided to stay so long.

He presses the buzzer next to the nameplate. It’s quiet for a while, Yuchan shifting his weight from one foot to the other as they wait. After what feels like ten minutes instead of just one, the door’s locking mechanism clicks open softly and they both make their way up through an old, poorly-lit stairwell to the third floor, where Jiwoo is leaning against the doorframe, waiting for whoever is coming up. She looks exhausted, shadows under her eyes pronounced and hair a little messy, but she brightens up considerably once she sees them approach.

“Kwannie!” She steps forward, reaches out, stops when Byeongkwan flinches back involuntarily. Instead, she takes his hands in hers and shakes them a little. “I’m glad you’re safe, none of us knew what was happening. Do you want to come in?” Her eyes focus on Yuchan, standing just past him, and she hesitates. “Who’s that?”

“That’s my friend, Chan. Helped me get away and patched me back up,” Byeongkwan lies with an easy smile. “He’s just here to make sure I’m alright in case my wound acts up.” It feels a little weird, attributing the things Sehyoon had done to him to someone else, but Byeongkwan doesn’t quite think he would have felt safe about bringing Sehyoon here. He’d have been too awkward. Yuchan, for all his loud character traits, seems like he’s probably better at making Jiwoo trust him.

“Right. Come in then, both of you. Mum and Dad aren’t home, I don’t know if you want to wait for them?” Jiwoo asks as she leads them into the apartment, showing them the shoe rack and ushering them to the living room. “Do you want some tea? I can go make some if you’d like.”

“Do we have anything else to drink?”

Byeongkwan rubs one hand over his collarbone. “I really don’t, honestly. Do you have water or
something?”

“Sure.” The look Jiwoo gives him is quizzical at best, but she goes regardless. Byeongkwan sits
down heavily on the couch opposite the two armchairs that his parents used to sit in a lot. Yuchan
comes to lean against the armrest of the couch and looks at Jiwoo busy herself in the kitchen.

“She’s nice,” he comments in a low voice. Byeongkwan shrugs.

“She is, as long as our parents aren’t around. We should probably start looking, though. Tell her I
got to the bathroom?” Yuchan nods, and Byeongkwan gets back up to steal his way past the
bathroom into his parents’ bedroom.

He’s never really been in here before. His parents’ room has always been off limits, even when he
was very young. When this door was closed, you knocked and waited, and you didn’t look at what
was going on inside, at all. This one applied to both him and Jiwoo - one of the few rules that did not
have an exemption for her.

The furniture is bland enough that he doesn’t really bother with it, instead immediately beelining for
any dressers and hiding spots. First, he has to find whatever his parents stole from Sorn’s house, then
he needs to figure out what he can from their paperwork, if they have any.

The search for the former does not look entirely promising, especially because Byeongkwan isn’t
really sure what they stole in the first place. That night is like a blur, hazy and hard to focus on when
he tries to remember details from it. Anything would pale in comparison to being shot, he supposes.
So, option one seems to be a bust, he concludes after rifling through both dressers in the room. He
remembers a box being taken, and at the very least that isn’t anywhere here - it’s simply too big to fit
in any other containers in the room. If they somehow scattered the individual items, he’ll have no
idea where. Damn.

In the living room, he can hear the kettle turn off. He doesn’t have much time.

Instead of going back out, he rounds his parents’ writing desk. There’s a few drawers - most of them
unlocked, most of them containing junk. Loose papers, old letter openers, a bottle of whiskey with a
glass, nothing of use. The lowest-most drawer, though, is locked, and if point and click adventure
games have ever taught Byeongkwan anything, it’s that locked drawers mean important content.

Now, where could the key be?

He allows himself to speed up for this - they don’t have enough time as it is, right now. He knows he
should take it easy, that even expending his energy on anything other than his leg will get him in
trouble real fast if he keeps it up, but this is important. So he searches on and around the desk until
his fingers finally hit a tiny little key, taped onto the underside of the radiator in the corner. The key
fits, and in the drawer lies something like a large notebook. Cracking it open, at first glance, it’s all
gibberish. Byeongkwan knows people work with codes to protect themselves, like the people at the
dogfighting ring did as well, but that’s no use for him now. If he snaps pictures of a select few pages,
chances are Junhee won’t be able to decipher the code, and then they’ll be right back at square one.
He frowns, flips the pages. Most of these almost look like a restaurant’s order log. There’s a date, a
name - usually animal names - and some kind of shorthand after it. Just flipping through,
Byeongkwan notices that the words mouse and eagle appear quite a lot, even going far back to the
first few pages.

If he is fast, he could probably at least take some pictures, maybe come back another time-
“Are you sure?” His sister’s voice is dimmed by the closed door of the bedroom, but he can still make out her words and her footsteps clearly. “He’s been in there a while now.”

“Yes, he probably just… ate something wrong?” comes Yuchan’s voice, higher pitch than usual. He sounds nervous. “It’s fine, didn’t you want to show me your photography?”

There’s three knocks in rapid succession. “Byeongkwan?” Jiwoo calls. Byeongkwan, for his part, freezes.

They fucked up.

Even if he tries to hide now, she’ll know he’s not in the bathroom, they’ve lived together long enough for her to know his habits. There’s no other room he could go to, either, unless he tries to sneak past them to his own room, but that’s on the other side of the living room and his leg doesn’t quite like being quiet and sneaky these days-

Jiwoo opens the door to their parents’ room.

“Byeongkwan?”

Byeongkwan lets his hands sink slowly to obscure the notebook, but he’s pretty sure it’s too late by the suspicious look on her face.

“What are you doing in here? You’re not supposed to be here, you know that.”

Byeongkwan clears his throat. “Yeah, I… I thought I lost something when I was visiting last, so I figured…”

“None of us ever come in this room.” Jiwoo crosses her arms in front of her chest, frown prominent on her face. “What’s going on?”

Byeongkwan clears his throat. “I don’t want our parents to hurt any more people,” he says. “So I’m doing my best to stop them.”

A few beats of tense silence pass between them. Jiwoo’s eyes zero in on his hands, obscured by the desk. “You’re here to take their things? What, get them arrested? Exercise your vigilante justice?”

She takes a step backwards, another one, bumps into Yuchan’s chest. Whirls around to look at him, then back at Byeongkwan. “Byeongkwan? What is this? Don’t you know you’ll ruin all of us?”

“And how many lives have we ruined, Jiwoo? How many people have we stolen from, blackmailed, threatened? Isn’t it enough? We’re all just glorified thugs, do you want to be that for the rest of your life?”

“You don’t understand,” Jiwoo spits out, stalking forward towards him. “This is all I have! I know you have your… your friends and internet blogs that talk about you, but for me? This is it. This apartment. This family. I can go nowhere else!” She runs a hand through her hair, bunches it into a fist at the back of her head. Tugs. Lets go. “Why are you trying to hurt us all the time?” she whispers. Byeongkwan looks down. Avoids her eyes.

Behind them, Chan remains silent.

“I’m not trying to, Jiwoo. Please. I used to love all of you, but what we’re doing is wrong. You have to see that.”

“You used to. You haven’t loved any of us for years, you know that.”
“And our parents haven’t loved me either. I don’t see why I have to give them what they’ve never
given me. I guess you wouldn’t understand.”

Jiwoo laughs. It’s bitter, acidic, and just on the wrong side of frantic. “At least you could do
whatever the hell you wanted at some point. Oh, Byeongkwan, he’s a lost cause, let him do what he
wants!” She takes the last few steps forward, leans on the desk separating them with both hands, and
forces eye contact. “I’m still the poster child. They want me to marry one of their colleagues’ sons,
you know that? I don’t have any privacy, you know that? Of course you don’t, you just up and left
the first chance you got! You have no idea what’s going on here anymore.”

Something eats at Byeongkwan’s stomach. It rises up, fills him with an uncomfortable, prickly heat,
makes his head spin and his throat hurt. “Then why do you still defend them?”

“Because without them I’d be on a list, or dead somewhere!”

“And I almost died because of them! If they care about you as little as they do me, why would they
save you when they wouldn’t save me?”

Jiwoo looks at him from tired eyes. She looks exhausted suddenly; worn down, and Byeongkwan
wonders how he’d missed that. How he’d missed so many things through his own jealous envy.

“You don’t have to shield them,” he insists. “You can live your own life.”

“You’re asking me to go back on everything I know. That’s not as easy for everyone as it is for
you.”

Byeongkwan sighs. “…I know that. But I need to do this.” He holds up the notebook. “Just let us
walk out of here with this.”

Jiwoo looks at Byeongkwan for a while, a stern set to her mouth, then rounds the table.
Byeongkwan steps back in apprehension, yet all she does is slump down heavily in the padded office
chair.

“There’s alcohol in the top drawer,” Byeongkwan points out. Jiwoo hums, doesn’t look at him, just
opens the drawer, pours herself two fingers of whiskey, and downs it all in one go. Her glass slams
on the table with a sharp thudding noise.

“I’m going down with this ship no matter what, aren’t I,” she states flatly. It’s like all the tension is
suddenly gone from her body, like she’s a puppet and someone cut her strings. “I can’t stop two of
you. You’ll just waltz right on out of here, the police’s pet crime fighter, and we’ll all end up in
prison cells.” The sound of liquid pouring into glass sounds louder than her yelling ever could have.
“And you’ll go on living your happy little life. Some brother you are.”

Byeongkwan leans against the table, snatches away the glass bottle when she goes to pour more.
“Then save yourself. For yourself, if not for me. Give us whatever you can, testify at the trial. You
can probably plead for a reduced sentence.”

Jiwoo’s smile is cold. “Golly, just three ruined years of my life. Do you think they’ll hire me
anywhere with a criminal record and a high risk powered registry?”

“As opposed to the same thing, but more of a sentence?” Byeongkwan leans in closer. Jiwoo’s
breath already smells of alcohol. It makes his stomach turn. “This is your best option, Jiwoo. You
know this. We both do.”

“Don’t ‘we’ me.” Jiwoo sighs. Looks down at her hands. Her dyed-brown hair hangs down around
her face in messy strands. Suddenly, she ducks under the table and starts fiddling with the PC under it.

“What are you doing?”

“Shut up, Byeongkwan.” Jiwoo yanks off the cover of the tower structure, presses both fingers into a pair of divots, and slides out a compartment with something silver in it. She pulls it out, wires dangling from the sides, and thrusts it at Byeongkwan’s chest. Byeongkwan fumbles, almost drops it, and Jiwoo takes the chance to snatch back the whiskey bottle.

“Now go.” Byeongkwan looks down at the hard drive, cradled in his hands.

“Jiwoo…”

“Go. Don’t talk to me.” She swivels around in her chair, looks out the window. Golden light streams in through the gap between the curtains, falls on the ground between them. The floorboard creak in commiseration.

Byeongkwan has never felt so empty before.

“I’m sorry, Jiwoo,” he says, and goes.

Back outside of the apartment, Yuchan puts a hand on Byeongkwan’s shoulder. “Will you two be alright?” he asks quietly. His eyes shine - not like he’s about to cry, but with a quiet sort of empathy.

Byeongkwan shrugs off his hand, spots Sehyoon, and raises a hand in his direction. “I don’t know,” he says. It won’t be the same either way, he doesn’t say.

“Park Junhee?”

Junhee sits up.

“Officer Hu?”

“We received a call from a member of the family you said you were targeting. She’s turning herself and her parents in.”

“...Oh. Will you be on your way to make an arrest?”

He almost hears her shrug through the phone. “Yeah, likely. If you hurry, you’ll be there in time.”

“Got it. Thanks.” Junhee hangs up without checking if she has anything else to say, tosses his phone on his desk, and leaves his room. “Where’s Byeongkwan?”

They all stand there, huddled in a semi-circle in viewing distance, as the police escort Byeongkwan’s family to their squad car. Sehyoon doesn’t bother watching them - instead, he looks at Byeongkwan, watches his eyes move and flicker about between the three figures.

“Do you want to go say anything?” he asks quietly. “This might be your only chance before trials.”

Byeongkwan shakes his head. “I’ve said all I had to say. If Jiwoo wants to help, she’ll let me know.” He sounds unusually distant, Sehyoon notes. Byeongkwan feels a lot. Maybe he ended up feeling
too much for the wrong people. He just hopes this won’t have a permanent effect on his personality. God knows they could use positive energy in their group.

“Let’s go,” Byeongkwan says, and turns to go. If he feels anything over his family being brought away, he doesn’t show it under his face mask and the mop of neon orange hair obscuring his eyes. He just walks, and they all fall into step next to him.

This is far from over, Sehyoon knows. But maybe now, Byeongkwan can start actually recovering.

Sehyoon looks down. Byeongkwan’s fingers tremble, clasped together tightly behind his back.

This may take a while, after all.
Yuchan likes the quiet mornings of the loft the most.

He used to dislike them, tension and awkwardness constantly hanging in the ear like a silent threat. These days, though, it’s shifted into a comfortable, warm kind of quiet. The type of quiet that you know is safe.

(Well, maybe not around the time Byeongkwan got injured, but aside from that, this has been true pretty consistently.)

Yuchan continues scratching between Frosty’s fuzzy ears, following her gaze to Sehyoon’s locked door. “I know, baby,” he tells her, “I bet he’ll be out soon. Don’t worry about it.”

Frosty has taken to waiting in front of Sehyoon’s door in the mornings, insistent on following him down the stairs and hanging out in the kitchen as he starts on breakfast preparations. Yuchan doesn’t really get it, especially when Sehyoon still seems borderline allergic to showing her any affection or even looking at her in the first place, but she’ll always have him and Byeongkwan to cheer her up when he turns her down yet again.

Together they wait for about half an hour, Yuchan laying down on the floor next to Frosty, idly scratching in between her ears. She lolls her tongue out whenever he does that, tail wagging lazily, and it’s probably the closest to true peace of mind that Yuchan knows. There’s already the sound of plates and cutlery being arranged below, and Yuchan realises just how late it is when his stomach grumbles. Sehyoon would usually be up three times over by now.

Yuchan is about to nod off again, still sleepy this early, when Sehyoon’s door finally creaks open. He looks up - Sehyoon’s hair is dishevelled, like he just now rolled out of bed, and there’s red pillow crease marks all over one half of his face. He raises one hand in the weakest wave Yuchan’s ever seen, then steps over Frosty’s prone form and makes his way to the stairs. Frosty, affectionate as ever, immediately gets up to trot after him, and Yuchan only pouts a little bit as he goes to catch up with them.
“You woke up late,” he tries, but all he gets for it is a shrug. “You okay?”

“I just didn’t feel like getting up,” Sehyoon tells him, and then doesn’t open his mouth again until he’s got food in front of him. Yuchan figures he’ll take that - he has days like that too. Instead of pressing him in front of everyone, he grabs his own plate, thanks Donghun for cooking today, and digs in. Absentmindedly, he notes that the flowers on the table have been changed. Donghun just swapped them out recently, too. Weird.

About a third through his food, a whine distracts him. He looks over, down, to Frosty. She’s sitting next to his leg patiently, but she’s whining and tapping one paw against the ground. She’s probably hungry, Yuchan figures, and glances at his food. There’s some sausage in there, which he swiftly picks out, just to wag it in the air over Frosty’s head.

“Come get it,” he stage-whispers as he meets Junhee’s disapproving eyes, and laughs with glee as Frosty lunges up, paws balanced on the table’s surface, and pulls the food from his fingers. She gets a pat on the head which she acknowledges with a huff, busy gnawing on the meat she’d just earned herself.

“Huh,” Junhee says. “She’s grown a lot. I didn’t even notice.”

“She has!” Yuchan nods - he’s proud of his baby, after all. She grew up in such poor conditions, yet she’s bounced back from all of them.

Breakfast ends quietly - none of them have much to say to each other today. Sehyoon gets up first, all his cutlery balanced on his plate, and is about to go for their dishwasher when Byeongkwan springs up behind him. “I’m done too,” he announces with a broad grin, and balances his plate with one hand as he links his free arm with Sehyoon’s. Sehyoon looks at Byeongkwan, eyes narrowed in some sort of confusion, but apparently decides not to say anything. Behind their backs, Donghun raises a questioning eyebrow at Junhee, then glances over to Yuchan.

“Alright, I’ll go wipe the table down.” Donghun nods to himself, pushes himself up, and wanders off. So does Yuchan, after a wary glance at Junhee, who seems to not be paying attention to anything but his phone right now.

Perfect.

It only takes Yuchan a minute to gather everything he needs. He’s been in Junhee’s ensuite bathroom before, the day they decorated the loft with the passcode Donghun had given them. Junhee’s changed the code, but it’s not like that stops any of them, not when all Yuchan has to do is to whip out his best puppy eyes for Donghun to give in. So he knows where to go, tiptoes around and grabs an armful of brushes and combs from in between hair products. Junhee really spends so much time on his hair and his image in general, it’s a wonder he gets anything else done during the day.

He’s not sure exactly what he needs, so he just grabs one of each and sneaks back out of Junhee’s room. The owner of said room is talking to Donghun, braced against the kitchen table, so Yuchan beckons for Frosty to follow him and hides the fashion contraband on the couch. Once Junhee’s gone to his room and shut the door behind him, he grins down at his favourite ball of fur.

“Time to get rid of all these knots of yours,” he tells her, brandishing three combs in each hand. Frosty, not understanding, simply lolls out her tongue and paws at his knee softly.

Junhee doesn’t emerge from his room until well past morning, about half an hour until they’re
usually planning to eat lunch, all together as a group. He knows he should probably be more social, out of necessity if not anything else, but he’s just so… busy. There’s a lot to do if he wants to keep the steady stream of money he uses to pay food and utilities for this place, and he doesn’t want to bother Donghun with it all the time.

He doesn’t really register anything going on around him for a bit as he shuffles outside and closes the door behind him. The security pad beeps as it locks the door for him, and only then does he look around the living area.

It’s empty. He knows Sehyoon should be driving Byeongkwan to his therapist appointment just about now, so that leaves only Donghun and Yuchan around. Donghun might be out too, now that he thinks about it - something about them running low on milk. Figures that living with four other people would put a quick dent in their food reserves, especially with one of them sporting a superhuman metabolism to match his superhuman speed.

So that leaves just Yuchan, then. A heavy breath draws his eye to the couch, one arm just visible hanging off of the side. Junhee rounds the room, and yeah, that’s Yuchan alright. He appears to be sleeping, mouth hanging open just slightly, a little bit of drool escaping his mouth where his face is smashed against the couch cushion. His body has twisted around halfway during sleep, leaving room for Frosty to climb up and drape herself over him. Junhee isn’t exactly a fan of dog hair on furniture, but the scene is cute enough that he won’t nag about it too much.

Looking at Frosty, she really has grown a lot. She used to be tiny, like a white ball of fur and fluff, but now she’s all long, gangly limbs hidden under… well, under even more fluff. Her ears are still way too big for her body, and Junhee wonders whether she’ll ever grow into them. They twitch as he’s looking at her, and she opens one eye in his direction calmly. Junhee looks away - he knows he’s not been caught, per se, since Frosty’s just a dog, but it feels like it all the same. Maybe he should just…

His eyes fall to a pile of combs on the floor, all clogged with white fur to the point they look like dust mops more than anything else. That’s really unhygienic, but at least…

Wait, are those his combs?

Junhee pinches the bridge of his nose, then proceeds to clear his throat so loud that both Yuchan and Frosty jump. Yuchan blinks, yawns, then looks up at Junhee. Down at the combs. Back up at him.

“Uh… Sorry?”

Donghun and Sehyoon run into each other in their underground parking lot.

Rather literally, actually - Sehyoon had been fiddling with his phone and Donghun’s vision had been obscured by the bags of groceries he was carrying, so it’s no surprise to either of them when they knock against each other on their way to the elevator.

Figures. Giant parking lot, only two of them there, and yet they manage to knock each other on their asses.

“You okay?” Sehyoon asks, getting up to crouch and help Donghun gather up groceries that had escaped their bags. Donghun nods, gets up, and chases after two apples that are currently rolling their way under Junhee’s car.

“Yeah, I’m good. Sorry. Did you hurt yourself?”
Sehyoon shrugs as he looks at a little scratch on the side of his hand. “Not really,” he says. “You went shopping? I thought we just needed milk?”

Donghun shrugs. Even through the darkness, his wry smile is easily visible. “I see a sale sign and my hoarder nature just comes out. I can’t help it, it’s a problem.”

“Starting to provide for winter this early?”

“Shut up and help me pick all this stuff up.” Donghun shoots him a grin, shakes his head, and opens an egg carton to make sure nothing has cracked. Sehyoon, meanwhile, hunts down the last rogue apples, eyes straying to Junhee’s immaculately kept, awfully expensive-looking car.

“I can’t believe he let you borrow that,” he muses to himself more than anything.

“I mean, he knew you were taking my car. He’s not as heartless as you might think.” Donghun cranes his head back to look over his shoulder and shrug at Sehyoon. Sehyoon, not wanting to argue, just shrugs back and presses the elevator call button for Donghun.

Upstairs, they find Yuchan sitting cross-legged on the floor, pouting as he’s cleaning off brushes. There’s a small pile of tangled white fur next to him, and another, bigger, breathing pile of white fur laying halfway on his lap. Sehyoon makes a questioning noise at him, and Yuchan sighs.

“I used Junhee’s brushes to comb Frosty, so he’s making me clean them,” he mutters at the floor. Sehyoon thinks he can hear Donghun huff a laugh as he’s making his way to the kitchen area to set down the grocery bags. Sehyoon, hands in his pockets, watches as Donghun looks down at the kitchen table, then turns his head to the wall separating Junhee’s room from the rest of the area.

“Hey, Junhee,” he calls, “would you mind unpacking the groceries?”

There’s a short pause before the keypad next to Junhee’s door beeps and he sticks his head through the crack between door and wall. “Are you busy?”

“I gotta do a thing, yeah.”

“Alright.” Junhee doesn’t press, simply shuffles out the room. He’s still in a suit, but he ditched the jacket and the buttons of his shirt have been halfway unbuttoned. Plus, he’s wearing mismatched socks, one yellow and one black, which Sehyoon really hadn’t pegged him as the type for.

“Come on,” Donghun says to Sehyoon and encircles his wrist with one of his hands to tug him to his room. Sehyoon follows, a little confused - Donghun hadn’t said he needed to talk to him before? This all feels entirely out of the blue.

Donghun leads him into his room, closes the door behind them, and leans his weight against it. “The flowers on the kitchen table died,” he comments airily, but there’s something heavy and searching in his gaze that completely contradicts the tone of his voice. “I had to throw them out and replace them.”

“Did you forget to water them?” Sehyoon stretches and sits down on Donghun’s desk chair, folding his arms on top of the back rest and letting his legs dangle from either side of it. Donghun rolls his eyes good-naturedly, but seemingly drops the subject for now.

“So, did you just want to hang out?”

“You still look kind of like shit, you know.”
“Wow, you’re just a peach today, aren’t you?”

He’s met with a shrug. “I just want you to take care of yourself. I know I already said that, but the point still stands. You have eye bags down to here.” Donghun pokes himself in the jaw.

“They’re Gucci, though.”

Donghun chuckles. “Sure they are. I just… I don’t know, Byeongkwan seems to be doing better now, and I can’t help but think you’re going backwards. It worries me.”

“I wouldn’t say he’s all better, considering he needs to go to therapy. And honestly, I should too,” Sehyoon points out, because it’s the truth. It’s not like he’ll act on this truth, but nevertheless, it’s there.

“Yeah, you should.” Donghun looks down at his feet, crosses his arms in front of his chest. “Listen, even if you’re not going to talk to me about it, at least try to get more rest?”

Sehyoon balances his chin on his hands. “I’m fine, Donghun. I’m sorry I’m causing you trouble, but I’m getting all the rest I need. Honestly.”

“Right. Mentally, too?”

“Are you about to suggest breathing exercises and whale sounds?”

“No, I have a feeling that’s more Junhee’s type of thing.” Donghun waves his hand dismissively. “Though… remember how we used to meditate? Back when we tried to figure out how to work on your healing?”

Sehyoon nods, cracks a smile. “We were both shit at meditation. You kept elbowing me.”

“And you just kept squirming.” Donghun shakes his head good-naturedly. “Want to try again? Maybe we’re better now.”

“Oh, I highly doubt that.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Sehyoon laughs, pushes his hair out of his face, scrunches his nose up as it all flops back into his face, and nods. “Sure, let’s try it again. Can’t be any worse than last time, eh?”

Junhee had just put their Roomba to work, watching it slowly roll over the floor, when he hears a muffled thud from Donghun’s room. Sehyoon and he had disappeared about twenty minutes ago, and he sort of wonders what they’re up to. Maybe he should poke his head in and ask if everything’s alright.

(A big part of him tells him to not disturb them, to keep his nose out of other people's business, to go back and do some more work instead of inserting himself into their lives in a way they never indicated they’d want.)

(The bigger part of him is just kind of nosy.)

His hand is on the doorknob before he consciously registers it, and by then, it’s too late anyway. He pushes the door open carefully.
“Are you guys alright? I… oh.”

Donghun and Sehyoon look up at him from the ground, to which Sehyoon has Donghun pinned with his thighs. He’s sitting on Donghun’s upper legs, halfway on his hips, and is gripping his hands in his own. He blinks at Junhee.

“Hey. Sorry, were we too loud?” Donghun’s voice sounds a little strained from whatever exertion he’d been through. His face is flushed.

“Uh. No, you’re fine. Just…” Junhee clears his throat. “Just, you know. Um. Stay safe?”

“What?”

“Bye!” Junhee slams the door back shut and powerwalks back to his own room. He almost trips over the Roomba in his haste to remove himself from the situation.

It’s not that he’s uncomfortable with members of the team being romantically or physically involved, no. That’s not it. It’s just… it could harm their dynamics if things were to go wrong between them. (Plus, weren’t Byeongkwan and Sehyoon growing closer? Junhee wonders how that’ll work out.)

It’s fine, though. They’re adults, they know what they’re doing. Probably. Maybe.

He really does have to talk to them about team dynamics, doesn’t he?

Sehyoon leaves the loft in the early afternoon. They’d usually be eating by now, but Byeongkwan’s still in the city, and Donghun said he’d much rather eat with him as well. Sehyoon tends to agree - he’s never been to therapy himself, but he imagines that all this emotional stress would leave Byeongkwan at least marginally hungry.

He takes Donghun’s car again. At some point he probably needs to buy his own, but being a vigilante doesn’t exactly pay, and he’s not about to go back to his old job or ask Junhee for handouts. Not with this large a sum in question. For now, driving on a loan basis will have to do.

Byeongkwan is already waiting outside his therapist’s office building, leaning against the wall next to the front door. Sehyoon honks once to get his attention, which makes him jump and clutch at his chest.

“Sorry,” Sehyoon says when Byeongkwan rushes over to open the passenger side door. Byeongkwan leans over the console to give Sehyoon a kind of uncomfortable, one-armed hug, then settles in his seat to buckle himself in.

“It’s okay. I just… loud noises.”

“Yeah.” Sehyoon’s side is still tingling from where Byeongkwan had made contact with his body, and he legitimately cannot tell if it’s a good or a bad feeling. “How was therapy?” he asks instead of exploring that any further.

“Alright.” Byeongkwan shrugs, looks out the side window. “We didn’t get into all the heavy shit yet, we just kinda scoped out if we’ll be a good fit for each other.”

Sehyoon just nods as he focuses on getting out of the very tight parking position he’d put himself in. Once they’re back on the street, he drives as usual: one hand on the steering wheel, the other on his
lap. He feels like Byeongkwan is looking at him, the side of his face warm in that way that intense looks tend to cause, but he doesn’t think much of it until Byeongkwan reaches over the console again, this time for his hand. He pulls it softly in his own lap, plays with Sehyoon’s fingers with a lax enough grip that Sehyoon could take his hand back if he wanted to, or if he needed it for something.

Truthfully, Byeongkwan has been kind of touchy recently. Whenever he comes to his room at night to talk, he ends up halfway over Sehyoon’s lap, or draped across his side, or playing with his hair. Sehyoon… well, he doesn’t really know what to make of it. It’s not like he dislikes the touching, but it’s so fundamentally alien to him, the concept of proper physical affection, that he really has no idea what to do with himself once someone initiates it. He can deal with Donghun, because Donghun has known him for a long time now, but Byeongkwan has some sort of different effect on him, one that he really doesn’t want to think about right now. No matter how many hints he thinks Byeongkwan is trying to drop, because things like that are never certain. It’s better to just move on and keep what he has right now.

(But hell if his heart doesn’t swell some at the thought of properly holding hands with Byeongkwan.)

“Did you talk to your lawyer yet?” he asks to turn his brain back to more productive thoughts. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Byeongkwan run a hand through his still neon orange hair, which flops back into place immediately. It’s gotten a little long, and the roots have started to grow in, but he probably hasn’t felt like going to a hairdresser’s yet.

“A little, yeah. He told me to think about any witnesses I might have to the actual familial abuse part, so that I can get myself out of as much responsibility as I can manage. Actually, that sounds super scummy when I put it that way.”

“Not really. You were coerced to do those things. That’s what you have to show the court as well.” Byeongkwan sighs. “Sure, yeah.”

“So do you have anyone?”

“Jiwoo would honestly be the best bet, but you know I don’t know what’ll happen with her.”

“Hm.” Sehyoon nods, tightens his grip on the steering wheel as he turns a corner. “Speaking of which, have you two talked at all?”

“Yeah, she called me earlier, asked me to visit her in her holding cell.”

“Are you gonna go?”

Byeongkwan tilts his head up, looks at the ceiling. His fingernails pinch the skin of Sehyoon’s hand, but he doesn’t pull away just yet. “Maybe. I probably should, just to see how she’s doing. Do you think she’ll get jail time?”

“Dunno. She gave them up though, so if she cooperates she might get some sort of sentence reduction?”

Byeongkwan pauses to mull this over, then huffs a laugh. “None of us know how the justice system works, do we?”

“Absolutely no clue.” Sehyoon squeezes Byeongkwan’s hand, then pulls away to shift gears. “It’ll work out somehow, I think. You want to cook or get delivery for lunch?”
They end up getting delivery. Because nobody can agree on what they want exactly (Byeongkwan wants pizza, Yuchan wants chicken, Donghun and Junhee agree on Chinese, and Sehyoon would rather just get a burger) they buy from multiple delivery places; by the time they’re done, their kitchen table is laden with half-empty plates and cardboard containers stacked on top of each other.

“I’m so full…” Byeongkwan whines, holding his stomach gingerly. He’s slid on his chair to the side that Sehyoon is on, and is now leaning against his side, head pillowed on his shoulder. Sehyoon doesn’t seem to be too affected as he idly nibbles on a leftover fry, casting his gaze around the kitchen table.

“Should we clean up?”

They’re all contemplating it, but the general sense of food coma has blanketed the entire room. Even Frosty is lethargic from where she’s lain over Yuchan’s feet, blinking up at them slowly.

“Maybe later…”

“We’re never going to do it if not now, you know.”

Yuchan puffs out his cheeks in protest. “An hour won’t kill us.”

“Really, it’s your fault for stealing food from everyone,” Junhee grumbles. “You just had to overeat.”

“I just wanted to try what everyone had…” Yuchan pouts in self-defense, raising a finger to poke himself in the stomach. Junhee just rolls his eyes.

“I know for a fact you’ve had all this stuff at the loft before, you know.”

Yuchan brightens a little. “Oh, you do pay attention!”

“Only because you’re so loud, really.” Junhee shifts to look at Donghun, who is piling used napkins on this plate, completely unaffected by Byeongkwan, who’s now trying to have an afternoon nap on Sehyoon’s shoulder.

Huh.

“Donghun, Sehyoon, can we talk for a moment?”

They both quirk an eyebrow at him.

“Something wrong?”

“No. I mean, maybe. Not directly.” Junhee sighs, rubs his forehead and gestures towards the door to his room. “Can we please just…”

“Alright?” Donghun shrugs, stands up, and contemplates the table. “Byeongkwan, Yuchan, can you start cleaning up?”

“That’s what we get for being the youngest, huh,” Byeongkwan grumbles good-naturedly, but he does get off of Sehyoon to gather everything on the table together. Yuchan leans his forehead on the table and groans, but gets up as well. Meanwhile, Junhee leads the other two to his room.

“What is it?” Sehyoon asks as soon as the door closes behind them, more confused than anything. He probably thinks this is out of the blue, and Junhee can’t fault him for that.

“We need to talk about…” How does he put this, though?
“About what?”

“Uh.” He waves a hand between the two of them. “Team dynamics…?”

Donghun blinks. “Aren’t we doing well right now? Nothing’s really happened recently, so I’m not sure…”

“It’s not really about that.” Junhee backs up until he can feel the wooden edge of his writing desk, then hoists himself on it to half-sit, half-lean as far away from the two as possible. “It’s more like… your relationship. And if you’re really thinking things through.”

Sehyoon inclines his head, eyes narrowed carefully. “I’m not sure what you’re trying to say.”

“I–” Junhee sighs. “Look, it’s fine to date, I wouldn’t forbid that even if I had the authority, I just want you guys to be aware of what could happen if you were to break up. We can’t afford a blow to the team integrity like that at this point.”

There’s a beat of silence.

“Shouldn’t you be talking to Byeongkwan and him about this? Why am I here?”

Junhee blinks at Donghun, confused. So does Sehyoon.

“No, there’s not really anything–”

“Maybe not yet, but I can tell that–”

“Have you been reading my mind because that’s kind of uncalled for a–”

“Um.” Junhee clears his throat. “No, I– I mean. Aren’t you two together?”

Silence, again. It’s beginning to feel kind of awkward.

Or at least it does until Donghun and Sehyoon both burst into laughter.

“W-what? What gave you that idea?”

“I’m sorry, no offense, but just no. What?”

Junhee feels his shoulders instinctively hunch up, his cheeks burn with embarrassed red, as he looks down at his hands, twists his fingers. “Because you two looked pretty close when I walked in on you, I figured that…”

“Well, no,” Donghun states resolutely, still chuckling in between words. “We’ve just been friends for a while, you’d know that if you’d listen to any of us when we talk.”

“I do listen, I just–”

There’s a sharp sound from outside the room, like something breaking. Before Junhee can even figure out what he had been trying to say just now, his legs move, and he pushes past the two in his room to open the door.

Outside, Byeongkwan is looking down, hands outstretched like he’s about to catch something, in front of the sink. There’s a smattering of glass shards around his feet. Yuchan’s frozen in the middle between the kitchen and living areas.
Junhee frowns. “Byeongkwan, what did you do?” He calls out, and all of a sudden, the tension in Yuchan’s body releases, and he turns and bolts straight out the front door.

They both stare. So do Donghun and Sehyoon from behind him.

“Uh…”

“Is Yuchan alright?”

Donghun steps forward. “Should I-”

“I’ll go,” Junhee cuts in. “He didn’t have his shoes on, so he’s probably not going outside. I know this building the best.”

Donghun frowns at him. “You’re not exactly the nurturing type, though…”

Byeongkwan looks back and forth between them, lips pressed together. “I think Junhee should go.”

That’s all the pushing Junhee needs, and he’s out the door in an instant.

Well, he says an instant, but the temporary hesitation had been enough for Yuchan to gain ground. Junhee casts a quick look at the elevator panel, sees it standing still at their floor, and heads to the stairs. Listening carefully, he can just barely make out the sound of rushed footsteps, but they sound like they’re below him, and they’re fading fast.

“What is it now, idiot,” Junhee mutters, and takes the stairs down.

Finding Yuchan, all in all, isn’t that hard. He hadn’t turned on any lights, but Junhee knows the layout of this place, and he especially knows that he’d left all the doors closed last time he was down here. The floor just under the loft used to house multiple offices, some IT company rented out the whole thing before the owners of the building became destitute. Now, most of the rooms have been cleared out, closed and locked. There’s only a few that Junhee has actually actively used, the biggest of which is a room at the very end of the floor that used to serve as an in-house cafeteria for the office workers.

Considering the other unlocked rooms he’d come across were empty, this might be his best bet.

He approaches the double doors, and as he’d thought - they’re open, even if just by a hair. Still, he treads carefully, footsteps muffled by the old, kind of gross looking carpet under him. The door he pushes fully open equally as silently.

It’s quiet.

The room, cleaned out before he’d moved in, holds all of the things Junhee wanted to bring up into the loft once he’d had it commissioned. Furniture, keepsakes, memories. The furniture is standing scattered around the room, covered in white sheets to keep the dust from settling, and the keepsakes are in boxes stacked into precariously leaning towers. It’s a labyrinthine construction, and somewhere from the heart of this labyrinth he hears badly suppressed, choked-up breathing.

It’s actually not that easy to make out details beyond what’s been ingrained in his memory, heavy curtains having been drawn across the windows long ago, so Junhee grabs for the light dial and turns it. Just incrementally at first, as to not blind Yuchan, but enough for him to see under the warm, artificial, yellow-golden hue of the dim lights. From inside the room, he hears light shuffling.
“Yuchan?”

The breathing stops. Junhee stills.

He hadn’t really come with a plan. Donghun, well… he was right. Junhee isn’t good at this. He isn’t good at offering emotional support, or at resolving situations like this. At supporting people. Sometimes he figures he should be, for the sake of the team, but Donghun’s got that covered a lot better than he ever could. So where to even start?

Junhee steps into the room. Underfoot, little clouds of dust spring up. He sees Yuchan’s footsteps, sees them leading him in a winding path to the biggest piece of furniture, set up in front of the big window front.

“Yuchan,” he tries again, quietly, as he steps forward, his own footprints intermingling with Yuchan’s. And there, next to the centerpiece of the room, he finds Yuchan, huddled into the blanket that had been covering it before. It’s slipped down to about halfway, so Junhee can make out a flash of white, a bit of gold detailing, a twinkle of ivory keys, but then he tears himself away and looks down at Yuchan, a little awkwardly.

“Uh. Are you okay?”

Yuchan trembles a little and wraps himself further into the blanket. He’s not crying, exactly, but he’s sniffling a little, and he’s curled up to make himself appear as small as possible. His eyes are trained resolutely on the dusty ground.

“I mean… you probably aren’t, huh.” Junhee scratches at the back of his head, then lowers himself down into a crouch, making sure his knees don’t touch the floor. “What happened?”

Yuchan shakes his head a little, mutters something under his breath.

“Sorry, what?”

“I’m sorry,” Yuchan breathes out. His face is still lowered. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, please…”

“Please what?” Junhee tries to reach out, but Yuchan draws back further. With the movement he pulls at the sheet more, and some of it slips down to cover his head. “I’m sorry,” Yuchan says again. “Just please don’t…” He trails off.

“Yuchan, I…” Junhee sighs. “Look, I don’t know what happened, and I don’t know how to make it better.” He pauses. “Actually, wait, that sounds horrible. I should have let Donghun come down here instead… Uh, what I mean is that it’s alright? Nobody’s mad at anyone, if that’s what you’re worried about?”

A pause. Then, minutely, a shaking of Yuchan’s head.

“It’s not?”

“Sorry…”

Junhee huffs. “Stop saying that, will you? You have nothing to be sorry about.”

They remain like this for a while, Yuchan still shivering and Junhee trying to come up with anything to say, when suddenly, there’s an impact to Junhee’s chest. He falls backwards, barely able to prevent himself from falling over, and— Yuchan is draped over him, face buried in his chest. His arms are clamped tightly over Junhee’s own, encircling his torso, and all Junhee can see is the top of
Yuchan’s head. It’s not a comfortable situation for either of them, but at least Yuchan is out of the blanket now, which has not quite slipped down the object yet, though it’s remarkably close to doing so.

“You feeling any better now?” Junhee tries carefully, and attempts not to bristle when he hears a mocking little laugh.

“It’s been like ten seconds, of course I’m not any better yet,” Yuchan mutters into his chest, but he doesn’t let go, and neither does Junhee, who’d somehow managed to get a loose hold around Yuchan’s upper body as well. It’s still a little awkward, but Junhee feels like Yuchan might need this, the physical contact and the safety, and so he holds on for as long as he needs to. It feels… foreign, being depended on like this, and he can’t help but think that it was a horrible idea.

Still. They stay.

A few minutes later, Donghun sticks his head through the open door. He looks at the pair a little quizzically– he’d originally wanted to come down to make sure the two hadn’t gotten in a fight, or that Junhee hadn’t made Yuchan cry or anything like that. It’s not like they get along a lot, so it’s a surprise to see them all tangled up like that, so much so that it’s awkward to say anything to interrupt them. His feet stay securely planted outside of the room as he looks at them, head inclined in askance. At one point, Junhee turns his head just a little to catch his eyes, and gives a minute shrug with one shoulder.

What happened?, Donghun broadcasts at Junhee.

I don’t know, Junhee answers him, face a little pinched as if he’s still trying to focus very hard on getting the answer across to him. I’m not the best at this.

We’re all aware.

Junhee sticks his tongue out at him.

Donghun gestures upwards. Junhee gives a minute nod, and with that, Donghun makes his way back upstairs.

Junhee and his weird personality really is going to give him a headache one of these days.

(And yet, even if he believes himself better at emotional comfort, something about that entire place, the obscured furniture and boxes, was too intimidating for him to feel comfortable in. Maybe he’s overthinking it, but maybe this was all for the best. Maybe Junhee was meant to take this one from the start.)

The afternoon and early evening are a little bit awkward. Yuchan doesn’t want to put whatever bothered him into words, which they all respect, but it creates a sense of missing closure for everyone. Except maybe Junhee, who’s elected to do his work at the kitchen table for the first time since they all had moved in. It’s likely to keep an eye on Yuchan who’s napping the day away, curled up against Frosty in the little puppy form he takes on sometimes when he seeks comfort.

Despite the abundance of lunch food, though, young adults with superpowers often have big appetites, so they all end up sitting together for dinner, eating a mixture of leftovers from the meal before alongside a few side dishes Donghun and Sehyoon had prepared. The glass shards have long since been disposed of, but Donghun still walks carefully around that particular area.
There's light conversation, but Junhee isn't really paying attention to any of it, instead electing to stare into his food. Donghun's not sure what he's trying to see there, but he's willing to let it go, considering Junhee must have had a very mentally taxing day for someone as emotionally constipated as he is. From next to Junhee, Yuchan is stealing bits and pieces of food off his plate, but if Junhee notices-- which he should-- he doesn't seem to care. That's new for him, at least.

So is Yuchan sitting next to Junhee. Donghun had been pretty sure that Yuchan was still a little afraid of him, but whatever happened on the floor below, it must have helped his perception of Junhee to some degree.

Byeongkwan is in the middle of recounting the latest episode of some anime he'd gotten hooked on when Junhee's phone rings. They all fall silent - it's pretty late to call anyone. Junhee hunches his shoulders inwards a little as he checks his phone, fiddles with it shortly, then places it face down on the table.

"Who was that?" Donghun asks curiously.

"Nothing important." Junhee sips on his glass of water. "Don't worry about it."

"...Right." It's not that he wants to distrust him, but when it comes to Junhee, 'nothing important' usually isn't all that insignificant in the long run.

"Right." Junhee nods, wipes at his mouth with his napkin, then stands up. "I'll be right back, though. You guys keep going." As he leaves for his room, he slides his plate just the littlest bit closer to Yuchan, who immediately pounces on the best parts of the food Junhee hadn't touched yet. Donghun watches Junhee's back disappear into his room, lost in thought.

Maybe it's nothing bad after all.

"You called?"

"Meet me at the police station right down city hall. I'm going to have to cash in that favour you owe me."

Junhee looks out of his window, down at the darkened cityscape, at the lights twinkling under him like a sea of stars. Overhead, the sky is dark.

"The whole group?"

"Just you, for now. They can be told later."

Junhee nods to himself. "I'll be right there."

There's static on the other side of the line.

"You'd better be," Sorn says.
Junhee Has One (1) Single Humour


[11:14] BYONK: i'm just on a run

[11:14] BYONK: it's a really nice day for a run i've done nothing wrong


[11:15] BYONK: so this isn't about the broken microwave ??

[11:16] Park Junhee: I told you it was him.

A hand lifts to block out the sun, and Byeongkwan lets out an exhausted sigh, slowing his walking pace to a meander. Today was not a day for shopping.

“It’s so hot. Aren’t you dying?” he asks, tugging on the sleeve of Junhee’s suit, who quickly pulls his arm away in annoyance. He doesn’t even bother commenting on Sehyoon—draped in heavy black fabric head to toe, as per usual. The guy was heatproof.

“He’s adapted to the heat,” Donghun says, leaning over to look at Byeongkwan. “Kind of like a desert lizard.”

Byeongkwan nods seriously, but his attention on the conversation falters a little once he realises Yuchan is no longer walking beside them. When he stops in his tracks, the other three also slowly fall to a stop to look at him questioningly. Byeongkwan turns around, scanning the street littered with various stores. Yuchan couldn’t teleport. Last time he checked, anyway.

He catches Yuchan standing only several metres behind, gaze glued to a very specific storefront. His eyes are wide, bright, full of fascination—

“Come on,” Byeongkwan demands, grabbing Junhee’s sleeve and tugging it with far more force this time.

“What are you doing?” Junhee frowns, pulling his arm free once more and running his hand over the newfound crease in the fabric. As if in response, Byeongkwan gestures meaningfully at Yuchan, still standing with literal stars in his eyes.

“No,” Junhee says. Beside him, the other two have already started to approach the store; Junhee watches as Donghun brandishes a credit card meaningfully in the air.

(Why does Donghun always have Junhee’s credit card these days? He’s never noticed this before.)
Byeongkwan dashes over, slipping an arm through that of a surprised Yuchan, and tugging him toward the store. Junhee lets out a sigh of total resignation, and follows the group into Build-A-Bear.

“Isn’t the entire purpose of this to build a bear?” Donghun asks, watching Byeongkwan clutch a shark plush with all the force in the world. The employees are standing at the side of the room, clearly unsure how to handle the herd of grown men busting into their plushie store.

“Not everyone is boring like you, Donghun,” Byeongkwan replies. He’s fiddling with his hand in the different boxes of plastic hearts, before he presents one with a huge smile. When he presses the button, the tiny piece of plastic lets out a cheap, lion-like roar from the soundbox. “Perfect.”

Donghun chooses to ignore the interaction, and focus on picking out a bear instead. Out the corner of his eye, he can see Sehyoon hovering uncomfortably. Yuchan is digging around in the masses of plushies, trying to pick one out.

“You don’t seem like a bear kind of guy,” Yuchan says thoughtfully. He picks up a dog, double takes, then puts it back. A few seconds later, he turns around and offers Sehyoon a plushie shaped like a tuxedo cat. “How about this one?”

Sehyoon takes it with an air of hesitation, offering Yuchan a half-smile. “Thanks.”

“That’s okay! Help me pick out one for Frosty, though.”

Byeongkwan reappears in Donghun’s field of vision, presenting a fully stuffed shark plushie, dressed in bright yellow sports gear. “Press it. Go on.”

Donghun hesitantly presses the shark, and it erupts a lion roar. He isn’t sure how to reply, so he just squints in confusion. On the other side of the room, Junhee is purposefully avoiding Yuchan’s enthusiasm.

“No thank you. Just get what you want so we can leave.” He’s shuffling out of the radius of Yuchan’s grabby hands, Sehyoon observing the chaos from the sidelines with his cat tucked into his arms.
“Nooo, you have to!” Yuchan whines. “Even Frosty’s getting one!” He’s hitting Junhee with full-on puppy eyes, and the man’s facade is crumbling. The moment Junhee stops scooting away, Yuchan shoves a bulbasaur into his hands. “Look! We match now!” He holds up his own pikachu, dressed in a little charizard hoodie.

This seems to shatter even Junhee, as he gives up the fight, and accepts the bulbasaur with his second sigh of the day.

(Donghun chooses not to point out the enthusiasm with which Junhee dressed the bulbasaur in a suit.)

**Junhee Has One (1) Single Humour**

[21:02] Park Junhee: What was that noise?
[21:03] Kim S.: Yuchan and Byeongkwan are playing Scrabble
[21:03] Park Junhee: How does that cause such a loud crash?
[21:04] Park Junhee: And since when did we have Scrabble?
[21:04] Kim S.: We don’t have Scrabble anymore
[21:04] Kim S.: Scrabble is in two pieces across the loft
[21:06] BYONK: HE CHEATED
[21:06] Park Junhee: Where is Donghun?
[21:07] Donghun: I’m trying to read, leave me out of this.
[21:07] Donghun: Sehyoon, don’t let them break anything.
[21:08] Kim S.: Unfortunately, Scrabble is beyond salvation
[21:10] BYONK changed Junhee Has One (1) Single Humour to YUCHAN CHEATS AT SCRABBLE

**YUCHAN CHEATS AT SCRABBLE**

[22:43] BYONK: okay but momo’s quirk is so overpowered
[22:43] BYONK: like she can literally create any small object that’s insane
[22:44] BYONK: her character is so underrated considering how crazy that quirk is
[22:46] yuwuchan: dude i KNOW
yuuwuchan: but mina is underrated too

yuuwuchan: she literally carries ultimate destruction in her quirk

yuuwuchan: momo can create but mina can basically destroy anything with acid

yuuwuchan: we have an obvious victor

Kim S.: In a fight, they are both near-useless and far too slow, though

Kim S.: Fumikage has the strongest quirk for fights

BYONK: you just like him because his quirk is edgy

Park Junhee: Technically, Eraserhead has the capability to shut down any quirk. In reality, that sort of power is unstoppable. Even the most powerful quirk is useless against him.

yuuwuchan: ohHHH MY GOD

BYONK: HFGDFGKJHKLJ I’M GONNA SCREAM

BYONK changed YUCHAN CHEATS AT SCRABBLE to Park Junhee The Weeb

Donghun: His favourite anime is Love Live.

yuuwuchan: SCREECHES

BYONK: i.......cannot breathe

BYONK: junhee come back i hhsdhfstdf

BYONK: junhee please

Kim S.: I think we may have just borne witness to first-class treachery

Kim S.: Right after he took you all to Build-A-Bear
Breakfast the next day is tense.

Yuchan sighs, plays with his scrambled eggs. When he said he liked the silence, he didn’t mean Donghun and Junhee tersely staring at each other while Byeongkwan keeps glancing up at the upper rooms. Sehyoon isn’t even here right now – Donghun had muttered something about him being tired and needing to sleep more before starting on breakfast preparations by himself.

Beyond the sounds of cutlery, all there is is Frosty’s gentle whining.

“So,” Donghun says eventually. “Care to talk about it?”

“I still don’t know what your issue is,” Junhee replies evenly, setting his fork and knife on his plate gently. His expression is measured, eyes meeting Donghun’s in what would seem polite and impassive to anyone else, but for Junhee probably means a challenge.

(Or so he thinks, anyway. To Yuchan, things like Junhee’s inner workings have always largely remained a mystery.)

Donghun pinches the bridge of his nose, pushing up the thick-rimmed glasses he wears when he doesn’t feel like bothering with contact lenses. “You absolutely do know.”

“I can’t go out without telling you what’s going on?”

“Not if it’s team-related, no.” Donghun sighs. “Listen, all you have to do is tell us what’s going on before you run off to do something. I’m not asking you live broadcast every time you blink.”

“I just don’t think it’s unnecessary to–”

“Can you please have your domestic somewhere else,” Byeongkwan grumbles. He’s stressed today,
hair standing up on all ends, almost nodding off every few minutes, and Yuchan figures he must have had a late night with either therapy things or court things. “I really don’t care what Jun’s up to in his spare time, but Donghun’s right. You gotta talk to us when we’re actually involved.”

Junhee looks down at his plate, awkwardly shifts his knife with his index finger. His lips are pressed together into a thin line. “I wasn’t aware this was such a concern, I usually—”

“You usually work alone. Are we alone right now?”


With that, a good part of the tension seemingly dissipates into thin air, and Yuchan happily starts breathing again.

“So, where were you anyway?” As Donghun asks, a noise comes from upstairs, then the sound of footsteps, then Sehyoon enters the kitchen space and makes a beeline for the coffee machine.

“Sorn called me.” Junhee watches Sehyoon as he fills up a mug, grabs a banana, and comes to sit with the rest of them. Yuchan looks, too: Sehyoon’s eyes are bloodshot and he’s even paler than usual, hair mussed up like he’d been gripping it.

He can’t help but think that something’s really wrong. Has been for a while, even, ever since they got Frosty. Well, or maybe there’s always been something off about him. It’s hard to tell sometimes.

“And she wanted to…?”

“To talk about the favour we still owe her.” From across the table, Byeongkwan grimaces. “She called me down to talk about a situation that’s been developing, wanted my opinion on it first. I wanted to go down to her precinct with all of you today, if you’re free.” That last part feels a little pointed, but if Donghun notices (which, likely, he does) he doesn’t say anything about it.

“Let’s go, then,” he says instead. “Everyone alright with that or should we wait a bit before leaving?”

Byeongkwan glances over at Sehyoon. “I’d like a nap first,” he declares. Yuchan mutters his assent.

“Alright, a nap it is.” And with that, the topic is laid to rest for now.

As soon as everyone disperses to do their own things while waiting to go to the police department, Byeongkwan lets his forehead sink onto the tabletop. “Ugh,” he says very intelligently.

“You’ll hit your head.”

“Thanks, buddy.” Byeongkwan sighs and sits back up properly. Yuchan, still remaining at the table, is idly toying with a knife, scraping the blunt end over the table’s surface. Seeing him like that, still a little shaken and drawn despite the time that has passed since, makes Byeongkwan remember the events of yesterday. His gaze strays down to the glass Yuchan had been drinking from.

“Say,” Byeongkwan tries, “what happened yesterday?”

Yuchan halts in his movements. The soft scraping sound stops, giving way to silence and the rhythmic ticking of the clock affixed to the kitchen wall.

“Did I do something or was it Junhee?”
“Ah…” Yuchan shrugs, a half-smile on his face that doesn’t reach his eyes. “It’s fine. I was just a little freaked out.”

“By what, exactly? You don’t have to tell me why, just what caused it, maybe. So it doesn’t happen again.”

Yuchan brings one hand up to rub at the back of his neck forcefully. “I just…” He sighs. “Just. Loud noises. Nothing special.”

For all his faults, Byeongkwan is not exactly blind when it comes to the feelings of his friends, and he knows trauma when he sees it; has to, after all, at the very least for the self-evaluation questionnaire his therapist gave him. He knows that lack of a spark in Yuchan’s eyes.

But he can’t press him for answers he will not give. So he nods.

“Same, I guess. Shame we’re the loudest people here, huh?”

Yuchan nods, shoulders sagging a bit. “Sehyoon would call it ironic.”

“Nah, he’d call it poetic justice, the nerd.” After a good stretch of his arms, Byeongkwan gets up, bounces on the balls of his feet. “So. Speaking of being loud, you wanna go play on the Switch I bought with Junhee’s money?”

“One day he will kick you out for stealing from him, you know.”

“I’ve got the new Smash…”

And with that, all concerns of morality are wiped away, and Yuchan beams at him. “I didn’t say I was against the theft,” he says, and follows Byeongkwan as soon as they’ve got their dishes squared away.

(Luckily, today, neither of them breaks anything.)

It’s only after Yuchan has beaten Byeongkwan quite handily with best girl Isabelle that he dares to ask what’s been on his mind for a while now.

“Byeongkwan?”

“What is it, you cheater,” Byeongkwan grumbles into his pillow from where he’s laying spread-eagle on his bed. He doesn’t take consistent losing very well, or at least he doesn’t when he’s playing Ridley, who he argues up and down should beat Isabelle in about a nanosecond.

“Do you know what’s up with Sehyoon?”

With that, the atmosphere in the room soberes. Byeongkwan sits up and turns to face Yuchan, the beginning stages of pillow creases running across his left cheek. “Why don’t you ask Donghun?” he asks back. “He seems like he knows more than I do.”

“You and Sehyoon have been really close, though,” Yuchan points out, swivelling on Byeongkwan’s desk chair. “I just thought, maybe he told you something, since I hear you guys in his room a lot.”

“Y...You do?”
“It’s literally right next door, of course I do.” Yuchan huffs, but it’s not mocking or malicious, and Byeongkwan relaxes as he picks up on that. “Not that I can really hear what you’re saying specifically. Just that you’re talking. So.”

With that, Byeongkwan lets out a heavy breath. “I’m… I don’t know. We talk a lot, but it’s really just me whining about my family life. He doesn’t really talk that much about himself— not that I think he’s hiding anything, though. I trust him. I’m just saying, he dodges questions a lot.”

To Yuchan, this feels familiar enough that he doesn’t feel like being hypocritical by saying how Sehyoon definitely shouldn’t do that. Instead, he puts aside the Switch controllers he was still holding loosely. “Do you want him to not do that?” he asks instead.

“What kind of question is that?”

Yuchan ducks his head a bit. “Sorry.”

“No, I mean. Of course I do. We’re friends, right?” It’s not really a question so much as a statement, and isn’t that just like Byeongkwan? If he wants to be friends with someone, it’s not his style to wait and wonder, after all. “Of course I want him to be upfront with me, but I won’t push him if he’s not quite ready yet.”

“And you still trust him? Even though you think he’s keeping things from you?”

Byeongkwan halts for a second, ponders his question, and then nods. “I trust him. Whatever’s up with him, he’d talk to us if it was really bad or if it affected the rest of us.”

“Right.” Yuchan certainly hopes that’s true. “You… sound like you’re really fond of him.”

“Are you trying to imply something?”

“No, no,” Yuchan protests, waving his hands in front of his face. “Well, actually, maybe just a little bit? I’m not sure. But you two have been really close, so…”

“He did save my life, you know,” Byeongkwan points out, but there’s a small dusting of blush that’s crept its way on Byeongkwan’s cheekbones. The trouble with his kind of complexion is that you really see every bit of bashfulness straight from its colour.

“And that’s all there is to it?” Yuchan prods, and the red travels up to the tips of Byeongkwan’s ears. Byeongkwan, for his part, looks down at his hands, fingers all twisted together, and mumbles something too rapid and quiet for Yuchan to catch.

“Sorry, what?”

“I said maybe he’s also cute,” Byeongkwan mumbles clumsily. “But you didn’t hear that from me. Actually, you didn’t hear that all, shut up, stop looking at me like that. I bet Ridley could still kick your ass.”

“Sure,” Yuchan chirps, but he’s still grinning at Byeongkwan when the latter tries very intently to demonstrate Isabelle’s inferiority. He really is a mess when he’s flustered like that, he notes, and wonders if being interested in someone generally makes you act like this, or if it’s just a Byeongkwan thing. Maybe both.

He still hasn’t gotten an answer though, Yuchan remembers, and his smile dims just the littlest bit. He knows he shouldn’t worry so much, but something about it all…
Well. He at least hopes Sehyoon and Byeongkwan figure out what they want from each other soon.

Throughout that entire day, Sehyoon does in fact not take a nap.

It feels a little like a waste of Byeongkwan’s (weak) effort to give him time to sleep, but it’s not really Donghun’s place to say anything, so he doesn’t. Instead, he sorts his clothes hamper, then tidies his shelves, does anything to keep himself occupied until they can finally go and talk to Sorn. She’d texted Junhee to hold until early afternoon, so he basically just feels like a sitting duck right now. He just wants to… do something.

From the common area, the soft sounds of a TV filter through the door. Donghun pauses. Sighs.

Might as well see what Sehyoon is up to, if he’s not going to take the time to rest.

When Donghun opens his door, all he sees is the top of Sehyoon’s mop of hair, so far has he sunken down into the couch in front of the TV. He moves closer, intent on checking if he’s still alive, when the thing playing on screen piques his interest.

“And this is my workspace,” the man on screen explains. He’s got soft features, pastel pink hair with sideswept bangs, and he’s wearing a lot of white– only with a second glance does Donghun recognise it as a doctor’s coat.

“Here we have all of the necessary equipment to facilitate easier use of my healing,” the man on screen continues cheerfully. The entire shot is almost painfully bright, whites and soft mint greens everywhere.

“What are you watching?” Donghun asks, dropping both elbows on the couch’s backrest and resting his chin on his crossed arms. In front of him, Sehyoon twitches; hunches his shoulders; grabs the remote and shuts off the TV.

“A documentary,” he drawls, letting his head fall back until he makes eye contact with Donghun. They’re close, and for a single moment Donghun remembers how Junhee thought they were dating. It makes him chuckle a little.

“That so funny?”

“No.” Donghun pokes Sehyoon’s forehead with his thumb. “Just wondering. Don’t you think documentaries are boring?”

Sehyoon breathes out– somehow both measured and laboured. “Yeah.”

“Do you want to steal Junhee’s nature sounds CDs to meditate instead?”

“His what?” Sehyoon quirks an eyebrow. “Actually, nevermind, I don’t think I want to know.”

“You probably don’t, yeah. He’s got a lot of stuff stashed in his room.”

“Huh.” His friend sighs. “Anyway, no, I’m kinda too tired to meditate, sorry.”

“And you’re not sleeping?”

“You, of all people,” says Sehyoon, something chilly entering his voice, “should know that I’d love to actually sleep.”

“Don’t bother.” With that, Sehyoon rights himself up, slides off the couch, and walks past Donghun sluggishly. “I’m gonna watch some cooking shows I’ll hate, call me when we’re ready to leave finally.”

Donghun really doesn’t have the heart to stop him. He just wishes Sehyoon would take his own advice and seek therapy. Or medication. Anything.

“It hurts to see you like this, you know,” he tells the empty air in front of him.

Of course, it’s never quite so easy with Sehyoon. It never is.

About an hour later, they do all manage to get out of the house. They even bothered to comb themselves and put on some deodorant, Junhee notes, satisfied. Sometimes, on off days, at least Byeongkwan would rather rise to the hygiene standards to a college all-mens dorm.

Everyone’s still quiet, but it’s less tense than before, so he doesn’t mention any of the previous events of the day, instead just piling them all in his car.

(Sometimes he really sees the appeal of owning a van, but he does still have standards.)

When they arrive at the precinct, Amelia Sorn is already waiting for them in her honorary office. Junhee’s actually not quite sure if she still works here regularly or if they saved her a spot because of how many years of effort she’d put into the place, and frankly, he doesn’t much care. As long as he gets this favour over and done with, that’s all that matters to him.

“So,” the detective says. She’s sat behind her desk, two monitors partially obscuring her clothes and the tattoos that peek out from under her sleeves. “Let’s get straight to the point. I’m calling you to do a favour for me.”

“To cancel out the one you did for us?”

Sorn nods. “Yes, ideally.” With an abrupt movement, she pulls a manila folder from an obscured drawer and slides it across the desk to Donghun, who takes it with a sidelong glance at Junhee. Junhee, for his part, has already heard all she has to say before, so the pictures in that folder are likely of no interest to him.

“I’ve recently caught wind of an arms deal,” she continues, as Donghun empties the contents of the folder on the table and spreads out the multiple pictures and files. They pertain people, locations, and all else a briefing file might need. “The prospective buyers are members of a suspected drug ring that operate out of a warehouse district at the outskirts of the city.” She leans over the desk to adjust some of the pictures, pulls out one that’s stuck behind another, depicting a drone-captured overview of said warehouse area. “We need to know when this arms deal happens, and ideally, we need evidence so we can bring them in for good. I want you to pinpoint the exact location they operate out of, and apply surveillance measures so we have something that holds up in court.”

“No offense,” Byeongkwan interrupts, “but you seem to already have a pretty good grip on this. Why bring in outsiders?”

Sorn sighs. “Frankly,” she admits, “we’re very low on available staff right now. There’s been a string of deaths that I can’t disclose anything about to, as you well put it, outsiders, but know that the only reason I’m turning to you over a trained professional is because, frankly, I have no choice.”
“We’re fighters, though,” he points out. “None of us are any good at actually sneaking anywhere. Well, Yuchan here is, but…”

“Ah, I really wouldn’t say I am particularly good at– ”

“Shut up and let me love you.”

“In either case,” Junhee interrupts with a pointed cough, “Yuchan isn’t the best at transporting and activating cameras of any sort while he’s using his power. So he’s right. We’re really not a good fit for this.”

“You told me yesterday you’d be up for it,” Sorn reminds him, something like a warning sharp in her voice.

“I did. Because we can still handle it.”

“Then I don’t see what all this discussion is about. Take the file, go home, do whatever it is you, ah, ‘independents’ do. Remember, you are not to engage directly with the suspects under any circumstances. Leave the heroics to the professionals, mail me about any developments. Dismissed.”

Even though she technically has no power to dismiss them, they all obediently file out of her office and then out of the police station. It’s only outside, on the sidewalk, that Donghun gives into the urge to groan in frustration.

“I really don’t like working with her. Why did you accept this for us again?”

“Because if we do this, we won’t have to deal with her again,” Junhee points out. “I’ve been thinking of a few schematics I want to test out in terms of cameras. It won’t be that big a deal.”

“Ugh, good, I can’t wait to talk to Officer Hu again instead,” Byeongkwan mutters to a commiserating Yuchan.

Back at the loft, Junhee locks himself in with the camera plans he’d mentioned, and everyone else disperses. It’s not unusual to spend an entire afternoon apart like this, even though they all live together; Sehyoon and Yuchan need to be alone sometimes, and Byeongkwan and Donghun try their best to accommodate that. As such, they all do their own thing sometimes. The only unofficial rule is to reconvene for meals—unless someone is seriously sick or has other commitments, they always eat as five. It’s something important to Donghun, and they follow that wish as best they can.

About half an hour before their regular dinner time, Sehyoon stumbles out of his room and into the kitchen, where Donghun had already started on food preparations. He greets Sehyoon with a nod, and shuffles to the side to give him room to reach the sink so he can wash his hands.

“What’re we cooking?” Sehyoon mutters. His voice is scratchy.

“Pasta. Can you chop the onions for the sauce? I’ll just get the water ready.” Sehyoon nods, so Donghun bumps his hip against his friend’s and goes to retrieve a pot. Bending over, he briefly makes eye contact with Junhee, who’s sipping coffee at the dinner table, greasy hands and all. These days, he’s been venturing out of his workshop more for his coffee breaks, instead of immediately shuttling himself in again once he’s acquired a cup. Donghun sees that as a minor victory. He blinks, smiles, and Junhee looks back down at his tablet.

Well, what’s a victory without some setbacks?
“Donghun, where’s the– ah. Fuck.”

“You alright?”

“Yeah.” Sehyoon’s voice sounds strained, so Donghun turns to look at him, just in time to glimpse a flash of red on Sehyoon’s hand. “I just cut myself, don’t worry about it. Where’s the plasters?”

“Byeongkwan took them earlier for something,” Donghun says, and raises his voice. “Byeongkwan?”

“Yeah?” comes an answer from the other side of the loft.

“Sehyoon needs plasters!”

There’s a short pause, then Byeongkwan surfaces out of his room, a small cardboard package in hand. “What’s he need those for?”

Sehyoon, a resigned look on his face, raises his hand. A drop of blood makes its way down his palm slowly, yet he makes no move to wipe it off.

“Really?” Byeongkwan snorts. “Dude, you’re literally a healer. Just close your wound?” He still tosses him the package, and Sehyoon fumbles with it before he can get a proper grip on it. In doing so, he leaves a small red smear on the pastel green box, standing out in stark contrast as something that shouldn’t be there.

“I can’t heal myself.”

“Huh?” Byeongkwan walks up to him and hoists himself up to sit on a free counter. “Seriously? Why’d you never say?”

“It never came up.” Sehyoon methodically peels off the adhesive from the back of one of the plasters and then wraps it around the cut, once he’s finally cleaned off the blood. Good. It was beginning to bother Donghun a little. “I mean, theoretically it’s possible, but it takes a lot more effort than healing other people. I guess.” His shoulders hunch up, not entirely comfortable with giving this explanation.

“And besides,” Donghun adds on to save him, “he’s pretty low energy these days anyway. A tiny cut doesn’t need to be healed immediately. There could always be emergencies that need it more.”

That shuts Byeongkwan up quick. “Oh,” he breathes, and looks at the tips of his feet. “Right. I didn’t really… Sorry.”

“For what?”

All Byeongkwan does is gesture towards his leg. “I… I mean.”

“That’s not it,” Sehyoon says with a sigh. “You know it’s not.”

“But it contributed, right?”

“Well, I’d rather be a little tired than have you dead,” Sehyoon snaps suddenly. Then, with sudden embarrassment, he looks down at the knife he’d been gripping all this time, and loosens his white-knuckled hold on it. There’s still a small trail of blood on the blade. “Actually, I’m not that hungry. Sorry. Can you do the rest?” He motions at Donghun, who shrugs.

“Sure. Are you sure you don’t wanna eat, though?”
“Yeah. Sorry to bother you.” As he leaves, he pats Byeongkwan on the shoulder. Donghun thinks he can hear a muffled ‘seriously, don’t worry’, but Sehyoon’s voice is so low that it’s hard to make out.

And then he goes back to his own room.

Sehyoon is the quietest of them, and dinner still feels quieter than usual without him. Maybe it’s the way Byeongkwan keeps fretting, or the way Yuchan keeps pouting at Frosty like she could make the situation any better.

Donghun just wishes he could say something, but the words never quite make it past his throat.

After dinner, Donghun follows Junhee to his workshop.

It’s still messy in there, wrenches stacked on top of pieces of metal stacked on top of oil-soaked cloth, but it seems like Junhee is at least making some kind of effort to clear a path and leave some seats free, so Donghun doesn’t want to complain too much. His workspace itself is pristine, though, almost shining in the chaos of the rest of the room.

“Can’t you extend that cleanliness to the rest of this place?” Donghun asks, running one finger over the metal tabletop. There’s not even one speck of grime.

“Stop sounding like my parent. I don’t have the time– I just can’t afford to contaminate my work on accident.”

“So, what is your work, then?”

Junhee picks up one of the items on the worktable, a small, black half-sphere made out of some type of matte material. Looking closely, Donghun can see the slightest hint of a lens mounted inside the sphere. “This is a camera I’m working on,” Junhee explains. “They’re small, portable, and not easily detectable if you stick them in dark corners. I’m trying to get its microphone to work, so it can record both audio and video. It’s got good memory– not that great of a resolution yet, but I should be able to fix that in a couple days.”

Donghun hums. “And that’s what you want to use for your evidence?”

“Ideally, yes. I’m not sure about the legality of putting surveillance in a property that’s technically not ours, but that’s for the police to figure out, not us.”

Donghun picks up one of the other model versions that are laid out in a neat line on the table. This one is a little slimmer, and when he turns it in his hand, a slight flash of light runs over the surface of the item. “These are impressive,” he comments idly.

“Thanks.”

“Have you ever thought about patenting some of your work?”

A snort makes Donghun look up at Junhee, who’s grinning wrily down at the table. “And what, tell the world that I’m developing incredibly efficient surveillance methods? Do you want 1984 to happen, because that’s how 1984 happened.”

“I mean, maybe some of the less dangerous…”
“Donghun. All I create is dangerous.” Junhee sighs. “And even if it isn’t, it can be used for dangerous purposes.”

“Anything can be, though,” Donghun points out, but somehow, that’s the wrong thing to say. Junhee’s expression shuttered, mouth drawn and jaw set.

“That may be so, but I’m not about to ruin any more lives, even if indirectly. Now can we please talk about our actual job?”

So much for that. Donghun sets the camera down again without meeting Junhee’s eyes again - not like Junhee is looking at him, anyway. “Sure. Sorry. So what’s your idea?”

“We need to figure out what warehouse they’re using, specifically. Sorn emailed me the location of the district itself, and they’ve sort of narrowed it down to one of the eastern areas, but we need the specific one. Nothing to do about that but to go ourselves and look for clues. Once that’s sorted, we apply these cameras to secluded areas.” Junhee reaches for his laptop, a bulky, ugly, indestructible-looking thing, and flips it open. “I cobbled together a software to view the video feeds from the cameras, he explains when Donghun asks about the six images on screen, all depicting the workshop’s ceiling. (Donghun can tell because there’s a scorch mark just above them. He does not want to know how that happened.)

“So we just wait for something to happen?”

“It’s not ideal, but it’s the best we can do,” Junhee says. “We could technically break into these peoples homes and try to gather information that way, but you know how that turned out last time.”

Donghun thinks of Byeongkwan, pale, and of the slight tremor in Junhee’s hands as he removed the bullet lodged in his leg. “Yeah,” he breathes.

“So, no breaking and entering.”

“Good. Yeah.”

Junhee nods. “These cameras still need to go through a refinement process, so they won’t be ready for a while. Until then, we can talk the plan over with the others and figure out how to best proceed stealthily.”

Donghun stretches. For a split second, Junhee looks down, but then he meets his eyes again. “Alright,” he says. “Fine by me.”

“Good, then get out of my workshop.” The previous tension has left him, or so it seems. Still, Donghun is not about to push his luck.

The next few days pass with the same quiet tension. It’s hard to place— after all, everyone talks to each other, everyone’s civil, nobody is hurt or sick. And yet, it’s like a shadow is passing overhead, intangible and unknowable, accompanied by a sense of creeping foreboding.

Or maybe Sehyoon’s just being a little dramatic. After all, the sun is shining bright outside, there’s not a cloud in sight. There’s no reason to be worried. Or at least there wouldn’t be, if Byeongkwan and Donghun would stop sending him concerned, sidelong glances, because he’s fine.

Really, he is. He’s had worse, and he’s still alive. He knows his mental health has gone to shit, but it’s not like this is the first time, so he can deal with it later, when their favour for Sorn is complete
and he doesn’t have to worry about the others getting hurt so frequently.

He can’t afford for anyone to die when he could have saved them. That’s his priority.

Junhee pulls them all aside as they’re coming up to a tall fence, its open gate allowing passage to a subsection of the warehouse district. It’s been quiet all day, nary a person in sight; most of these warehouses had been abandoned a long time ago, so nobody really comes here anymore. Which makes them, a group of five, all the more suspicious, especially under the clear summer sun. It’s the first days of August, or what Sehyoon likes to think of as summer’s final chance to crank the heat up as far as possible, before autumn starts to set in. It certainly feels like it, at least; he tugs at the collar of his shirt, then looks down at himself. Long sleeves, combat boots, all black, and the protective spandex suit underneath. Now that he thinks about it (and steals a sidelong glance at Dong hun’s flower-patterned T-shirt) probably not the most seasonally appropriate choice of attire.

“Are you sure it’s okay for us to be out this early?” Yuchan asks, shooting glances behind them as they walk. “Don’t people usually do all this stealthy stuff at night?”

“Yeah, so the people we want to spy on will most likely be here at night as well,” Dong hun points out. “Don’t worry, we’ll be alright. If push comes to shove, you can transform, and the rest of us are gonna be able to work something out.” He pats Yuchan’s back, lets his hand linger a bit, and Yuchan’s worry seems to almost seep away from the point of contact.

“Plus,” Byeongkwan adds, jabbing his thumb in Junhee’s direction, “we have a lucky charm with us. Not that I’d ever call him charming otherwise.”

Junhee just rolls his eyes. “Whatever. Can we get a move on, now? All of you take a warehouse, coordinate with Dong hun, move on to the next if you don’t find anything. If anything happens, let him know. Clear?”

“Clear,” they echo with various degrees of enthusiasm, and Junhee sends them all off in their respective directions, complete with a slight shudder and a brief gold overlay of the world as his luck takes effect.

Sehyoon enters his first warehouse. It’s dilapidated, in impressively bad condition, with holes in the roof and paint chipping off its metal doors. He really doubts anyone would use this place to so much as sit down in, let alone host a drug ring.

Still, he takes his time looking around. Everything’s covered in grime, yet there’s no footprints or anything indicating people being here on a regular basis. There’s stairs leading up to a landing with doors leading off of it, but they’re all empty, dusty, and quiet: probably used to be offices overlooking the storage area. There’s tiny little holes punched in one of the walls, and Sehyoon can see tiny little rays of light filtering through, illuminating the dust he’s stirring up.

Nothing to see in this one, he concludes, and moves on.

The next two warehouses are much the same, except for a sleeping bag in one that he decidedly does not touch once he gets a whiff of what it smells like. It’s only when he tries the door to the fourth warehouse when he stops.

This one’s locked.

Huh.

Junhee had distributed little automatic lockpicking kits earlier, so he straps his to the padlock securing the front entrance and waits. As far as he knows, a picked lock is essentially broken and can’t be re-
locked again— he has no idea if Junhee had somehow found a way to circumvent this problem, but he sure does hope so, or they’ll be leaving a flashing neon sign alerting the drug ring to their previous presence.

When the kit beeps at him, even blue light flashing to indicate it’s done its job, Sehyoon removes it alongside the lock and enters. The first thing he notices, looking back at the floor behind him, is that his footprints aren’t visible. Even though the place is locked, it sees enough activity for dust not to be able to settle, huh? He might be on the right track here.

Even the back door is locked, he finds out after some more snooping. The warehouse is filled with large shipping containers, the ones he looks into being empty. It, too, has a metal staircase leading up to a landing and some rooms, which, again, are empty. Sehyoon’s starting to sense a pattern here. Maybe this place is used primarily for meetings, or maybe they’d cleaned out whatever drugs have been stored here. In any case, Sehyoon notes idly, there’s a lot of opportunities to take cover and sneak around, except for a circle in the middle of the room, conveniently empty of crates. The landing runs across the perimeter of the warehouse, elevated like the one at home, and likely provides a good vantage point for lookouts.

It also provides a good place to put cameras, if done well.

Sehyoon looks around a bit more, figures he’ll contact Donghun soon, when he hears the lock on the back door click.

He freezes, hands clutching the railing, and looks down. The landing is made of metal, and would make sound were he to walk, or run, across it— all he can do is stand still. Hope whoever’s coming doesn’t look up.

The door opens to reveal a haggard-looking man, clad in a black suit that’s baggy on his form, red baseball cap obscuring his face. A yellow watch glints on his wrist as he fumbles with a light switch that Sehyoon had disregarded before.

The warehouse is bathed in light.

The man looks up and locks eyes with Sehyoon.

For a moment, everything stills. Sehyoon doesn’t even dare breathe, even though he knows there’s no need not to, logically. The railing groans under the force of his grip— he almost fears it’ll snap, rusted in places as it is.

The man below hastily lowers his face, turns, and books it. The door slams shut emptily behind him.

Sehyoon lets out a shaky breath.

Donghun, I’ve found the place, he sends out, and goes back downstairs.

It takes everyone a quarter hour to get there and take a look around.

“This sure looks like the place,” Junhee mutters to himself, already holding one of his refined camera models up to see where they’d be camouflaged the best.

“Good job, Sehyoon,” Donghun tacks on in his place.

“Thanks.” Sehyoon clears his throat. “Did anyone else see anything? People walking around or
something?”

“Hmm.” Yuchan, perched on a shipping container (how did he even get up there?) shakes his head thoughtfully. “I haven’t seen anyone.”

“Me neither.”

Donghun stretches to place a camera against the wall in a shadowed corner. With a little whirring sound, it affixes itself into place, and then the material covering the lens slowly takes on the colour of the wall. “Why?” he asks. “Have you?”

Sehyoon thinks back to the man, scruffy stubble covering sunken cheeks.

He thinks about how their entire plan will fall apart if he says something, because Junhee is absolutely not one to take any chances. Thinks about the stress they’d gone through to even get here.

Thinks about how he just wants to go home and sleep.

“No,” he says. “I haven’t seen anyone. Just wondering.” Even as he does so, it feels like the wrong answer, but everyone’s turned back to what they were doing already, and the words get stuck in his chest. He really can’t worry anyone any more than he already has. Who knows? Maybe the man thought he was just some random squatter, his fashion sense definitely lends itself to the ‘school-skipping teenager’ vibe. And at least he’s not watching them, or else one of the others would have noticed him. That hat would have been eye catching in the general brown-grey surroundings of these abandoned buildings.

They’ll be fine.

“Hey, pass me a camera,” he calls to Junhee, and resolutely marches back up the stairs.
The camera feeds stay silent for the next four days.

While that is not surprising in itself, it makes Junhee antsy. There should at least be some activity there, he argues against Donghun, who claims that the drug ring definitely would not meet every night to not make themselves too obvious. It seems like mostly everyone is siding with Donghun though, which is just typical, so Junhee lets it be after a while.

He does still keep thinking about it regardless. There’s no way this is good. If things are peaceful for too long, it just means that he’s failed to notice a problem brewing beneath the surface. One day, it will bite all of them in the ass, and then he’ll be sorry he didn't see.

To somehow get a grip on his latent restlessness, he pulls Donghun aside and lets him voice his plans at him. Donghun talks to him about eventualities, plans B and C and D and Y, and for some weird reason it actually soothes him. Their eldest may sometimes get this glint in his eye like he’s talking about conspiracy theories that he fervently believes in, but Junhee’s reassured that someone thinks of consequences even more than he does, for once. It takes a little bit of the stress off his shoulders.

Well. Definitely not all of it, though.

Junhee uses these days to stack the solid metal table the surveillance laptop is on with cases. First aid, emergency disguises, communication devices, weapons. A lot of weapons, nestled in the protective foam shell inside a long, rectangular case sitting at the far end of the table. He doesn’t know what’ll come in handy when, so it’s best to just have all of his best pieces out at all times. To make sure.

And somehow, his nerves are still biting at him. Donghun, for his part, seems way too preoccupied with both planning and worrying about Sehyoon to entertain Junhee’s vague fears (not that he’d really tell him about them anyway), so…

Luckily for him, Donghun seems to not be the only one who can read his mind: his phone rings, then, when he’s just on the verge of plunging headfirst into worst-case scenarios.
He picks up.

“Hello?”

“Junhee, hello.”

There’s a voice he hasn’t heard in a bit.

“Miss Adley,” he responds easily, and makes his way downstairs. His voice always feels a little dull in the workshop, maybe due to all the noise-cancelling panels on the walls. Plus the seats aren’t too comfortable; he figures that if she’s calling, he’ll have to settle in for a half-hour. They both have lots to say, to each other and just in general.

“I did tell you to call me Isabella,” Adley admonishes him gently. “We’re friends; you shouldn’t talk so impersonally.”

“Right, sorry,” Junhee says and sits down in his desk chair. The plushness of it is welcoming, comforting, but almost too soft– he always feels like he’ll struggle actually getting out of the thing. He knows he should maybe replace it someday, but it does feel very relaxing. “So,” he continues once he’s finished with that train of thought, “why do you call?”

“Did you hear what happened an hour ago? With chairman Ivanov?”

Junhee hadn’t, but it only takes about a half-minute of googling for him to find the headlines. “Briefly, yes. Do you know how he died?”

“The police are still investigating, I believe,” Adley hums. “It’s really such a tragedy, though. He was bound to do good things for the city’s welfare.”

“Yeah,” he agrees absentmindedly. Frankly, he’d met Ivanov only once, and that was one time too many; the man had been superficially pleasant, but every now and again he let slip comments that hinted at something deeply repulsive under the surface. If he remembers correctly, he’d off-handedly advocated in favour of compulsory boot camps for powered children, but had changed the topic before Junhee could probe any further.

Probably for the best, that.

“I wish I could trust the police to fully uncover the matter,” Adley sighs, “but I heard from an acquaintance that they’re very much spread thin with all the deaths that have been happening. He said they’d even been dealing with vigilante powered folk to handle some of their issues, can you imagine?”

Junhee can very much imagine. “No,” he says, “that’s pretty extreme. I didn’t think they would cooperate with people who aren’t licensed.”

There’s a beat of silence, and then rustling as Adley, on the other line and the other end of the city, leans forward in her seat. “You don’t sound all that surprised,” she prods gently. I feel like you know more than you’re letting on.”

Something in Junhee’s voice must have betrayed him; he grimaces to himself, grips the phone more comfortably. “I might, but it’s… well, sensitive information.” As well as they get along, he’s not sure he wants to trust Adley with that particular secret quite yet.

Adley, it seems, does not share his sentiments. “A shame,” she replies easily, “as I do feel like I could help you, should you require it. I have a knack for sensitive information.”
Junhee stalls. Should he talk to her? He knows it’s unwise, can practically picture her as a hungry shark circling him, ready to pounce at the first sign of blood— or maybe she’s just genuinely offering up her friendship. After all, he thought of Donghun in much the same way, and while he’s not sure they could be called proper, close friends just yet, he did turn out to be both more useful and more trustworthy than he’d initially believed.

And he knows Adley’s stance on powered rights already, so it’s not like he’s going into this with his eyes closed.

And, frankly, he’s just tired of never being able to talk to an objective outside party.

“You might have found the vigilantes your acquaintance told you about,” he admits finally. “Maybe we should talk about it over lunch.”

“Oh, I’d love that.” Adley’s voice has taken on more than a tinge of what can only be described as delight, and Junhee still isn’t sure if he made the right decision or not. “We’ll schedule a time. Ah, but I don’t want to keep you from your work, I really only wanted to check up on you.”

“It’s appreciated. I’ll email you later, yes?”

“I’ll look forward to it.” And the line goes dead, and Junhee is left with his own thoughts.

Well, he figures, in the grand scheme of things, talking to her won’t turn out to be the end of the world. He’s done worse, after all. (Though that’s not exactly a high bar to set.)

It’s been getting colder, lately.

No matter that it happens like this every year, Byeongkwan is still thrown by the fact that early fall already starts in August here. Just three days ago the weather was all sunshine and clear skies, and now he has to wear a sweater to go outside? Bullshit. He won’t stand for it.

He’s really not looking forward to winter. Winter sucks in this city.

Sehyoon, for his part, seems quietly content with the slow change of the seasons. He’s still cooped up inside his room for most of the day, but he doesn’t look like he’s about to sweat through all the black he’s wearing constantly.

(Which, just wear colours for once, dude. Seriously. You’re supposed to outgrow your emo phase by the time you hit sixteen at the latest.)

So, Byeongkwan is happy that Sehyoon is happy, but it means that he has to bother Junhee until he agrees to make him a version of his workout-slash-superheroing gear with longer sleeves and better cold insulation, and by the end of that he’s so drained that he just flops his way into the first room he can waddle to. Considering he’s upstairs, that just so happens to be Sehyoon’s; Yuchan’s is locked, and Byeongkwan knows better than to bother with it when he does that.

In his room, Sehyoon is all sprawled over a bean bag he’d gotten some time ago, during a shopping trip that was originally supposed to be to replace some of Frosty’s worn-out toys. Nothing is as much of an enabler as Junhee’s bank account, apparently.

“Hey,” Byeongkwan greets him, and then goes to make himself comfortable on Sehyoon’s bed. Sehyoon, for his part, just grunts noncommittally, eyes trained on his phone. The faint music coming from it makes Byeongkwan think he’s playing that Japanese cat collecting game again, which
honestly doesn’t require this level of attention. “What are you up to?” he asks, just to make sure.

“Nothing. ‘S fine. What’s up?” He’s still not looking at him, and it sends a twinge of irritation through him. He should be used to it, and yet...

“I bothered Junhee to make me new heroing clothes,” Byeongkwan tells him, then gets up to cross the room and collapse in Sehyoon’s lap, chest to chest, face buried in the dark blue material of the bean bag. Sehyoon just keeps on tapping, but he does free one arm from between their bodies, uses it to pat Byeongkwan’s shoulder gently. And, just with that, Byeongkwan feels some of his irritation melt again.

“I’m so tired,” he complains when Sehyoon makes no move to say anything further. “I swear, this dude can argue you around in circles until you end up disagreeing with yourself. He sucks.”

“He is a Gemini,” Sehyoon offers quietly.

“Huh. You’re right.”

They both fall quiet for a bit. Sehyoon’s chest rises and falls against Byeongkwan’s own, easy breaths intermingling. As a child, Byeongkwan would never have imagined that existing near somebody else could be this peaceful. That he could be around someone and not have to unravel every sentence they say for manipulations and lies.

Sehyoon is simple like that. He says what he wants to say. Byeongkwan can appreciate that.

“I’m glad we met,” he blurts out after a few minutes of silence, blanketed only by the muffled sounds of Neko Atsume under him. Sehyoon doesn’t say anything, but he also isn’t looking at his phone anymore; has it pressed to his chest, staring up at the ceiling.

“And I know something’s going on,” Byeongkwan continues now that he has the courage to, “and I don’t need to know what exactly it is. Seriously. I just want you to know that you can trust all of us, okay?”

Sehyoon blinks rapidly. His nose is beginning to turn a little red, and Byeongkwan resists the urge to tweak it affectionately.

“And... I just hope you’ll feel better soon,” he concludes instead, a little lamely. “Because we do all care for you. Right?”

“...Right,” says Sehyoon, a little choked, rushed, and rubs at his face. “I know. Thanks. Sorry, can you stand up, I gotta...”

“Oh. Yes. Sure.” Byeongkwan scrambles to his feet, concern overtaking his fondness, but before he can say anything else, Sehyoon brushes past him and leaves the room. Shortly after, he can hear the click of the front door closing behind him.

Byeongkwan stares at the bean bag. Drags his palms over his eyes. Sighs.

He really doesn’t know what to do anymore. He knows he wants to help, has to, he literally owes his life to this man, but he doesn’t feel equipped for the job at all.

The only hope in his mind is that Donghun will be able to do better than him, before Sehyoon goes and gets shot too, or something.
Once the afternoon starts giving way to evening, and the outside air starts growing chillier, Sehyoon calls Donghun.

Donghun’s just a little dumbfounded when he sees the caller ID. He’d thought Sehyoon was cooped up in his room still? Where would he have gone that’s far enough for him to have to call?

He almost forgets to actually pick up.

“Hello?”

“Hun?” That’s Sehyoon alright. He doesn’t sound like he’s in immediate distress, which makes the coil of tension in Donghun’s chest loosen a tad.

“What’s up?”

“I need you to come pick me up. Central Park.”

Donghun looks out his window, tries to remember how far Central Park is from here. Not too far actually, right? Did something happen after all?

“Are you hurt?”

“No. Just tired,” Sehyoon drawls, and now that he mentions it, Donghun does notice the exhausted slur to his words.

Fucking idiot.

“I’ll be right there,” Donghun murmurs, and hangs up. A single day cannot pass without Sehyoon getting up to some shit, huh?

The plants in Central Park have not remained untouched by the change of the seasons. Most of the leaves droop a little, have yellowed edges either from the heat of the preceding months or the onset of colder times now. As such, finding Sehyoon isn’t especially hard: the park is near empty, considering the time of day, and he is also slumped against the only tree unaffected by the weather, its leaves remaining brilliantly green as if it’s still spring.

Sitting against the massive trunk of the tree, curled up like this, pale and exhausted-looking, he looks so fragile. It makes Donghun’s stomach clench, noticeable even under the bitter taste in his mouth.

“Sehyoon,” he calls out. Sehyoon looks up; whether he’d heard the steely edge to Donghun’s voice is unclear. He makes no move to stand up until Donghun reaches him and offers him a hand, at which point he staggers to his feet by himself. The hand still hangs in the air between them.

“Thanks for coming,” Sehyoon says quietly, almost under his breath. His fingers clench and unclench at his sides, and he’s avoiding eye contact. There’s sweat beading on his brow, his breathing is a little staccato, a little strained, and Donghun bets if he were to touch his skin it’d feel cold and clammy.

Donghun feels anything but cold.

“Come on,” he manages, and turns to leave without insisting to steady Sehyoon. He still keeps pace, keeps an eye on him, but says nothing until they reach the car and Donghun has watched Sehyoon climb inside wearily.
Donghun grips the steering wheel until the leather creaks under his fingers. The way his stomach roils doesn’t make things any easier – he feels sick.

The streets roll by at a moderate speed.

“I’m sorry,” Sehyoon says after a while. He’s not looking at Donghun. He’s not really looking at anything, actually.

Silence.

“Look, Donghun–”

“Spare me,” Donghun sighs, and reaches over to switch gears without taking his eyes off the road. The abrupt motion of the manual gear shift feels jarring. “I know what you’re going to say.”

“Well, it’s true. I’m just stressed, you know that.”

Through the haze of anger, Donghun laughs, but it doesn’t sound very appealing. “God, I wish I had the authority to ground you, sometimes.”

“Would be the first time I’ve been grounded.”

“Don’t. That’s got nothing to do with you being stupid.”

Sehyoon leans heavily against the door on his side, rests his head against the glass. His arms are wrapped around his torso, and they’re trembling just a little.

“I told you to talk to me,” Donghun continues after a pause. “I’m literally right here. And yet you’d rather run around and fuck yourself up?” He wants to ask if he’s really that bad of a friend, but bites down on his tongue instead. Even now, he figures it’s not the right thing to say. This is not about him. “At least tell me you’re not doing okay, even if you don’t want my help.”

Sehyoon sighs wearily. “Fine, I’m not doing okay. Byeongkwan was nice to me and it almost made me cry because it was too much all at once. Is that what you want to hear?”

“Not really,” Donghun responds, pursing his lips. “You’re not exerting yourself for the rest of the month. We can heal on our own.”

“But what if the drug dealers–”

“We can deal with them,” Donghun decides, as firm as possible in his position. “You need to deal with your head.”

“And how would you suggest I do that?” Sehyoon asks, just a bite of frustration seeping through the way he rights himself up, clenches his jaw. “I can’t do shit about my situation. I’d rather help out than wallow in my own misery, thanks.”

Donghun can’t help it – he laughs again. It sounds even uglier, even colder this time.

“What, you’d rather kill yourself by overexertion than sit down and sort yourself out?”

What he said doesn’t process until he realises Sehyoon hasn’t responded for a good minute. When he glances at him out of the corner of his eye, he’s got both hands fisted into the fabric covering his stomach; while Donghun can tell he’s trying to appear relaxed, the way his knuckles have turned white belie him.
Donghun brings up a hand to press the heel of his palm against the side of his head, then pulls over on the side of the road. Sehyoon doesn’t even seem to register the bump when one side of the car rolls over the edge of the sidewalk.

“I’m sorry. That was uncalled for.”

“You fuckin’ think?” Sehyoon’s voice is cold, and it stings even though Donghun knows he deserved that.

“It doesn’t change the facts. That’s what you’re doing right now.”

“And what would you suggest I do?” Sehyoon asks, but flatly, like he doesn’t want to hear an answer. Like he’s already rejected all possible answers.

“Go to therapy, for one.”

“And you think I can talk to some state-sponsored lady without getting locked up? Donghun.” Sehyoon drags both hands over his face slowly. “Donghun, we’ve been over this. You know that’s not how this works.”

“You could at least go for your depression, though.”

“Unluckily my depression is pretty much linked to the shit I’d get locked up for, buddy.” Donghun sighs.

“Then talk to the group.”

Sehyoon’s mouth actually hangs open a little.

“Are you kidding me?” he asks, voice rising in pitch alarmingly. “All this time of keeping secrets and you just want to what, expose me? Are you thinking? They’d kick me out immediately!”

“They wouldn’t, we’re friends—”

“We’re barely coworkers, Donghun,” he says. “They’d never want to talk to me again. They’d be scared of being near me. You know that. We both know that.”

“They’ll be more upset if you wait this long before telling them.”

“I’d legitimately rather leave the group than tell them.”

That hangs in the air for a bit. Donghun… well. He’d known this, to some degree. Still, something in his chest hardens at the thought. Sehyoon was the first person he’d found, way back when, the person he’d talked to about his ideas for the group in the first place. He was always part of his concept. The fact that he’d be willing to walk away so easily is hard to deal with.

“You know things are never going to get better if you keep being stubborn like this.”

“You know there’s not much to look forward to either way.”

“That’s not true.”

Sehyoon rolls his eyes. “Can we just go? I’m tired, and this arguing isn’t helping me.”

Donghun presses his lips into a thin line, but pulls the car back off the sidewalk regardless. “Still. No
fighting for the rest of August.”

“Whatever.”

Even as Donghun comes down from his heady rush of anger, the air between them is still thick. Uncertain. Full of unresolved emotion.

He hates this feeling.

The next day, Yuchan feels hungry.

That’s nothing new. He feels hungry a lot. He’s still young, after all, and the more he shapeshifts the more energy he needs. He’s just hungry for something specific, but he has no idea what.

“Pizza?” Junhee offers absently. He’s staring at his laptop, tapping away at it instead of looking at Yuchan at all. Yuchan tries not to take it to heart too much – that he even interacts with him is progress, right?

“No,” he pouts in response, “too much cheese for today.”

“Fried chicken?”

“You already said that. Nah.”

“Well, I don’t know, Chinese?”

“Eh.”

Junhee’s fingers still on the keyboard before he shuts his laptop and gives Yuchan a weary, long-suffering stare. “Go eat literally whatever, then. Who cares.”

“I care! And Frosty cares, too,” he tacks on, reaching out to squish Frosty’s cheeks between his palms. Junhee, for his part, seems entirely unimpressed.

“All food is just food. Go get a steak or something, I don’t know.”

Yuchan stills, then cheers so loudly Junhee actually flinches back a bit. “Steak! That’s it, thank you! Do you wanna come eat steak with me?”

Junhee looks at him, then back at his laptop, back at him, and slowly pulls the lid of it up again. “I’m busy,” he mutters, despite Yuchan’s intense pouting.

“Fine.” Time to assess the situation. He really doesn’t want to go out alone today. But if Junhee is busy… Byeongkwan, Donghun and Sehyoon had all seemed pretty shaken yesterday, like they weren’t doing very well. Sehyoon specifically, now that he thinks about it… Would it be worth it trying to grab him to go? He’s already walked Frosty, so he doesn’t have to account for that, and he’s been wanting to talk to the guy anyway. So. Maybe?

“I’ll go ask Sehyoon to go with me,” hecomments airily, and takes Junhee’s lack of vehement denial as his blessing. Frosty whines at him when he stands up, thumps her tail against the ground, so he stops for one-turned-twenty more head rubs before heading upstairs.

Sehyoon’s door is closed. Figures. He can just barely hear the sounds of some video game inside when he presses his ear up against the smooth wood, however, so he takes a chance and knocks.
Sehyoon doesn’t answer. Again: figures.

“Hey,” Yuchan calls, “it’s me. Chan. Can I come in?”

A moment or two of quiet, then: “Sure, I guess.” Yuchan decides to disregard the obvious lack of enthusiasm; after all, that’s a thing Sehyoon does a lot. Can’t let that discourage him.

As he opens the door, the first thing he notices is that it’s dark. The curtains are drawn – the only light is the cold glare of a lit phone screen coming from somewhere inside the mess that is Sehyoon’s bed. He’s not the type to make his bed, and he’s gotten even worse with it these days, Yuchan thinks. It’s almost like everything on the bed is balled up into this soft Tower of Pisa, with Sehyoon buried somewhere underneath it all.

“What?” comes a grumble from under the blanket mountain.

“Are you hungry?”

“Not really.”

“D’you wanna get some fresh air then?”

“...Eh.”

Yuchan sighs, rolls his eyes, and grabs Sehyoon’s foot. “Come on,” he whines, “go out with me. I don’t wanna eat by myself, it’s awkward.” Sehyoon’s leg shakes in his grasp until he finally lets go, after which Sehyoon finally surfaces from under his blanket. There’s a pillow balanced precariously on top of his head, hiding what must be extremely messy hair.

“Where are you going?” There’s pillow creases on his cheek, and his voice is scratchy. Did he just wake up? But it’s like… four in the afternoon. That’s a horrible schedule.

“The steak place we all went to a month ago, the one with the really fancy food. I’ll pay for you?”

“With Junhee’s card?”

Yuchan pats his back pocket, feels for the unassuming outline of a plastic card. “Yup,” he declares, “It’ll be fun. Please?”

“Ugh.” Sehyoon rolls over and hides his face in his Build-A-Bear plushie. “Five minutes.”

“I’ll wait downstairs?”

“Sure. Whatever.”

As far as Yuchan is concerned, this went excellently.

They both feel a little out of place at the restaurant.

Yuchan had forgotten just how fancy it really is in here; Junhee had taken them, and back then he was a lot more preoccupied with the food than with the dress code. They did get a table, the two of them, but Yuchan can’t help but feel like he’s underdressed, or like people are staring at him. Good thing he brought a friend along.

Even though said friend looks about as uncomfortable as he does.
“Couldn’t we have gone to Burger King?” Sehyoon mutters into his appetizer salad. He’s barely eating, just picking at it listlessly, which just makes Yuchan want to shove the whole thing in his face. He looks too tired to be not eating.

“Burger King doesn’t have steaks,” he points out instead, and smiles disarmingly at the waitress as she brings them their main courses. His food smells great, and it almost makes him forget about wearing a clip-on tie.

“A burger patty is technically a steak.” Sehyoon pushes his salad aside and resumes picking at his main dish with equal lack of enthusiasm. “Did you drag me out to lecture me, too?”

“Hm?” Yuchan forces down his mouthful, wipes at his mouth with a napkin. “Lecture you about what?”

Sehyoon snorts. “Don’t tell me Donghun didn’t tell everyone yet.”

“Well… no? I mean, we all noticed you come in yesterday. Hard not to. He didn’t say anything beyond that.”

“Then why am I here?” Even under the soft, warm restaurant lighting, Sehyoon just looks drawn and exhausted.

“…I just wanted someone to eat with.” Why else would he be here? Does he need an ulterior motive of berating Sehyoon to go out to eat with him? Just thinking about it like that makes Yuchan feel a little queasy, a little less hungry. That’s not what their relationship is supposed to be. Sehyoon should know that, right?

Maybe Sehyoon can read some of his confusion from his face, because he leans back in his chair and lets up after that. He even eats a little, but he genuinely doesn’t seem to be very hungry, and Yuchan can understand that.

“Thanks,” Sehyoon says after a while, breaking the silence set between them. “I figured you’d take Byeongkwan out for stuff like this, not me.”

While it’s true that Yuchan would consider Byeongkwan his closest friend out of everyone, that doesn’t mean everyone else isn’t his friend also. He tells Sehyoon this. “You know? You’re all important to me.”

“Oh.” Sehyoon’s face screws up a little weirdly, in a way Yuchan can’t tell is supposed to be happy or disgusted. Maybe happy? Hopefully? Sehyoon tries for an unsure smile, and he’s still seated, hasn’t left in a huff, so. He probably doesn’t hate Yuchan, right? That’s gotta be a good sign.

“…I mean,” Yuchan admits after they’ve both eaten as much as they could respectively manage, “I was also worried about you.”

Unsurprisingly, the admittance makes Sehyoon withdraw back into himself, so Yuchan jumps to clarify. “That doesn’t mean I asked you out of pity or anything, because I didn’t. Trust me. I just figured you might want to spend some time outside the loft.”

“So we are here for you to lecture me.”

“Not really. Look,” Yuchan lays both hands out on the table, as if he was showing him his metaphorical cards, “If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine. I’m not here to give advice, or pry, or tell you to do anything, I figure everyone else has been doing that enough. Plus…” he clears his throat, shrugs, “I get wanting to keep things to yourself. You know I do.”
Slowly, Sehyoon nods.

“So,” Yuchan barrels on before he loses steam, “I’m not talking to you because I feel bad for you. Yeah?”

“...Yeah.”

“Right. Anyway, I’m full, do you want to take the rest home with us? Oh, let’s get boba, I gotta tell you about those buskers I saw when I took Frosty out yesterday.” Before he even gets an answer, he already flags down their waitress, but even in his haste to leave, he notices the way Sehyoon looks a little gentler. A little less tense.

Junhee’s squinting at some news article on his phone when the laptop in his workshop starts beeping. The shrill, incessant sound it produces cuts through the entire loft like a hot knife, and Junhee has never been on his feet so fast.

“What’s going on?” Donghun asks, scrambling off the sofa, immediately alert when he’d been halfway to a nap before. Junhee doesn’t bother answering, just takes two steps at a time up, and Donghun follows closely behind; soon after that, everyone else is following along.

He can’t decide if he’s relieved or anxious about something finally happening. Both. Depends on what the cameras have to show.

Everyone crowds around the metal table in the workshop, the laptop taking place of pride in the middle, framed still by the weapons cases. All video feeds are active suddenly, and Junhee swipes through them, focused on whatever angle would give them the cleanest view of the goings-on.

Camera six: A man standing near the back entrance with a gun loosely held in both hands. Camera four: Two women standing close together, talking presumably, their lips obscured to the point he has no idea what they’re saying. Camera nine: a person with a bag over their head, squirming in the arms of two burly-looking guys.

Oh.

“Did you get the microphones to work?” Donghun asks from his right side. Quiet. Focused.

“Sort of.” Junhee fiddles with a few commands, and soon enough, slightly staticy noises start filtering through the laptop’s speaker system.

“Let me go,” the woman with the bag over her head shrieks, kicking her legs wildly. “Where am I, just let me go, what the fuck!” Even though she’s throwing her entire body away from her captors, it does nothing.

Junhee grimaces; his legs ache. If he has to stand still any longer, he’ll hurt himself.

“Okay,” he says, and turns the volume down. “We’re dealing with a likely kidnapping and there’s people with guns. We’re going in.”

“Didn’t Adley say to leave it to the police?”

“Someone died in a theatre downtown an hour ago.” The news article is still open on his phone, forgotten downstairs. “They’ll be too spread out to do anything. We know what’s going on and we
can help, so we will.”

There’s a warm pressure where Donghun lays one hand on Junhee’s forearm. “Are you sure this is a
good idea? Two of us aren’t really in a fighting condition and–”

“Didn’t you say you wanted to create this group to help people?” Even as he’s saying this, Junhee is
already rooting around in the weapons cases and pulling out various objects. “This is us helping. We
need everyone, no time to argue.”

“We can’t bring Sehyoon.”

“I’m going with.”

“No.”

Sehyoon groans. “You need me, like it or not. I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine!”

Junhee steps in between the two, presses a first aid kit against Sehyoon’s chest. “You stay in the
back. No healing with your power, use these instead, and you only come in if it’s absolutely
necessary. Got it?” Sehyoon looks like he wants to protest, but Donghun looks at least a little bit
mollified, and that’s all Junhee can ask for right now. How hard is it to have a team work together
during an emergency? “Go on, get your suits on, let’s go, we don’t have time.”

They disperse. Junhee, already having put on his protective undersuit that morning, is left alone in
the workshop, only a screaming woman and an array of weapons to keep him company.

He grabs his umbrella. Looking down, he realises his hands are trembling.

They can’t fuck this up. Not when a civilian’s life is on the line like this. Not when the last time they
dealt with hostages went so easy.

He can’t fuck this up, specifically.

The warehouse district lies dark and empty. Five sets of feet crunch against gravel, five pairs of eyes
look out for any sign of life. Their steps are sure despite the general unease blanketing the group.

“We can do this,” Sehyoon can hear Yuchan tell himself in a low whisper. “We can do this. We did
it before.”

And that’s true. They have done this before. Except this time, they lack the luxury of time, or police
backup. Also, from the camera feed still playing on Junhee’s smart watch, there’s a lot more people
with guns, more than they can take on one on one.

Sehyoon honestly doesn’t know if he’d understood the plan Donghun had cooked up. Not that it
matters; he’s instructed to stay back during all of it.

His hands feel clammy, and shaky, and cold.

He should be fighting, too.

When the warehouse they’re looking for comes in sight, Junhee holds up a hand, then makes a few
complicated gestures; they’re from the improvised sign language Donghun had made them all learn a
while ago, just in case he ever needs to use his bracelet and they can’t communicate that way. ‘Halt’, Sehyoon reads from under the fluorescent orange lights of the sparsely set street lamps, then ‘Go behind’, then ‘Quiet’. To Sehyoon specifically he makes a series of circular motions that he can’t quite decipher in this light level.

He means stay here, look out for anyone else coming, and be ready to follow my instructions if anything happens, Donghun thinks to him. He doesn’t quite look at him as he does so, and the pat on the shoulder he gives him feels kind of abrupt. They haven’t talked since they talked, and it shows. Considering Sehyoon will just act as a glorified camera tonight, he supposes it won’t impede much.

He’s not bitter at all.

Maybe a little bitter.

He watches the four sneak in the direction of the back door, slowly becoming more obscured by the shadows lapping at the sides of the building. Slowly, they all vanish behind an edge. Only Yuchan is still visible, and Sehyoon can see him pay rapt attention to something presumably Junhee or Donghun is expressing, nodding along. Before he can look away, Yuchan looks up at him, gives a wave and a thumbs up. He thinks he’s trying to mouth something at him, but it’s too dark to tell what. But still, it helps put Sehyoon at ease somewhat. Yuchan’s optimism is nothing if not infectious.

Yuchan turns back around, and there’s the briefest flicker of gold, and the world aligning itself. It’s as much of a reassurance as Sehyoon can get: that things will go well for Junhee, and by extension, the rest of them as well.

They’ll be fine, he thinks to himself, watching them disappear into the warehouse. They’re competent.

The gravel crunches under his feet as he shifts his center.

He waits.

He’d set up camp far enough from the warehouse to have a generous field of vision. The downside of that is that he can’t hear anything going on inside, except if it’s incredibly loud. Such as a gunshot, for instance.

A gunshot does not come.

He waits.

Idly, he notices that it really is getting colder. The night air has a bit of a bite to it, to the point where he subconsciously starts rubbing his hands up and down his arms. The tiny pebbles under his feet roll under his feet as he shakes his legs out, press up into his soles.

He waits.

The warehouse lies quiet.

He waits.

So lost is he in thought, he almost misses the frizzle at the edge of his mind. It’s a sensation that was once familiar to him: it’s the way Donghun used to probe at his mind, back when he was still unsure of their boundaries and of how far his own power could reach.
Donghun?

Sehyoon leans forward. Closes his eyes. Focuses.

...Yoon?

Sehyoon frowns. Yes?

*Sehyoon, can you hear me? You need to call the police and leave. Right now.*

Donghun’s thoughts are jittery, sharp, jagged almost. Sehyoon feels like someone’s shining light directly into his eyes. His left leg hurts, discomfort gnawing at him with sharp teeth and sharp claws.

Donghun’s thoughts have always been calm. Cool. Like water. This? This is not like that.

*Donghun?*, he tries to transmit back, tries to ask what’s going on, if he’s in pain, but the feeling of being connected to him fades in just that instant, and he’s left talking to the empty air around him.

Donghun said to call the police. It’s only now that this sinks in.

They’re in trouble. They might be hurt. They might be…

Sehyoon, without giving himself space to breathe, let alone think, half-turns and bolts towards the warehouse’s back entrance.

Call the police, call the police.

He can’t do that.

He won’t.

He has to help. He needs to help. Somehow.

Somehow.

He barely hears his footsteps anymore, blanketed under a current of anxiety, of blood pumping, of needing to go, go faster, no matter how exhausted he is, no matter how much his muscles groan and scream at him.

He has to push himself.

His hands catch the side of the doorframe, fingers scraping over cool metal. He might have nicked his skin on an obstruction, but that’s the least of his worries, because–

The warehouse before him is worryingly silent. The woman isn’t yelling anymore. There are no footsteps. All he can make out, faintly, is voices from the middle of the area, dampened by the various shipping containers standing in his way. He can’t get a visual, but he knows whatever prompted Donghun to contact him is happening there. He has to get closer. He has to…

There’s a little stream of light in front of him, cutting through the space in between two big containers, parting the twilight like a knife. Sehyoon inhaleds, steadies himself, and creeps forward. Presses his face up against the crack. Blinks.

The center of the warehouse lies before him. He can see people standing there, wielding guns. He can see one man, talking. He can see the woman who’d been kidnapped, standing free and without any constraints. She’s not trying to run. She’s not trying to do anything, actually, hip cocked out and
hands stuffed lazily in the pockets of her jeans.

He can see four people, familiar figures, sprawled on the ground, can see a man wielding a gun step on Yuchan’s back. Can see the man who’d been talking crouch down. Grab Byeongkwan by the back of his shirt. Lift him up. The muzzle of a gun glints biting white under the warehouse lights. Byeongkwan’s legs hang limp.

The man laughs.

Sehyoon’s fingernails scrape against the metal as his hands curl into fists, biting into the balls of his hands. He doesn’t hear the noise, only hears his heart beating, beating in his chest, in his ears, in his mouth.

Someone else hears him.

Before he can run, move, do anything, someone grabs his arm.

“Here to see your friends get taken care of?” someone sneers next to his head. Sehyoon turns to look. He sees an unassuming face, a red cap, a fake Rolex grinning at him in contempt.

“I thought you’d come with the rest of ‘em. Doesn’t matter – just made our jobs easier.” He grins. His teeth are yellowed. His grip tightens.

Sehyoon – he shivers. His stomach turns. There’s no way out.

But he’s not looking for one. He’s not running.

Instead, he lifts a hand and grips back. His fingers dig into the man’s arm through his ill-fitting suit, and this time he knows he’s drawing blood.

It doesn’t matter.

It does not matter.

He can hear the barrel of a gun click just next to his ear. Can feel the cold kiss of it against his temple.

“I’d suggest you let go,” the man growls at him, playfulness gone in an instant. Sehyoon only hears half of it. Doesn’t care for any of it.

His vision focuses. His power, coiled tight around his throat, his chest, his ribcage, reaches out. And he pushes it along. Helps it reach, helps it take hold, and then – he pulls as hard as he can.

The man is dead before he hits the ground.

Sehyoon moves on before he hears the thump.

He sprints, a mad dash, takes a left, a right, tries to find a way to the heart of the room. Two women bar his path, both with their weapons drawn. Sehyoon doesn’t even think about it, doesn’t weigh his options, digs his hands into them, takes and takes, takes until nothing’s left. Until he’s safe.

The women lie still. His leg doesn’t hurt anymore.

Nothing hurts anymore. His vision is bright from the flecks of light rising from his form. His feet impact the ground, faster than he’s ever moved in his life.
He’s not tired. He’s not strained. The life he’d taken, stolen, thrums in his veins alongside his own.

Two, then one, then four, then one more. They all fall.

He comes to a halt once he reaches the clearing in the middle.

The first person he sees is Yuchan, face down on the dirty ground, the boot of a man with an assault rifle grinding into his back. He’s shaking. His mouth is moving, but all Sehyoon hears is the rush of blood in his ears. An ocean of just him, his energy, his power.

Byeongkwan is next. The man with the handgun had pulled him up on his knees, gripping his hair with one hand, the other pressing a gun against his head. He has his eyes fixed on Sehyoon, is shouting orders, but Sehyoon can only look at Byeongkwan. At the tears in the corners of his eyes. At the tremors running through his arms.

Junhee’s lip drips, and his nose drips, and the ground under him is soaked in red.

Donghun looks at Sehyoon. Sehyoon doesn’t know what his gaze says. He doesn’t have time for that.

The lights engulf him. Reach out on their own, guide his hand.

Yuchan gets buried under his captor.

There’s only one left alive.

He can’t think. He stalks forward. Snaps out a hand, faster than the man with the gun can react. Presses his fingers tight around his throat.

Distantly, he can hear a gun clatter to the ground. Can hear the thump as Byeongkwan is let go.

Sehyoon presses harder. Lifts up the man until his feet barely touch the ground. He’s probably taller than Sehyoon is. That doesn’t matter.

He digs in. Feels skin and muscle and sinew give under his fingers. Can feel something being crushed under his grip.

Can feel the life draining from him.

The blinking lights that ascend from where hand and throat meet shine the brightest.

There’s blood on the man’s throat. His fingers are warm. If he were to listen, he could hear choking. Pleas. He might even hear his companions. But he can’t, so he doesn’t.

So his power takes once more.

He’s not sure if it’s the blood loss, the lack of air, or his power that kills the man first. He doesn’t care.

The man’s body impacts the ground with a crunch. His head is twisted at an unnatural angle. His skin is pale.

Eyes, unseeing, stare into Sehyoon’s.

Sehyoon, equally unseeing, stares back.
The power in him threatens to shake him apart.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

_You have to center yourself_, his inner voice tells him. It sounds like Donghun. _You have to calm down._

He clenches his hands into fists. Unclenches. Looks down at them.

Barely visible under the array of white lights is red. So much of it, dripping from his fingers, pooling on the ground, snaking up his arms.

He turns slowly. What he’s borrowed, taken without permission, is leaving him bit by bit. It clears his mind, if only for a moment. He feels like he can breathe again. The lights aren’t crowding in anymore. They’re dissipating.

His eyes meet Yuchan’s. Wide. Shocked.

Scared.

Of him.

Byeongkwan, too, he’s moved back, visibly tries to keep himself from breathing. Sehyoon looks back around, sees Junhee. How he’s inched his way next to Yuchan, half in front of him. A shield. Sees his eyes, staring daggers into his essence.

He looks at Donghun. Donghun, who knows.

Donghun, who looks at him with such utter disappointment that he can’t take it.

The rush of blood in his ears abates. He opens his mouth. Closes it. Looks down. Tries to recount what he’d done.

How many people he’d…

His stomach turns violently. He presses a hand up against his mouth, to keep himself from losing anything, but breathes in copper and bite. Tastes metal on his tongue.

He needs to go. He needs to leave.

Yuchan’s shaking. He’s safe, but he’s shaking.

He’s not safe. He doesn’t think he’s safe.

It’s Sehyoon.

Sehyoon drops his hand and turns. He thinks he can hear someone say his name, pitched too far into panic. He doesn’t listen.

He runs.
Chapter End Notes

turns out blue rose by up10tion works great for writing intense scenes;;

this chapter was uploaded earlier than normal to celebrate 1 year since we came up with the concept for sonder! it's sort of hard to believe it's been this long, and that we stuck with it for all this time. and that all of you did, actually, even though it's been less time for you. love u :(

catch us on twitter @gloxinie_ and @blackandbluemy, or drop me a comment over on my cc
Sehyoon

Chapter Summary

Sehyoon;
(n.) a murderer

Chapter Notes

we were joking about abandoning sonder after last chapter, but then i actually got writer's block. sorry for the long wait!!
chapter warnings: brief suicidal ideation, referenced animal death

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sehyoon’s footsteps echo in the quiet.

“Sehyoon,” Donghun calls out, tries to stand, but the throbbing pain at the back of his head throws him off balance. “Sehyoon, wait–”

Sehyoon is gone by that point. The little trail of light he’s left behind slowly starts to dissipate.

For a moment, everything is still.

Then, Byeongkwan turns his head and retches.

Somehow, this snaps at least Junhee out of it, makes him shake his head and wipe at the blood still generously smeared on his face. “Okay,” he says, the tremor in his voice belying the confidence he’s no doubt trying to project, “We need to move.”

Yuchan, who’s made his way over to Byeongkwan, stops where he’s rubbing the other’s back to crane his head towards him. “What? We can’t… Sehyoon, he–”

“Yes, but if anyone heard us and called the police, we’ll not be doing anyone any favours this way.” Junhee gets up, voice muffled from the way he’s still adamantly pressing his sleeve to his face. “Can everybody walk?”

Donghun reaches out a hand and places it on Byeongkwan’s leg. It’s still trembling from the augmented taser blast he’d suffered, and overall he doesn’t look so good.

(No one of them look very good right now.)

“Get Byeongkwan out of here,” Junhee continues. “Check for blood on your shoes beforehand. If there’s any traces of anything, take them off and carry them.”

Donghun wants to say something, or protest, but everything feels muted, slow, unreal right now. He
knows this feeling, has experienced it before, the day of the accident. It’s still as uncomfortable as it was then, he realises, and shivers as he feels little pinpricks of pain travel down his body.

“What are you trying to do?” Yuchan asks in his place. Unsteady.

Junhee’s face is pale under the red, and he’s pressed his lips together so hard they’ve disappeared. “Cleanup,” he responds, and bends down to reach for a thug’s gun.

They all wait by the back entrance of the warehouse, huddled together in the darkest corner they could find, until Junhee finishes his ‘cleanup’.

The first gunshot makes all of them jump, press closer together, makes Donghun grab for the others’ hands and rub them soothingly. The second comes as less of a surprise, and by the fifth, they’ve all dulled to it.

It takes Junhee maybe ten minutes, maybe fifteen, but no matter what, it feels like the longest, most tense wait Donghun has ever had to sit through. When Junhee finally exits the warehouse, shoes loosely held in one hand, without any police sirens blaring yet, Donghun exhales in relief.

“Are you done?”

Junhee nods.

“What about the cameras?”

“I’ll figure that out if I need to.” Junhee comes to a stop in front of them, shifts the center of his balance as the gravel under his soles undoubtedly presses up in a fairly uncomfortable manner, says: “Let’s get everyone home first. It’ll be okay.”

Donghun would marvel at Junhee calling the loft their home, or him trying to comfort his teammates at all, if he weren’t severely doubting the truth to his assurances right now.

Nothing of note happens until they’re back at the loft. And then, when the door swings shut behind them, when Donghun half-heartedly flicks the lightswitch… still nothing. Instead, Junhee quietly instructs them to change clothes, gathers up everything marred by blood, and disappears into his room.

Donghun suspects he won’t be seeing that outfit of his again.

They don’t talk for a good while. Donghun sits down heavily on the couch, runs a hand through his hair, barely registers how the cushions dip on either side of him. There’s a hand rubbing soothing circles on his thigh, and then there’s a wet nose in his lap, and whining coming from its owner. Absentmindedly, Donghun lifts a hand to smooth it over Frosty’s furry head. The point of contact doesn’t feel defined, like he’s reaching through layers of cotton.

“Is that why he’d never touch her?” Yuchan asks abruptly, words strained. “Because he can do that?”

“He touched us plenty,” Byeongkwan points out quietly.

“Just you, really.”
The two fall into a tense, uncomfortable silence. Donghun knows he should say something. Explain. After all, he’s known all along. He knows why Sehyoon does the things he does.

But right now, he feels like he knows nothing at all.

When he looks up, Byeongkwan is staring at him, some type of glint in his eyes. When all Donghun responds with is a weak shrug, he turns on his heel in a huff and makes for the front door.

“Where are you going?” Donghun calls out after him, a little anxiety cutting through him. Byeongkwan can’t just… leave, not after what just happened. It’s unsafe, right?

“Out,” Byeongkwan grunts. “I can’t be here right now.”

“But what if Sehyoon comes back?” Donghun tries.

Byeongkwan grimaces. “That’s why.”

If Donghun wasn’t feeling like nothing could possibly be worse than the situation they’ve found themselves in, he’d watch him go with a sinking feeling in his chest. As it stands, however, the helpless anxiety within him simply grows.

He needs to find Sehyoon.

His head throbs. Yuchan, next to him, is watching him with a careful, pinched face. Like he’s expecting Donghun to topple over any moment now, which makes no sense. He’s fine, right?

“Are you sure?” Yuchan asks, leans forward to place a warm palm on Donghun’s thigh. Donghun just blinks and elects to not mention that he wasn’t planning on saying that out loud.

“Yeah,” is what he says instead, then: “I’m alright. I just need to find Sehyoon.”

“Maybe you should rest first…”

“When he’s missing?”

Yuchan worries his bottom lip between his teeth, clearly torn. “...You’re right,” he agrees, “but if you don’t feel well after, you should rest up before we do anything important.”

“Sure,” Donghun mutters, then draws a breath and closes his eyes. Sehyoon, he thinks, pictures the way his inner voice sounds. He can sense it, somewhere not too far, he just has to reach out and try to grab ahold of that sound–

A gasp, followed by fifty voices at once, a cacophony accompanied by pictures of the warehouse, the corpses, corpses oh god I killed them oh god they’re dead I’m a murderer a murderer a–

When Donghun blinks his eyes open, two faces hover uncertainly over his. His vision is a little blurry, so he blinks, rubs at his eyes, groans when he moves his head and the pain comes rushing in again all at once.

“Go get him something to drink,” he hears Junhee say quietly, then there’s a hand cradling the back of his head, another pulling at his waist, steadying him as Junhee helps him up and then leads him back to where he was sitting before… before what?

“What happened?”
“Yuchan said you fainted out of nowhere.” Junhee shrugs. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Do you want to rethink that answer?”

Junhee peers at him, and there’s something so honestly concerned about the way he looks that throws Donghun off completely. Instead of reassuring him, or explaining what had happened, he asks: “Why are you so worried?”

It’s probably not an unfair question, considering who he’s talking to, but his voice comes out just the wrong side of harsh by the way Junhee draws back a bit, detaches his hand from where it had been resting on Donghun’s arm. Donghun’s gut churns – this isn’t what he had intended.

“Is it that wrong for me to be concerned after what happened?” Junhee mutters. He’s hunched into himself a little and refuses to make eye contact when Donghun bends down to look at his face. “Whatever.”

“No, it’s not, it’s just…” Donghun trails off, rubs at his fingers nervously. He’s not sure if he can take more uncertain change right now; at this point, he’d almost rather have cold asshole Junhee back.

The floorboards creak, then Yuchan presses a cold glass of water into Donghun’s hand. When Donghun looks back up properly, Junhee has left, and he feels like they’ve taken ten steps back.

“Thanks,” Donghun says instead of vocalising any of this, and gingerly sips at the water. His head is still hurting horribly from the mental exertion. He should ask Sehyoon if he can heal…

Well. Or not.

“Please don’t scare us like that anymore,” Yuchan tells him softly as he leans his body weight against Donghun’s side, arms coming up to wrap loosely around his middle. “And it’s okay if you can’t find Sehyoon immediately, as long as you’re healthy, right?”

“But I have no idea where he could have gone without reaching out to him,” Donghun admits begrudgingly. “I know places connected to him, but if he wants to hide, he’ll go anywhere but there, right?”

Yuchan stays quiet.

Oh.

Donghun sits up so fast some of the water spills and drips over his fingers. “You can help, can’t you? If we go out to look for Sehyoon ourselves, you’d know where he could have gone?”

Yuchan shuffles around a little. “Let’s maybe call him first and check the places that are connected to him,” he offers. “I don’t know if I want to… revisit all of that.”

“I know. I understand. Just… we might need your advice. You’re the one who knows their way around the best.”

His friend just nods. “I guess I am,” he sighs. Still, he doesn’t really sound convinced.

The rooms under the loft lay undisturbed.
It’s clear nobody has been down here since Yuchan; dust blankets the surfaces he hadn’t touched, the swaths of white fabric still covering furniture that had been moved down here years ago. It’s dark aside from a little sliver of the moon peeking through the curtains, but he doesn’t bother turning on the light; he knows his way.

He comes to a stop in front of the piano. The sheet Yuchan had tugged on has fallen to the floor, lies crumpled at its feet. Junhee looks down at it for a while, lets his eyes trail along the creases and stains of dust, then picks it up and smooths it back over the instrument.

On his way out, he locks the doors.

When Junhee enters the loft again, he runs right into Donghun. Unluckily, Donghun doesn’t seem to be paying a lot of attention either, so Junhee knocks him off balance the second they collide with each other, and almost takes him down to the ground with him; he needs to hold on to the doorframe with a grip strong enough he worries about splintering the wood a little.

“Sorry,” Donghun mutters quietly, and makes to extricate himself from Junhee. “I wasn’t looking.”

“Neither was I.” Junhee looks at Donghun, his haphazardly thrown on cardigan and the way his hair is dishevelled, grabs his elbow, and steers him towards his own room.

“Junhee, I was wanting to go outside–”

“Not in this condition.” Donghun rolls his eyes at that, but lets himself be steered into Junhee’s room and deposited in his reading chair.

“Now,” Junhee says, as he sits down on his bed, “what happened?”

“Byeongkwan won’t pick up his phone.”

Junhee can’t even say he’s surprised anymore. “Do you know where he is?”

“I was going to reach out to him if he isn’t at one of his usual spots, but…”

“No.” Junhee shakes his head. “Absolutely not, we can’t have you collapse in the middle of the streets.”

“Then what else am I supposed to do?” Donghun asks, a bite to his voice. He sounds frustrated, and Junhee gets that. He really does. But…

“We’re going to sit here, and we’re going to wait.”

“...You can’t be serious.”

Junhee rubs at his temple, wills the stress-induced headache to settle, and looks up at the ceiling. “He’s taking it the hardest out of all of us. If he needs to be alone to cope, let him have that. With how you’re doing, we won’t be getting anything done anyway.”

“So... nothing?”

“Well.” Junhee shrugs. “I do have some things to take care of, make sure we won’t be connected to what happened. But as for our team stress, yes. You can’t force this kind of process.”
“Which you would know about, I guess.”

Junhee just looks at Donghun measuredly. He knows that one day, if this is to go on, he’s going to have to talk about his own demons instead of just awkwardly trying to resolve those of the others. And he will, if he trusts Donghun enough at that point. But right now, he also knows that his concerns are the lowest possible priority in the face of all that’s happened. So he says: “Not really, honestly,” and ignores the skepticism apparent in Donghun’s expression.

“Go sleep,” he continues instead, and by some miracle, Donghun actually goes. When he hears the door shut softly, he looks down at his hands, oddly pale in the moonlight; he watches them tremble as he remembers the rush of luck running through his skin, remembers how Sehyoon wasn’t quite so lucky.

Clenches them into fists. Now’s not the time for any of this.

Instead of dwelling, he takes the stairs up to his workshop, where he’d dumped all the bloody clothes for now. There’s nothing to be done about those, so instead he sits down at the metal worktable, boots up his laptop, and logs in to the camera feeds from the warehouse.

The first thing he sees is police milling about the place, putting up police tape and securing the area. There’s not too many, but one of them is on the phone; probably requesting backup, a good idea, considering just how many corpses there are.

There’s no point in watching them work. Junhee rolls the camera footage back until he can see the blurry, glowing outline of Sehyoon, then keeps an eye on the middle of the room. He’s not going to look at what’s happening. He doesn’t want to think about it.

It’s not productive.

Sure enough, when Sehyoon starts advancing, he sees one of the women on screen turn and run. By the time Sehyoon makes it to the middle, she’s made it outside with her panicked scrambling, which makes her the only person beyond ACE who knows.

Junhee pauses the footage where he can see her face somewhat clearly, then clicks on the camera software’s integrated facial recognition system. It doesn’t take very long to find a couple possible matches from a criminal registry; it takes even less to filter the bad matches out. Then he pulls out the USB he’d transferred it all on, pockets it, and goes to work corrupting the evidence.

And then he leaves to deal with the woman.

Morning rolls around accompanied by high-pitched whining.

When Donghun, sleepy and disoriented, finally manages to make his way up the stairs to the bathroom to get some water, he finds Frosty trying to shove her nose underneath Sehyoon’s door. Her paws scratch against the floor as she presses, and whines, clearly looking for something.

Donghun exhales measuredly, closes his eyes, then crouches down to place a hand on her head. “He’s not here right now,” he says quietly, but even if Frosty could understand him, she doesn’t seem to be paying attention. That’s fair. He doesn’t want to hear himself either.

As he scratches the top of her head, Yuchan’s door creaks open, and Yuchan pokes his head out. He looks like he’s slept poorly, or like he’s not slept at all: disheveled hair, shadows under his eyes, a strange pallor to his skin. He must be a mirror of how Donghun himself is looking.
“Hey,” Yuchan croaks, and leans on the railing.

“Want to eat something?”

“Not really.”

“Eggs?”

Yuchan shrugs. “Sure,” he mutters, and that’s enough for Donghun to get back on his feet and do his job for now. He has to take care of his friends, and that is what he’ll do, while he can still do it.

Yuchan swallows a mouthful of egg, puts down his fork, and makes eye contact with Donghun. “How’s your head?” he asks.

“Better,” says Donghun, right before his head gives a sharp throb. “Well. Not good,” he amends, “but better.”

“Tracking Sehyoon is out, then?” is what Yuchan follows up with, careful, guarded. Donghun sighs and folds his hands on the table.

“Look, I know you’re not a fan of the idea, but it might be the only real shot we have. The longer we wait, the more danger he could get himself into. We have to at least try to get to him.”

Yuchan stays silent for a time that feels too short and too long at the same time.


“Thank you, seriously. It’ll help a lot.”

“I hope so.” Yuchan stands up and carefully arranges his cutlery on his half-full plate. “Also, Kwan texted me an hour ago.”

“What’d he say?”

“That he’s crashing at a friend’s place, and that he doesn’t want to be around the loft right now. Said he might be back tomorrow if Sehyoon isn’t here yet.”

“…Right.” Donghun reaches over the table to gather up the dishes, but stops when a hand curls softly around his wrist.

“Do you…” Yuchan begins hesitantly, “do you think that’s the end of us?”

Donghun thinks of the fall of the one thing he wanted to call friends, maybe family someday; of how yesterday destroyed a fundamental part of their bond that will never return how it was.

“Of course not,” he gets out around a smile that tastes wrong on his lips, “of course not, Channie. We’ll be okay.”

He’s not sure if Yuchan wants them to be okay. He’s not going to ask.

Junhee accompanies them.
Donghun seems happy that he’s coming along to help, or at least a little relieved. Yuchan had heard them talk yesterday, when he was bringing Donghun water, so he supposes it’s good to know that particular relationship hasn’t broken yet.

On the other hand, though, it just makes him even more nervous. Junhee’s this… rich, imposing figure, even if Yuchan now knows about his secret anime stash. He bets he’s never had to become familiar with a less comfortable style of living.

Oh, well.

“Right, so,” he begins, twisting his fingers together, “most emergency shelters here are actually confidential when it comes to people staying in them, but they have to show records to the person’s parents or police if asked, basically. So I don’t think he’ll have gone to one, and if he had, we wouldn’t be able to find out without involving the police.”

“Which isn’t going to happen.”

“I figured. I remember there being a lot of… uh, blood… so I guess he stayed outside the city? Because we’d have heard stories about him running around by now if he’d been spotted?”

“Are there any places for him to hide?” Donghun prods gently. “Have you been around here before?”

Yuchan listens to a stray piece of gravel crunch between his foot and the pavement, and looks around. “Not a lot,” he admits. “But there’s a large bridge nearby that homeless people use sometimes, and a couple abandoned houses and playgrounds. If he even stayed in the area at all.”

“Do you think he would have?” Junhee asks. Yuchan kind of wants to ask why he thinks he would know anything. Instead, he hums.

“His instinct is going to be to run as far as possible, but his panic will probably have worn off fast enough, so he might have changed his mind and decided to rest, or maybe he’ll have crashed by necessity. I think he’s probably somewhere around here, but he’s going to want to move soon. He won’t want to be close, just in case someone’s looking for him.”

“Like us.”

“Or like the police.”

“I guess.”

“Do we split up to look?” Yuchan prods. It’ll probably be more effective, but he honestly doesn’t want to be walking around these parts by himself. Donghun must be picking up on his apprehension, as he puts a large hand on his back to reassure him.

“Junhee can split and we can go together.”

“Fine by me,” Junhee says absentmindedly, busy with some sort of map app or the other. “By the way,” he continues, “Sorn wants to meet us. Do I field that or do you want to come along?”

“I don’t want to come,” Yuchan answers immediately, and the hand on his back becomes heavier for a second.

“I can tag along,” says Donghun. “But you don’t think she suspects anything, does she?”
“No. But since we were supposed to monitor…”

“Right.”

“It’s not that big a deal, but I want to get some information about the police proceedings out of her if I can. Anyway. I’ll let you guys know if I find anything.”

“Likewise,” the other two echo, and then they part ways, Sehyoon’s name on all of their lips.

They don’t find him.

That evening, Byeongkwan returns home.

Outwardly, he doesn’t look all that horrible, though Donghun’s perception may be coloured by the fact that he’s seen him almost die from blood loss in this very loft. Inwardly, though? Unclear.

“Did you find him yet?” is the first thing he asks as soon as he’s toed his shoes off and thrown his jacket over the back of the couch.

“No, we were out all day, but–”

“Hm.” Already Byeongkwan seems to have lost interest; instead of sticking around, he’s moving towards the door to his room. “Let me know about food.”

“Uh.” Donghun honestly hadn’t expected this kind of reticency, so all he can do is step aside so as not to get shoulder-checked. “Sure. I’ll… let you know.” Then, just before Byeongkwan can touch the handle: “Do you want to help search for Sehyoon tomorrow? We’re going early in the morning.”

Byeongkwan stills.

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“I mean ,” says Byeongkwan, “that I don’t want to look for him. I don’t care where he is. Can as well leave the country for all I care.” His shoulders are squared, he’s standing up straight, but his voice wavers on a word, like it wants to fold up on itself and change its meaning.

Donghun clenches his jaw. “He could be in danger right now,” he points out, “and you’re just going to sit here, then? I thought you were his friend, at least, I see that I was–”

“None of us were ever his friend ,” and oh, that’s proper acid dripping from Byeongkwan’s tone, “except you, maybe. Wonder how that worked out for everyone.” And with that, he slams the door behind him, and leaves Donghun behind with his nails digging into the palms of his hands.

He just needs time , he tells himself. It’ll be okay , he tells himself.

They don’t find Sehyoon the next day.
They don’t find him the day after that, either.

Sehyoon wakes up to the cool press of hardwood flooring against his body.

It’s dark, save for the little bit of weak light that has managed to make its way through a little gap in between the curtains. Little bits of dust swirl around lazily in that light, thrown into disarray every time he breathes.

He sits up. The floorboards creak under the redistribution of weight. It’s loud in the otherwise empty house, so loud it almost makes him wince.

It’s okay, though. Nobody’s home.

He gets up gradually, slowly, willing his muscles to relax. His entire body has tensed up, is slow to move. His limbs ache: exhaustion, no doubt.

Even though he’s this tired, he still can’t sleep well.

After a while, Sehyoon drags himself to the bathroom. His old toothbrush isn’t here anymore, and he doesn’t want to use either of the ones there, so he smears toothpaste over his teeth with his finger, then rinses it out. It’ll be good enough, he wagers. It’s the most he can do right now.

His gaze falls down to his hands, cracked and red. He can still almost see the blood coating his fingers, dried under his fingernails, seeping under his skin to stain it indefinitely. He’d spent most of yesterday showering, and showering again, and washing his hands until he’d used up all the soap his parents had left laying around. And still, look at the wrong angle and there’s the steady drip of it from the tips of his fingers. Sehyoon shakes his head, screws his eyes shut, and makes for the kitchen instead.

Frankly, he’s not sure how long he’s been here. He vaguely remembers running, spending the night under a bush next to a playground, but the light has eaten away at his memories. He knows at some point he decided to come back here, but he doesn’t know when, or how. His phone got lost somewhere, and he’s not about to mess with any electronics in this house, so… it’s probably been a while, though. A couple days. He really doesn’t know.

The fridge, when he checks it, is unsurprisingly empty. There’s a packet of butter, a plastic bottle with what smells like lemon extract of some kind, a half-opened bottle of ketchup. Raiding the shelves in the kitchen leaves him with some crackers, canned bread, and some type of German sausage in a jar. Not exactly appetizing, and more importantly, it won’t last him for a very long time. On the other hand, he can’t exactly go grocery shopping – is he wanted by the police? Are ACE looking for him? And anyway, it’s not like he’d brought his wallet to the warehouse. And if he takes his parents’ money, someone might recognise him if he goes outside…

Bottom line: He can’t buy any more food.

Which means he’ll have to go back at some point.

No. He can’t think about that now. The idea of having to face all of them, his… his friends, and explain what he’s done, the mere thought of it alone is enough to make his heart stutter. He can’t do that. He’s not strong enough for it. Maybe in a couple more days. Or maybe he’ll return and immediately be kicked out, and it all will have been for nothing anyway.

Nibbling on one of the crackers doesn’t do much for his restless stomach, but he’s not feeling very
hungry anyway, so he only finishes the one, then puts all the food away again for later.

At this point, night has slowly begun to fall, and Sehyoon briefly laments his incredibly destroyed sleep cycle, but can’t bring himself to care very much. Instead, he watches the sun disappear behind the treetops of the nearby forest, listens to the clock in the kitchen tick, and waits, although he is not entirely sure what for.

The kitchen is as spotless as he remembers it, if only because it’s in a state of constant disuse. There’s a thick blanket of dust on everything that Sehyoon would feel unsafe about disturbing, if he didn’t know nobody would be around to see it.

His eyes drift to the wall calendar hanging next to the fridge. There’s a few markings, notes written in a sloppy hand about work events and friends’ birthdays, and the last one he can see is a date circled in red, the words ‘skiing in Austria!!’ scrawled underneath. It’s probably been about a week or so since that, and if Sehyoon knows his parents at all, they’ll spontaneously extend their vacation for at least double that time to ‘see the sights’ and ‘fully appreciate the local atmosphere’.

(Not that he presumes to know his parents, not one bit. Not when he’s likely said more words to Junhee than to both of them combined in his lifetime.)

His hands itch. He goes to wash them again.

On day three, Yuchan finds Sehyoon’s phone under a rusted-over swingset. It’s bloody, cracked, and pretty much unusable.

“It must have fallen out of his pocket,” Yuchan guesses, holding it up pinched between thumb and forefinger. “And look, the branches over there are broken. He probably slept here.”

Donghun crouches down, runs a couple fingers over the uneven ground. “It doesn’t exactly seem comfortable,” he offers.

Yuchan shrugs. “It’s not that cold yet,” he says, “and really, nothing on the street is comfortable. As long as you’re able to sleep a little bit and be out of sight, any place is okay.”

“Huh. Looks like he stepped on his phone.” Donghun reaches out to poke little streaks of mud imprinted on the phone’s screen. “Must have not noticed what was going on.”

“He was probably still out of it, then… is there any place he could have gone?”

Donghun runs a hand through his hair. “Not really? I mean, I went to the grocery store he used to work at, but they didn’t know anything. I called his sister, she hasn’t talked to him in months. I even went to take a look around his parents’ house, but I doubt he’ll want to spend a lot of time there; plus, it looked incredibly uninhabited.”

Yuchan nods along. “Right… I just hope he’s safe, then. Whereever he is.”

“Yeah.” A big part of Donghun hopes he’s wrong, and that Sehyoon is actually at the house or somewhere else with beds and an actual roof.

A sigh escapes Yuchan. “Seriously,” he mutters, “this isn’t getting us anywhere. We should just wait for him to come back, even if that really sucks. We can’t force him to come back on his own, he has to actually want to be around us… right?” His confidence falters as he gets closer to the end of the sentence, like he’s second-guessing himself immediately. His eyes flick up to Donghun’s, as if
looking for reassurance that Donghun’s not sure he can give.

“I mean, yeah, but what if he’s scared of coming back? Because he thinks we’ll reject him?”

“Will we?” Yuchan sounds completely serious, eyes wide and grave. “Can we? I mean, I know you two are friends, but I’m not sure about Junhee. Or Byeongkwan.” Especially Byeongkwan, Donghun interprets into the pause.

“We can’t if we don’t try,” he answers simply, and grabs for his softly vibrating phone.

“Junhee?”

“Yeah, it’s a reminder about Sorn, I might have to get going to provide assistance.”

“That’s fine.” Yuchan turns Sehyoon’s phone over in his hands, trying to ignore how it leaves copper-red stains on his fingers. “I’ll look around some more.”

There’s determination clear in Yuchan’s stance, in the way he’s already moving over to the broken branches. Donghun doesn’t leave immediately; instead, he watches him work.

He’s always known that Yuchan has a mature core. Of course he does, he has to have one after what’s happened to him over the course of his life. But it’s still a little surprising to see him like this, focused and dedicated and shedding his jokester persona. On one hand, he feels bad that he has to do that, but he’s also… proud, to a degree. That Yuchan is so willing to confront things to help out, even if they still clearly bother him. He just hopes they can find Sehyoon fast so he can go back to being unburdened. If that’s at all possible now.

The sound Sehyoon makes is the only indication anyone is alive in this space.

For a while, he passes the time by running, listening to his feet slap loudly against the flooring. He tries talking to himself, to increase the volume of his voice, but as soon as he hits regular conversational tone he stops, scared of being overheard by something that isn’t there.

From outside the glass sliding door of the living room, the back yard stares at him accusingly. He can make out a branch, broken off years ago, the little stump of it still pressed upright into the soil in the far back.

He turns his back to it, makes to go back to what was once his room and has now been repurposed into a sewing studio, when a shadow flits at the edge of his vision. He turns sharply towards it, but there’s nothing; turns back, presses his palms against his eyes, and sees the people he’s killed.

Well, doesn’t see, but… kind of sees. Remembers. Even if it’s not entirely tangible. He freezes in the middle of his movement – he knows this isn’t real. Of course it isn’t. But it’s hard being rational when your breath hitches and your hands begin to shake. It’s hard to dismiss the reality of it when you can feel the light biting at your skin, asking for more, hungry –

“The police aren’t pressing the issue,” Junhee informs the other two once he returns with Donghun. “Said it happens a lot out in the outskirts. I told them some electric impulse scrambled my cameras, so they’re dismissing us as witnesses.”

“What about Sorn?” Byeongkwan asks, probably less detached than he’d wanted to come across.
His arms are crossed over his chest, but there’s a twist of apprehension to his posture.

“She seemed… skeptical at best.” Junhee gets his phone out as he talks, glances at it intermittently.
“She kept signalling that she doesn’t buy the story, but she let us off the hook in exchange for some of the uncorrupted footage.”

“So she’s not going to have me arrested?”

“You’re fine.”

Byeongkwan nods, but he doesn’t relax. “Good,” he says to himself.

“I have to deal with a loose end,” Junhee says, indicating his phone, and then disappears in his room; a sign for the entire group to disperse. Donghun is the only one who remains in the living room, eyes drifting to the sky outside.

None of them talk to each other anymore. It’s like they’re strangers. Yuchan tries, at least, but the rest…

The cold bathroom tiles dig into Sehyoon’s forehead.

He’s tried all the meditation techniques, the breathing exercises, but halfway through he’d become aware he needs to wait this out. As much as it is possible to wait out the knowledge that you’re… well, a murderer. A killer.

It still doesn’t feel real. It’s almost as if he’s thinking about another person’s memories when he tries to recall what happened, tries to picture the dead eyes he looked into.

The bigger part of him knows he had to let go at that point. They’d have died otherwise. Junhee, Donghun, Byeongkwan, Yuchan, they’d all have been gunned down, and it would have been his fault for not intervening. And the thought of their eyes being the lifeless ones instead… he can’t take that. He’d rather take the blood on his hands.

Slowly, he sits back up, and looks at the little white pills scattered all over the floor. It’s almost a ritual, honed by years of reflex: his mind gets heavy and foggy, and he counts the pills he has, whether here or in the locked bedside table at the loft that Donghun has never looked into. He counts them, and he entertains the thought of getting it over with, and he invariably accepts his cowardice. He’ll never be able to do it himself, he knows – he’s tried. So he collects them, puts them back in the bottle, secure in the knowledge that the amount he has could kill him, should he need it to. And then he repeats the process.

He doesn’t even make it through half this time. He can’t tell if that’s progress or a setback.

It’s been a week, and frankly, Donghun is too exhausted to be worried anymore.

Yuchan keeps telling him Sehyoon will find his way back to them, so he supposes he’ll have to trust that. He can’t think about Sehyoon injured somewhere, or dead, or otherwise in danger. While his headache has abated, looking for Sehyoon disorients him still, to a degree he’s never experienced before. Junhee figures it might be because he’s actively resisting to be found. Yuchan suggests all of Sehyoon’s feelings could interfere with the connection, after all, Donghun has always had a penchant for empathising more than he should. Byeongkwan says nothing on the matter, which
Donghun should guess would be the case by now.

“iT’s going to rain,” Junhee tells Donghun when he’s putting on his shoes. “Take an umbrella.”

“The weather report said it’ll be clear, though?”

“Just a hunch. Trust me.” And while Donghun knows this is meant to be light, not to be read into as he often does, he can’t help but hold onto those words. Trust me. Trust Junhee.

“Thanks for the warning,” he says, and makes for the umbrella rack.

It’s evening when Sehyoon finally slides open the glass door and steps outside.

The grass feels familiar under his bare feet: it reminds him of the hours he’d spent playing here as a child, before depression made him too tired and irritable to step outside much. He barely remembers details anymore, just some fleeting impressions and the concept of a childhood as happy as a person like him could have.

Far at the edge of his parents’ property, where the lawn bleeds over into the forest, sectioned off only by a half-hearted little fence, there is a stick in the earth. It’s broken of like he had assumed, and the stones that his little hands had piled around it have long since disappeared. Maybe carried by the winds, maybe by his parents. He doesn’t care to guess.

Sehyoon sits down in front of the remnants of the stick, and presses both hands against the ground.

“Hey,” he starts, quietly. “I’m sorry I haven’t come to visit. I hope you can forgive me.”

There’s no answer. He doesn’t expect one.

“I’ve done a lot of bad things. I… I don’t know what to do with myself sometimes, you know? I know you’d love me no matter what. You probably loved me all the way until,” and here’s where he starts getting choked up, where his lips start to tremble. “I just miss you so much,” he whispers, words catching in his throat, “I really miss you, I’m so sorry. You deserved so much better. I’m sorry.”

He keeps whispering, digs his fingers into the soil underneath his body like it’ll take him closer to what he’s talking to. Overhead, the clouds darken, give a warning raindrop, and then it begins to pour.

Sehyoon simply lets the rain wash over him, sitting on the makeshift grave of his childhood dog he’d murdered just as he’d murdered all those people, and allows himself to cry.

Junhee was right. It is raining.

Donghun gingerly places the little bundle of flowers down next to the headstone. Even though he has an umbrella, the water splashes against his shoes and the bottoms of his pants. Junhee might nag at him to get them dry-cleaned later, if he’s lucky and everyone’s in a decent mood. But for now, he stands in front of the grave and watches the water run along the inscription on the black marble.

“No,” he says into the emptiness, “I brought you guys flowers.”

A particularly big raindrop hits the surface of the umbrella. The grip shakes in his hand.
“I probably haven’t been a very good son lately,” he continues, “so I’m sorry for that. But I know you guys are happy up there, right? So it’s fine for me to have my own struggles, so I won’t disturb you as often.”

There’s nobody else in the graveyard, which is something he’s quietly thankful for. He doesn’t want people to think he’s talking to something invisible; people with ghost powers suffer a very particular stigma he hasn’t personally been confronted with.

“To be honest, I haven’t been a very good friend either. Recently, a friend of mine really needed help, and I didn’t give him what he needed, so the stress harmed him. I’m not sure how I can make it up to him. I remember you always gave me good advice, so I wish you could give me some now.” He laughs to himself, and is proud to note that it sounds less like he’s about to cry than usual. He’s getting better about these visits. “I hope I’ll see my friend again. I really just want him to be happy, but it’s really hard.”

Even two years ago, he would have thought of the uptick of the wind as a sign from his parents, maybe a soothing embrace. Now, all he does is shiver and pull his jacket tighter across his body.

The rain impacts against the window dully.

Junhee sighs and leans back in his chair. He’s finally managed to buy the woman’s silence after days of back-and-forth negotiation. Of course it had been money she wanted, not protection or a clean criminal record. Just money. Money is power, and powers have power, and he has too much of both.

“Are you proud of me yet?” he asks the framed picture propped up on his desk. None of the frozen smiles give him an answer, so he huffs and jams it back into the upmost drawer. Now’s not the time to be sentimental.

Sehyoon sleeps in the mud that night. He’s cried until there’d been nothing left to cry about, but his heart is none the lighter for it.

Maybe in a few days, he’ll return to the loft and face the judgement. The loss of the only people he’d ever considered friends. Just not right now.
Chapter End Notes

glox's twitter and cc
xelin's twitter and cc
Sehyoon doesn’t know how long he’s spent in this house; he only knows that food is starting to run dangerously low.

He’d managed to get into his mother’s laptop at one point – she’d never been one for password security – and at least it seems like he’s not actively being hunted for. No wanted postings, no news reports, nothing. Only a little footnote in an online newspaper about a gang altercation in the warehouse district. There’s no comments under the one-paragraph article. Nobody cares.

Sehyoon doesn’t know whether to thank Junhee for it or not. He’s not sure if he wants to know, doesn’t want to think about how easily murder can be covered up. That if he’d have been killed, people would have cared just as little.

If he’d died killing these people, would his friends have cared?

He can feel the pull of the fog again, ready to take him back to sitting on the bathroom floor wallowing in his own misery, so he leaves the house instead of engaging with it; maybe, if he spends time out, he can force himself into a better mindset. Or maybe he’ll start crying in public. Only one way to find out. (Also, he does really need food. As much as he forgets to eat sometimes, it’s been a day or two, and his stomach is exceptionally angry at him.)

With the hood of his sweater pulled deep into his face, nobody seems to be paying attention to him in the slightest. It’s reassuring, the way he gets to blend into the streets without an issue. Still, he remains wary, keeps an eye out for either police or Donghun. He’s not quite sure how Donghun
hasn’t found him yet… maybe he’d decided to give him space. Or maybe something’s wrong.

No. He can’t think about things this way. It won’t make anything better.

Sehyoon ducks into the first convenience store he sees. He ends up buying some ready-made food, something to drink, and picks up some painkillers on impulse as well. While the pills at home are probably enough, it never hurts to have variety, he figures. Just in case.

Just in case. He tries to tell himself that, but he knows this isn’t an innocent coping mechanism anymore. It never has been.

Either way, he pays with money from the cash stash under his father’s bed that he probably will never notice has been touched, then leaves, making straight for one of the narrower alleys. As much as he’s probably not being looked for right now, the wide open streets still don’t exactly put him at ease. There’s so many people, people with judging eyes, any one of which could know…

Sehyoon shudders, takes a turn into a walkway so narrow his shoulders nearly brush both walls to his sides, and freezes when he hears a dull thudding sound ahead of him.

Donghun takes a deep breath. Squeezes his hands together. Runs one through his hair. Takes another deep breath.

He shouldn’t even be so nervous, but he really, really is. After all, what do you say? Sorry I insinuated we aren’t friends? Sorry I made you feel like I didn’t want your compassion, when I really did?

Stop being a coward, he tells himself, and knocks on the door.

“Yeah?”

When Donghun pushes open the door, he sees Junhee in his desk chair as always, typing away on a keyboard, both his tablet and his phone propped up next to him. His hair is a little messy, his simple T-shirt has a crease or two. Despite everything, this is not something Donghun gets to see a lot, and he’s beginning to think it may be, in part, his own fault.

“Junhee. Can we talk for a second?”

Junhee glances at his watch. “Sure, I have a bit, come in.” He doesn’t look hurt, or distant, he mostly just looks tired, and that makes Donghun feel guiltier than anything else. It’s obvious how hard Junhee is working for their sake, even if he doesn’t often express this affection he holds out loud. He wonders when he’d come to care for the group like that. Wonders if Junhee would ever tell him.

“What is it?” Junhee prompts when Donghun doesn’t say anything at first. Donghun shrugs, clears his throat, and sits down on Junhee’s bed, immaculately made as always.

“I wanted to… apologise.”

“What for?” Junhee asks, brow creased, and he sounds legitimately confused. Like he doesn’t remember. Like it wasn’t a big deal to him.

Maybe it wasn’t?

“For being rude yesterday. About, you know. When you were worried.”
“Oh, that.” Junhee waves his hand, attention already trained back on his laptop. “That’s fine, don’t worry about it.”

Now it’s Donghun’s turn to be confused. “Are you sure? I blew you off pretty hard. I just don’t want you to get the wrong impression.”

“Yeah. It’s whatever, you were stressed, we were all in a pretty shit situation.” Even though Junhee’s tone is light, casual even, he still won’t look at Donghun, and the sound of his typing has increased in volume. “Plus, my feelings getting hurt isn’t exactly on the list of priorities. How’s your head?”

Okay, no, Donghun can deal with nonchalance, but he can’t deal with casual self-deprecation like that. Instead of answering, he marches over, grabs Junhee’s wrist, and holds it in a tight grip until Junhee is forced to look up at him, offended at his personal space being invaded like this.

“The hell? Let me go.”

Donghun just frowns. “You do know that your feelings are important, right?”

“What? Is that what you got from that?” Junhee presses his lips together, his eyes glint, and there’s irritation building under his skin. Donghun, second-guessing himself, leans back, but he doesn’t quite let go yet. “I’m fine, Donghun. Stop mothering me and go see how the others are doing.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m absolutely certain, now get out of my room,” Junhee snaps, and Donghun has no choice but to sigh and relinquish his hold on Junhee’s wrist. He’s not going to push it. He can’t, not when he doesn’t know Junhee’s breaking point.

So he leaves.

Sehyoon’s been pressed against the cold, dirty wall for close to five minutes now. He’s not sure what to do – he can’t see what’s going on, doesn’t know how many there are, what they’re doing… well. He can guess at what they’re doing. Still, if he runs, he might alert them, and if he runs in without knowing what’s going on, he might… do worse than just that. So he waits.

“Call it in,” he hears a muffled voice after what feels like an eternity of holding his breath and keeping as still as humanly possible. There’s rustling, quiet voices he can’t quite make out, then footsteps. “Is that everyone?”

“The first person scoffs. “Even if she wasn’t, who’s going to find her here? Anyway, who’s next?”

“That girl we’re supposed to keep an eye on. The Soojin one, with the two kids.” The voices quieten a little, the speakers likely walking away. “From the very top, I heard.”

“Oooh. The rich always get what they want, don’t they?”

There’s silence, then brief scuffling, followed by: “Shut up, you don’t know if she has ears anywhere…” And then they move too far for Sehyoon to understand what else they’re saying.

As soon as he feels the coast is clear, he darts out of the tiny space he’d crammed himself in, then rushes over to where he’d heard the thump. It’s a little nook carved out behind what appears to be the
back door of a restaurant; big green dumpsters line the walls, and the smell of food bites heavily with the odour of trash and decay. Also with the puddle of blood on the floor, sunken into the grooves between flagstones, glistening against the sun.

Sehyoon screws his eyes shut. Forces himself to breathe. The convenience store bag hits uselessly against his leg.

What is he supposed to do? He can’t just… he can’t call the police, but he also can’t just leave and pretend he hadn’t seen anything, can he?

Maybe… maybe he can save someone. Maybe whoever they’d attacked is still alive.

Driven by that thought, he kneels down near the puddle, then looks around. There’s some smears of it, a stray droplet or two, leading towards one of the dumpsters. Sehyoon pushes open the big lid of it, pushes aside bags of trash and loose items that he really doesn’t want to know the identity of, until he sees – hair. And more blood, and then a woman’s face, drawn and impossibly still. When he ducks down to press an ear against her chest, he can hear the sluggish beat—beat—beat of a heart that’s struggling to go on. She’s barely breathing, either, and the amount of blood leaking from a wound hidden by her hair is frankly alarming.

No worries. Sehyoon can work with this. She may be practically dead, may die in the next couple of seconds, but… he’s got this. He has to.

This time, when he wills out the light, it still burns his hands. It still makes him sick, looking at the dancing lights and knowing what they’re capable of, but right now, he’s in control: he’s healing someone, and that’s what he’s honed his power to do for a long time. This is known to him; this is comforting. Even if he ended up pouring all of himself into this body, into the wound draining it, it would still be comforting. Like coming home, almost. Like finding one’s purpose.

This is good.

The woman takes a deep breath, and her eyes snap open. Her chest arches up to meet Sehyoon’s touch, and then – then she’s coughing, spluttering, heaving, and Sehyoon slowly guides her to sit upward as she’s about to cough her lungs out.

“What…” she tries, “are they gone?”

“Yes,” Sehyoon says, as gently as he can muster, and rubs her back in soothing circles until she’s able to catch her breath again. “Do you know who they were?”

The woman shakes her head carefully, the curls of her hair bouncing with the movement. “I couldn’t see their faces. Two guys, though. Big.”

Sehyoon nods, then pulls his convenience store bag close to him. His other hand remains on her arm, feeding his energy into her body in steady pulses. There’s not much light anymore, but enough to be noticeable to the woman, who stares down in wonder.

Luckily, his purchases hadn’t touched any of the particularly gross shit in the dumpster. Still, he figures he should probably help her out. She’s a little wobbly as she moves, and has to lean against a wall, exhaustion clear in her features, but it’s a step up from being surrounded by bags of rotting trash. He hands her the juice he’d bought, which she takes with a thankful smile.

“What’d you get attacked?”

She shrugs. “I’m not sure. I do a lot of activist work, and a lot of people generally don’t like what I
say in a public setting, but nobody’s tried to kill me before.” She laughs, but it’s just a little too pitchy. Sehyoon doesn’t mention it, just lets her process at her own pace. “Activist work?” he prods instead, all of a sudden finding himself keenly reminded of Donghun.

“Civil rights, minorities, people with powers, the works. I work in a very intersectional field of interests.” She grins, then suddenly turns somber. “I guess I should be more careful from now on, huh?”

“Probably. Do you have your phone?” He takes back the empty bottle she hands him, deciding to throw it away later. “There’s a police precinct twenty minutes from here, do you think you can get a taxi to bring you?”

She nods, pats her pockets, comes up with a smartphone. “You’re not coming?” she asks, “I figure the police might want a statement from you too.”

“Ah, I…” He clears his throat. “I don’t do well with police. Actually, I’d prefer if you didn’t mention me at all, if that’s possible.”

“Well, I don’t have miraculous regeneration capabilities…” She looks down at her hands, then moves one to scratch at her head, where her wound had been. “…but I can tell them I don’t know who saved me, if that’ll work for you.”

“Yeah. Thank you.”

“No problem.” She reaches forward, takes his hand, squeezes it. “I’ve been arrested a couple times before, I know the feeling. Hopefully they’ll actually do their jobs for once now.”

Sehyoon grins to match her expression, doesn’t tell her that if the police were to arrest him, they’d very much be doing their jobs, then extricates his hand from her own. “I should be going,” he tells he, “do you want me to wait until the taxi gets here?”

“It’s fine, I’ll go wait where there’s people, who can watch me get attacked again. Hey…”

Sehyoon pauses from where he’d turned to leave. “Yes?”

“Thank you. I mean it.” When she smiles at him, it’s a little bit more watery than before. There’s a tremor to her hand; the shock is likely starting to set in now. “I don’t know what I…”

“It’s fine. No problem.” And before she can say anything else, he hurries away, her gratefulness burning red into his face. It’s a bit too much, all at once.

(He still stays close by until he hears her call a ride, then keeps an eye on her until she gets to the car and incites displeased yelling from the driver, who likely hadn’t been expecting garbage to be tracked all over his seats. She gets in, though, and they drive off in the right direction, and only then does Sehyoon let himself relax.)

And while he has no idea what he’s supposed to do now, after all this… he supposes he could start with a shower.

Donghun finds Yuchan cross-legged in front of the TV, playing tug-of-war with Frosty. Or rather, Frosty’s playing; Yuchan is yanking at the rope a little, just enough to give a bit of resistance to the rapidly growing puppy, but not enough to really look enthused by what he’s doing. It’s not like he looks bored, because Donghun doubts Yuchan could ever even be remotely bored when Frosty is
concerned, he just seems… like his heart isn’t really in it.

Donghun settles down on the couch, glances at the TV playing some sort of daytime drama, then looks down at Yuchan. “Are you watching that?” he asks, just for a way to start the conversation.

“Not really,” Yuchan replies, nonchalant, and yanks at the rope a little bit too hard: Frosty loses her balance with a little yelp, but is back at it again in no time.

“She’s probably going to be taller than all of us someday,” Donghun points out with a bit of a smile.

“Yeah.” Yuchan’s face stays impassive. He hasn’t looked up at Donghun once.

Donghun sighs.

“Okay. What’s wrong?”


“Yuchan, look at me.”

Reluctantly, Yuchan looks up at Donghun, relaxing his grip in the process. Frosty bounds over to the rest of the rope, yanking it out of his hand fully to run around with it in victory. “I’m fine,” he repeats, but he’s obviously not fine.

Donghun just raises an eyebrow and waits.

After about a minute, Yuchan deflates, then scoots closer to him, leans his head on Donghun’s knee, looking up at him. “I don’t know,” he says as Donghun’s hand instinctively comes down to scratch at Yuchan’s head.

“What do you mean?”

“I just…” Yuchan blows out a puff of air. “Sehyoon still isn’t home.”

“Do you miss him?”

“I mean, of course, but what I mean is…” Yuchan seems to be struggling with the words, as though unsure how to put them together in a way that makes sense, so Donghun doesn’t rush him, just waits until he thinks he’s ready. “You relied on me to help, you know?”

“And you helped.”

“But not enough,” Yuchan mutters into Donghun’s knee, then frowns. “I should’ve helped bring him home, but he’s still out there.”

“None of us were able to find him,” Donghun points out. He wants to add that he’s the one who should have found him, given his power and their history, but he doesn’t want to make this about himself. Still, Yuchan doesn’t have this obligation, not where he is concerned. That he helped as much as he did was already amazing, after all.

“But I just feel so useless,” Yuchan whispers, rubs at his eyes in a manner that seems more frustrated than soothing. “If I can’t even do this, then what can I do? How can I help when I…” He trails off. Shrugs. Closes his eyes. “I just want to do something for once,” he says, “something that’ll help someone. I want to be worth something.”

“Oh, Yuchan,” Donghun breathes, and sinks down from the couch, to his knees, where he can pull
him into a hug without obstruction. “Oh Yuchan,” he repeats into his shoulder, “you *are* worth something. You’re worth everything. Even if you didn’t contribute anything to the team, you’d still be worth something. You hear me?”

“Yeah,” he hears Yuchan say, but he doesn’t sound entirely convinced. It’s not like he can really blame him for it, either; he just needs to work harder to make sure he’ll understand someday.

Upstairs, he hears a toilet flush, and sees Byeongkwan emerge from the toilet. He looks down at them, the way they’re crouched on the floor, hugging, Frosty nowhere in sight; he huffs, then, and beelines straight for his room. Against his shoulder, Yuchan lets out a weary sigh.

“We’ll be alright,” Donghun tells them both. “Sehyoon is going to come home, and we’ll be fine. You’ll see.”

The empty juice bottle has been standing on the kitchen table for an hour, and Sehyoon has been staring at it for just as long. It still smells vaguely of garbage, just by virtue of them both having been in contact with it.

All things considered, it’s just a bottle. A bit of clear plastic with a bit of opaque plastic on top. But it’s also the white-knuckled grip of the woman’s hand on his arm, it’s the exhaustion swimming in his brain after expending this much energy. It’s the satisfaction of knowing he’s saved a life. And while he’s felt it before, back when they saved people as a group, it hadn’t been so… so personal. So intense.

He’s almost scared of the feeling.

Almost.

He spares one last glance at the glass door, at the yard outside, at the clumsy little burial mound he knows had been there years before. Part of him still wants to go out there, to bury himself in the earth next to Oreo, to pay back the debt of life in the only way he knows how to. But the other part… feels like there is another way after all.

At least, if his friends are willing to take him back. That’s a question he doesn’t have an answer to yet.

Well. Only one way to find out.

Junhee watches the sun slowly set behind the city, stark contrast to the buildings sprawling all the way to the horizon, phone pressed to his ear. It’s been an hour since he’d called Adley, and for no real reason anyhow, so he’s surprised they’d managed to carry a conversation this long.

Well, maybe ‘no reason’ is a bit of a lie. Maybe Junhee had felt guilty about snapping at Donghun, maybe he’d been unfocused all day thinking about his exceptional ability to shut down anyone trying to connect to him on any emotional level. Though, really, he should have shut down Donghun a long time ago if that was what he was going for.

Still, he’s a little out of it, a little uncomfortable, and talking to Adley helps him calm down sometimes, so. He’ll take what he can get.

“So,” Adley asks softly, “you think the presence of might is condemnable in itself?”
Well. Maybe she’s not exactly soothing in a traditional sense. “I’m not sure,” he admits, watching the sun set further. By now, the tendrils of red and orange are beginning to make way to blues and dusty lilacs. “All power can be used for evil.”

“And for good, like you quite clearly demonstrate.”

Junhee chuckles, though not entirely happily. “You’ll find,” he says, “that I’ve done more bad in my life than good.”

“You’ll find that I might be aware of all the bad you think you’ve done, yes.”

It’s not that he’s surprised, really, but still, her saying it out loud like that makes a thrill of anxiety shoot up his spine. He leans forward, listens to his chair creak unwillingly as it releases him. “Then you understand,” he says cautiously, “why I can’t see an imbalance of power as a good thing.”

“But why must power be given value? You did bad things, and now you’re doing good things. And don’t you think that if you gave yourself to your power fully, you could do much greater things?”

“I only do good things because I’ve learned to restrain myself,” Junhee points out, anxiety deepening into his nerves and his bones. “If I hadn’t, then I’d have destroyed so much more.”

“Like how your friend restrained himself?” Junhee stays silent. “Junhee, look. I understand why you feel this way, but you can’t keep punishing yourself forever for things you didn’t mean. You’re going to have to learn to let go if you ever want to grow as a person.”

So much for her helping him calm down, huh.

“I’ll think about it,” he mutters, though he’s not sure if he has any intention to. “Though I’m not sure you can really know what it’s like.”

“Maybe I can.” Adley laughs, seemingly relaxed as ever. “I don’t know, I just feel like if you have the power, you should do whatever must be done to better the world. No compromises.”

“I guess so,” Junhee concedes, not really in the mood to speak any more. He’s not quite sure what to make of what she’s been saying to him. It’s almost like he’s missing something, like he can’t piece it all together just yet.

In any case, Adley seems to have picked up on his discomfort, because she sighs down the line. “Well,” she continues, “I do fear I’m a little busy, so I’ll have to leave you to your devices. Let me know when your friend returns, yes?”

“Of course. Goodnight, Isabella.”

“Good, you’re finally using my name. Goodnight, Junhee. Have a nice rest.”

“You too.”

Junhee hangs up. Leans back. Exhales. Blinks up at the ceiling, then looks outside; the sun has completely set by now, the last bits of warmth having disappeared with it.

From outside his door, he hears arguing, and with a roll of his eyes, he pushes himself out of his chair. When he opens his door to look outside, Byeongkwan is in the process of angrily setting the table, putting down forks and knives with a little more force than entirely necessary. From the other side of the kitchen, Yuchan is frowning at him, a green plastic bowl clutched in his hands.
“Don’t apologise to me, okay?” Byeongkwan is saying, voice rising. “I literally could not care any less if you find him or not. I don’t want him back.”

“How can you say that, he’s our friend—”

“He lied to us, how’s that make him a friend?” Byeongkwan scowls, throws the last knife on the table, and crosses his arms in front of his chest. “He left us to deal with his mess, and you call him a friend? That’s ridiculous. Please.”

“But…” Yuchan opens his mouth, closes it, tries to come up with something to say. Instead, he looks over Byeongkwan’s shoulder at Junhee. Byeongkwan follows his gaze, sees Junhee, and shakes his head. “You know what,” he says, “you guys have fun with dinner, I’m not hungry.” And he stomps back to his room before either of them can say anything.

Yuchan steps forward and gently sets the salad bowl on a counter. “Sorry,” he says, “I shouldn’t have talked to him about it.” He bows his head, and Junhee wants to reach out, to comfort, which is an impulse he’s repressed so often it feels alien to him now. Instead of giving in to it, he clears his throat, then steps up to the table and starts righting the mess Byeongkwan has made of the table setting. From Yuchan’s cautious smile, he takes it as enough of a sign.

Byeongkwan shuts the door behind himself, perhaps louder than necessary, and leans against it with the weight of his entire body. The anger still lies hot in the pit of his stomach, makes him want to shake apart, to punch something, to tear his hair out from the uncomfortable warmth in his face and his hands and his chest. His fingers shake. His breath rattles in his chest.

He grits his teeth. Balls his hands into fists until his knuckles are bone-white and he can feel the bite of his fingernails in his skin. There’s frustrated tears building up behind his eyelids, but – he can’t cry. He won’t let himself. Not over Sehyoon of all fucking people.

Honestly, if someone asked him what he was feeling, or how, or why, he’d have no idea. All he knows is the heat burning in him, all he knows how angry he is, how betrayed, how disappointed, how he’d gladly tear into Sehyoon right now if he could, but how he doesn’t want to see his face for at least another month.

It’s difficult, and none of the others seem to understand, and he just doesn’t know why. Why aren’t they angry? Why aren’t they furious? Why aren’t they demanding Sehyoon to stand for his actions, to live by his mistakes, why aren’t they telling him to just come back and face the fucking music?

Why aren’t they telling him to go far away and atone by himself?

Why don’t they agree when Byeongkwan says what they all should be feeling? That Sehyoon isn’t a friend? Because if he really had been a friend – really, truly, had seen them as such – then he’d have told them.

Right?

Since it impacts them, right? Did Sehyoon really just not care about how they’ll live with this? Did Sehyoon think it doesn’t matter, that it’s okay to let people grow close to him like this?

To let Byeongkwan fall in love like this?

Not that he’s really in love, not that that really matters. Not that he should be even feeling this anymore, this core of affection, when Sehyoon doesn’t even care enough to let him know who he
really is, what he can really do.

They deserve to know. They deserve to not have things hidden from them when it could impact their daily lives. He deserves to know what he’s in for. It’s only fair.

So why don’t they agree? Why don’t they see it? If Byeongkwan suddenly starts lying to them, impacting results every time they fight, plan, rescue someone, would that be okay too? Or is it just because it’s Sehyoon?

Byeongkwan swallows heavily, lets himself fall back on his bed, and screams into his pillow. It used to bring relief, to help release all the awful poisonous tendrils all bottled up in his chest and stomach and lungs, but now it just makes him feel worse as his vocal cords grate against each other. His throat is too dry; it makes him cough, curl up into a ball, hug his chest as he coughs and coughs and goes nowhere.

He just doesn’t know anywhere. Sehyoon is this hard, confusing knot in between his ribs, always there, always present, but he can’t make any sense of it. Of himself. And if he doesn’t know how he feels, how could anyone else? But isn’t exactly this what Donghun does?

And why isn’t Sehyoon home yet?

And why isn’t he on the other side of the country yet?

He rolls over onto his back, stares at the ceiling. There’s a single glow-in-the-dark star still stuck up there, from when Yuchan had bought a 20-pack and distributed them around everyone’s rooms. He knows Junhee had taken his down immediately and changed the password to his room, and that Sehyoon’s and Donghun’s are still up somewhere. His own have fallen one by one, and he hasn’t gotten around to sticking them back up. Instead, only little balls of white adhesive on the ceiling show him the constellations the stars used to make up.

He’s not sure if he could put it all back together like it used to be, even if he tried.

No, this introspection doesn’t suit him. It’s easier to be angry, easier to give himself to the loud noise in his head than to actually stop and think, because—

–because truthfully, thinking hurts—

–because he misses Sehyoon, misses him so much he could burst—

–because he feels weak, and he’d told himself he’d stop being weak after he saw his parents on the other side of the visitation room.

No more, he tells himself, and resists the urge to throw something through the window.

Later, Donghun calls them all to dinner.

Byeongkwan goes, because maybe he wants to not be angry for ten minutes.

Junhee goes, because maybe he wants to be sure he’s making the right decisions.

Yuchan goes, because maybe he wants to make sure he isn’t losing his only family.

And when they’re just about to finish up, the doorbell rings, a shrill sound cutting into the, for the first time in a while, amicable silence between them.
Immediately, they’re all on their feet, like a particularly scared flock of hens. They all look at each other, unsure despite the knee jerk reaction; what do you do here? What do you do with this?

None of them move for a bit; then the bell rings again, and Donghun springs into action. “Stay here,” he tells the rest, then cautiously approaches the door, then pulls it open.

Sehyoon looks back at him, and in that moment, Donghun feels something in him give way; he has to grip the doorframe so his legs won’t disappear from under him. “You’re okay,” he breathes. “You’re alive.”

Sehyoon looks down at his hands. Turns them over. Pulls his clothes tighter over his now significantly slimmer frame. “Yes,” he answers, “I am.”

Then he looks over Donghun’s shoulder and meets three pairs of eyes, notices Yuchan’s bottom lip tremble, the way he looks ready to fight or bolt. Immediately, he goes to take a step back, then another one, but Donghun catches his hand before he can flee again, pins him with a look so fiercely searching that Sehyoon can’t help but allow him in. Donghun brings up the hand he’s holding, looks at it, sees the way Sehyoon had rubbed them raw in the shower, sees the red skin, the dried little beads of blood in the cracks. He sighs.

“Come on,” he says, gently, “let’s get you cleaned up.”

He leads Sehyoon past the rest of them, then to the stairs. They ascend it in silence, the sound of their footsteps loud, grating on his ears.

Nobody says anything until they’ve reached the top, like the entire room is holding its breath. Then–

From the corners of his eyes, Sehyoon sees Byeongkwan step forward.

“Are you serious?”

Donghun sighs, but he doesn’t stop. “Come on–”

“No, seriously, stop,” Byeongkwan says, and his voice is rising in volume. “Are you kidding me? He just gets to come back like nothing happened?”

“Byeongkwan. Not now–”

“No, now is great for me!” Byeongkwan takes one more step, and the tips of his shoes hit the first step of the stairs. “He doesn’t even say anything, and you take him back just like that? Like it’s easy?” He’s seething now, but his eyes are trained only at Donghun, drilling into his form. Like Sehyoon doesn’t matter in this equation. (He supposes he really doesn’t. Not right now, anyway.)

“We’ll talk about this later,” Donghun says firmly, then drags Sehyoon to the bathroom. Closes the door behind them. Flicks on the light. “I’m sorry,” he tells him, “he hasn’t been doing well lately.” None of us have, is what he doesn’t say, but Sehyoon hears it just as clearly.

“I’m…” he begins, not sure what to say, how to vocalise all the words in his head and on his tongue, but before he can even try, Donghun pushes him to sit on the lid of the toilet, then rummages around for a first aid kit.

“It’s alright,” he says as he rubs ointment into the space between Sehyoon’s thumb and pointer finger. “Everyone’s on edge. It’ll get better.”
“Is it? Will it?” Sehyoon sighs, leans back, stares at the lightbulb set into the white ceiling. “Did I do the right thing by coming back?”

Donghun hums. “That depends.” He looks up, then, and their eyes meet. “Why did you come back?”

Sehyoon mulls this over.

“I want to help save lives,” is what he decides on. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to make what I did okay, but I need to feel like I’m doing something. I want to do good.”

“Then you did the right thing,” Donghun says simply, and closes the little red tin box. “You’re all good. Do you want to get some rest?”

The static behind Sehyoon’s forehead hums at him, and he nods, suddenly feeling exhausted and like he could sleep for a night and a day. Donghun nods in return, helps him up, and leads him out of the bathroom and to his room over the balcony. Sehyoon can see everyone else downstairs, can see Byeongkwan staring at him, the fire in his eyes dulled but still present. And he stops.

“Donghun.”

“Yes?”

“I can’t not explain to them.”

“Yes, but you can do that later. You need to rest.” Donghun tries to nudge him forward, but Sehyoon shakes his head, puts his hands on Donghun’s.

“Not now,” he tells him, and turns to go downstairs.

Donghun follows him, obviously unhappy about how this is going, but he doesn’t try to hold him back when he goes over to sit at the kitchen table. Somehow, the couch seems too cozy for this talk.

Junhee, Yuchan, and Byeongkwan all look at him. They don’t move. Behind him, Sehyoon can feel Donghun squeeze his shoulder comfortingly.

“I’m sorry,” he begins, “for not telling any of you. I thought I’d never have to bring it up. I… I didn’t want to have to. I never intended for… you know.” He shrugs weakly. Stares at his hands. Resists the urge to pick at his fingers, but only barely. “I don’t expect you to take me back like nothing happened, but if you have any questions, I can answer them for you.”

On the other side of the length of the table, the three stand like a jury, and suddenly Sehyoon keenly regrets his decisions. All of them, foremost agreeing to Donghun’s stupid plan all those months ago, when he’d first approached him with the idea of helping people. He should’ve known it would never work out for him, entertaining heroic notions like that. It could never, this is not where he belongs, this is not what he deserves. He’s not made for it. Never has been.

“I don’t have any questions,” Byeongkwan spits, all acid and spite, and goes to leave, but Yuchan catches his elbow. Says something quietly that Sehyoon thinks is ‘just give him a chance’. He’s not sure.

He can’t say this doesn’t hurt, but it is the bed he made for himself. So it’s fine. It has to be.

Byeongkwan stays, though seemingly incredibly unwillingly, and Junhee clears his throat. He comes and sits down, which actually does wonders for making Sehyoon feel a little better. Who knew
Junhee would ever be the most comforting presence in any situation?

“So. What can you do?” Junhee asks, maybe a little awkwardly. It’s hard to open a conversation that has the deaths of twelve or so people behind it, after all. Sehyoon remembers the actual number clearly, yet at the same time not at all, all the bodies like a hazy, melted pile in his mind.

“I…” He rubs his hands together. “I’m a battery, essentially, just with the energy of other people. I can take it, and I can give it. If I give it, it typically focuses on supplying their natural healing process with resources. If I take it, and if I take too much, well.” He shrugs. “You’ve seen what happens then.”

“Can you control it?”

“Usually?” He huffs a dry laugh. “I just guess I’ve been exerting myself too much. Made my body starve for energy. That and the high intensity…” Behind Junhee, Byeongkwan flinches, mouth set in a tight line. Sehyoon catches his eyes for a brief second, but breaks contact before he can see what’s there in his face. He doesn’t want to know. He can’t know, rather. In most ways, he is still a weak man, and he doesn’t think he can face the disdain Byeongkwan undoubtedly has for him.

“Did Donghun know?” Yuchan asks. Sehyoon tilts his head back just in time to see Donghun nod at them. “He helped me figure out the healing part of it,” he supplies, “when I was younger, I only knew how to take, not how to give.”

“Right.”

Junhee sighs. “Everyone should get some sleep. Will you still be here tomorrow?”

Sehyoon nods, then hesitates. “If I’m allowed to.”

Nobody really says anything for a moment, then Yuchan nods. “Of course you are,” he offers somewhat timidly; it’s not exactly reassuring, but appreciated either way. Still – when he leaves for his room, he knows he’s leaving awkward silence behind.

This is going to take a long time.

When Sehyoon wakes up in the middle of the night, gasping for breath, he sees Byeongkwan standing in front of the closed door. The light of the moon, filtering through a slight crack in between the curtains, hits his form, outlines his crossed arms, furrowed brow, clenched jaw. Sehyoon doesn’t know how long he’d been there; he sits up, drags a hand through his hair, blinks the sleep out of his eyes. “Hey,” he says, and his voice is rough and gravelly.

Byeongkwan doesn’t say anything. Briefly, Sehyoon wonders if this is a dream – he’s never known him to be so silent before. So still. It’s like he’s barely even moving. “Are you okay?” he tries.

Byeongkwan still doesn’t say anything, but he huffs out a breath quietly. He looks… Sehyoon’s not sure. Defensive, maybe? Angry? Sad? That last one might just be projection. All of it might be, actually. He’s never been the best at reading people, he’s been told.

“Byeongkwan…?”

“I know they all want to pretend nothing happened,” Byeongkwan says, then, “but I can’t do that. You can’t just come back with a half-assed explanation and expect everything to go on like before. That’s not how this works.”
“I never said it was.” Sehyoon pulls his legs to his chest, pats the bed next to him, but Byeongkwan doesn’t sit. “You have every right to be angry.”

“Do I, though?” Byeongkwan laughs, a harsh, bitter, mean sound. “When I didn’t have a right to know who you are?”

“My power alone doesn’t define who I am—”

“But it does, doesn’t it? At least a little bit? Like how this—” Byeongkwan shakes his hand so fast it disappears into a vaguely skin-coloured blur, “—is part of me? You can’t just not tell people you want to be your friends, if you’ve ever even wanted us to be that!”

“Of course I want you to be my friends, but I don’t think—”

“Have you seen Donghun stay up at night?” Byeongkwan asks, and he’s nearly boiling with it now, blushing an angry, blotchy red all the way down to his shoulders. “The way he tries to make sure none of us get hurt? Have you seen Yuchan trust us? Did you not…” This is where he loses steam, but he barrels on regardless, “did you not listen when I told you I trusted you? Were you just going to play me until you had enough? Was it funny to you?”

This… this sudden personal turn, this sharp emotional change, it catches Sehyoon entirely on the wrong foot, and he can feel himself bristling, because does Byeongkwan really think he’s capable of that? Is that what he’d imagined all along? “Nothing about this is very funny to me,” he stresses. “You seem to be taking it pretty lightly, though.”

“Oh really? Did the nightmares give it away? The trauma, maybe? The guilt? Tell me, Byeongkwan,” and he’s getting out of bed now, the cool surface of the floor an anchor, “am I laughing?”

Byeongkwan musters him, chin stiffly held high, and Sehyoon feels like he’s not really seeing anything at all. “Why are you back?” he asks instead of giving an answer. Always on the offensive, always attacking, Sehyoon’s really not in the right mind to deal with this.

“Because I want to help people,” he says.

“Should have thought of that earlier, then,” Byeongkwan mutters to himself, and that’s what really breaks him.

“You think I haven’t?” he asks, voice louder now, more demanding, “you think I haven’t struggled with myself every day? Do you even know what it’s like to feel like you’re inherently evil? Like you can destroy everything you touch?”

“Don’t be dramatic—”

“I killed my dog when I was like twelve, Byeongkwan,” and oh, he’s yelling now, but he can’t take it back, “buried in the backyard and all, just because I couldn’t control myself! Because of what I was born as! Fucking excuse me for not parading that around for everyone to see!”

“While I get to bleed out on your back and tell a sob story about how my family abused me? You’re just hiding because you have the option to, and it’s unfair!”

“Unfair? I don’t owe you—”

“You let me fall for someone I don’t even know anymore!”
“Is that what this is really about? You’re accusing me because of your feelings?” Sehyoon can’t even muster the energy to be shocked, or think about the implications of this, not through the acid biting through his throat. “How selfish can you be?”

Byeongkwan takes a half-step back, something like hurt flashing over his features, and Sehyoon has a second to feel guilt deep in the pit of his stomach until his face hardens again. “Not as much as you,” he retorts, and then grabs behind him to take ahold of the door handle. “I wish you hadn’t come back,” he says then, quiet, voice hoarse from yelling, and yet that sentence is louder than anything else he’d said all night. Sehyoon wants to answer, to say something, anything, just to have the last word, but Byeongkwan leaves before he has the chance.

He looks out the window. Contemplates, with his heart still beating at the back of his throat, with lungs too big, squeezed by his ribcage, with static at the edges of his vision.

When he brings his hands up to his face, they’re shaking. Itching. He could swear they’re still stained a light red, if he just looks closely enough.

“What am I supposed to do,” he asks the moon, tries to catch its rays in between too-thin fingers.

It doesn’t answer.
Chapter End Notes

glox's twitter and cc
xelin's twitter and cc
metanoia

Chapter Summary

metanoia;
(n.) the journey of changing one's mind, heart, self, or way of life

Chapter Notes

we're not dead! fancy that! :D
i would like to sincerely apologise for the delay, though. things didn't... Go As Planned
so i wasn't able to write for a bit. i hope you're all still with us tho hehe
no new warnings!

Despite everything, the sun rises all the same.

No black sky, no spontaneous solar eclipse. No unscheduled Armageddon. Just Donghun, a cloudless sky, and some birds somewhere far below his window.

For a second, he wishes the weather could actually reflect his state of mind, because it just does not feel very fitting to think of all that... well, that happened, while his floorboards are being softly warmed by daylight. Then again, he wishes he could just take the day as it is. Change his circumstances to reflect it.

Well. He may not have that kind of power, but he can at least do something to take his mind off the screaming match he’d unfortunately had to listen in on last night. Not that he’d wanted to. They just weren’t all that quiet. Either way, he can’t dwell on it now; he might talk to them about it later, but right now breakfast is in order. All else can come after he feels a bit more like a human.

As he sets the table, the others start trickling in, alerted by the noise he’s making in the kitchen. Sehyoon does not join them, which is not much of a surprise; Byeongkwan does, however, which does make Donghun raise an eyebrow. Not that he says anything out loud. Instead, he just sets the table, then waits for everyone to start in on their eggs before he starts eating.

It’s painfully quiet, like a blanket over the sounds of scraping cutlery and chewing. It feels uncomfortable.

So much for breakfast making everything better.

After a while of this, Yuchan quietly clears his throat.

“So,” he ventures, after a glance up to where Sehyoon’s door is, “is it okay if I ask you something?”

Donghun hesitates, then carefully sets down his fork and knife, arranging them neatly on his plate. “Sure,” he says, once it looks perfect. It’s taken him a minute. Nobody calls him on it.
“You were friends before the group, right?”

“Right.” He nods to himself. “We… well, we met a while before I even had the idea to be a vigilante and all that.” When he looks up, they’re all looking at him; two attentively, Byeongkwan like he’s just bitten into a lemon. “He used to work at a convenience store back then. Still lived at his parents’ house. I came by to buy snacks a lot, and we got to talking.”

“That sounds kinda anticlimactic,” Junhee points out. Donghun huffs, stretches his arms out towards the ceiling as he falls back in his seat.

“I suppose it kind of is? We got to talking once we figured out we both had powers, and it just kind of went from there. He helped me plan all this, the vigilante group and the things around it, though if you hear him tell it, it had always been a horrible idea with no security or sense. I guess he was right, but he helped anyway.” Because that’s who Sehyoon is: needlessly selfless in most cases, even when it’s to his own detriment. It’s part of what got them in this whole mess to begin with.

Still, Yuchan doesn’t seem quite satisfied – gnawing at his bottom lip in a gesture of insecurity until his eyes meet Donghun’s. “Yesterday…”

Next to Yuchan, Byeongkwan stiffens.

“…He said something about a dog, and…”

Wood scrapes against wood as Byeongkwan pushes himself away from the table a tad too forcefully. “I’m leaving,” he mutters, not even bothering to fish for an excuse as he beats his retreat, and not ten seconds later the door to his room slams shut.

Junhee and Donghun sigh in near-unison.

“...He said something about a dog, and…”

Donghun still remembers the day Sehyoon had told him about it. They’d been trying out a meditation technique Donghun had found through a bit of research, trying to get Sehyoon’s head cleared and his energies balanced or whatever. Truthfully, neither of them were experts or anything, but trying this was better than not doing anything at all. After all, Sehyoon needed a way to control his power, give him a way to not suck the energy out of anything he’d randomly touch.

“Are you sure this’ll work?” Sehyoon asked him, frowning down at his legs that he’d somehow pretzeled under his body, sitting on a rug in the back room. They were still in their work and outside clothes respectively, and being surrounded by cartons of lychee drinks didn’t exactly make for a very professional meditation environment.

“If it doesn’t, it just won’t do anything,” Donghun decided with a shrug. “It won’t really hurt you, unless you pull a muscle.”

“Which is a very valid concern,” came a whine from Sehyoon. “My legs will freeze like this and then I’ll get fired and die on the streets.”
“Oh, shush.” They looked at each other for a beat, then both dissolved into giggles. It was a weird situation, all things considered. “I’ll buy you yoga pants if you make it through this,” Donghun promised him after they’d quieted down, and for some reason that seemed to be incentive enough for Sehyoon to straighten up and at least try.

All in all, it was a pretty good session where Donghun was concerned.

Once they were done, Sehyoon starfished out on the ground, limbs all askew and face serene. It’d gotten properly dark now; they’d stayed late after Sehyoon had closed up, so it would have been far into the evening by now. Still, neither felt like moving in a rush.

“You know the picture I carry with me that you asked me about?” Sehyoon asked out of seemingly nowhere. Donghun frowned, thought back to his wallet he’d shown him before, nodded. “Yeah. Why?”

“That’s Oreo. She used to be our dog.” Sehyoon went quiet for a bit, then sighed. “My dog, specifically. My parents were too busy to really care for her at all.”

“Right.” Donghun remembered this, recalled a couple throwaway comments of Sehyoon’s parents being in this country and on that skiing trip. He’d figured they weren’t the most present at best.

“I…” Sehyoon bit his lower lip, and Donghun couldn’t help but reach out to squeeze his bicep. Let him know it’s okay. “When I was what, nine years old? I think? I was upset about something I can’t really even remember very well.” Sehyoon drifted off, then, lost in thought.

“Upset?” Donghun gently prompted, and saw Sehyoon bodily pull himself together to continue. “I was upset, and she was trying to comfort me, and I…” He started hunching in on himself, then, squeezing one hand with the other, gnawing at the inside of his cheek, and Donghun had no idea what to do but sit and listen. “I accidentally took…” A deep breath. “I didn’t even notice until she was. Well. Not moving.” His hands stilled, but Donghun could see the way his nails dug into the flesh of his palm, likely hard enough to leave indents.

“Oh.”

“Buried her in the backyard later. Told my parents she’d ran away. We put up one or two wanted posters, but it was obvious they didn’t really care.” He shrugged, clearly trying hard to maintain a neutral expression. Before he was able to start explaining his feelings away as usual, Donghun shuffled over to put one of his hands on Sehyoon’s leg, stroking his thumb up and down softly. Almost immediately, Sehyoon deflated. “That’s why I don’t trust myself with all of this,” he explained quietly, voice a little hoarse. “I just can’t bear that happening again.”

“It won’t,” Donghun responded, and in that moment swore to himself to keep his word. He would never let Sehyoon go through anything like that again.

And now, the present Donghun who’d failed to keep his promise to both himself and his friend finds himself looking up at a very determined-looking Yuchan.

“...Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s great,” Yuchan chirps, and stands up to bring his plate and cup to the sink. “I have stuff to do, but thanks for telling us!” Even as he talks, he’s already making his way up the stairs to the bathroom, picking up Frosty in the process.

Donghun frowns.
“Did I say something?”

“Who knows with him,” Junhee tells him, and there’s the tiniest little hint of a smile there that Donghun would never have expected to see, even a month ago. “He probably means well though, whatever it is he’s up to.”

“Yeah.” At least Donghun can be secure in that much. “Come on, help me with the dishes.” And if he’s planning to accidentally splash Junhee with dish water, he doesn’t have to find that out.

Sehyoon sleeps in late.

That’s neither new nor surprising. Though, ‘sleep’ is kind of a misnomer – mostly it’s just him laying awake punctuated with brief bouts of napping. Nobody can really blame him for that, he doesn’t think. Rest doesn’t come easily in the situation he’s in.

Also, even if he’s awake, he doesn’t really want to leave his bed. If he runs into Byeongkwan today, he’ll probably do something stupid. Like punch him. Or cry. Because he may have let himself be engaged yesterday, but nobody’s ever said he isn’t a weak person with a weak heart for actual conflict.

He’s incredibly content to just lay there and ignore his need for food when someone knocks at his door. Sehyoon figures he could ignore it, it’s probably just Donghun or Yuchan wanting to tell him to eat something, but the knocking persists no matter how often he turns around in his bed or presses his face into the pillow.

Whoever it is knocks again.

And again.

Christ.

“What?” Sehyoon groans as he hoists himself up – with considerable difficulty, considering how much his arms feel like half-cooked spaghetti from how long he’s been in bed. He makes it to the door, yanks it open uncaring of what a mess his entire room must look like to anyone not accustomed to all the stuff accumulated on his floor, and squints.

Yuchan stands in front of him, Frosty in his arms in an approximation of a bridal carry. She’s even bigger now, looks like she’s almost going to pour out of his hold like very fluffy liquid. Yuchan’s visibly struggling a bit to keep her up, but all she does is pant happily, blink up at him, tongue lolling out of her mouth. Loving as always. (Because she can’t know better.)

Sehyoon looks away.

“What do you want?” he asks, and frowns at the way his voice catches in his scratchy throat. He kind of just wants to go back to staring at the ceiling again.

“I wanna show you something,” Yuchan says, so brightly he can almost hear the grin in his voice, “come on.”

“I don’t…”

“Please?”
And when has Sehyoon ever been good at refusing Yuchan’s wishes?

“Sure,” he mumbles, follows Yuchan to… the bathroom? The light is on, and the bathtub is filled a third of the way with clear water. There’s squeaky toys floating in the water.

Huh.

Before Yuchan can really say anything, Sehyoon leans over the sink to inspect his own face, swollen and exhausted-looking as it is. His hair is an absolute mess from him not having bothered to shower since a couple days ago, which definitely adds to his cave gremlin aesthetic. Overall, he unironically looks better than he did just last week.

He looks down at his hands.

For just a split-second, the stuff under his fingernails becomes crusted, red, stains his skin and his arms and eyes and–

Carefully and methodically Sehyoon grasps the faucet. Opens it. Holds his hands under the water, adds some soap, scrubs his hands until everything under his fingernails is washed away.

He takes a breath, turns the faucet off.

Turns it back on. Repeats the process. Hesitates. Repeats it again. He’ll stop after this one, he thinks, then stares at the water blankly, pauses, then does it again.

A warm touch on his forearm startles him out of his trance so abruptly that he actually feels dizzy for just a second.

“Sehyoon,” Yuchan says gently, “it’s fine. Your hands are clean, see?” He takes one of Sehyoon’s hands in his own as he shifts Frosty’s weight to his other hip, brings it up for him to see. And Yuchan is right; the only redness he can see is the slow reddening of his own skin. He frowns. Had he really done this for that long? It’s not like he has to do it, it just kind of happened this way and…

“Ah,” he says very intelligently. “Anyway.” He dries off his hands, a little more uneasy than before. “What is it you wanted?

“Frosty’s due a bath,” Yuchan explains.

“Okay? And?”

“I want you to help me bathe her.”

Immediately, the cold clamps around Sehyoon’s gut again, and he takes a step back. “No,” he says, already shaking his head, “I’m not going to do that. I can’t–”

Yuchan catches one of his hands; he’d let down Frosty, who immediately takes to splashing around in the water and testing out the toys in it. “Sehyoon,” he says, and the intensity of his gaze makes Sehyoon feel something funny in his chest. “Donghun told us about it.”

“Then why would you ask me this?” he retorts, pulling his hand free. “Aren’t you concerned for Frosty’s safety?”

“Hm.” Yuchan ponders this, then shrugs. “Not really.”

“Why the hell not, then?”
“I trust you,” Yuchan says simply, and Sehyoon halts his backwards retreat. “Even if you didn’t tell us everything, you’re still our friend. Besides, things have changed from when you were a child, so...” He bends over the tub to get a bottle of dog-friendly shampoo, patting Frosty’s head in the process. “I trust you. And I want you to trust yourself.”

Sehyoon’s... not sure what to say.

He’s not sure what to think either, to be honest. Just the concept of having to be this close to Frosty for an extended period of time makes him vibrate with anxiety, but... but they’re both looking at him with that expression, and maybe he just wants to be around someone for a change?

Why are feelings this complicated?

Carefully, gingerly, Sehyoon steps forward, then sinks to his knees next to the bathtub. He only sticks out one hand at first, extends a finger until Frosty’s fur is almost tickling the tip of it.

Frosty yaps at him, dark eyes focusing on the hand; then she leans forward and butts her nose against his palm, the cool skin making Sehyoon jump. Frosty just looks up, and if she were human, she’d probably be grinning right now.

This feels... not quite as bad as Sehyoon had feared. Nobody’s died yet, and while he is more than a little taut with anxiety, the swirl of energy inside him behaves itself well enough. So carefully, slowly, he puts his other hand on top of Frosty’s head to ruffle the fur there.

Frosty grins.

Might as well, huh?

“Where’s the shampoo you use?” he asks, and the way Yuchan’s face lights up is worthy to rival each and every star out there.

(This doesn’t mean the trauma is cured; he’s aware of that, and presumably Yuchan is as well. But it’s a step, if nothing else. A good one.)

(Though other steps have yet to follow, and sooner rather than later.)

Junhee’s wrists hurt.

That’s not uncommon these days; whenever he types too much, they get stiff and achy, so he has to take a break to stretch them a bit. He’s technically still in his early twenties, and yet he feels like an old man whenever his body starts complaining at him.

He briefly lets himself contemplate the possibility that he’s overworking himself, then promptly dismisses it. There’s work that needs doing, and it doesn’t matter if he wants to whine about it or not. All that matters is he does it. (Even if he’s running on only three hours of sleep from staying up all night monitoring police channels, whilst also balancing accounts and checking in on revenue sources. Whoever said multitasking could help complete tasks faster hadn’t tried having as many of those as Junhee does these days.)

Either way. He’s immersed in skimming news sources for mentions of any more suspicious deaths – nothing new in the past couple of days, which is surprisingly alarming – when the door creaks open.
needed to regret it, though maybe that regret starts now.

Junhee looks up to see Sehyoon cradling a medium-sized potted plant in his arms. He ducks through the doorway, and Junhee, sufficiently reassured that nothing’s going to be broken in the foreseeable future, goes back to his research.

“Uh.” He hears Sehyoon shuffle his feet. “I have a question.”

“Yeah?” On second thought, he hasn’t been finding anything useful anyway, so Junhee minimises the tab and gives Sehyoon a quick once-over. There’s foam stuck on his left sleeve, and long white strands of what is rather unmistakably Frosty’s hair.

Huh. Well, that’s a development.

“Go on,” Junhee says, and takes this time to rub his wrists as he watches Sehyoon heft the pot up. His hands are red and rough-looking, now that Junhee gets a better look at him, the skin cracking like Junhee’s when he ate things as a kid despite having allergies. Sehyoon doesn’t have any allergies that he can think of. Weird.

“I… bought plants for the loft.”

“Yeah?”

“But I bought a couple too many for the common area. Do you maybe want this one?”

Junhee doesn’t really get why Sehyoon is so apprehensive over this. Regardless, he’s about to decline, but… thinking about it, his room is a little bare, isn’t it? Though that’s by design more than anything. But with the things that have been happening, maybe he should rethink his design choices a little bit?

Not too much, though. The anime box stays firmly under his bed. A plant is probably tolerable. “Sure,” he shrugs, and leans back in the chair that he still needs to replace. “Just put it down somewhere.”

“Alright.” Sehyoon twists around a bit, trying to take the whole room in, then comes over to put the pot on the ground next to where Junhee’s desk is. “There’s a card in there,” he points out, “but basically you have to water it twice a week, and ideally give it a shower once a month. That’s about it, really.”

Junhee nods to acknowledge that, observes Sehyoon as he rights himself back up. Watches him hesitate in a show of indecision.

“Is there anything else?”

“Actually…” Sehyoon runs a hand through his hair, then leans his hip against the desk. “I have to talk to you about something.”

That doesn’t sound ominous at all. “Go on, then.”

“I came back because I saved someone’s life and realised that’s something I want to keep doing.” He picks up one of Junhee’s pens, fiddles with it. “I witnessed her getting attacked, and… well, it just felt weird. The attackers were talking about someone else to keep an eye on after they thought she was dead, like they were ordered to do so. I figured you might want to hear about it.”

A glance at his screen reveals nothing new in terms of information. Now that Sehyoon is telling him
this, he wonders if maybe that’s why…?

“The person I saved is an activist fighting for powered rights. They talked about having to watch someone else, but I don’t really know who. Someone called Soojin who has two children. That’s all they mentioned.”

Junhee stills.

Why does that sound like…

No. That’s silly. It can’t be that. Can it? Maybe he should make sure just in case. But if it were her, what would be the reason?

Ah. Sehyoon’s looking at him, and only now does Junhee realise he’s been digging his fingers into the wood of his table. He clears his throat, leans back in his chair. “Right, well,” he says, trying his best to present nonchalance regardless, “I’ll keep an eye out for that. Thanks for letting me know.”

“No problem.” Another moment of hesitation, then. “If there’s anything you need help with, let me know. Since I’m the one who heard about it, I feel a little…” He trails off, clearly unwilling to elaborate further, but Junhee gets it, he does. After all, being one of two people to know someone is under threat of death, would you not feel responsible for their wellbeing?

Well, maybe not death. Let’s not get rash here.

“I will,” Junhee says, and he actually means it, weirdly enough. “If you tell me who the girl you saved is, I can keep an eye on her as well. Make sure they don’t try again.” He does wonder why this story hasn’t gone public yet. Maybe because it hadn’t happened all that long ago, or maybe someone’s keeping it under wraps deliberately… either way, it means the focus of the attackers has likely not gone back on her yet.

Now, if her and the previous deaths really are connected, then why switch from anti-powered legislators to a pro-powered activist? It really doesn’t make any sense, but maybe he’s looking at this from the wrong angle. Hm.

Junhee figures Sehyoon’s noticed him sinking back into thought, since he straightens himself and clears his throat. “Thanks for listening,” he says, and then he’s out the door. The plant he’d left behind is still there, and Junhee absentmindedly reaches down to rub at one of its leaves.

It’s probably nothing to worry about, and yet…

And yet.

Byeongkwan looks down just as Sehyoon leaves Junhee’s room and heads back to the kitchen table, where he’d stacked pots filled with plants of varying sizes. He doesn’t even know how he’d carted all of this back here, and frankly he doesn’t want to know. He doesn’t need to know. Who cares about what he does.

Still, to his great frustration he finds himself leaning over the railing of the upstairs balcony a little as his eyes follow Sehyoon placing a little succulent next to the TV. He hasn’t noticed him yet, and Byeongkwan would like to keep it that way, so he doesn’t say anything. Just watches.

It’s not that Byeongkwan isn’t still angry, because he is, very much so. The biting warmth still bubbles in the pit of his stomach, still warms the tips of his ears painfully, but at the same time he is
just watching Sehyoon put plants around the place. He can’t really yell at him for that. Maybe he shouldn’t yell at him for some other things either.

Admitting you’re wrong is hard, and Byeongkwan isn’t sure he needs to do it, because he hasn’t changed his mind. But maybe he can ease up just a little bit. Just a tad. To make things easier on both of them, even if he’s not intending to rekindle their friendship.

Sehyoon looks up, then, and catches Byeongkwan’s eyes with an unreadable expression of his own, and Byeongkwan promptly flees to his room.

Or he can just never talk to him again. That works just as well.

Donghun, on his part, has been stuck in memories all day. Ever since he’d retold Sehyoon’s story about his dog earlier that day, his head had stayed in the past, in the moments he’d met the man for the first time and slowly started building a friendship with him. It’s been a while, but it feels like a couple lifetimes ago now, after everything.

Even though Sehyoon is back now, at least, he’s kind of still at a loss about where to go from here. He knows he should probably let Byeongkwan and Sehyoon work out their own issues; Yuchan seems to be taking all that’s happened surprisingly well, and Junhee… well, beyond sinking back into his workaholic ways, he’s willing enough to play along. It’s just Byeongkwan, and he has the feeling he knows what his issue is. There’s really no way to hurry that along, but at the same time it feels wrong to not do anything at all.

After all, he’s still responsible for all of this, isn’t he?

The thought alone almost makes him feel guilty, because he knows Sehyoon would never want him to think this way, but it’s true. While he wouldn’t call the events that transpired his fault directly, he could have still prevented them. Dropped hints, or made sure Sehyoon talked to him more, or… or anything.

There’s a heaviness to his conscience that feels oddly reminiscent of the feeling he had when Yuchan got hurt preventing the bank heist, only there’s more at stake than a wound now. Donghun isn’t sure how to handle that. How to handle any of this.

And yet he’s letting Sehyoon handle it alone. There’s a light gray pot holding a maidenhair fern on the floor in front of him – a new addition. Looking at it is a weird experience, happiness for Sehyoon’s gradual betterment mixed with the shameful bitterness of not doing enough himself to help him along with it.

As he ponders this, there’s a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Donghun allows absentmindedly, and only tears his eyes from the delicate little leaves when Sehyoon slips inside and closes the door behind himself. “You all done with the plants?”

Sehyoon nods, then comes to sit beside him on the floor. The boards creak a little, and Donghun wonders if you can oil wooden flooring. Probably not.

“I hope Frosty doesn’t chew them up,” Sehyoon remarks, reaching out to rub one of the leaves of the fern between his fingers. “Some of these are pretty delicate from what the store clerk told me.”

Before today, Sehyoon would never even say her name out loud. It’s a weird, if reassuring change.
“She’s not too interested in plants,” he points out, then: “I do kind of wish I’d been there to see you impulse buy all of these.”

“Well.” There’s a sheepish tilt to Sehyoon’s smile. “There’s worse things to impulse buy.”

“I guess.”

Silence.

Then a rustling of fabric, and Sehyoon’s hand squeezing Donghun’s thigh. “Are you alright?” he asks, eyes intense as if searching for something, and it makes Donghun laugh. Not out of happiness, rather a hacked-up excuse for laughter, but he can’t be bothered to try to turn it into something more appealing. Instead, he rubs at his eyes, then hangs his head.

“I should be asking you that,” he responds, and studiously avoids looking up. “After all you’ve been through.”

“I’m… well, I’m not fine, but I’m getting there.” One of Sehyoon’s hands sneaks into his view to take Donghun’s own, darker in comparison to Sehyoon’s cellar tan. “But I don’t want to talk about myself right now.”

“Well, there’s not much to say about me.”

“But there is.” There’s a sigh from Sehyoon, then his free hand is placed on Donghun’s jaw to tilt his head up. Donghun contemplates being stubborn, but he knows nothing will come of it, so he lets himself be guided until they can make eye contact. It’s kind of uncomfortable. “Talk to me,” Sehyoon tells him quietly, “I know you too well to think there’s nothing going on.”

And, well, that he does.

“I’m just tired of fucking up,” Donghun says quietly, reaching up to grab Sehyoon’s hand with his own as his eyes flit away. He’s intending to pull the hand from his face, at first, but ends up just clutching at his fingers instead. “I’m tired of shit being my fault. I just don’t want you guys to hurt anymore. You deserve better than that.”

An intake of breath as Sehyoon considers this and Donghun steels himself for the worst.

“That extends to yourself, you know?”

“What do you mean?”

“You deserve better than what you’re doing right now.” Donghun looks at him again, and Sehyoon’s face is set in a grimace that he doesn’t get to see often. He’d almost be proud, were it not such an unpleasant expression. “You did your best, alright? This isn’t your fault, it was just me being horrible and stubborn.”

“But if I’d…”

“Donghun, please don’t act like my decisions aren’t my own.” And ah, there’s a distinct note of annoyance in Sehyoon’s voice, so Donghun does the smart thing and listens for a change. “I’m not a child, you can’t micromanage me. I decided to be this stupid despite you being there for me, and the consequences are my own. You have nothing to feel guilty about. Okay?”

“I still do, though,” he replies, but the fight, or whatever there even was thereof, has long since left him. “Is it so bad that I do?”
“It is if you torture yourself with it.”

“When did you become so mature?”

Sehyoon barks a laugh. “Oh, I’m far from that, trust me. I just don’t want you to beat yourself up so much.”

That’s fair, Donghun supposes. It’s not like he can help it, and he’s not going to stop anytime soon, but at least for Sehyoon’s sake it might be best not to dwell on it so much when he can help it. What’s important now is Sehyoon’s recovery and mending the rift between him and his… he’d say friend, but whatever’s between him and Byeongkwan is a little different from that, from what he’s seen. Donghun’s own problems, unfounded as they are, would have to come later. Not to speak of the others, who might have guilt issues of their own over all of this. Nobody really comes out of something like this unscathed, and that’s the scary part. Bit by bit, Donghun feels like the burden to take care of everyone is getting too much for him.

Good thing he doesn’t have to shoulder it alone, and that there’s someone to take care of him in turn.

“No promises. Now, how was bathing the baby?”

The retelling Sehyoon launches into is more animated than usual, involving some gesturing and actual body language, and Donghun takes comfort in it, for now.
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