The Art of Knowing You

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**The Art of Knowing You**

by Crimsun

**Summary**

“I’ve seen boys like you,” Ten’s voice sounds wistful, “You’re perpetually curious.” There’s a hint of anger when he speaks, the look in his eyes shifting into something almost vengeful.

Johnny doesn’t get time to backtrack because Ten’s gaze shifts again, it’s warm when he looks back at Johnny.

“But you’re different. You’re patient. You’ll wait for forever to know.” The letter isn’t crumpling in his grip, it’s held delicately.

**Notes**

Hello world,

Johnten was my first ship in NCT. I’ve been shipping them since Rookies era and I miss them so much since SM is playing the unnecessary role of The Barrier™, so the moment this plot formed in my head, I knew I had to write it for them. So, here we are. I sincerely hope you guys enjoy. Please heed the warnings in the tag before you read. (and let me know if you want me to tag something else.)

Also, English is not my first language so proceed at your own risk.
Much love to my favorite sunflower, Bhea for staying by my side. I love you, sunshine!

Happy reading, y'all!!

See the end of the work for more notes.

The familiar, comforting scent of coffee and the residual but pleasing mixture of caramel and cinnamon wafts in as Johnny steps inside the dimly lit cafe, the door bell jingling mellifluously in his wake. The place is moderately occupied by customers, but there aren’t enough coffee lovers for the crowded and stuffy feeling of an over-thronged cafe to set in. It makes sense considering the late hours. He sidesteps a pair of college girls as he walks in, pausing to hold the door open for both of them, their hands occupied with bulky books and paper sets. One of them bows to him in gratitude, Johnny mirroring it out of courtesy.

Several tables are unoccupied, the night setting in full swing and herding the living folk back to their homes. Johnny pockets the keys dangling from his index finger and walks with intent to the lone table on the distant corner of the cafe, his favourite spot ever so pleasingly empty.

He sits down without much thought and leans against the cushion of the chair, letting the muscles in his back relax from the effort of the day, the numbers of deliveries tattooed on the back of his eyelids. He takes out his phone and is placing it on the table when his gaze falls on the little yellow sticky note stuck to the table, neat and slanted calligraphy saying “This spot is booked for our hot boss”, accompanied by a winking face.

Johnny shakes his head and pulls the note off, ambling over to the counter and slams a hand on it, the note sticking to the polished granite.

“Who?”

Donghyuck shrugs at him, face housing the most unamused expression ever, hair messy and eyes swollen. Johnny is about to ask him to go home when Doyoung struts out from the kitchen, his apron speckled with flour, the sleeves of his olive coloured shirt impeccably clean as a contrast. He takes one look at the death glare Donghyuck is levelling him and smiles wide.

“If you are talking about the note on the table, that was me. I am disgusted that you even doubted who it was, hyung,” Doyoung says, leaning forward on the counter, Donghyuck muttering under his breath about “shitty chem homeworks” and “late as fuck evening shifts”.

“You’re really embarrassing, Doyoung. You could have turned away potential customers.”

Johnny sighs and takes the note back, ignoring the smirk on Doyoung’s face.

“Chill. It’s not that deep, Mr. Seo,” Doyoung teases.

Donghyuck wobbles dangerously on his feet and Doyoung immediately huddles closer to him, a hand steadying him.

“I told you to go home, brat,” Doyoung chastises and throws Johnny a look.

“Donghyuck, go home. Take tomorrow off too,” Johnny says, reaching across the counter and ruffling the younger’s hair, the boy whining in protest, Doyoung smiling appreciatively at him.
“Don’t go dad mode on me. I just need some sleep,” Donghyuck explains, one eye drooping shut and his left hand gripping the edge tightly.

“Where’s Mark?” Johnny asks.

“He’s at the apartment. He’s coming to get him. This idiot didn’t tell him that he had a fever,” Doyoung says, concern making his eyebrows pinch into a frown in the way Johnny has gotten used to seeing.

Several minutes later filled with mindless chatter between Doyoung and him, the door bell jingles again to reveal Donghyuck’s boyfriend, his face red as if he had rushed here which Johnny is quite sure he did. Johnny offers Mark and the maknae a ride which they decline politely, hands clutching each other’s tightly.

“Call me if you need anything,” Johnny instructs when Mark shifts on his feet, waiting for Doyoung to get the extra umbrella just in case it rained on their way back home since it had been pouring intermittently throughout the day. The boy nods, Donghyuck’s face pressed against his bicep, eyes closed.

When they step outside the door, Johnny doesn’t look away, a small smile arriving on his face at the scene taking place near the entrance. Donghyuck is whining loudly as Mark takes his coat off and wraps it around the younger, eyebrows scrunched up before he leans in to press a kiss against the other’s forehead. Johnny looks away when Donghyuck stops protesting, the tension unwinding from his body at the single touch, their hands linking without so much as the slightest bit of hesitation.

The sky is particularly dark tonight, midnight blue battling charcoal black for dominance resulting in a murky and unintelligible shade shrouding the atmosphere. The cold which has accompanied the rain is a nice contrast to the warmth inside the cafe, the dim lighting setting the aesthetic. Johnny is glad that he had handed over the reins completely to Taeyong when he decided to revamp the place. The man had clearly done a magnificent job.

“I’m not giving you coffee tonight,” Doyoung says out of the blue. Johnny hears the couple at the table near the entrance leave, Doyoung waving at them with a smile he reserved for his regulars.

“I own this place,” Johnny retorts.

“Look at you pulling the boss card. That’s low.” Doyoung wags his finger in disapproval and when Johnny sighs, his gaze softens.

“I know you’re tired but coffee isn’t gonna help you, hyung. You look like a panda already with eye bags that big,” Doyoung muses, eyes raking over the plains of Johnny’s face.

“Geez, thanks,” Johnny mutters. The boy sitting at the table next to the counter, their last customer for the night gets up, pens cluttering to the ground. He leaves without a backward glance after haphazardly collecting his multi-coloured pens.

Johnny’s phone starts ringing, the slow opening beats of an R&B track filling the silence.

“Who is it?” Doyoung asks when Johnny presses accept.

“Jaehyun,” he answers when the call connects.

“Hello, hyung?” Jaehyun croaks and Johnny cringes at the wrecked voice of the younger.

“Are you sick?” Johnny enquires, standing straighter.
“Yeah. I caught the flu. I called to let you know that I can’t make it to work tomorrow. I’m sorry.” Jaehyun coughs violently into the mic and Johnny winces at the intensity, pulling his phone away from his ears.

“That’s okay. Rest well and go see a doc if the fever doesn’t break soon. I’ll handle things at work this week,” he says, feeling genuinely bad for the younger.

Doyoung snatches the phone away from him and proceeds to demand Jaehyun to give the phone to his boyfriend, Taeyong. Johnny walks away and settles down on the chair closest to the counter, Doyoung’s smooth voice aggressively instructing his fellow mother hen ally on fever remedies.

Johnny smiles at his best friend from the seat when he comes around the counter and hands him the phone.

“Cinnamon rolls?” Doyoung offers.

Johnny snorts. “You’re gonna make me fat.”

Doyoung shushes him. “It’s the good shit, hyung. I dare you to say no to the mouth-watering result of my culinary skills.”

“Right,” Johnny mumbles.

“I kept this batch away from the ones to be sold, you dick. The least you can give me is some gratitude!” Doyoung declares, walking away even before Johnny says that he wants the baked goods and returning with said delicacy packed in a white box.

Johnny opens it and hands one roll to Doyoung as a peace offering, the baker snorting after eyeing it. He settles down opposite Johnny’s seat and takes a bite of the roll just as Johnny does.

Johnny stares at the only constant in his life for the past fifteen years and finds himself unable to hold back the tug in his heart. They hadn’t met each other in a playground or a classroom or at a football game like normal childhood friends say they do. Instead they had met each other in a wooden floored room, expensive paintings and imported paraphernalia adorning the walls, Doyoung wearing a stuffy suit, standing with his hands behind his back.

Johnny’s father had introduced them, his deep and cold voice telling him that Doyoung would be his companion from then on.

“Servant for life,” He had said, voice filling the room, glaring at young Johnny standing with his t-shirt mud-stained from playing football.

Johnny remembers hating the word choice and walking out of the room, little Doyoung waddling behind him, duty-bound from that very moment. He remembers waking the boy in the middle of the night to offer him a cinnamon roll, marking the beginning of a tradition that would last for fifteen years and counting, upgrading from store-bought to self-made after Doyoung got his degree in cooking.

The clock strikes nine and Johnny can’t help the deluge of philosophy inside him. He has always been weaker in the night. Doyoung smiles at him knowingly, picking up a tissue and wiping his hands.

Johnny’s face breaks into a smile at the scene. They are two adults who have reached a place in their lives when there are no regrets, sharing a box of cinnamon rolls, way past the appropriate time to have them but not giving a damn.
“Are you gonna do the delivery tomorrow then?” Doyoung asks, leaning forward and untying the apron with his hands twisted behind his back, a relieved sigh escaping him as he takes it off.

Johnny hums and pockets his phone. “Kun and Taeil hyung already has a few deliveries scheduled. I guess I'll have to do the rest.”

Johnny had opened a delivery service soon after he received his degree in business. They did what normal delivery services did but they also did a private letter and goods service for special events, something not many people knew about, a personalized delivery service of sorts. If you wanted a cake to be delivered right as you propose to the love of your life or needed someone to wait at a restaurant holding on to a special letter for that special someone or needed someone to attend a funeral with a bouquet of your choice of flowers, their personalized delivery service was the place for you.

It had been something Johnny always wanted to do. Distance from the one person he cared about most was hard, so Johnny had gotten used to resorting to gifts when he felt particularly grateful for the other’s presence despite Doyoung’s stern protests against the little (or large) trinkets he sent him. He remembers the struggle of sending Doyoung gifts from Chicago, the delivery being a hit or miss, most of the time. Either it reached the baker after the intended date or before and rarely, on time. Even when Doyoung left to work as an assistant under one of the coffee connoisseurs in Gongju for a year, Johnny’s gifts almost always failed to reach the other on time.

Nonetheless, it was extremely frustrating and when Johnny’s gift failed to reach Doyoung on the other’s 21st birthday, Johnny had made it a mission to begin a delivery service when he was done with college. He hadn’t done it solely for him but Doyoung had acted as the extra push Johnny needed to finally accomplish what he had always wanted to.

They only had three people working for the special delivery since demands were understandably low for the service. Taeil, Kun and Jaehyun all had online jobs so it was very convenient for them to work with Johnny. Johnny made sure that they were paid well too. After all, his father had left him a fortune, even if he didn’t want any of it. There were other staff that did the normal delivery but none of them were part of Johnny’s inner circle, keeping a solely professional relationship with them.

Doyoung snaps his fingers in front of him, and plops down on the seat, Johnny not having registered when exactly the man got up and left.

“You are the boss, Johnny. You should consider hiring someone else for the special delivery,” Doyoung suggests, having returned with two mugs of hot chocolate in the time Johnny took to reflect back on the past.

Johnny shakes his head and takes a sip from the drink, the warm drink moving down his throat soothingly.

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“Maybe someday in the future when I can’t handle it between the four of us but for now, things are fine the way they are.” Johnny takes another sip.

“Taeyong hyung said that a food critic from Seoul Mail wants to write a review on your restaurant,” Doyoung says, changing the topic.

“Yeah. It’ll be good exposure,” Johnny replies before he eyes Doyoung with a serious look.

“You could still work there, Doyoung-ah. You don’t have to stay here and bake and brew coffee all your life,” Johnny offers.
“I’ll pass,” Doyoung answers like he always does, politely letting him down, rising to his feet with his mug cradled in his hand.

Johnny follows the other to the kitchen, the conversation continuing like it never paused.

It’s drizzling a little when Doyoung locks up the cafe, the water drops hitting the awning and gliding to the ground gracefully. It’s much colder than when Johnny arrived, a full body shiver overtaking him. He regrets ignoring Kun’s advice to wear a jacket.

“What? Johnny asks, Doyoung’s teeth chattering but he shakes his head in a negative in response.

“I drove today.”

Johnny nods in understanding, the water refracting as it slams the ground and soaking the lower part of his jeans the more he stands there.

Doyoung’s phone pings with a notification, the younger man’s usual composure shattering as he smiles widely at the screen.

“What?” Johnny asks, already knowing the answer.

“Jungwoo went to get groceries for dinner and it started raining. Long story short he asked if I could go pick him up,” Doyoung says, smiling too much for a man who is shivering in the rain but enough for a man who is completely whipped.

“Go get him then. I’ll catch you later, Doyoung-ah.”

Hugging with the umbrella is hard. Even then they make it work somehow but not without a few stray rain drops soaking them. Doyoung ambles over to his silver sedan, his silhouette lit from the light emitting from the convenience store opposite the cafe.

Johnny waves at his best friend, watching Doyoung get in the car and drive away. He stands in the rain for a few more minutes, glancing at the rain drops landing straight on the puddles created by the drizzles from the day. When the rain drops start getting heavier, enough for the umbrella to rattle lightly in his hands, he makes his way to his car and drives home, the windscreen wipers moving mechanically in an attempt to make the road visible to him.

Johnny doesn’t really sleep all that well, insomnia from back when he was still in college slowly creeping its way back into his life. He welcomes it with his arms stretched out and bloodshot eyes wide open, finally having something to hold close to his chest.

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“I didn’t order anything, young man,” the woman insists, the corners of her lips tight. She is full on glaring at him now, raking her gaze shamelessly down the length of his body, scoping him out for potential threats. Johnny nearly snorts when she squints at his boots and he only keeps it in because of the present in his hands and because he is a functional adult with manners and decorum.

“It says your address here, ma’am,” Johnny says, way too familiar with scenarios like this where parents became victims to material manifestations of love. He had gone to the crystal shop himself to
get the gift which the client, a man who had a high voice and spoke with the air of someone who lived during the renaissance era, had ordered.

The gift is slightly hefty in his hands and even with his weekend sessions at the gym, it’s proving to be quite the challenge to keep holding it in the time the woman takes to scrutinize him like he’s a thief or some kind of law breaker.

The client had told him to text him when he reached the address stated on the side of the box and Johnny had done it. But the man hasn’t responded yet and Johnny wonders silently if it’s one of those rare cases where the special delivery turned into quite the mess. Despite it being painful to admit, it had indeed happened a couple of times, thrice, to be specific.

The woman’s eyebrows knit together when her phone rings and she closes the door rather rudely in his face and leaves. He stares at the shut door in confusion, hands itching with an uncontrollable urge to rub his irritated eyes.

The door opens a moment later, just when Johnny is about to take his leave, cursing the almighty and the uninformed client under his breath for his fourth failure in four years of running the establishment. The woman’s face is stained with tears, her lips wobbling. She paints quite the picture of a loving mom when she stretches her hand out with the warmest smile Johnny has received today, even cancelling Kun’s wide, toothy one as he, out of a strange but welcome hybrid of habit and instinct hands the box to her.

“Thank you.” Her voice is an airy whisper, eyes crinkled at the corners and smile lines visible as she gives him a look of gratitude.

“It’s my pleasure. Good day, ma’am,” Johnny wishes, all of the disappointment from before disappearing as he bows to her before he goes down the stairs, his lips stretching widely, feeling like a child who has finally gotten the carousel ride he had always dreamt about.

The final delivery for the day is a letter, one in a series of many. A young girl, a high school student judging from her backpack, had been the one to come to their office to drop them all in. There was a schedule she had given Taeil who had been at the desk then, with a detailed list of the days she wanted the delivery to take place in. It wasn’t a strange request. They had already done their fair share of letter runs.

What was strange was the sender according to the writings on the top of the letter was a man.

Johnny doesn’t dwell too much on it and shifts gears, the car moving forward and to another destination.

The house he stops outside of is small but it’s one that screams home. It’s relatively simple in structure, almost nondescript with the typical car porch on the right side on top of being single-storied, nothing there that particularly stands out. The shutter of the porch is drawn and there are mud imprints on it from the rain the day before. There’s not much of a front yard, barely a couple of feet of terribly groomed grass in the front, the driveway an ugly pale grey pertaining to it being concrete.

Johnny reaches for the letter on the passenger seat and grabs it, getting out of the car, shutting the door gently in his wake. He rings the doorbell and stands back, waiting for someone to open the door.

The lock clicks barely a moment later, the wooden barrier swinging open to reveal a rather petite young man, maybe younger than him. He takes off his round glasses with one hand and raises an eyebrow at Johnny.
The man is really handsome, beautiful, in fact, with his long and wide eyes, eyelashes thick and curved, coupled with kittenish lips and a small face, his skin a beautiful blend of warm and pale. His ears are covered in piercings, the metal trinkets sparkling when light falls on it at an angle.

Johnny sputters for a second before he gathers himself.

“Special delivery,” he says, voice dipping and rising simultaneously from being caught off guard by the handsome man before he hands him the letter. The man’s expression hardens as he reads the name on the letter before the curiosity from before falls completely off his face. He rushes past the threshold, causing Johnny to scramble back without making it seem too awkward as the resident of the house searched behind him with his roving eyes for someone who isn’t there.

“Who?” He asks, a hint of sadness in his rushed voice.

“We’re not supposed to reveal the identity but I’m certain that the letter has the name on it, sir,” Johnny explains.

“Yeah but this...” He trails off, sadness evident in his voice but also a speck of something Johnny knows is an attempt to keep himself in check.

“I’m sorry, sir. It’s in our guidelines. We don’t reveal the sender unless we have permission to,” Johnny tells him regretfully, eyes drawn to the way the man’s grip is crumpling the envelope with how tight it is.

The shorter man runs his thin fingers, nails neatly trimmed and painted an iridescent shade of purple, through his black, messy hair and rips the mouth of the letter open. Johnny stands frozen waiting for the man to dismiss him but also wanting to leave before he has to witness the other lose his control over his emotions.

Then, a choked sob escapes him and Johnny feels his heart clench in his chest.

When he opened the door, he was a beautiful young man, someone Johnny would hit on if he was still in Chicago and had the liberty to guess other men’s sexual orientation without over thinking about the consequences, every aspect of his life a blank canvas. Now, moments later, he’s the same beautiful young man but he has a story and Johnny is hooked but also terribly and irrevocably curious.

Watching him cry like this, breaking down in front of him like Johnny is invisible to him, pretty manicured hands trembling and legs weak as he leans against the wall, it reminds him of something Johnny felt when he was thirteen, knees scraped and ankle twisted but heart thudding in worry for Doyoung who laid there on the slippery concrete path, hands clutching his bleeding forehead.

It’s weird but that doesn’t cancel out the fact that he is feeling it, the protective feeling expanding inside his chest and he lets out a heavy exhale in hopes of feeling lighter.

“Thank you,” the man gasps out and promptly turns away, slamming the door in his face.

Johnny’s presence is unwanted, the gesture conveys. Johnny’s feet are glued to the ground, and his ears catch the silent tears from before transform into heart wrenching sobs, something inside him dying out at the sound.

He lifts his hand up, positioning it to knock on the door but Johnny, despite being the heir to a humble empire has never been someone who acted upon his instincts. He waits for a few minutes, staring blankly at the door in what he knows qualifies as a weird gesture, déjà vu hitting him in the chest from the last delivery. But unlike before, the door doesn’t swing open again.
When the sound of a little boy riding his bike past the house drifts in his ears, the whirring sound of the slightly faulty chain helping him break out of the reverie, he turns away and walks to his car but not without glancing at the house one more time.

Something porcelain hits the floor inside, the noise much too recognizable.

Johnny blinks once and tells himself that this is just one man who is hurting among millions. It seems so insignificant to the business major inside him.

Somehow that does nothing to ease the hollow in his chest being evaded by empathy for someone he doesn’t know.

Perhaps that is the reason why Johnny calls Kun on his drive home, telling him that he will take care of delivery in that part of the town. Kun tells him that it’s a dead area, that there’s nothing scheduled for the next six months or so except for a weekly letter delivery. Johnny hums absentmindedly and informs the other that he wants to.

“You’re the boss, hyung. If you wanna do it, go ahead,” Kun says, a smile in his voice, always oozing comfort. Chenle’s screams fill the other side, the mild-mannered man chuckling lightly in response to the high school student’s tantrum. Johnny hangs up with a smile.

The nameless young man has a story, a painful one from what Johnny can tell.

And he has always been a weak man in front of a tempting tale.

Perhaps they’ll find a connection, Johnny thinks, because he has one to share too.

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It’s another uneventful Friday evening when Johnny drags his car’s keys off the table, pushing the door of his cabin open to leave for the letter delivery. Taeil raises an eyebrow at him, twisting around in his desk chair. Johnny frowns and pats his face twice, hoping to God that Jisung hadn’t doodled something on his face during his afternoon nap.

“There’s nothing on your face,” Taeil supplies helpfully, still looking unnervingly smug.

“Then why are you looking at me like that?” Johnny counters, eyes flicking to the clock on the wall before it settles back on the eldest.

Taeil lets out a prolonged hum and smiles. “You’re going on the special delivery.”

The stress on the word doesn’t go unnoticed. Johnny needs better friends. Preferably someone who didn’t come to the office in orange tshirts and fluffy hair one day and ripped jeans and undercuts on another.

“Hyung, it’s not like that,” Johnny whines and it is the worst answer he can possibly give at the moment, Taeil’s manic grin making an appearance.

“Is he pretty?” The elder asks, ignoring Johnny’s answer, his red nail polish covered fingers splaying out under his chin and wiggling, kohl-rimmed eyes blinking rapidly for dramatic effect.

“Yeah,” Johnny breathes, pinching the bridge of his nose, choosing the safest path aka the path of
truth. Taeil hums contemplatively, clearly not expecting Johnny to come clean so fast.

“So, who’s sending pretty boy letters? Is it, perhaps, from someone who is... competition for you?”

Johnny shakes his head, shoulders sagging a little because he had spent the past week wondering just that. However, he had arrived at a favourable consensus that the chances of the letter coming from a significant other was not much since it had ended with things being thrown at the wall.

“I don’t really know, hyung. Maybe not,” Johnny replies, sounding as uncertain as he feels.

“May luck be with you, my brave Jedi,” Taeil says, both his palms in the air as if he is blessing Johnny like he’s a warrior going to battle.

Johnny groans loudly and walks out the door, one thing on his mind.

It’s not quite a short ride there, the “pretty boy’s” house that is, the area being a relatively less-populated one, a bit farther into the city, situated exactly where the lines blur and is no longer qualified to be called anything even remotely related to an urbanized, polluted shithole. It’s deliveries like these that are on the expensive side because it requires driving longer. Johnny inwardly wonders how the girl paid such a huge amount, knowing that the real question should be “why” instead of “how”.

Johnny rings the bell without much of a preamble this time and it takes longer than the last time for the young man to open the door. His skin is pale, the warm, golden tone from before faded into nothingness, eyes sunken in and tinged red. It’s like seeing an entirely different person.

“Should have expected you, huh?” The man says, voice thin, a berating smile on his face.

Johnny finds himself at a loss of what to say but nods anyway, handing the letter to the man.

Before the man opens it, Johnny is hit with an intense need to run away because suddenly, he doesn’t need this man’s story. He’s broken, visibly so and Johnny is shit at fixing things. He was an idiot for thinking that he needed a story. He doesn’t need one when he already has his own. Johnny backtracks so quickly that his vision hazes over before it focuses on the man again.

“Thank you,” the man says, a pensive smile on his face, hands clutching the letter tighter than he did the first time. The nail color is aquamarine this time but it’s scratched and lumpy like he gave up trying to do it after failing multiple times.

“It’s a pleasure, sir,” Johnny replies, hoping that the smile on his face is cordial, wanting nothing more than to sprint to his car and drive far away from here.

“Ten,” the man says quietly and Johnny frowns in confusion as to why he’s suddenly talking about a number.

“Ten,” he repeats again, “It’s my name.”

Johnny fixes him a stare, trying to see if the stranger(well, not really) is kidding but the sombre expression on his face stays.

“Uhh, okay, I’m Johnny. It’s nice to meet you,” Johnny tells him, surprising himself at the steadiness of his voice, the urge to run away dying down as the soft timbre of the other’s voice falls on his ears.

“I’m sorry for the other day,” Ten mumbles, eyeing the door when Johnny quirks an eyebrow asking what the apology is for. Johnny is promptly reminded of the way Ten shut the door straight on his
face without saying much else.

“It’s okay. You were... visibly rattled. I understand,” Johnny states, trying with all his might to break through the awkwardness surrounding the conversation.

“Are there more?” Ten asks, teeth digging into his soft and pink lower lip in a clear nervous gesture. Johnny doesn’t need to use his business degree for figuring out what the other is asking about.

“Yeah, quite a few,” Johnny confirms, keeping the questions his mind raises locked inside a thick vault so as to not overwhelm the man in front of him.

Ten opens his mouth as if to say something but shuts it with a click, looking a little lost and weary.

“Have a good day,” Johnny utters, genuinely wishing for it. Perhaps he’s selfish for not asking what Ten is clearly considering in his mind but he wastes no time thinking about it and steps away, the petite man throwing him a hesitant wave which Johnny reciprocates awkwardly.

Johnny doesn’t sit in the car and stare at the steering wheel today, feeling a pair of eyes focus on him. When he drives away, he chances a look at the mirror and sees the door closing in the distance.

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The third and fourth time turns out to be better than the second. Ten asks him where he’s from before he goes inside, letter clutched tight just like usual. He doesn’t glance at him when he drives away, choosing to close the door after bidding him a soft goodbye both times. The month that follows falls in tune with the same patterns and just like that, another four weeks pass with Johnny’s words getting stuck somewhere between the cogwheels of his brain and the tip of his tongue.

Johnny can clearly see that whatever the subject of these letters are, it’s slowly but surely breaking Ten apart, dragging him through the kind of hell no one deserves to wind up in. He even considers burning the letters, just so that he wouldn’t have to deliver what he knows is turning out to be the other man’s certain descent into something he doesn’t want to drown in.

But Johnny is only a delivery man. Over the years, he has gotten used to distributing happiness wrapped in surprise and condolences twisted in love and now that he is delivering heartbreak, he doesn’t know how to act, doesn’t know what to do to prevent it from happening.

Johnny considers asking Kun or Jaehyun to cover for him, but he screws his eyes shut, wonders whether Ten will be disappointed and decides against it. He had asked for this and now, it feels like a divine responsibility, a punishment even, to see as the delicate man crumbles to stardust little by little, right in front of Johnny’s eyes.

“How do you fix someone?” Johnny asks, phone resting next to his head on the pillow, a defeated sigh dallying in from the other end.

“You’re alright now, hyung,” Doyoung breathes, voice barely a whisper but certain all the same.

“Answer the question, Doyoung. This is not about me,” Johnny mumbles, eyes adjusting to the darkness in the room when he opens them, like Doyoung owes him the answer just like he believed when they were children.
He hears the unmistakable sounds of Doyoung getting up, covers rustling and when he speaks next he’s no longer whispering.

“You get to know them. It’ll come to you then,” Doyoung assures.

“What if... what if they don’t tell you everything? What if they don’t let you help them?”

Johnny asks and for some reason, he’s scared, so scared. He feels like someone is demolishing everything he has ever known, cackling madly as they do so because Johnny has never wanted to do something with this almost carnal need and it is driving him crazy.

“Then, you have to wait, wait for as long as it takes,” Doyoung reveals, like he’s unfolding the secrets of the universe to him.

Johnny nods even if Doyoung can’t see and hums in response.

“I don’t know what you mean, hyung. What I do know is that this might be about someone else but somewhere along, it’s also about you. Goodnight.”

Doyoung hangs up and Johnny feels his lips curl in appreciation of the other’s deduction because he’s right.

Maybe this is about Johnny too. Maybe if he fixes Ten, he’ll fix himself too.

There’s an empty spot inside his chest and a heart which has never been given to someone else.

Maybe Ten can benefit from both.

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“I know that you coming here again and again with these letters is not a coincidence,” Ten tells him on his third visit of the fourth month, looking as pale as a ghost, way thinner than he was when Johnny saw him first.

Johnny freezes. How do you respond to something like that?

“I ... If it makes you uncomfortable, I can stop,” Johnny offers, crossing his fingers that Ten doesn’t ask that much of him.

The beautiful man looks up at him through his eyelashes and smiles. It’s small but it’s sincere.

“You don’t have to lie, Johnny. I know you don’t want to stop,” Ten observes and Johnny is so enamoured. He’s heard of people talking about how other people remind them of art, of them feeling like they’re being suspended in time in the presence of someone else and the more his gaze rakes over the lively contours of Ten’s face, he thinks he gets it.

“I’ve seen boys like you,” Ten’s voice sounds wistful, “You’re perpetually curious.” There’s a hint of anger when he speaks, the look in his eyes shifting into something almost vengeful.

Johnny doesn’t get time to backtrack because Ten’s gaze shifts again, it’s warm when he looks back at Johnny.
“But you’re different. You’re patient. You’ll wait for forever to know.” The letter isn’t crumpling in his grip, it’s held delicately. Johnny wonders what warranted the sudden shift. His nails are a beaming sunshine yellow looking slightly better than the week before but not as impeccable as they had been on the first day four months ago. But even then Johnny can imagine him like that, aura as bright as the shade, somewhere in the past, carefree, unguarded, an unbroken spirit.

“That’s too deep an observation to make for someone who has only met me a couple of times,” Johnny remarks, trying not to ask how much more Ten thinks he knows about him.

“It is, isn’t it?” Ten throws the question into the wind.

Johnny doesn’t have an answer so he settles for counting his breaths. Ten shifts his feet and whispers goodbye, turning and closing the door.

Maybe he’s not that broken, Johnny thinks.

He’s proven sorely wrong when the sounds of crying meander through the thick wooden door.

Maybe he is, he corrects, tugging his coat closer to his chest, the sides meeting in the middle.

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“Go out with me,” Johnny says, a determined look on his face. The letter is in Ten’s hands and he’s visibly breaking apart.

Ten’s eyes are blown wide, miserable almost, the whites of his eyes a light cerise and under eyes swollen. His lips are chapped and bitten raw, hair seemingly unwashed, ears housing all the spots where his piercings used to be but the sparkling jewellery all gone. Even then, he is the most beautiful person Johnny has ever laid eyes on.

But something tells him that if he doesn’t loop a thread around Ten and hold him down, he might just levitate to the heavens and Johnny would be left grieving for someone he never really knew. Perhaps that’s what brings about the surge of unexpected courage. Johnny has zoned out way too many times, dreaming about this moment, when he’d extend his hand and hope to all the Gods up there that Ten reciprocates with even just his pinkie.

“I can’t. You don’t even know if I am gay,” he spits the last word like it’s hell fire but Johnny has met him enough times to realize that things are way different than they appear in plain sight. So he knows that Ten doesn’t mean for it to come out as menacing as it does.

“You are right. I don’t but it doesn’t really matter,” Johnny pauses and makes sure to look straight at Ten’s weary and sceptical eyes when he repeats what he said before, “Go out with me.”

“I don’t want to,” Ten says but his resolve is crumbling.

“A friend, Ten. I can be a friend,” Johnny says with determination but Ten looks like he’s seen the world end in a vision faraway.

“Ten?” Johnny snaps his fingers in front of the other.

“Friend,” he tests the word on his tongue and there’s something deeper, an unheard merging of
desolation and rage in the way he says it but Johnny tries not to dwell on it too much.

“We have to start somewhere,” Johnny suggests and it’s meant to be a promise, a promise that there’s something more at the horizon but it’s also something that is supposed to assure Ten that Johnny won’t force him into anything he doesn’t want to.

“Go out with me,” he repeats, this time it’s a hopeful request, his hand extended towards the other.

Ten’s right hand is scarily cold in his but he nods and whispers an affirmation. In a burst of courage, Johnny interlinks their fingers and squeezes once before he lets go.

Ten’s fingers are soft. Johnny makes a mental note of it.

Exchanging numbers is relatively easy, especially considering the tension that enveloped the conversation before. He catches a glimpse of the state of his bare nails, bitten and torn, an angry red, blood dried at the tips, cuticles stripped of the delicate layer of skin.

Seeing his nails deteriorate is like watching him fade like an echo that has reverberated for too long. Johnny tells him that he’ll pick him up the day after in the evening.

“I’ll be dead inside,” Ten says, waving the letter in the air.

Johnny nods in understanding.

“I’ll just have to try twice as hard then,” Johnny responds.

“I can’t promise you anything,” Ten adds and it is supposed to be a way out for Johnny, he’s giving him a chance to bolt. A few years ago Johnny would have, shamelessly, without even an ounce of guilt but he’s not who he was years ago. He has nothing to fear now, no one to tell him what to do, nothing that he has to hide in the dark of the night.

“That’s okay. You don’t have to,” Johnny assures him.

“I don’t know anything about you,” Ten mentions, a curious expression on his face along with a look Johnny isn’t sure he’ll ever decipher.

“I am Johnny Seo. I own a delivery service and a cafe. My parents are dead. My mom died giving birth to me. My dad passed away five years ago. I used to have a cat but he ran away. I never bothered to look. My father couldn’t find time to change his will so I own a restaurant chain in the city. The rest you’ll get to know in time.”

Ten nods in satisfaction, gaze warm.

“6 o’clock sharp tomorrow like you said. Maybe I’ll let you know if it’s a date then.” Ten stands on his tip toes and leans in next to Johnny’s ear, whispering, “But take me to your cafe. I wanna see.”

Johnny smiles and promises him just that.

Johnny doesn’t hear loud cries today but sees the exact way Ten’s face falls as soon as he rips the cursed letter open.

He knows he has to let this tide over. Perhaps, when it ends, Ten will finally tell him everything.

Perhaps then, he won’t be so broken anymore.
Johnny’s jaw drops open when Ten opens the door, the shorter man holding up a finger as he locks up behind him.

Ten isn’t really dressed up but he’s wearing a long sleeve loose grey sweater, his collarbones on display and delicate shoulders tapering down to a thin waist. Ten is definitely skinnier than he was a month or so ago but Johnny is not about to lose hope when this thing between them is just going to officially start. His lips are tinted an unnatural red, eyes smoky with product and even if Johnny is all about natural beauty he likes seeing him like this, likes how comfortable he is in his own skin to be this brave.

It’s the first time he’s seen him like this, dolled up that is, but he likes it.

Ten runs a hand through his jet black hair and eyes Johnny appreciatively. Johnny shrinks a little under his gaze, trying his best not to fidget under the other’s gaze. Ten smiles disarmingly at him and pockets the keys.

A sweet scent mixed with something like lavender and pine wafts into his nose and Johnny immediately knows that it’s not from the overrated air freshener Doyoung had bought him two months ago. It’s Ten and he smells delectable, making Johnny want to sniff himself to make sure that he doesn’t smell terrible.

“You smell good,” Johnny blurts when Ten’s scent is the only thing on his mind, the road fading into the background.

Johnny chokes on his spit as he realizes what exactly slipped past his lips without his permission and he manoeuvres the car, narrowly avoiding a crash against the motorcycle in front of them.

Ten levels him with a quirk of his lips but Johnny’s heart is still pounding from the fact that Ten is here willingly, sitting breaths away but somehow not close enough.

The rest of the drive is silent, Johnny letting Ten choose the music, the petite man settling for a soft ballad, the volume turned down low, his arm settling on the edge of the window, head resting against the glass.

“We’re here,” Johnny announces a good hour later, cursing the traffic jam internally. He parks the car in front of the cafe and turns off the engine, getting down after unbuckling the seat belt. Ten gets down as well, Johnny coming around the corner just as he slams the door shut.

Johnny doubts himself but finds his hand reaching for Ten’s smaller one anyway. The shorter man looks down at their hands and entwines them properly after a moment of contemplation, Johnny’s breath stuck in his windpipe during the few seconds it takes.

Johnny can’t help the smile on his face when he sees the midnight blue shade adorning his nails. It’s kind of all over the place, a far cry from how it should be but he remembers the bare nails from the day before and feels a little happier because if Ten is trying, then obviously there’s hope, for him, for Johnny and for both of them together.

“Young man, you smell good.” Ten gestures with his right hand and Johnny nods, casually walking to the entrance of the coffee, the fairy lights on the door glowing brightly. He pushes the door open but doesn’t let Ten’s hand go.
It’s peak evening rush hours. The place is packed with customers, a cacophony of their conversations layering over the other, turning everything into a jumbled mess. He feels Ten tense next to him and he looks at him, mind already telling him how much of a bad idea this was but the younger man takes a deep breath and nods at him reassuringly.

Johnny navigates to his corner seat, this time a much larger neon green sticky note is stuck to the table.

*Hello lovely*insert name here*, my father and brother from another brother aka the boss, Seo Youngho claims this table as his own. So watch it!*

*In other words, this table is taken yo!*

Ten settles down on the chair, a grin making its way on his face at the words scrawled in poor handwriting.

It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that it’s Donghyuck’s doing this time. Johnny cringes but he is also eternally grateful because he hadn’t informed any of them that he would be coming with Ten so if not for the note, he’s certain that none of the tables would have been free for them to use.

“Welcome to Black on Black. What can I get you?” Donghyuck’s teeth are fully on display and any other day, Johnny would find it cute but right now, it only resembles a shark who is about to rip him into pieces.

“Uh, Ten, this is Donghyuck,” Johnny introduces, crossing his fingers and toes that Donghyuck won’t embarrass him. “Ten, this is Donghyuck.”

Ten smiles hesitantly at the young boy and then flicks a quick look back at Johnny.

“Ten hyung, I’m sorry but I’ve never heard about you before. Is this,” Donghyuck pauses for effect, “perhaps a first date?” He asks, wiggling his eyebrows, shoulders shimmying.

It is quite a scene to see a teenager act so freely in the midst of a jam-packed cafe, perhaps that is why Ten giggles, Johnny’s heart immediately responding by beating three times faster.

Johnny’s gaze ricochets back to Ten, leaving the ball in his court, allowing him to decide whatever this is going to be.

“It is,” Ten answers with a strange kind of certainty, doing a complete 180 from the day before when he looked almost nauseous with nerves and hesitation.

Johnny can see the way Donghyuck backs down, teasing smirk from before lulling to a warm smile, a variation of the one he directs at Mark but fond all the same.

It looks and feels like approval.

“So are you guys gonna tell me your order or do you need time to play footsie and hold hands?” Donghyuck asks, sneaking a meaningful glance at Johnny.

Johnny shakes his head in mock defeat and turns to Ten, asking him, “What do you want?” under his breath.

“Surprise me, little Hyuck,” Ten responds, looking at Donghyuck whose eyes go wide, clearly not expecting Ten to be the one to answer, especially not like this.
“Holy crap! That’s the cutest name ever. Consider yourself surprised, hyung,” Donghyuck says, bowing and walking away with a wide grin on his face. Johnny is glad to see the boy be so happy in the midst of all the workload from school.

“He’s cute,” Ten comments.

“He’s a minor,” Johnny deadpans.

“Not like that. He looks like a sweet kid,” Ten explains and Johnny laughs in his face.

“If you only knew.” Johnny pours himself some water and drinks it.

The glass makes a thud as the bottom touches down on the table and when Johnny looks up, Ten’s eyes are roving over the entirety of the cafe, his neck straining as he looks at the detailing on the walls, the coffee coloured gradient intensifying in shade as it goes from top to bottom. Ten twiddles with his thumbs looking at the simplistically styled lamps hanging from the ceiling which creates the warm glow that dunks the cafe in a soft yellow throughout the day.

Ten looks breathtakingly stunning and as he observes the cafe’s interior, Johnny is busy trying to hide how absolutely gone he is for the man sat opposite him.

“I like it here.” Ten has the tiniest smile playing on his kittenish lips.

“Yeah, me too,” he makes sure to look straight at him when he says it.

Ten stifles a giggle, pretty Prussian blue nails prominent as he covers his face with his hands.

Johnny’s heart is weak. His eyes are drawn time and time again to the way Ten seems so docile in a strange environment, the other’s attention anywhere and everywhere like he’s looking for a place in the universe like a planet that has left its orbit.

With me, Johnny wants to say. You belong with me, he wants to proclaim.

“You’re thinking up a storm,” Ten states like it’s an observation, tucking his hands between his thighs before he flits his gaze to the people around them and straightens up. Johnny wonders why the smile on his face looks a little like the one on the plastic dolls he buys for Yeri.

“I’m not the only one,” Johnny responds.

Ten shrugs, no denial, no acceptance just a shrug.

“Ladies, your treats are here,” Donghyuck sing-songs making Johnny snort loudly, “Special cinnamon rolls for the lovely couple. Chocolate peanut butter cupcake and a frappuccino for the future husband and dirty water americano for the boss.”

Donghyuck sets the plates down first and then, the drinks. He takes a bow with the tray held close to his chest, creating a funny picture with the white patches on his black apron, hair looking like a flour dusted rain forest.

Johnny figures that one of their waiters must have taken a leave because Doyoung wouldn’t have let Donghyuck out like this to serve the customers otherwise.

“I am surprised, little Hyuck,” Ten drawls, dragging out the words as one would do a song and Donghyuck flashes him a thumbs up, and rolls his eyes at Johnny.

The sheer disrespect. He forgives the brat because Ten genuinely looks like he enjoys the special
attention and that’s really all that is on Johnny’s mind today and maybe, if he gets a chance, forever.

“This is very unhealthy,” Ten says and Johnny shrugs.

“You were the one who wanted to see the cafe. I wanted to take you to dinner.”

Ten gives him a blank look and tilts his head, eyes intense with scrutiny. Johnny doesn’t quite understand.

The strange tension breaks when Ten bites into the cinnamon roll, eyes widening. The rest of the date is really just Johnny praising Doyoung and talking about how the cafe came to be, leaving the ugly parts unsaid of course. If he needs Ten to open up to him and allow this to become something else, Johnny can’t have a story, so he hides the tales of a spoilt heir inside a casket and buries it.

“You do strange things, Johnny,” Ten says when he finishes eating the baked items, moving on to his drink soon after.

“Like what?” Johnny asks.

“You lie,” Ten mumbles, leaning forward in his seat.

“I didn’t,” Johnny defends.

“Lying by omission is still lying,” Ten says and there’s a sick smile twisting the corners of his faded red lips, his eyes sultry and dark with something Johnny keeps catching glimpses of but is never actually able to pin down.

“In time, I’ll tell you everything,” Johnny promises and takes a big sip from the Americano, knowing better than to prod when the other is volatile.

Ten takes a sip from the frappuccino and finishes it in a hurry. He licks his tongue over his lips in an almost lewd manner, leaving no traces of lipstick on his previously red lips, now a soft shade of pink, both attractive in their own ways to Johnny who’s merely a spectator.

Ten digs into his pocket and takes something out.

It’s lipstick and a mirror.

He opens the lid of the lipstick and dabs it on before filling the faded spots with his fingers, the other hand expertly holding up the small rectangular mirror. He peers at Johnny and stays impassive as he puts on the lipstick. There’s a distant look on his face as if he didn’t quite expect Johnny to react this way but Johnny smiles encouragingly, giving up on attempting to control exactly how hooked he is on the way the other’s thin fingers move elegantly.

Ten is beautiful in the way that Johnny isn’t used to. He has called boys at his frat house back when he was in college “pretty”, bony and muscled bodies lying under him with their legs spread wide, their bodies connected, his eyes closed in the darkness, mind chasing the pleasure, thoughts void of their names and faces.

He has flirted with boys and called them “beautiful”, hands brushing each other’s in dark clubs, has whispered the same word against their lips as he pinned them to graffiti-adorned walls, a bruising grip on their wrists in the minimalist lighting but never has a boy looked this beautiful in his eyes, not like Ten. He wants to pin him down and wreck him but at the same time he wants to shield him from the world and protect.
Ten’s face is darkened by a shadow of something from the first day he delivered the letter. Johnny wants to ask him about it, he wants so badly to shake him out of the whirlpool he keeps spinning and descending down into but he’s interrupted by a familiar voice.

“You didn’t tell me you had a date.”

Doyoung looks imposing when he’s standing like that, shoulders tense and eyebrows scrunched together. Johnny takes a look around and the tables in the cafe are almost cleared, leaving only three occupants, one of them packing up and leaving, the glass door gliding shut behind her.

Ten raises an eyebrow at Doyoung and then at Johnny.

“Doyoung, I’m sorry. It’s kinda... complicated but meet Ten. Ten, meet Doyoung,” Johnny says and finishes the Americano in one go, the drink soothing his parched throat.

Doyoung drags a chair from the empty table set next to them and joins them. He’s clearly displeased with how Johnny has kept the other a secret but Johnny has reasons and when his best friend is willing to hear them out, he will tell him.

What follows, unlike what Johnny’s mind supplies, is a very calm conversation and after the first ten minutes Ten and Doyoung are actively bonding over their mutual dislike for Americano, giving Johnny the stink eye for drinking it.

“So what do you do, Ten? Are you working?”

Ten nods and Johnny is reminded of how even he doesn’t know what the other does for a living. He remembers phrasing the question in his head but stopping himself solely because he didn’t want to ask Ten anything that might make him uncomfortable and scare him away.

But even then, what a way to know that you suck at dating. Thanks, Doyoung.

“I do art. I also do commissions online. I design logos on the side too,” Ten says, obviously liking the topic a little better than Americano. Johnny can tell it is so by the way he leans forward, elbows placed on the table in clear interest.

Ten doesn’t say much else about himself other than tacking on the fact that he used to be a tattoo artist too but that he stopped because he liked canvases and screens better than people. Doyoung being the instinctual one shifts topics and talks about himself, more about Jungwoo than himself really and Johnny excuses himself to the washroom just as the last customer leaves.

Johnny doesn’t go to the washroom but instead finds himself in the kitchen. Donghyuck stops wiping the counter and looks at him with a frown.

“What the fuck are you doing here, hyung?” He asks, one hand on his hip and Johnny internally facepalms knowing that the kid will probably grow up to be a bigger menace than Doyoung.

“Needed some air,” Johnny replies, leaning back on the counter, keeping himself from calling the other out on his language.

“Did Doyoung hyung gatecrash your date?” Donghyuck asks and he looks ready to fight. Johnny walks to him and ruffles his hair.

“Naah, he’s just seeing how he is I guess. Scoping out his quirks and all, you know him,” Johnny says, taking the other cloth and wiping the counter to relieve the tension in his back.
“But Ten hyung looks so sad,” Donghyuck mumbles after a while, frowning intensely at the counter as if he has had a personal vendetta against it all along.

“He does, doesn’t he?” Johnny breathes.

Donghyuck stops wiping again and looks at him, prompting Johnny to stop as well.

“You like him, right?”

“That obvious, huh,” Johnny hums.

“Very,” Donghyuck confirms and continues, “You look at him like you don’t need any reason to like him.”

Johnny smiles, wondering when the fourteen year old teenager with the baby fat on his cheeks grew up into this seventeen year old wise boy. Donghyuck is right. Johnny does act like a father.

“How do you know?” Johnny asks out of pure curiosity.

Donghyuck’s face lights up when he says, “It’s how Mark hyung looks at me.”

Johnny wipes down the counter and bids Donghyuck a goodnight, ruffles his hair and walks out of the kitchen. Doyoung stops him in his path.

“You were right. He does need to be fixed up. It’s gonna be hard, hyung,” Doyoung’s voice is weary, sadness dripping from it.

“That’s okay. I already knew that,” Johnny says.

“No, you don’t understand,” Doyoung stutters out, “He’s... if you fail... if you don’t fix him... you’re gonna fall apart yourself.”

Johnny looks down at his shoes and then at Doyoung. He makes sure to smile when he says, “That’s it, Doyoung. That’s where we went wrong. He’s not a machine that needs fixing. He’s a person, like you and me and Donghyuck. I was wrong too and if I fall apart trying to help him, then that’s okay.”

Doyoung gives him a glare. “You think he’s worth it,” he spits.

“I do but I know you don’t,” Johnny states. It breaks his heart to know that his best friend is not on board but it’s time that he gave up looking for fulfilment inside himself when he’s just hollow like a cloud. Another hollow person just might be his cure. Doyoung will never understand it well because he’s not broken, he’s way too collected to ever be. Johnny hopes it stays that way.

But when Johnny lays his gaze on Ten, he doesn’t see a cure, he sees a potential someone for his future and the empty spot in his arms cry for him to try for once. Fixing each other and knowing him better is only a bonus because right now, Ten is no longer a story, he’s someone who is worth every pleasant thing in the world and Johnny would be a dumb idiot to let him go like that.

Doyoung mumbles a good luck under his breath and storms inside. He’ll crawl right back to Johnny in a day so he doesn’t follow him.

When he returns, Ten is twirling the cup of his frappuccino, his complete attention given to the perspiration dripping down the sides of it. He looks up when he feels Johnny’s presence, his gaze shifts from dark to gentle and back again and he holds it for a moment like he’s trying to rifle through the mess that Johnny is but when Johnny blinks, it’s gone.
Johnny is fascinated. He knows that he’s not supposed to because things are never straight forward with Ten. Everything. Every single thing has a reason and Johnny can only hope to unearth all of them as he goes along.

“Let’s go?” Johnny asks and Ten gets up, nodding.

The date was good but it feels like a failure.

The ride back is completely silent except for a series of sighs from Ten. Johnny is not going to lie, he’s scared that he has messed up all his chances with the other man. His limbs itch with an irresistible urge to fidget but he controls it. It starts raining halfway through.

When they reach Ten’s place, the street is shrouded in an even inkier black. Johnny unbuckles his seatbelt to walk Ten to his door when the other man swings open the car door and sprints to his house, the rain falling heavily outside.

Johnny stares at the empty seat and then at Ten’s front door slamming shut. He swears under his breath and jumps out of his seat, coming around the corner and slamming the passenger side’s door before he runs.

His chest is heaving with the effort and the rain soaks him, his hair wet and clumped up together by the time he knocks on the door.

“There’s no use. Go away, Johnny,” Ten begs.

Johnny bangs his fist on the hard wood this time, shoving the pain to the back of his mind.

“I can’t. Everything seemed perfect. I don’t get this. Tell me why, Ten,” Johnny’s voice cracks on his name and there are tears rolling down, mixing with the rain water.

Ten is sitting with his back to the door, Johnny knows because the sobs reach him louder than ever.

“Ten, please. Tell me why,” he pleads again.

“You don’t understand,” Ten says and he sounds angry.

Johnny stops for a moment, collects himself and says, “Then, help me understand.”

There’s silence for another moment before the door swings open but all hope drowns when Ten’s face comes into view. His eye makeup is messed up, tears and rain having done their part. His lipstick is smudged and he looks like a thorough wreck, obsidian hair wet and plastered to his forehead.

Ten is dripping water on the wooden floor like Johnny but he pats his pockets and takes out the lipstick and mirror again. He is crying full on and all Johnny wants to do is collect him in his arms and keep him safe but he won’t touch him, not until he is given permission.

He is still sobbing when he draws on his lips with the lipstick and Johnny frowns in confusion. It feels like there’s a deeper meaning in this single action that Johnny is supposed to comprehend but he is a lost cause, mind refusing to budge and he’s left scrambling for a solution.

“See? I like this. But even when I did this at the cafe, in front of so many people you didn’t care, Johnny. You weren’t the least bit disgusted and I can’t... I can’t break you like that. I can’t drag you down with me. You know nothing about me and if you knew you would hate me but you won’t because you’re too good to be true.”
Ten’s sobbing as he says it but he takes a deep breath again and continues, “You’re a dream and boys like me... boys like me aren’t meant to be with boys like you.”

Johnny shakes his head in denial, words failing him in this moment and steps forward, Ten taking a step back, shivering both because of the cold and something else. He gently pries the lipstick and mirror away from Ten and looks down at him. The hurt is clear on his face but Johnny looks deeper and he can see it, the way Ten has given up on them already. Even then, there’s something else coupled with this visceral pain, different from what is haunting him already. It is conspicuously painted on his face and it takes Johnny two breaths to realize that Ten wants this, that he’s just scared.

It’s enough of a thread for Johnny to hold onto.

He wraps his arms around the other and tugs him closer, uses his hand to press the petite man’s head against his chest and Ten tenses but doesn’t fight it. It’s after a long strained eternity that Ten finally relaxes and melts against Johnny. His hands lay limp against his sides and he cries so hard that Johnny feels his chest constrict painfully. Ten raises one of his hands and bunches up Johnny’s jacket, squeezing it tightly in his clenched fist.

“They think I’m pretty at first but the next day, I’m a slut. Once they’re done with me, they say they’re disgusted,” Ten says, the words muttered with his lips pressed to his chest.

Johnny rubs a soothing hand down his back but Ten doesn’t stop trembling.

“Ten, I won’t do that to you. I promise. Just let me in. Please, give us a chance,” Johnny pleads, willing to put his unparalleled ego on the line, all for the artist with the chipped nail paint, all for the man in front of him, broken time and time again but somehow still finding it in him to breathe through the days no matter how hard they are.

The rain has soaked them both and Johnny can feel the cold settling deep into his bones but he’ll stand in the violent downpour for a hundred days if that’s what it takes to convince Ten to let him stay.

Ten twists his neck and looks up at him, eyes red from crying, swollen and black smudged all over but he’s beautiful, still so heart-wrenchingly beautiful with the tears clinging to his lashes, midnight blue nails a contrast against Johnny’s white denim jacket and it hurts.

Realization hits him like a bullet, straight to the chest.

He wants Ten. He wants Ten forever.

“You promise to not hurt me?” Johnny can imagine how life was for him from that one question and it leaves him shattered like shrapnel on a battle field.

Ten has seen war, the kind Johnny hasn’t and he’s still suffering the after-effects. All Johnny really wants to do is stop the hurt.

Johnny nods his head and leans down to press a kiss into his wet hair. Ten sighs against his chest, still shivering like a leaf, his fragile bones moving under Johnny’s arms when he shifts.

Johnny holds him and stands there, outside the threshold, the rain lulling to a drizzle behind them. It’s not the best decision he’s ever made in his life but all else fades to the background and Johnny is but there to fulfil the artist’s wishes.

Ten pulls away after a few minutes, unclenches his fists and presses his palms flat on Johnny’s chest.
Johnny selfishly hopes that he can feel his heart pounding.

Ten sends him a small smile as if he reads Johnny’s thoughts and loops his fingers with Johnny’s, tugging him as he walks inside the house.

It’s meant to be an invitation to enter, one that Johnny accepts easily because he realizes how significant this one gesture is.

Johnny steps out of his boots with little difficulty, Ten does the same, hands still twined firmly, Johnny’s large palm covering Ten’s entire hand. The sight does things to his chest.

They are trailing water into the house but Ten doesn’t seem to care so Johnny stays silent. The living room is in a state of mild disarray, understandable with the way Ten is struggling to hold himself together, breaking at the seams, with barely anything to hold onto.

The laptop is in shambles on the floor, the screen decorated with spidery cracks, several keys scattered around it. Ten had probably thrown it in anger. The letters are lying in a clutter on the coffee table, art supplies and paint bottles next to them, a broken blue bottle on the edge, dripping blue liquid on the floor, a sizeable puddle of it already drying.

The walls are embellished with different kinds of paintings all linked to one or the other, portraits of lilac angels and desperate men; of the euphoric and the mesmerizing, of the unconsolable and the overlooked, way too many stories for Johnny to appreciate with just a sweep of his eyes.

Johnny turns to Ten only to find the shorter man already looking at him.

“You like it, the paintings,” Ten says in awe, like he can’t quite absorb that. Johnny nods and clutches Ten’s hand a little tighter.

“When did this happen?” Johnny asks, his chin pointing towards the laptop.

Ten freezes. Johnny smooths a thumb over the other’s hand.

“Yesterday.”

Ten drags him along to what Johnny assumes is his bedroom, clearly trying to shift Johnny’s focus and he plays along without complaint.

Johnny softly gasps at the scene in front of him, jaw dropping right after. The four walls as well as the ceiling were painted varying shades of blue but it looked exactly like the sky and he turns with wide eyes to Ten.

“Ten, this is amazing,” Johnny breathes, jaw threatening to drop again.

Ten untangles their fingers and goes to the dresser, picking out some clothes, ignoring the compliment with a tiny smile.

“Go take a shower.” Ten stretches his hands out, a small pile of neatly folded clothes on them.

“You go first,” Johnny says but Ten shakes his head.

“I’ll use the other bathroom. Leave your clothes in the laundry hamper, okay?” Johnny nods and ambles over to the en-suite bathroom. He stops in his tracks and eyes the clothes.

“If these are your size, it’s not gonna fit,” Johnny remarks. Ten gives him a defeated look.
“They’re gonna fit. I like wearing over-sized stuff.”

For a second, Johnny is attacked by an onslaught of images of Ten wearing his clothes but he shakes his head to get rid of them and closes the door behind him.

When he finishes up and comes out, towel hanging from his shoulders, Ten is sitting on the fluffy mattress, legs folded under him wearing a white wide-neck t-shirt and grey sweatpants, wet hair softly flopping on his forehead. His face is bare, pink lips a little chapped and eyes soft red and slightly puffy from the crying.

He looks up from the floor and gets up, walking past Johnny and grabs the laundry hamper.

“I’ll be back. Let me get this in the washing machine,” Ten says and in a blink, he’s out the door.

Johnny sits on the bed and towel-dries his hair, not very used to it since he preferred to blow dry at home. He jolts when he feels someone grab the towel from his hands. Ten giggles quietly.

“Let me,” he says and softly dries his hair for him, running his hand through the strands when he is done to make them look at least mediocre.

Johnny smiles throughout, tearing up a little when Ten steps in between his spread legs to dry the hair on the back. He blinks them away before Ten can see.

“It’s still raining,” Ten says when he steps away to the window and draws the curtain.

“That’s okay. I’ll return these,” Johnny tugs the fabric of the t-shirt he’s wearing, “when I come back. You can return my clothes then.”

Ten turns and considers him. Johnny gets up to collect his keys and phone even if all he wants to do is stay with him but he’s scared of overstaying his welcome.

“Johnny,” Ten leaves his name hanging in the air for a moment as if it’s difficult to say whatever he’s planning to follow it up with, “will you stay?”

Johnny slowly shuffles over to him, ready to back away if Ten so much as blinks in denial but Ten doesn’t, not even when Johnny’s just barely a feet away.

Johnny cups his face and silently ponders if this is how it feels like to hold the world in your hands. He strokes Ten’s right cheek and the other draws in a sharp breath. Johnny gazes deeply into his eyes and when he sees no objection, he leans in and drops a kiss on his forehead, holding his lips there for a second and then lets go.

“Of course,” Johnny whispers.

Ten loops their fingers and drags him to his bed. Johnny lies down and does nothing, just waits for the other man to initiate whatever he wants. The artist turns the light off and cuddles up against his chest, hiding his face much like he did when they were hugging a little while back. His fingers come up to clutch at the fabric and Johnny smiles in the darkness, an arm holding the other man against him, an attempt at a makeshift shield.

Johnny is conscious of every move the other makes. He wonders if they’re moving too fast but then he placates himself, reminding his head that he had given up all control to the petite man. Ten
whimpers somewhere at dawn and jolts awake. Johnny holds him close and hushes his sobs. He doesn’t ask for anything, Ten doesn’t either.

He makes him breakfast in the morning, just some coffee and toast but Johnny makes sure to give him the brightest smile in gratitude. Ten’s eyes fill with tears but he pretends like it’s something in his eyes. Johnny doesn’t ask why he’s lying.

Johnny shoves his phone into his pockets and twists the door handle but Ten makes a choked sound next to him. He turns and raises an eyebrow. Ten looks up at him, nervous and hesitant before he stands on his tip toes and presses a soft kiss on his cheek. Johnny smiles and leans down to cup his face, pressing their foreheads together, the piercings on Ten’s ears stealing his attention for a moment before it zooms in on the other’s face.

“Thank you for letting me stay,” he breathes out.

They both know what he means by that.

Johnny drives away with the image of the artist’s small smile glued behind his eyelids.

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Things aren’t automatically fixed. Not that Johnny expected them to be. Despite feeling anxious and worried for Ten every waking moment, he doesn’t really get enough time off from his work to actually visit the man until the next week when it’s time for the next delivery. Johnny calls him every night, tells him about his day, and leaves the less interesting parts out of the equation.

Ten texts him twice during the week when he’s at work. Both times, Taeil is close by and snatches the phone to read the text.

“Young love,” he drawls in that special way of his and Johnny feels alive hearing the big word. They’ve been on one date, has known each other for a couple of months, but it feels like a bond which is meant to be.

Taeil only smirks knowingly and wiggles his eyebrows.

But when Ten is listening to Johnny talking about Taeil nearly ripping Jaehyun in two for touching his new golden highlights, Johnny pretends like he doesn’t hear sniffing on the other side. Instead, he chooses to promise Ten that he’ll come to him no matter what, promises that he’ll wait forever for Ten to tell him, means it wholeheartedly and by the time he continues the office shenanigans, only his nasally giggles fill his ears, no trace of crying evident.

Doyoung, just like he predicts calls him the day after, close to midnight, whispering out an apology. The baker tells him that he had never really gotten used to the fact that Johnny could look out for himself because all he ever remembers is him hurting and that’s enough reason for him to attempt to protect him even if he’s the younger one. The conversation doesn’t reveal any groundbreaking facts owing to the fact that everything Doyoung says are things Johnny already knows, having seen his best friend struggle to help hold him together when all he wanted to do was pop some pills and relieve his father of the shame he had brought upon him.

“Whatever you do, if it makes you happy, no matter what I tell you, you know I’m on board right?”
Doyoung asks before he hangs up, voice firm. It’s not the answer Johnny is seeking but what it is is something he knows he needs no matter how much he says that he doesn’t.

Doyoung has approved, Johnny realizes, when the call clicks off. It’s not an outright statement but it’s conspicuous enough for Johnny to feel warmth blooming in his chest. It won’t change the way he feels about Ten, how he wants to be there for him but it makes him a little( lot) happier to know that the one special person in his life accepts the other. His approval is offhanded but that doesn’t make it any less valuable.

Johnny stretches in his chair and winces at the cracks resounding through his cabin. He gets up and digs around in the one of the drawers in the delivery shelf and finds that there are only two letters left.

The sight of the two lonely pale yellow envelopes is daunting because he doesn’t know how intense the subject matter is, neither does he know of the effect it will have on Ten. What he does know is that there’s nothing he can do except to stay if Ten asks him this time.

That’s how he finds himself knocking on Ten’s door again. This is familiar. He has done this every Friday for four months, after all. But what comes after is familiar too, achingly so.

Ten opens the door and Johnny allows a smile to creep up his face because he looks less pale than he did on their date. He makes a mental note to take him to the cafe soon at a time when Donghyuck is not stressed with exams. They had hit it on well and with Johnny wanting Ten to be nothing but happy, this can work, his head supplies. Also, if he had to trust one person to make Ten laugh, it would be Donghyuck. Mark didn’t call him “Full sun” for nothing.

Johnny extends the letter to him but Ten grips his wrist and pulls him inside, ignoring the envelope. Johnny realizes that it’s for the first time that Ten has looked at him like he’s more important than some words scribbled on a letter from some unknown person in some corner of the world.

Johnny sits down on the couch, pleased to see that the laptop’s remains have been cleared away. The paint bottles are all arranged on a tray next to the easel which is located on the far corner.

Ten is still standing, shifting on his feet, the letter in his hands.

“It’s the second last one,” Johnny says. Ten peers at him, a distant look invading his face, almost as if he’s dissociating.

“Ten?” Johnny calls and the artist startles, before he comes around the corner to sit on the other end of the couch. Johnny supposes that it’s because the other doesn’t want him to see the content of the letter. He respects his wishes and keeps his gaze away.

Ten doesn’t tear up until he finishes reading and then he’s dropping the letter, crawling to Johnny, burrowing into him like he wants to disappear inside Johnny’s chest. Johnny is caught off guard but he still accommodates him, twines his arms around Ten as he sobs loudly, like he’s hoping that the harder he cries, the easier it will be to heal. Johnny understands why it must be so. He used to cry like that back when he was in uni before he learnt that tears never really helped.

Johnny hushes him with calm words and occasionally coos assurances in the way Jungwoo and Doyoung does when Jisung or Chenle are struggling with something. A few minutes later, Ten’s body feels like dead-weight against him, the other man no longer making a sound but still crying, salty tears soaking Johnny’s jacket and the plaid shirt underneath. He’s unresponsive but Johnny doesn’t prod him, just lets him stay close to his chest.
Guilt traps him inside four walls and probes him every which way. He could have helped. Every time Ten closed the door in his face, his agonized cries reaching Johnny’s ears, he could have done this. If only, he had been braver sooner.

Better late than never, Johnny thinks even if it hurts to program his thoughts that way because a part of him knows that thinking this way doesn’t take away the hurt. None of it does.

An hour or more later, Ten flops backward on the sofa and doesn’t respond to Johnny’s questions. He’s worried sick but he’s afraid of pushing Ten so he walks to the kitchen to get some water for the both of them.

Perhaps it’s because it hits him that whatever this is, it’s huge or perhaps it’s the fact that he can’t see Ten like this or just perhaps it’s the way this reminds him of the story of that boy in his psych class.

And perhaps it hits him like a shot to his gut because he remembers exactly how the story of the boy ended and he wants to jump in front of a train as he imagines Ten in his place.

Whatever it is, tears are dripping down his face when he opens the fridge and he can’t stop them. He rubs at his eyes with his fingers and aggressively dabs at them to no result. He curses under his breath and runs a hand through his hair, pulls at the strands hard enough to hurt and finds himself at a complete loss.

Ten is breaking right in front of his eyes and he’s useless. Completely useless.

Johnny washes his face in the kitchen sink and grabs a bottle of cold water, shuffling to the living room with it.

Ten is still frozen still, glassy eyes blinking lewdly, slowly, completely shut down.

Johnny wants to hold him close but Ten had been the one who pulled away and now, he doesn’t know if physical contact is the way to go. His words are useless because it keeps ricocheting off the walls and never actually falls on Ten’s ears.

Johnny sits on the floor, his back resting against the cushion, a stray tear slipping down unknowingly before he quickly wipes it away.

“What have you heard the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice?” Ten asks, sitting up, eyes still glossy but finally back to reality.

Johnny shakes his head and lets out a relieved sigh.

Ten doesn’t elaborate like he expects him to. Instead he gets down from the couch and throws Johnny a blank look.

“Let’s make dinner, hyung,” he says but in contrast to the look on his face, his voice is warm and it sounds like this statement has so much more to it than what he sees on the surface but Johnny nods, vocalizing an affirmation, both for the dinner and the unknown.

If it’s with Ten, he’s willing to do anything. It’s a dangerous mindset but Johnny had never been someone who played it safe.

They do end up making dinner. Johnny chops up the vegetables and helps Ten out, simply hovering over his shoulder but hesitant in meddling because the artist still looks out of it, lost in some neverland which has transformed into something sinister and distressing.
The food is good but Johnny can’t stomach it properly with the way Ten pokes around his plate for show. A few minutes later, he gets up and the silence which only had the companionship of cutlery grazing the plates finally have a chair screech to add to their clique. Johnny scrambles after him, stomach twisting with suffocating anxiety.

Ten falls on the bed with a muffled thump. Johnny hovers at the doorway.

“My first time was when I was 15 with a boy I loved more than he deserved to be loved.”

Ten says, gazing at the painted sky on the ceiling. On the outside, it’s random but it’s not. It’s how Ten opens up, in spurts of emotion and blowups of truth.

Ten sits up and spreads his arms, “Will you hold me and help me get through the night?”

It’s not a line Johnny’s ever heard before. It’s too real, the question way too intimate but Ten’s face betrays nothing. He is a board that has been wiped way too many times.

“Always,” Johnny says and Ten smiles. Then it fades, and he’s back to being the monochrome doll, the jaded counterpart but Johnny likes Ten, all parts inclusive.

Ten doesn’t snuggle up to him but keeps their hands looped as he drifts away to dreamland. After a few hours, his fingers loosen and Johnny wakes up but Ten’s palm lands on his chest right then. He stays still for what seems like another eternity. When Ten shifts, Johnny gets up and casts a glance at him before walking with clear intent to his coat. He grabs his cigarettes and lighter and slips out the room.

It was one of those habits leftover from his frat boy days, smoking that is. He is by no means a chain smoker but it helps clear his mind and he badly needs it now. His last hit had been over a year ago and he feels his nerves thrum in anticipation.

He sits on the step in the front of the house and lights up the cigarette, inhaling deeply before releasing a cloud of smoke, his throat and nose burning with it. He finishes two and is on his third one when Ten plops down next to him. Johnny doesn’t startle.

“You smoke.” Ten’s eyes are black caverns with nothing but the small over head lamp to light the rest of his features. Ten’s piercings twinkle when the light shines on it but he shifts closer and they no longer do.

“I do.” Johnny takes another puff, chest expanding with it, the cigarette loosely hugged between his fingers.

“Shotgun,” Ten says and it’s a request guised as a demand.

Johnny turns and folds his legs under him, Ten mirroring him on the other side. He places his freezing palm on the warm skin of Ten’s face and the contrast makes him laugh, so he does. Maybe it is just the high speaking.

Ten looks up hopefully at him. Johnny takes a puff and presses his lips to Ten’s chapped but soft ones, blowing the smoke into him. Ten doesn’t cough. Johnny repeats it thrice and flicks the stick away. It takes every modicum of control for him to not just kiss him like that but he keeps away from doing it because there’s nothing he wants more than Ten’s happiness and safety and he knows that throwing something like a kiss into the mix isn’t the best way to go.

“Ask me.” Ten utters, like he’s reading his mind.
“Can I kiss you?” Johnny does as asked, speaking against Ten’s lips. Ten nods, the movement causing their foreheads to rub against each other.

Johnny’s other hand comes up to cradle Ten’s face and he leans in, their lips meeting in a firm but gentle kiss. Johnny pulls away, hands retracting from the other’s skin, gaze flicking down to Ten’s lips. He’s half a breath away when Ten leans forward, one hand balancing himself on Johnny’s thigh, his hands coming up to hold his waist, rubbing small circles on the delicate skin stretched over the jutting hipbone.

Johnny gives up control, allowing Ten to take what he wants but the artist closes his eyes and pauses, a clear gesture for Johnny to go ahead and take. Johnny leans in with a feverish fervour; tongue licking over Ten’s bitten lips, the other opening up his mouth willingly, sighing in content with the first drag of Johnny’s tongue inside the warm cavern. Ten moans and Johnny tips him backward, one large palm coming behind him to support his back. They part for breath once, a string of saliva connecting their lips.

Johnny dips in the shallow waters of Ten and loves how he’s so responsive, loves the way he’s so pliant one moment and fighting for control the other. His tongue sweeps over the other’s gums and he tilts his head when Ten sighs into his mouth. He swallows the gasp and tries not to dig his fingers into the other’s hips.

Ten pulls away and places kisses down his neck, hiding his face in the crook of his neck. Both their breaths are heavy, loud in the soundtrack of the night with the screeching crickets and the wheezing wind, the cigarette blunt burning out, the last ember dying.

Johnny feels the high fade away when he feels tears on his neck but Ten doesn’t budge when Johnny tries to catch a glimpse of his face.

“He came to my room in the night, said he loved me and I gave him everything I had. Every damn time, just like this,” Johnny tenses but Ten lifts his left hand and caresses the other side of Johnny’s neck, pulling at the hem of his t-shirt, “But then in the day, he called me names and I broke, waiting for night to come because I only felt whole when I shattered under him.”

Ten’s voice resembles an impassive narrator’s but it’s meek and softer than what Johnny is used to. He grabs the other’s hands and presses soft kisses on his knuckles and nails. Ten gasps when he kisses his nails, one by one.

“Is this not okay?” Johnny asks, halting his actions but still gently holding the other’s hand in his.

“It’s more than okay,” Ten breathes.

“I love your hands, especially your nails.” Johnny dips down and presses another kiss to Ten’s hair, one of both their hands occupied in each other’s.

Johnny straightens up and lifts Ten up with him, an arm around his waist. When their bodies hit the mattress, Ten snuggles closer, something he avoided a few hours ago, and taps some unheard beat on Johnny’s chest with his painted nails.


“Good night, Johnny,” he continues and presses his lips against Johnny’s neck, a feathery touch.

“Sleep, Ten.” Johnny’s arm tightens around him.
The last letter is taken out of his grip with quivering hands. Ten reads it with furrowed eyebrows and then, throws his head back and laughs, like he’s reading the greatest comedic moment. Johnny’s feet are glued to the wooden floor. Ten slams the door shut and keeps laughing until it fades into painful chuckles, the sound daggers piercing his chest cavity.

“He says he’s sorry,” Ten laughs again but tears start cascading down his cheeks and Johnny stumbles forward to wrap his arms around the artist in a tight embrace. Ten grips the front of his shirt and weeps, saying the same thing over and over again.

“Hey, it’ll be fine. Ten, hey, hush, baby please,” Johnny tries, his own tears soaking the other’s head but he gets no response and when Ten wobbles in his grip, Johnny lowers one arm and wraps it around his waist, holding him up, supporting his weight.

The letter is from a man, Johnny knows for certain now. He doesn’t want to piece the bare minimum Ten has given him.

It’s hard having to restrain himself but Johnny’s a man of his words, has always been. He walks Ten to the bedroom, carrying his weight with his arms around him as support, his face still hidden in his chest as his breaths get faster, shallower like something is dissonant in his mind, seizing his windpipes.

The letter falls to the ground like a dry leaf in autumn but Johnny feels no remorse.

Ten lets go of him once they reach the room, Johnny freeing his hold around him, stepping back. He gets a proper look at Ten and his face is pink, eyes swollen and wide with fear. His breathing is visibly getting agitated and Johnny knows what’s going to happen before it happens.

Ten panics, stops breathing and crumbles to his knees, his legs failing him pitifully. Johnny breaks but he has to stay strong.

“Ten, breathe,” he gasps out, patting the other on his cheeks.

“Just breathe,” he repeats and Ten doesn’t, clawing at his neck with his nails and Johnny curls his fingers around the other’s wrists and pulls them away, tears hazing over his vision before he rapidly blinks to clear them.

He places one of his palms flat on his chest and Ten looks at him pleadingly, eyes bulging out from the lack of air. Johnny takes one breath and Ten tries to follow, face tearstained, a lost expression on it.

Several moments later, the man slumps forward, finally breathing properly, and Johnny runs his fingers down the other’s hair, holding his thin body close to him, and hopes that he can hear the way Johnny’s heart is pounding in fear for Ten.

Ten is struggling and it’s something beyond Johnny’s control. He needs help but Johnny isn’t it.

Ten cries throughout the night, pauses for some moments and then resumes like he never stopped. Every time, Johnny hopes it is the last but it isn’t and the stifling silence gets too much for him. However, he never lets him go, never stops comforting him, never gets tired of the way Ten clings to him like he’s the light at the end of the tunnel, like he’s the thin branch that will stop him from ascending down to the depths of a terrifying life.
“Stay with me,” Johnny says in the morning, shrugging his jacket on, getting ready to leave because he doesn’t know if Ten wants him to stay and he won’t unless he asks him to. Ten’s knees are held close to his chest, his chin placed on top of them, eyes hazed over.

“I told you I will, didn’t I?” Ten asks, looking vacantly at the wall in front of him.

Johnny turns around and faces him, he feels particularly brave when he says, “You did but I wasn’t asking about that,” Ten looks up at him, the welts on his neck angry red from when he clawed at his throat night before, “Come to my house, stay with me for a few days.”

Ten doesn’t reply for a long time.

Johnny consoles himself saying he at least tried. He is no expert in dealing with matters like these and all he can offer is the safety of his arms and a heart that will wait for him in patient anticipation if he ever decides he wants him. They kissed but things are still uncertain and if Ten asked him to leave, Johnny will, no matter how much it hurts him but not before he makes sure he’s healed, not a second before that.

“Are you sure?” Ten asks.

Johnny nods with determination.

“I’ll hurt you, Johnny. Even if I don’t want to, it’ll hurt every time I break down,” Ten smiles sickly sweet as he says it.

“I know. It hurts now but I chose this. I chose you and I’ll do it over and over again. Just come with me, please. I’m scared to leave you alone. I don’t know what is in these letters and I don’t know what’s going through your head but I want you,” Johnny takes a breath, runs a hand through his hair and continues, “I want you, Ten.”

Ten gets off the bed, pulling the sleeves of his tshirt over his palms and walks over to him, leaning up to press a firm kiss against his lips.

Ten quietly packs up some clothes in a bag and smiles down at Johnny who sits on the bed, looking up at him in gratitude. Ten’s expression crumples and he hugs Johnny’s head to his soft stomach, his arms automatically wrapping around his fragile waist, Ten’s nimble fingers dancing over Johnny’s long hair.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Johnny takes a deep breath and tightens his hold around Ten.


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“So he’s staying over at your place?” Doyoung asks, voice rushed probably from the morning breakfast rush.

Johnny hums, tilting his stiff neck from one side to another.

“What’s he doing now?”
Johnny sighs as he feels the cushions against his back.

“Lying on my bed.”

Doyoung yells something at Jeno and then there’s a groan before an oven timer goes off.

“You need to get him help, hyung. Professional help.” Doyoung has his stern voice on when he says it, stressing on the last part.

“He won’t go,” Johnny says, feeling a headache coming on.

“He has to talk to someone about this. If not a therapist, convince him to talk to you,” Doyoung argues.

“I promised him I won’t ask, Doyoung,” Johnny mumbles.

The other man sighs and it rings like an “I told you so” but Doyoung isn’t cruel to say it out loud.

“Then distract him. He’ll come around. Time heals everything, hyung. You know that better than anyone.”

Johnny smiles, eyelids shutting, “I do. Thanks, Doyoung-ah.”

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In the week that follows up, Johnny takes Ten out on a late night icecream run. Ten smiles throughout but it’s strained and hollow like he feels obligated to convince Johnny that he is happy. He doesn’t smile with all his heart until Johnny links their hands together.

Johnny doesn’t loosen his grip until they return home, keeping Ten’s hands in his even when he pays the money for it.

Later at night, Ten mumbles a small “thank you” against the crook of Johnny’s neck. Johnny responds with his hands rubbing small circles on the skin of Ten’s hip in the way he has gotten accustomed to.

Even after two weeks have passed, Ten doesn’t really break down, not like when he received the letters, never again like that. Instead, he zones out for too long and takes ages to respond to Johnny’s random questions and texts. Some days, his eyes are the shade of pink when he comes out of the shower and he just comes over to wherever Johnny is in the house and collapses against him.

Johnny offers to not go to work because it’s not like he didn’t have any staff to handle things but Ten refuses it with a shake of his head, and tells him, “Don’t put your life on hold for me.”

When Johnny comes home, some days Ten opens the door for him. The other days, he bundles himself up in Johnny’s blankets and waits on the couch, Johnny unlocking the door himself.

“Ten, if you wanna go home, let me know,” Johnny says, when he sees no visible change in the other’s demeanour over the weeks.

Ten perks up and Johnny feels stupid for not having asked him earlier but then he says, “I need my art supplies. I don’t need anything else from there.”
Johnny drives to Ten’s home, Taeil tagging along to help him after he overhears him talking to Kun about it. The artist doesn’t come with him, shaking his head over coffee during breakfast. Johnny accedes with a nod.

Taeil gasps in awe when he enters the living room. “Wow, he’s really talented, Johnny.”

Johnny nods. “Wait till you see the bedroom.”

Upon hearing it, Taeil walks to the bedroom and returns with a star-struck look in his eye.

“He should be doing art shows at museums and stuff, not crying over stupid letters,” Taeil says, brutally frank. Johnny snorts.

“We don’t always get what we need in life.”

Taeil sighs in defeat. “True. Like the Chanel bag that sold out and the Etude House lip colour I wanted to buy but watched get snatched by a teenager. Life is sad like that.”

Johnny gives him a meaningful look and starts wrapping the glass paint bottles in newspaper. Taeil joins in and when they’re just about done, Johnny goes to Ten’s room and packs up all his clothes. He makes sure to grab the other’s cosmetics too. Just in case.

He is aware of what this means.

Ten is moving in. Maybe for forever, and it makes him feel giddy even if the circumstances are all wrong.

But he’ll take this over the aching distance any day. He’ll sleep in his office if Ten says he needs space because this is a decisive step in their relationship. Every Friday, from the very first time, even before Ten acknowledged him properly, even before Ten asked for his name, Johnny’s greatest worry has constantly been the distance. The fear that he wouldn’t make it in time if God forbid something tragically drastic were to happen and now, he will have Ten close, right next to him for as long as he wants to stay.

Taeil snaps his fingers in front of him and Johnny shakes his head.

“Here, the letters.” He hands them to Johnny.

There’s an urge to open them and read. It would be so easy but he won’t.

He wants to know what it is from Ten’s own mouth, wants to hear it in his soft, melancholic voice. He locks the envelopes in the bedside table drawer and turns to see Taeil eyeing him with a look, half judgement and half pride.

“You’ve grown, Johnny. I’m speechless.” He says and Johnny cracks a smile.

Locking the door behind him isn’t hard. He was never attached to the place anyway.

It was the person who mattered and he was home.

Johnny drops Taeil at the office and drives home after thanking him profusely. He carries the boxes and places them outside the door before he knocks.

Ten opens the door and helps him carry them inside despite his protests. His eyes are a little brighter than they were last week and Johnny feels pleased.
“Open it,” Johnny says when Ten frowns at a gift-wrapped box.

Johnny had seen the broken laptop on Ten’s table and knew that it was beyond fixing and even if it were, it wouldn’t have been worth it.

“Hyung..” Ten trails off, sat on the couch, gaze roving over the sleek silver laptop in his hand. He sets it aside.

“Don’t say anything. I swear I wanted to. Your old one was all smashed up.” Johnny walks over and settles beside him. Ten thanks him in a whisper and scoots closer, leaning in to kiss his cheek.

“Ten, I...” Johnny trails off when he sees the look in the other’s eyes, “I... I’ll go make some coffee.”

Johnny slips to the kitchen and switches the coffeemaker on. Seconds later, he feels Ten’s arms wrap around him and he stills. Ten’s forehead presses against the centre of his back and Johnny tears up immediately.

“I know. I just... I know, hyung. A little more time. I need a little more time.”

Johnny twists around and dips down, capturing the other’s plush lips in a kiss, Ten’s hands tangling themselves in Johnny’s long strands of hair. Ten licks at his closed lips for entrance and Johnny opens up, hands slipping under the other’s tshirt and gripping his narrow waist desperately.

Ten gasps into the kiss. Johnny pulls his hands away, suddenly worried if he overstepped his boundaries but Ten places his hand over his in a clear sign to go ahead. Johnny sighs into the kiss when Ten tilts his head and stands on his tiptoes to reach him better. He tastes like something sweet with a hint of coffee and suddenly, it’s Johnny’s most favourite taste in the world.

With Ten in his arms, breathing into him, free and serene, Johnny is home again.

***

Months pass but Ten doesn’t divulge anything significant. They settle into a rhythm of Johnny leaving for work on weekdays while Ten stays at home, back to doing digital art commissions. His insomnia stops acting up with Ten there and the empty space in his bed is no longer so.

The house starts smelling like paint but Johnny secretly loves it and when Ten crawls into bed at night, he smells the same along with his inherent smell of pine and lavender. On days when Johnny is exhausted, he wants to dip himself in Ten’s scent and just sleep forever.

Ten paints actively, but mostly sticks to digital art and logo designs. Johnny’s favourite days are when he stumbles home in the evening to see Ten concentrated on his sketchbook, carbon pencil held tight between his fingers, glasses on the bridge of his nose, his lips curving up into a smile Johnny has come to understand is reserved for him alone.

There’s a kind of tension in the air, not something that affects them much but it keeps the touches lingering, gazes intensifying and soon, kisses turn into full blown-makeout sessions. Johnny makes sure to never initiate, content with waiting for Ten to be comfortable. It’s not like he doesn’t want more. He does. But he wants to wait for Ten, wants to wait till he’s entirely ready to trust Johnny with something that intimate.
Johnny doesn’t forget the bits and pieces he got from Ten about his past and it makes him all the more cautious. Ten doesn’t deserve to be hurt and he will make sure that he never does.

Johnny loosens his tie and toes away his shoes right as he steps inside the house, the door swinging shut behind him. He shrugs off his blazer and groans, feeling the exhaustion from the day settling into every muscle in his body.

Ten is in the kitchen, Johnny supposes when he hears the sound of a lid closing. He is rubbing the piercings in his ears, peering at the dish with a focused look before he turns the stove off. He looks up and smiles like Johnny is the best thing he’s ever laid eyes on.

“You’re home,” Ten breathes, a smile in his voice. Johnny rounds the counter and comes up behind him, arms wrapping around the other’s torso and hums in confirmation.

Ten melts in his arms and leans back. Johnny leans down and noses along the other’s neck, laying a kiss under his ear, one of his piercings nudging his nose.

Johnny takes his hands off Ten and steps away. Ten whines and Johnny freezes. Ten whips around to look at him.

“I’m...” Ten gives him a pleading gaze. Johnny clears his throat and keeps his eyes from wandering over the other.

“I’m gonna go take a shower,” he announces after a terse moment of heated silence.

Ten shifts on his feet but concedes with a nod. Johnny notices that the younger is wearing one of his t-shirts, the one Doyoung bought for him two years ago from his friend’s store on the first day of sale. Ten looks soft in it, the sharp jut of his chin seeming smoother, a pink hue colouring the tip of his ears, eyes filled with want.

Johnny books it out of there, giving himself time to come to terms with what is so clearly visible now. When he gets out of the bathroom after the shower, Ten is sitting in the same position he was months ago at his own home but this time, his fingers are fidgeting, eyes travelling anywhere and everywhere.

“Ten?” Johnny calls and he flinches.

“Do you want me?” He asks and Johnny chokes on his spit.

“I’m... it’s okay if you aren’t ready. It’s fine like this. We don’t have to do anything, I promise. I genuinely don’t want to force you I swear to God I never...”

Ten cuts him off. “Do you want me?” he accentuates every syllable, rising to his feet, walking closer, “It’s a no-brainer question, Johnny. You either want me or you don’t.”

Johnny groans loudly and closes his eyes, then blinks up at the ceiling. “God, you have no idea...” Ten glares at him and Johnny snaps his mouth shut.

“I do. I want you,” Johnny whispers.

Ten smiles, his eyes curving, a thin line of his teeth appearing because of how wide his smile is. There’s kohl left over in his eyes, probably from when he went out in the day for getting art supplies, and it makes his pupils seem darker than it already is, the black smudged around the edges making him look even more enticing.
He reaches up to Johnny’s ear on his toes and whispers, “Then take me. Give me everything.”

It’s like the words unlock some deeply veiled passion in his core because the next moment, Johnny is kissing the petite man with everything he has, licking into his mouth and savouring the taste he loves. Ten’s knees weaken under him with the intensity of the kiss and Johnny places his hands on the sides of his thighs and lifts him up, his ankles hooking behind him. His arms link behind Johnny’s nape. Ten doesn’t let him pull away from his lips even as Johnny carries him to the bed.

Johnny lays him on the bed, gently, contrary to the way they were trying to swallow each other whole. Johnny takes his shirt off in a single motion, Ten’s gaze sweeping over his bare torso. He sits with his knees on either side of the petite man.

Ten’s pitch black hair is spread in a halo on the pillow, his eyes full of want and something Johnny can’t quite place. He dips down and kisses him full on the mouth before he starts kissing down the arch of his neck.

Ten is delightfully responsive, gasping and moaning when Johnny finally decides to bite his neck on a whim. He sucks on the small fold of skin between his teeth and sucks, Ten’s hand pulling his hair. He sniffs the other’s neck, not being able to control himself and Ten freezes under him.

Johnny stills at the realization of what he has gone and done but then, Ten giggles, a high voice escaping him. Johnny unfreezes and smiles as he presses a kiss against the other’s neck.

“Your hair tickles,” Ten whines when Johnny is sucking another hickey on his soft skin, right on his collarbone.

Johnny straightens up and smiles, apologizing softly. Ten shakes his head. “No, I... I like it,” he says, sitting up as Johnny moves backward, his hand coming up to run through his hair.

Johnny slides his hand down Ten’s(t) shirt and tugs it over his head, his toned body pale and lithe but beautiful all the same. Ten hides his face in Johnny’s neck, a little shy. Johnny rubs his hands soothingly over his back before he lays him back down on the mattress again.

Johnny pulls at the waistband of Ten’s hips and glances once at Ten for confirmation, the other man smiling gently at him, a fond look on his face. He tugs the other’s briefs along with the sweatpants and they come off in one go.

Ten’s lying naked under him. It takes several moments for that particular piece of information to register and when it does, Johnny feels a blush travelling to his face the familiar red spreading from Ten’s torso up his neck like paint diluting in water, slow but colourful.

Johnny awkwardly shifts to the side and pulls his own sweatpants down so that they’re both naked. He hovers over Ten and kisses him firmly, their tongues entwining around each other’s. Ten moans into his mouth and Johnny nearly climaxes then but he holds out.

“Spread your legs, babe,” he whispers against Ten’s ears, biting on his lip and sucking once. Ten follows obediently.

He looks vulnerable like this, under Johnny, stark naked and lips kiss-swollen, legs spread wide and cock already hard. Johnny kisses down the length of body, rolling his tongue around and sucking on his nipples, Ten keening under him. He pulls Ten closer to him and kisses his inner thigh, biting on it, Ten writhing in response.

He reaches to the side of the bed, where the bedside table is and opens the drawer to get the bottle of lube. Ten blinks slowly at him. Johnny squirts some of the clear liquid on his fingers and warms it
He glances at Ten again for permission. The other man nods, nervous, teeth sinking into his lower lip but looking at Johnny with expectation.

Johnny circles his fingers around his entrance and counts to three in his head before he presses inside. Ten inhales sharply but taps on Johnny’s hand to carry on, neck bared, the side of his face pressing against the pillow. Johnny presses his finger inside past the first knuckle and turns Ten’s face to kiss him. It’s messier now, with Ten gasping as Johnny presses in to his tight heat, crooking his finger and probing around.

Johnny sucks his bottom lip and crooks his finger again. He keeps at it until Ten stutters “More” against his lips. He pulls away and squirts some more lube on his fingers and rubs his fingers together. He presses Ten’s hips down with one hand and slowly presses both his fingers together into the tight ring of muscles, Ten wincing sharply.

“Relax,” Johnny says, climbing up to kiss him again as he moves his fingers inside him and slowly starts scissoring his fingers, the lube making the task easier for him. Ten whines and gasps into his mouth and when he can move the fingers loosely enough, Johnny stops and Ten asks for more again. Ten tenses when he pushes in with the third finger but when he kisses down his neck, he relaxes again, the insistent pressure around his fingers diminishing.

Ten bucks his hips when Johnny rubs against a particular spot inside him. Johnny experimentally rubs there again and when Ten moans loudly, he knows that he’s found the other’s prostate. Johnny teases him for a minute or two but when Ten growls into the kiss, he retracts his fingers.

Ten whimpers at the emptiness. Johnny strokes his inner thigh and reaches for the condom on the side. He is about to rip it open with his teeth when Ten stops him with a hand.

“I’m clean. If you are too, can we do this without it?” Johnny turns saucer-wide eyes to him, “I wanna feel you, Johnny.”

Johnny takes a sharp breath and nods.

“I’m clean. I got tested a few months ago when all of us at the office went for a check-up. I haven’t been with anyone for the past three years. If you want this, I...” He clears his throat, “I can give this to you.”

Ten’s eyes widen when he mentions the three year abstinence but he nods his head enthusiastically at the rest.

Johnny sighs and throws the condom to the side. He takes some more lube and spreads it up his length and strokes it twice before he lines his cock against Ten’s hole.

He presses inside, Ten’s body arching as he bottoms out, their hands finding each other’s, Ten’s bright red nails making the sight feel even more intimate solely because it reminds Johnny of how far they’ve come. Ten squeezes their entwined hands and takes calming breaths. Johnny waits a moment for the other to get used to the feeling and when Ten relaxes, delving deeper into the bed, Johnny pulls out and thrusts back in, Ten moaning high and needy, a few tears escaping him. Johnny keeps a steady pace as he thrusts into his wet heat, chasing the spot. He grunts as Ten’s hole clenches around him, leaning down to peck the other on his lips, the artist’s eyes hooded and lost in pleasure.

“Fuck me harder, Johnny. I won’t break. I promise,” Ten moans out. “Please,” he begs and Johnny loses all control.
He hikes one of the other’s legs up on his shoulders and fucks into him, the bed creaking under them. Ten wails louder as Johnny hits his prostate, a steady string of nothing but Johnny’s name escaping his mouth. He pistons his cock into the other again and again and feels his climax building up in the pit of his stomach.

Ten cums with a loud scream of his name, shuddering under him.

“Don’t pull out,” Ten begs, fucked out and tired. Maybe it’s Ten’s hoarse request or maybe it’s the way his hole clenches tightly around his cock, it doesn’t take too long for Johnny to follow. He shallowly thrusts two more times before Ten whines from oversensitivity, squirming under him.

Johnny pulls out and leans down, kissing Ten on his lips, their tongues lazily gliding against each other. Johnny presses a wet kiss on Ten’s forehead, the artist sighing softly, still coming down from the high.

“Was it... okay?” Johnny asks, heart pounding, chest rising and falling rapidly.

Ten doesn’t respond for a second.

“It was perfect,” he breathes out, a smile in his voice.

They lie staring at the ceiling for a few more minutes, before Johnny gets up, suggesting that they take a shower.

“Only if you join me,” he says, a smile on his face. Johnny damn near collapses but holds his ground.

The shower is innocent, just two men standing under the water. Johnny helps Ten wash his hair and keeps his eyes away when Ten cleans himself up.

“I love you,” Ten says, steady and firm, like he wants Johnny to know that he really does. Johnny opens his mouth to repeat the words back at him, not because he is obligated to or because he is in the heat of the moment but because Ten has stopped him a million times from saying it and tonight just might be his chance.

Ten sits on him and leans down to kiss him, scent fresh and lavender-like, their lips meeting in a bruising kiss. He licks deep into his mouth and Johnny tries to keep up with his passion, sighing when Ten’s hands come around his ears, thumb stroking the side of his cheek. They kiss like that for some minutes and it’s like a diversion tactic but Johnny lets him carry on. Ten is too smart to fall for it though, he smiles against his lips and replaces them with his index finger to silence him.

“Don’t tell me now. Tell me when I’ve told you everything and if you still feel the same then,” Ten says, kissing him again, Johnny’s jaw slightly sore and heart a little broken from Ten’s ability to think that Johnny might not love him after he bares himself.

Which is a complete lie.

There is no possible thing that Ten can tell Johnny to make him love him any less but that’s for Johnny to prove when the time comes. For the moment, he settles for a bruisingly tight grip on the other’s waist and enthusiastic participation in slow, languid kissing.

“I love your heartbeat,” Ten breathes into the night, Johnny losing himself to sleep when the other’s voice pierces through.

“Why?” He asks, rearranging his arm around Ten’s torso so he can lie a little more comfortably on
“Because it feels like it beats for me.”

***

“I’m getting better, mom. I swear I am,” Ten says, stirring something in the pot. Johnny freezes in the hallway and leans back on the wall.

He knows that Ten’s mom checks up on him once in a while. They have a very precious bond with her letting Ten have his space, only texting him randomly but never calling unless Ten initiates it. Johnny has talked to her once but she hadn’t said much except, “As long as you love him, I’m fine with you even if you have four arms.” Johnny remembers sputtering on the line before she chuckled on the other end, proceeding to ask him about his work and their relationship.

“No, it’s just... I’m scared but I want to and it’s stressing me out.” Ten sounds torn. Johnny nearly loses his composure wanting nothing more than to run to the other and hold him in his arms.

“I told you this before, mom. I’m... He does. I know he does,” he pauses and Johnny knows he’s tearing up, but then he speaks up like he’s revealing some mystery of life, “He likes my nails. He likes my nails, mom.”

Johnny smiles, tears stinging at the back of his eyes. He doesn’t stay there any more, walking back to the bedroom, coming out only when he’s certain Ten is done talking to his mom, figuring he’s heard enough.

When he back hugs Ten, he makes sure to press a kiss against his nape before looping their hands together and tears up when he’s kissing his nails, painted a dull yellow this time.

“Johnny?” Ten calls, worried and trying to turn around but Johnny doesn’t let him.

“I’m fine. I just... yeah.”

The pause conveys what he wants to, the words Ten hasn’t let him say yet floating in the room, suspended in thin air.

Later that evening, Johnny returns with a bouquet of pure white astilbe, red carnation and four leaf clovers, the stem of the bouquet scrunched in his hands.

“What do they mean?” Ten inquires, curious.

“The world wide web is your friend, babe,” Johnny says and walks to the bedroom.

***

Johnny groans in frustration, closing the lid of the laptop as it shuts down. He pulls the charger out and plugs it to the socket, hands working quickly, sleep chasing his eyelids. When he turns to the bed, Ten is sitting with his knees tucked close to his chest, moonlight illuminating the room, the
curtains drawn to the sides.

“He wrote it, the letters,” Ten mumbles and if not for the silence of the night, Johnny wouldn’t hear it as clearly as it does. He stills and looks at Ten, urging him to go on knowing that this moment in time is pivotal.

This is the moment Johnny has kept himself from asking about, from even thinking about and now, Ten is going to declare an end to his wait.

Finally, Johnny can let go of his patience.

“I met him when I was fourteen. He was a year above me but he enrolled in my class from another school. We became best friends but I was only just figuring out who I wanted to be. I came out to him and he said he was fine with it. It was like a dream come true. Your mom accepted you. Your best friend accepted you. What more do you need, right?”

Ten tacks on a bout of sharp laughter and Johnny can hear the pain in it.

“I knew I shouldn’t have liked him like that but he was so supportive of me and I fell hard. I was 15 when he told me that he thought he was gay. We were so young and stupid and so when we got drunk on his dad’s liquor and he kissed me, I let him. I let him do everything to me. It hurt but I told him it felt good.” Ten doesn’t look up from the floor, as if he’s still ashamed of how his first time was handed over to a drunken 15 year old boy.

“Then things changed. He started to join the bullies who picked on me for being gay and at night, he would come home crying. I never stopped him when he touched me. I spent my days waiting for the nights because he only looked at me like he loved me when he was buried inside me.”

Tears are the only response from Johnny. He dare not move a muscle because Ten is living through all of it again and he’d be damned if he let his struggle go to waste.

“He hated my nails. My mom gifted me a set of nail polish after she caught me staring at hers a couple of times. It was at night and he got angry seeing them but I never stopped painting them. He told me the nails would make the bullying worse and it did. He told me his parents were homophobic and I knew how bad things could turn out but I hated him as much as I loved him.”

Johnny wants to go back to the past and pull Ten out of the misery because he knows how hard it must have been. His father had been homophobic too, trying to pray the gay away from Johnny, threatening to disown him if he didn’t turn straight. But Ten knows Johnny’s story and now it’s time for him to reveal his. Johnny waits with a breath stuck in his lungs.

“Then in the last year of high school, I transferred from Thailand to here for a few months when my aunt got sick and we had to move. I missed him every day. I tried to keep in touch but he started distancing himself from the first month itself. I felt like shit but I still clung on. My mom noticed and she booked me a flight back home hoping that seeing him would make me feel better. She didn’t know about how he treated me at school.”

Ten pauses and looks at Johnny then, tears cascading down his face, arms tight around his knees.

“He already had someone else to fuck on the side. He introduced me as an ex friend with benefits to a boy on the first day we met up and told me that he had a boyfriend now. He was lying to me the whole time, I spent three years never questioning him about his actions, never pushing him to come out to his parents thinking they were homophobic when they were not, always letting him into my house even when I was aching from being shoved against the lockers by the very same hands which
pushed me down to my bed.”

Ten’s eyes focus on him. “I ran then. Took the next flight back home. He didn’t follow me. He never apologized, never called me, it ended then and there and I picked myself back up. It was hard but my mom helped me, she was there every step of the way. It took two years of therapy and even when my mom moved back, I stayed here.”

Ten’s lips twists to a dark smile then. “Then I got a call a year ago from my mom. Apparently he killed himself. I felt happy, Johnny,” he says, like he thinks it’s wrong to be, “I smiled so wide. Some part of me hurt but I felt like I won for the first time against him. Is that wrong?”

Johnny shakes his head. “After all the things he dragged you through for years? No. It isn’t wrong.”

Ten nods blankly. “Then some months later, you entered my life and I thought ‘oh a handsome man, what does he have for me?’ But it turned out that you were the bearer of his letters. Do you know what they said?” He pauses, looking at Johnny again from where he dragged his gaze to the sky visible through the window.

“It was his diary entries from back when were still together. He loved me, at least it says he did. But he wanted to be normal. Even if his parents weren’t against it, he didn’t want to be gay. He thought I turned him gay by being around him so just like I hated him as much as I loved him, he felt the same way and when he came to terms with how it wasn’t my fault, he couldn’t face me so he looked for someone else. Before he killed himself, he wanted me to know that it wasn’t all a lie, that I somehow deserved to know the truth,” Ten spits.

“That’s why it hurt because I healed myself thinking he was playing me but in the end he had only been playing himself,” Ten sobes out, hiding his face in his hands, legs awkwardly bent and Johnny quickly moves to him, gathering him in his arms, hoping, praying that this is enough.

“I hope he’s at peace now,” Ten chokes against the fabric covering Johnny’s chest, hands keeping Johnny from moving away.

“But I still hate him, hyung. I hate him because he took everything I had and just when I was at a good place, he wrecked me with some stupid letters.”

Johnny leans in and presses a kiss on the other’s hair, the scent of his strawberry shampoo ever present.

“Maybe it was his last attempt at redemption before he died,” Johnny says, trying to be logical rather than spouting a rant about how if he wasn’t dead he would have killed him with his own bare hands.

“Maybe,” Ten breathes, lips moving against Johnny’s neck.

“But right now, I’m getting better. I needed time to come to terms with what he did and said but it put a lot of things in perspective. I’m done with it. All of it. I just needed time to tell you this because it isn’t easy putting myself back there but I trust you. I trust you with all I have. You waited for so long to know and now, here I am, an open book for you. Now tell me if you still feel the same,” Ten says, pleading, tears rolling down his flushed cheeks, eyes puffy, pulling away from Johnny as he prepared himself for his answer.

Johnny wonders how he can ever doubt his feelings when he has waited this long for Ten to come to terms with things. But he gets how his mind works, so he only smiles and strokes his cheeks with the back of his knuckles, Ten leaning to the touch.

“I do. I love you. I loved you then. I love you now and it’s stupid to assume but I know you are it for
me, Ten. I love you so much.”

It feels like the deluge he has stopped with his bare hands and layered sand breaks when Ten’s face splits in a teary smile, the other’s arms coming around his shoulders, his fragile skin and bones and secrets, all for Johnny.

Forever, people say is the word but it doesn’t hold a candle to how it feels in this moment, with the love of his life wrapped and cradled to his chest, relieved of the weights drowning him. But Johnny is selfish, even if this moment is enough, he wants more, more time with Ten and perhaps, people are right.

Forever might just be the word.

It hits him then that the sky in Ten’s room was for himself, that he was a trapped bird who could do nothing but paint a sky to feel at home again.

Johnny hopes that in his arms, Ten feels at home.

When Johnny squeezes his hold on him, it feels like he’s holding an entire galaxy, not one with the glittering stars and the broad expanse of the unknown, but one with painted nails, sparkling eyes with a million tales and miles and miles of sometimes pale, sometimes gold skin.

***

“Can you help me with something, hyung?”

Taeil looks up from the screen of the computer and raises an impeccably groomed eyebrow at him, turning around in his desk chair.

“Depends on what it is, Chicago boy,” Taeil tuts.

“I need to get a gift for Ten. It’s his second birthday with me. I had to whip up a surprise party last minute at the cafe last year, remember? I don’t wanna do that this time. I want it to be special,” Johnny replies, hoping to all heavens that Taeil agrees.

The past year was bumpy but things had gotten a lot better and Ten owned a shop which sold paintings now. He still did commissions and his own art on the side but Johnny had never seen him happier. Ten sold his house at the edge of the city and made his moving in official.

Doyoung proposed to Jungwoo at the cafe a couple of months ago, and Ten being more artistically inclined had been asked to help them with the wedding planning. It was nice to see his friends mingle with Ten even if only Doyoung knew of the intimate details of their relationship. Kun and Taeyong had welcomed Ten with their arms wide open, bonding over their mutual dislike of Johnny’s weird habits. Jungwoo and Taeil shared Ten’s enthusiasm over makeup and most of Johnny’s double dates with Doyoung ended with the best friends sipping coffee, staring with lovesick looks at their significant others as they argued over the pros and cons of liquid lipstick over stick ones late into the night.

Taeil claps his hands loudly. “What do you have in mind?”

Johnny scratches the back of his neck. “Nail polish.”
Taeil’s gaze widens. “Wow, you really wanna marry him, huh.”

Johnny doesn’t deny him. The urge to look at the same jewellery shop where Doyoung and he visited to get the ring adorning Jungwoo’s finger had been mounting every day after all and Johnny is nothing if not an honest man.

“Should I wear blue heels to your wedding then?” Taeil asks, seriously.

Johnny laughs. Taeil looks at him with the same expression.

“If you wanna go now, let’s go. I’m busy in the evening, got myself a catch,” he smirks scandalously.

Later when they are in the car, Johnny finds himself thinking back on the conversation.

“Hyung, you know that’s okay right? If you were my groomsman and wore blue heels to my wedding?” He asks, cautiously, knowing that it’s a sensitive topic to touch upon.

Taeil turns to him with a small smile of gratitude and ruffles his hair gently as they stop in front of the cosmetics shop, “I know. I know you’ll let me be your groomsman even if I am in a fucking yellow Beauty and the Beast gown and a long wig.”

Johnny lets out the breath he didn’t know he was holding.

Life is good.

***

“I want a tattoo on my chest,” Johnny finds himself blurting out, after he zones out on the sparkly green nail polish adorning Ten’s nails tapping an incoherent beat on his chest, the skin around them intact.

Ten hums sleepily.

“I want you to do it.”

Ten cranes his neck to look at him, drowsy and all Johnny’s.

“What do you want it to be?” He asks, laying his head on his chest.

“Your name.”

End Notes

If you’ve made it till here, give yourself a pat on the back! This was my first time writing such an intense relationship but I worked hard to give life to their emotions and I hope it came through. This was also the first smut scene I’ve ever written so forgive me if it seemed off. I hope you are having a wonderful day/night wherever you are!! Please let me know what you
think in the comments section and leave kudos if you liked it!! I'd love to know what you thought about this fic!!

HMU on my cc or Twitter

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!